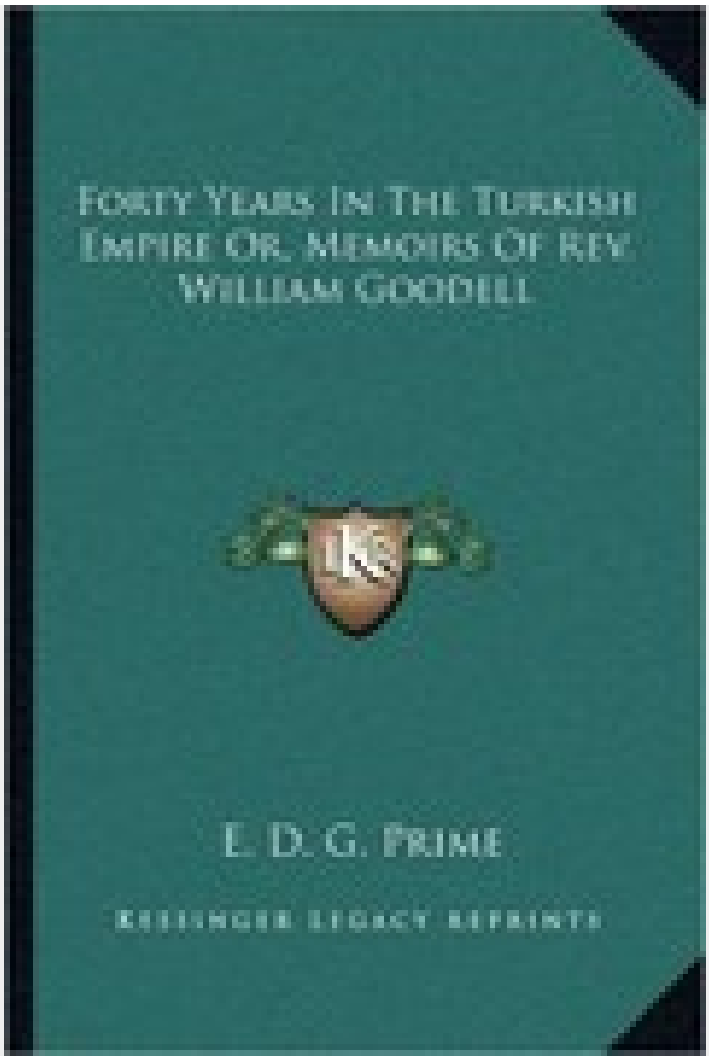
GOODELL AMONG THE ARMENIANS

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By Vahe H. Apelian, OH, USA, 11 October 2013

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Recently I came across the memoirs of Rev. William Goodell who played a prominent role in establishing the Protestant community in the Ottoman Empire. The book, titled "Forty Years in the Turkish Empire or Memoirs of Rev. William Goodell D.D, Late Missionary of A.B.C.F.M at Constantinople", was edited by his son-in-law, E. D. G. Prime. It was published by Robert Carter and Brothers (New York). Its fifth edition, posted on line by Google, is dated 1878. The below quotes are from the on-line book.

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Rev. William Goodell left the United States and embarked on his overseas mission in 1822. After a long sojourn in Malta, Lebanon, and Syria, he arrived to Constantinople, as Istanbul was known then. He had embarked on his mission on behalf of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (A.B.C.F.M.), which was the first U.S. missionary organization.

I was surprised to read that Rev. Goodell's primary, if not sole, mission was evangelizing the Armenians. I quote "*When Mr. Goodell went to Constantinople, his mission was to the Armenians*". Mr. Goodell was entrusted with the mission to Turkey proper because of his knowledge of Armenian and Turkish he had mastered while in Malta, Syria and Lebanon. He was also fluent in Arabic, Greek and Italian. He translated the Bible into "Armeno-Turkish", that is to say a Bible that reads Turkish but is in Armenian characters. It was a twenty-year endeavor.

This assertion was a revelation to me but it made sense. Sultan's Sublime Porte would have never allowed American missionaries free rein to evangelize Turks. It caved in to the Western powers and allowed Americans to do missionary work in the Ottoman Empire as long as their evangelism was carried among the Christian subjects of the empire. In all probability, the missionaries and their organizations, if not also their governments, were warmed of dire consequences should they attempt evangelize the Turks. No wonder then not a single Turk was evangelized.

