

Early Protestant Missionary Activity, Heresy and Church in Ottoman Armenia (1782–1909)

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Introduction: The Birth of a “Foundation Myth”

For the tenets of Paulicianism, planted in Thrace in the eighth and tenth centuries, spread into Poland and Bohemia, into Italy and France, into the countries of the Rhine, and even into far-off England, everywhere preparing the soil for the great Reformation which was to come.¹

With these words, in 1909, the Armenian Protestant scholar Leon Arpee traced the ancestry of Reformed Christianity to the medieval Armenian movement of the Paulicians, active mainly in the sixth-ninth centuries. This reading was not new: already in 1788 Edward Gibbon, in his monumental *Decline and Fall*, described the fight of the Paulicians against Byzantine emperors in the ninth century as a struggle for religious freedom against the tyrannical, obscurantist and archetypally decadent rulers of Constantinople, putting that effort in relation with later movements for reformation.² Arpee, however, pushed the discourse further, turning the Paulicians into the *real* ancestors of “the great Reformation which was to come”; additionally, he also claimed that they, later persecuted under the name of “Tondrakians”, survived until his own time, finally finding protection thanks to the presence of Protestant missionaries in Ottoman Armenia:

1 Leon Arpee, *The Armenian Awakening; A History of the Armenian Church, 1820–1860* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago press, 1909), 91.

2 See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Volume the Fifth* (London: W. Strahan; and T. Cadell, in the Strand, 1788), 519–540. Describing the wars between the Paulicians and the Byzantine emperors, Gibbon observed: “The most furious and desperate of rebels are the sectaries of a religion long persecuted, and at length provoked. [...] Such have been the Hussites of Bohemia and the Calvinists of France, and such, in the ninth century, were the Paulicians of Armenia” (ibid., 528); and, later on, commenting on the short-lived success of the Paulicians: “It is not unpleasing to observe the triumph of rebellion over the same despotism which has disdained the prayers of an injured people”, 529.

And who can tell how much Protestant missions in Armenia have been feeding on Paulician soil? [...] In 1880, of the one hundred and thirty-seven Protestant households of Valarshabad (Neapolis), in the vicinity of Etschmiadzin [i.e. Ējmiacin, the see of the Armenian catholicos], nearly three-quarters were originally Tondrakian.³

The circle was thus completed: the last remnants, those who had “prepared the soil” for the Reformation, enduring centuries of harsh persecution, were—according to this view—saved by the trees sprung from that very soil. And not only that: what Arpee hints is that those “Tondrakians” were, in fact Protestants *ante litteram*. They always had been, even before Protestantism existed: it was not Armenian Protestants who were the result of Protestant preaching, it was Protestantism itself that was indebted to the Armenian Tondrakians, and to their centuries-long quasi-missionary activity, to their “preparing the soil.”

This interpretation, which effectively overturns the relationship between the agent and recipient of preaching, may look (and probably is) a bit stretched; nevertheless, its development is worth exploring, especially since it can help to shed light on the beginnings of Protestant missions among the Armenians, and on the relationship between preaching, history and scholarship. In fact, Arpee’s opinion was not isolated: in 1898, the orientalist and armenologist F.C. Conybeare published an eighteenth-century manuscript titled *The Key of Truth*, that he considered to be “A manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia.”⁴ We will return to this important document later, but for the moment it is sufficient to say that Conybeare held the same views expressed by Arpee.⁵ His theory was explicitly influenced by Gibbon, as he states in the preface to his work:

In the autumn of the year 1891, I went to Armenia for a second time, in the hope of finding an ancient version of the Book of Enoch, and of recover-

3 Arpee, *The Armenian Awakening*, 75. As we will see in section 3, Arpee was not the first to make such a claim, even though it was he who contributed more to its popularity.

4 Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare, *The Key of Truth: A Manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia: The Armenian Text Edited and Translated with Illustrative Documents and Introduction by Fred. C. Conybeare*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898).

