

Christianity in Armenia



The origin of the Armenian Church dates back to the Apostolic age. According to the ancient tradition well supported by historical evidence, Christianity was preached in Armenia as early as the second half of the first century by the two disciples of Jesus Christ, namely, St. Thaddeus (John 14:22-24) and St. Bartholomew (John 1:43-51). During the first three centuries Christianity in Armenia was a hidden religion under heavy persecution.

It was at the beginning of the fourth century, 301 AD, that Christianity was officially accepted by the Armenians as the state religion. It should also be remembered that the idea of Christianity as state religion was an innovation at that time.

St. Gregory the Illuminator, the patron Saint of the Armenian Church, and King Thiridates III, the ruler of the time, played a pivotal role in the official Christianization of Armenia. It is a well recognized historical fact that the Armenians were the first nation to formally adhere to Christianity. This conversion was followed in the fourth and fifth centuries by a process of institutionalization and Armenization of Christianity in Armenia.

Events of the fifth century were critical to the making of a distinctively Armenian Christian culture and identity. The foremost of these was the invention of the Armenian alphabet by the monk Mesrob Mashdots and his compatriots. Translations of scripture, commentaries, liturgy, theology, and histories were made. In addition, the fifth century witnessed the first flowering of original Armenian literature. An example is Yeznik Koghbatsi's doctrinal work, *Refutation of the Sects*. The Battle of Avarayr in 451 against Persia, although a defeat for the Armenians under Vartan Mamigonian, has been remembered as critical for winning the Armenians the right to practice their Christian belief.

The invention of the Armenian alphabet brought on the Golden Age of Armenian literature. Students were sent to the centers of classical and Christian learning in Edessa, Caesarea, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Athens, to prepare themselves to translate the Bible, the liturgy, the important writing of Greek and Syrian church fathers, and classical literature—Greek and Latin—into

Armenian. The Bible, translated from the Septuagint, was finished in a few years; it and most of the Patristics were translated within thirty years; but the whole process, including the translation of secular books, lasted some two hundred years.

The “Holy Translators” are highly revered in the Armenian church. Many of the works translated have since been lost in their Greek or Syriac original, but have been preserved in the Armenian.

Original works were also composed during the Golden Age, including works on history, philosophy, hagiography, homilies, hymns, and apologetics. Later works on the sciences were written. While much has been lost due to the ravages of war and time, many are preserved today in the great library of the Matenadaran (in which, for example, there are almost three hundred manuscripts of Aristotle’s works) in Yerevan and in the Armenian monasteries at Jerusalem, Venice, and Vienna. Thus, the Armenian church provided the Armenian people with a strong national culture just at the time the Armenian state was losing its political independence.

A Migrating Catholicosate

St. Gregory the Illuminator became the organizer of the Armenian Church hierarchy. From that time, the heads of the Armenian Church have been called Catholicos and still hold the same title. St. Gregory chose as the site of the Catholicosate then the capital city of Vagharshapat, in Armenia. He built the pontifical residence next to the church called “Holy Mother of God” (which in recent times would take on the name of St. Etchmiadzin, meaning the place where the Only-Begotten Son has descended), according to the vision in which he saw the Only-Begotten Son of God coming down from heaven with a golden hammer in his hand to locate the site of the new cathedral to be built in 302. The continuous upheavals, which characterized the political scenes of Armenia, made the political power move to safer places. The Church center moved as well to different locations together with the political authority.

Thus, in 485, the Catholicosate was transferred to the new capital Dvin. In the 10th century it moved from Dvin to Dzoravank and then to Aghtamar (927), to Arghina (947) and to Ani (992). After the fall of Ani and the Armenian Kingdom of Bagradits in 1045, masses of Armenians migrated to Cilicia. The Catholicosate, together with the people, settled there. It was first established in Thavblour (1062), then in Dzamendav (1072), in Dzovk (1116), in Hromkla (1149), and finally in Sis (1293), the capital of the Cilician Kingdom, where it remained for seven centuries. After the fall of the Armenian Kingdom in Cilicia, in 1375, the Church also assumed the role of national leadership, and the Catholicos was recognized as Ethnarch (Head of Nation). This national responsibility considerably broadened the scope of the Church’s mission.

Two Catholicosates within the Armenian Church

The existence of two Catholicosates within the Armenian Church, namely the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin (the Catholicosate of All Armenians), Etchmiadzin-Armenia, and the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, Antelias-Lebanon, is due to historical circumstances. In the 10th century, when Armenia was devastated by Seljuks, many Armenians left their homeland and came to settle in Cilicia where they re-organized their political, ecclesiastical and cultural life. The Catholicosate also took refuge in Cilicia.

In 1375 the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia was destroyed. Cilicia became a battleground for hostile Seljuks, Mamluks and other invaders. In the meantime Armenia was having a relatively peaceful time. The deteriorating situation in Cilicia on one hand and the growing cultural and ecclesiastical awakening in Armenia on the other, led the bishops of Armenia to elect a Catholicos in Etchmiadzin. The latter was the original seat of the Catholicosate, but it had ceased to function as Catholicos See after 485. Thus, in 1441, a new Catholicos was elected in Etchmiadzin in the person of Kirakos Virapetsi. At the same time Krikor Moussapegiants (1439-1446) was the Catholicos of Cilicia. Therefore, since 1441, there have been two Catholicosates in the Armenian Church with equal rights and privileges, and with their respective jurisdictions. The primacy of honor of the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin has always been recognized by the Catholicosate of Cilicia.

Throughout much of its history, the Armenian Orthodox Church has been an instrument of the Armenian nation's survival. It has been the Church, indeed, that has preserved Armenian national consciousness during the many centuries in which there was no Armenian state.

The Armenian Church played a significant role in the succession of Muslim empires in which its faithful were located. Because some of these were divided according to religious affiliation, the leaders of the Armenian were, in fact, also politically responsible for their communities. The Armenian Church was greatly affected by two phenomenon in the twentieth century: the genocide in Turkey, in which 1.5 million died, and the Sovietization of eastern Armenia, which ushered in seven decades of official atheism. The Genocide essentially destroyed the church in Turkey, where only a remnant remains. It has also profoundly affected the way in which the Armenian Church approaches the idea of suffering in this world.

The Church thrived in the Armenian Diaspora, and regained its strength in newly independent Armenia (1990's).