Why would A.B.C.F.M embark on its mission, I wondered, singling Armenians when there were other Christian communities in the empire? Reading the memoirs presented an interesting picture of a way of life that did not have a natural evolution for reasons we all know too well.

Rev. William Goodell arrived in Constantinople on June 9, 1831. In a letter to a friend in the United States, he noted: "*My family is said to be the first who has ever visited this place*." There were other American ladies with the Goodells.

Constantinople, where the Goodells established their residency, presented the following demographics. I quote: "*The city of Constantinople contained, including the suburbs, a population of about 1,000,000 of various nationalities and religions. The Turks and other Mohammedans comprised more than half; the Greeks and Armenians each numbered 150,000, the former being the more numerous, there were about 50,000 Jews; the remainder was made of Franks and people from almost every part of the world".* Istanbul's demography was much different than it is now and the difference did not come about through natural evolution.

These distinct ethnic communities naturally intermingled but *"for the most part occupied different quarters of the city* with the *Turks having almost exclusive possession of the city proper*."

The 'Millet' system that constituted the core of the Ottoman Empire appeared odd to this western visitor who found it to be an "*anomalous form of government, the Sublime Porte, as the Sultan's government is called, being supreme, while each separate nation has its own head."* In the case of the Armenians, it was the Patriarch of Constantinople who was also the civil head of the Armenian community (Millet).

The A.B.C.F.M. board and Rev. Goodell knew well that the Armenians *"were descendents of the ancient inhabitants of Armenia. The nation embraced Christianity about the commencement of the fourth century*". The zealous missionary and the organization that supported his mission apparently had already determined, even before the missionary arrived into the fold of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, that the Armenian Church needed to embrace the "truth". According to Rev. Goodell, the Armenian Church *"has almost wholly given up to superstition and to idolatrous worship of saints, including Virgin Mary, pictures, etc."*

There appears to be a more pragmatic and practical, if not a strategic reason, for A.B.C;F.M and Rev. Goodell to single out the Armenians for their mission. I quote: " *The Armenians were an enterprising people, and the great wealth of the bankers, who were nearly all Armenians, made them very influential throughout the empire, even with the Turkish officials, who were largely dependent upon them for pecuniary advances and assistance. The various connections of this people with different parts of the country, and the influence which they were in a position to exert, in promoting the spread of the Gospel in Turkey, made it exceedingly desirable that they should embrace the truth."*

Mr. Goodell's arrival in Constantinople coincided with a reformation movement within the Armenian Church. Fifteen years later, and after much agony and ecstasy, on July 1, 1846, *"Forty persons, of whom three were women, voluntarily entered onto covenant with God and with each other, and we, in the name of all the evangelical churches of Christendom, rose and formally recognized and acknowledged them as a true church of Christ.*" The assembly on that day became the foundation of The Evangelical Church of Armenia--"Hayasdaniatz Avedaranagan Yegeghetsi"**.** In time, its adherents would continue to render much service to the Armenian nation, enriching it way more than one would have expected from the meager demographic constituency of its faithful.

On November 15, 1847, "*the grand vizier issued a firman, declaring that the Christian subjects of the Ottoman government professing Protestantism should constitutes a separate community…This firman was so worded that converts form among the Greeks and Jews who joined the Protestants might enjoy the same immunities*". On Nov. 27, 1850, Sultan Abdul Mejid ratified the edict that became the "Magna Carta" of the Protestant community that stands, to this day, in the Middle East. The Armenian Evangelicals are part and parcel of the Protestant community.

Having lived through this turbulent period for over 30 years, Rev. Goodell left Constantinople on June 27, 1865, some 40 years after leaving his homeland. Through those over four decades, he had visited his country only once. Before taking leave for good, he addressed his brethren in the Evangelical Churches in Turkey and said, "*When we first came among you, your were not a distinct people, nor did we expect you ever would be; for we had not sectarian object in view, it being no part of our plan to meddle with ecclesiastical affairs. Our sole desire was to preach Christ and Him crucified*." By then the Armenian Evangelical Church was firmly entrenched among the Armenians.

After his return to the United States, Rev. Goodell visited friends and gave sermons. He lived with son and namesake in Philadelphia where he passed away on Feb. 16, 1867.