5 Actually, Arpee drew extensively from Conybeare’s work, developing his ideas in an article of 1906. See Leon Arpee, “Armenian Paulicianism and the Key of Truth”, *The American Journal of Theology*, 10, no. 2 (1906): 267–285. Some passages of that article were incorporated *verbatim* in *The Armenian Awakening*, three years later.

ing documents illustrative of the ancient heretics of that land, particularly of the Paulicians. For Gibbon's picture of their puritanism, fresh and vigorous in an age when Greek Christianity had degenerated into the court superstition of Constantinople, had fascinated my imagination.⁶

Gibbon's stance towards any form of organised religion, as is known, was unflattering to say the least; the same can be said of Conybeare, even though his position regarding Christianity is perhaps more difficult to describe.⁷ Certainly both display a sympathetic view of the Reformation. Both, one may add, were undeniably British. They seem to have looked at Oriental Christianity with an attitude very similar to that described by Bernard Heyberger:

For a long time, Eastern Christians have only interested a specific milieu in European opinion, that of those believers in search of a Christianity of the origins and the ascetic spirituality of the Desert Fathers [...]. It is not otherness that they seek in Eastern Christianity, but a kind of fulfilment of their own identity and their own faith, disregarding what Eastern Christians may have that is authentically different, or even disturbing, in relation to the European Christianity that emerged from the two Reformations, Protestant and Catholic.⁸

Arpee was in a different position: he was a "chrétien du Proche-Orient", an Eastern Christian himself. He was an Armenian Protestant scholar and pastor, who was born in the Ottoman empire and moved to the United States

6 Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, v (the pages of the lengthy preface and introduction are numbered with Roman numerals).

7 For a biographical notice about F.C. Conybeare, see Louis Mariès, "Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare (1856–1924): notice biographique et bibliographie critique", *Revue des études arméniennes*, 6, no. 2 (1926): 185–332. According to Mariès, to describe in further detail the religious thought of Conybeare "est impossible et vain" (*ibid.*, 192).

8 Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens au Proche-Orient. De la compassion à la compréhension* (Paris: Payot, 2013), 8, "Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient n'ont longtemps intéressé qu'un milieu spécifique dans l'opinion européenne, celui de ces croyants à la recherche d'un christianisme des origines et de la spiritualité ascétique des Pères du désert [...]. Ce n'est pas l'altérité qu'ils recherchent dans le christianisme oriental, mais une sorte d'accomplissement de leur propre identité et de leur propre foi, en faisant fi de ce que les chrétiens orientaux peuvent avoir d'authentiquement différent, voire de dérangeant, par rapport au christianisme européen issu des deux Réformes, protestante et catholique."

early in his life, and whose work would become a cornerstone of the Armenian Evangelical Church.⁹ He was both the result of missionary activity and preaching, and a preacher himself, in a sense: as evidenced in the 2010s by the work of Anna Ōhanjanyan,¹⁰ the reading proposed by Arpee and subsequently by other Protestant Armenian scholars has later become what she describes as a “foundational myth” for the Armenian Evangelical Church. In Ōhanjanyan’s words,

the most important instance of this [myth] is a belief that all Armenian Evangelical churches have their historical and ideological roots in the medieval Paulician and Tondrakian movements, which troubled the Byzantine empire from the eighth century onwards.¹¹

It is not my intention to discuss here the implications, the actual circulation, and the historicity of this “myth”: it would be a challenging and intriguing task, but one that goes far beyond the limits of the present contribution. What I propose, instead, is to trace the history of its development, from the beginning of Protestant missionary activity in the Ottoman empire to the formulation made by Arpee in 1909. More precisely, I will focus on the first half of the nineteenth century, in order to see if and how Protestant missionaries, the

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- 9 In addition to *The Armenian Awakening*, mentioned above, see Leon Arpee, *A Century of Armenian Protestantism, 1846–1946* (Armenian Missionary Association of America, Incorporated, 1946). For a biographical sketch of Arpee, see Robert Hastings Nichols, “Leon Arpee”, *Church History*, 17, no. 1 (1948): 55.
- 10 Anna Ōhanjanyan, “Evangelical and Pentecostal Communities in Armenia: Negotiating Identity and Accommodation”, in *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity, Politics and Popular Practice*, ed. Alexander Agadjanian (London: Ashgate, 2014), 99–103. See also Anna Ōhanjanyan, “The Key of Truth and the Problem of the ‘Neo T’ondrakites’ at the End of the 19th Century”, *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 20 (2011): 131–136; and Anna Ōhanjanyan, “*Banali čšmartut’ean*” *erkə* (Erevan: Erevani Petakan Hamalsaran Hratarakč’ut’yun, 2015). I am grateful to Anna Ōhanjanyan for having provided me access to her work.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 99. This narrative, sometimes in less clear-cut terms, is maintained not only by Arpee, but also by a number of other Protestant Armenian scholars: see for instance Giragos H. Chopourian, *The Armenian Evangelical Reformation: Causes and Effects* (New York: Armenian Missionary Association of America, 1972), 52–53 and 56–57. Still in 1995, an Armenian man aged 94 who escaped to the United States a few years before the genocide of 1915 declared himself to be a Paulician, see James R. Russell, “The Last of the Paulicians”, *Hask*, 7–8 (1995–1996): 33–47; republished in James R. Russell, *Armenian and Iranian Studies*, Harvard Armenian Text and Studies, 9 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 677–691. Reportedly, the man was on good terms with American Baptists, “since they seemed to resemble Paulicianism”, Russell, “The Last”, 46.

