MISSIONARIES AND THE ARMENIANS: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

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Category: Opinions

By Varouj Pogharian, Bogota, 14 December 2024

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was founded in 1810, becoming the largest American missionary organization of its time. By 1840, the Board had established missions in Africa, Southern Europe, the Near East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, including India, China, and Japan. Its mission in Asia Minor began in 1831, in Constantinople, and quickly expanded to regions such as Kharpert/Harput.

Initially, ABCFM missionaries in Asia Minor aimed to convert Muslims to Protestantism. The attempt proved nearly impossible due to the severe legal consequences of apostasy under Islamic law. The Sabbateans, followers of the Ottoman Jewish rabbi Sabbatai Zevi— who declared himself the Messiah in 1666 but converted to Islam under duress—also resisted the missionaries' efforts. This resistance helped shield them from Ottoman suspicion. The Sabbateans remained secretive. Later they became known as the *Dönmeh*. Some *Dönmeh* individuals rose to prominence in the late Ottoman period, including Mehmet Talaat Pasha, a leading figure in the Young Turk movement and one of the architects of the Armenian Genocide.

When efforts to convert Muslims and Jews faltered, the ABCFM directed its focus toward the Christian Armenians, who viewed the missionaries as potential allies in faith and modernization. Many Armenians embraced the schools, clinics, orphanages, and colleges established by the Board. The missionaries often harboured a white Anglo-Saxon sense of superiority, perceiving the Armenian Apostolic Church as spiritually deficient and steeped in what they deemed pagan rituals.

The Board's involvement in Ottoman Armenia brought progress and peril to the Armenian community. Its educational initiatives modernized Armenian society but also increased tensions with the Muslim majority. By supporting Armenian cultural and educational advancement while largely neglecting the needs of the Muslim population, the Board deepened sectarian divides. This disparity fed resentment among Muslims, reinforcing the perception of Armenians as privileged outsiders—a perception that contributed to their vulnerability during the Genocide.

A cornerstone of the ABCFM's strategy was education. They translated religious texts, beginning with the Ten Commandments, into vernacular Armenian rather than *krapar* (classical Armenian), accessible only to clergy and scholars. This democratized access to religious knowledge, fostered literacy, and instilled Protestant ideals of personal devotion and moral discipline. Many Armenians converted to Protestantism, and literacy rates soared as a result.

The Armenian Patriarchate, which served as the official representative of the Armenian *millet*, perceived Protestant advances as threatening its authority. It lobbied the Ottoman government to close missionary schools, ban Protestant publications and ostracize converts. Protestant Armenians faced excommunication, eviction, and even imprisonment or torture, further fracturing the Armenian community.

The earlier creation of separate Armenian Catholic and Protestant *millets*, under pressure from France and Britain, gave Europeans a pretext to meddle in Ottoman affairs. Although European intervention in defense of Armenian Christians was symbolic or self-serving, the mere perception of it fueled Ottoman fears of an external threat. Sultan Abdülhamid II and, later, the nationalist Young Turks viewed missionaries as agents of Western imperialism, and by extension, Armenians as collaborators with foreign powers.

Protestant missionaries began to refer to Armenians as the "Yankees of the Orient", a label that implied an imagined closeness to Western powers. While this flattered Armenian converts, it exacerbated envy and suspicion among Turks and Kurds, further isolating Armenians within Ottoman society.

Understandably, during World War I there were limitations to international diplomacy. However, as the Genocide unfolded, the evangelical movement, foremost the ABCFM, failed to leverage its influence in Washington to advocate for the Armenians despite decades of close ties to the Armenians. The Board refrained from pressuring President Woodrow Wilson—son of a Baptist minister—to intervene to stop the Armenians' systematic destruction. Concerned about the loss of their extensive property holdings in the Ottoman Empire valued at millions of dollars, the Board sat on the fence, taking the ludicrous position that American intervention in any way could make things worse for the Armenians. The Board threw the Armenians to the wind when their needs were the greatest.

The State Department, meanwhile, dismissed reports of atrocities from cities like Erzurum, Bitlis, and Harput as wartime exaggerations, further dooming Armenian pleas for help.

When the United States entered the war, American missionaries were expelled from the Ottoman Empire. They left behind a shattered Armenian population, reduced to destitution, and scattered across the globe. The schools, hospitals, and orphanages they had built over decades lay largely in ruins. Nevertheless, the missionaries' heroic efforts to care for orphans and destitute survivors remain a testament to human valour.

The involvement of missionaries in Ottoman Armenia remains a bitter legacy. On the one hand, they modernized Armenian society, internationalized their plight, and pretty much Anglo-Americanized and Protestantized two generations of Armenians. On the other, their actions—however well-intentioned—exacerbated divisions and heightened Armenian vulnerability to persecution.

Had Catholic and Protestant missionaries never set foot in Asia Minor, might the Armenians have avoided their tragic fate? The Sabbateans' strategy of rejecting foreign influence and maintaining secrecy might have shielded them from Ottoman wrath; could Armenians have benefited from a similar approach?

In contemporary Armenia, the uncritical acceptance of groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons raises questions about whether history's lessons are being forgotten. As philosopher

George Santayana famously remarked, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." While history rarely repeats itself exactly, failure to heed its warnings can lead to eerily similar outcomes.

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Photo - Wikipedia - Girls in the Euphrates College of Kharpert/Harput/Kharpoot (1873)



Varouj Pogharian was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. His grandparents were from Van, Arapkir and Urfa. His family moved to Canada when he was 18. He retired from the Canadian federal government following a career that included assignments in South America. He is currently working on a historical novel, which is set in Asia Minor during the tumultuous period that spanned the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the rise of the Young Turks. His narrative is poised to explore the complexities of this historical backdrop.

Comments



Héctor García López – 2024-12-20 19:27:30
This article explores the complex and often contradictory role of missionaries in Ottoman Armenia. While acknowledging the missionaries' humanitarian efforts in establishing schools, hospitals, and orphanages, particularly during times of hardship for the Armenian population, the article also examines the negative aspects of their presence. These include the exacerbation of internal divisions within the Armenian community, increased vulnerability to persecution, and a degree of cultural assimilation. The article raises the question of whether the Armenians' fate might have been different without missionary involvement and draws parallels to contemporary Armenia's acceptance of new religious groups. It concludes with a warning against forgetting historical lessons. Varouj, I congratulate you on this insightful and thought-provoking article. You have skillfully presented a nuanced perspective on a complex historical issue, avoiding simplistic narratives and prompting important reflections. The exploration of both the positive and negative impacts of missionary activity on the Armenian community is particularly commendable. I express my sincere gratitude to you, for sharing this valuable work. It has provided me with a deeper understanding of Armenian history and culture, specifically the intricate relationship between the Armenian people and missionary influence. Your article has sparked a strong interest in learning more about this fascinating and often tragic period. Thank you for making me part of the people interested in such an interesting culture.



Ezana – 2024-12-20 12:54:05

Modernization in a society facing plight is always promising on the surface, but as the title notes, a double edged sword because intentions for change are varied, and don't have much in common. While issues such as boosting literacy and diffusing western innovations are positive, we see local agency, the church and culture being shaken and questioned by those exposed to the West through the good intention of individual missionaries. Theologically, rationalism and the need to literally understand the bible and acquire faith through knowledge challenges the Eastern contemplative faith, which bases itself on the mystery of the almighty not needing to be understood, but believed in as in the case of the transubstantiation - conversion of bread to Christ's body and wine to his blood. This is hegemony in that its domination with the consent of local actors such as peasants aspiring better conditions and opportunities in the world they are being exposed, providing them with English and preparing some for Western higher education, contributing to new leadership. Nonetheless, it contributes to a divided society posing a challenge to local institutions, which have symbolized identity. Many orthodox communities have had to undergo changes similar to the Councils and Encyclicals in the Western Roman Church such as using modern and comprehensible languages.



Varouj Pogharian – 2024-12-19 04:42:21

In the 19th century, evangelical missionaries expanded into Asia Minor, Asia, and Africa supported by missionary societies which aimed to convert non-Christians to Protestantism. Evangelicals were driven (and still are today) by a belief in the divine mandate to spread the Gospel. During the 'Scramble for Africa' and increased European colonialism in Asia, missionaries often accompanied colonial expeditions, viewing their work as a means to civilize and uplift indigenous populations. The cultural, theological, and historical complexities of Islam and Judaism posed barriers to conversion, not least the perception of missionaries as representatives of colonial powers. The success of the missionaries in converting Muslims and Jews was modest. However, among Apostolic Christian Armenians, evangelical ideas and practices were welcomed. The evangelicals' efforts were not solely directed at non-Christians overseas. The ABCFM also sent missionaries to the Southeastern United States to establish missions and schools to convert the Cherokee. The Cherokees resisted those efforts. In Hawaii, the missionaries had significant success replacing traditional Hawaiian religious practices with Christianity.



Vahe H Apelian – 2024-12-18 20:17:39

*When efforts to convert Muslims and Jews faltered," is more a saloon conversation than historical. I Quote from the memoirs of Rev. William Goodell who played a prominent role in establishing the Protestant community in the Ottoman Empire. The book is 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”: The quote: ““When Mr. Goodell went to Constantinople, his mission was to the Armenians”.” The American missionaries’ mission was NOT to evangelize the Turks or among the Muslims. As to why it was, interested readers my read my blog about William Goodell and his mission.



Nicolai – 2024-12-18 20:10:18

Not to forget,, the official Gazette of Turkey, (Takvimi Vekayi), Nr. 3604 on the 22 of july 1919 published the verdict of the Ottoman Turkish TribunaL Djavid, Talaat,, Enver,,Djamal and Dr. Nazim were sentenced to death and Mustafa Sheref, Musa Kazim were sentenced 15 years hard labour. For the full version of the verdict, see www.armenianjustice.com on the Armenian Genocide page.