Armenian Apostolic Church, and Armenian Protestant themselves made use (or not) of such a “myth” in their early activity, for preaching, condemning, or justifying Protestantism, and how these actors reacted (or not) to the existence of alleged “Tondrakians” in Armenia.

In order to do this, I will first provide a short summary of specific Protestant missions and preaching activities among Armenians in the early nineteenth century, with contextual information about the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Ottoman empire. I will then proceed to present one of the major factors at the origin of the “myth”, namely the existence of alleged “Tondrakians” in Ottoman and Russian Armenia, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Finally, I will examine how the alleged Tondrakians, the Protestant missionaries and the Armenian Apostolic Church interacted in the middle of the nineteenth century, arguing that the “myth” was largely a by-product of the historical processes that occurred in those years, and was only later picked up by some researchers—and particularly by Protestant Armenian scholars such as Arpee. Only later would it become relevant also to preaching, becoming the sort of “myth” that Ōhanjanyan described. I will then conclude with some final remarks.

The sources on which this research is based are almost entirely represented by published studies or reports: in many cases, they consist of contemporary (or almost-contemporary) accounts by Protestant missionaries, which must therefore be evaluated in the light of the positioning of their authors. The same must be said for documents produced by Armenian Apostolic ecclesiastical authorities, that have been recently re-examined and re-evaluated by Ōhanjanyan; it is thanks to her work that parts of the archival documents pertaining to the alleged Tondrakians are now identifiable and partly published.¹² A particular case is represented by the manuscript of the *Key of Truth*, the “manual of the Paulician Church of Armenia” published by Conybeare, which is an extremely relevant, complex and debated document: more details about it in will be given in the third section of this work.

12 See the appendixes to Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*.

1 The American Board of Commissioners and the Beginning of Protestant Missionary Activity in the Ottoman Empire

The first Evangelical Church in the Ottoman empire was created in 1846, while a charter for Protestant Christians in the Ottoman empire was granted by the Sublime Porte in 1847; finally, in 1850, Protestants received *millet* status, thus becoming a formally recognised religious community within the empire.¹³ These events were primarily the result of the missionary activity of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions among Christian Armenians. Founded in 1810 on the initiative of some students of the Andover Theological Seminary (Massachusetts), the American Board started its first mission in the Ottoman empire in 1820.¹⁴ Originally, it was meant to convert Muslims and Jews to Christianity, to “completely demolish this mighty empire of sin”, in the words of one of the first missionaries.¹⁵ Soon enough, however, it turned to the conversion of Eastern Christians—or, in the words of the American Board, “the degenerate churches of the East”:¹⁶ Orthodox Christians (mainly Greeks), Copts, Syrians, and most importantly Armenians. The Protestant *millet* was actually created as a result of the successful mission of the American Board among the Armenians of Constantinople, who up to that point belonged for the most part to the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁷

13 This is, in short, the meaning of *millet*. For a more detailed explanation of the *millet* system see Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East, The Contemporary Middle East*, 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 81–88. For the dates and the creation of the Protestant *millet*, see Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810–1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 14–15. The event fits in the wider process of fragmentation and ultimately dissolution of the *millet* system which characterised the last centuries of the Ottoman empire.

14 The first mission was addressed to Palestine, with the main aim of promoting “awakening” (in a religious sense, as intended by American Protestants of that time) through education and schools. For more details about the early history of the American Board, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 51–71.

15 The quotation is from a letter sent from Smyrna on 1 February 1820 by Levi Parsons, one of the first two missionaries from the American Board who arrived in the Ottoman empire, see Levi Parsons, *Memoir of Rev. Levi Parsons, Late Missionary to Palestine. In Three Parts*, ed. Daniel O. Morton (Poultney, VT: Smith & Shute, 1824), 285. On the quotation and about this first mission of the American Board see Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 6. See also Chourpourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 21–34.

16 The definition is found in an 1831 report of the American Board quoted in Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 8.

17 That is not to say that all Protestant missionary activity in the Ottoman empire was carried

The Armenian Apostolic Church has existed at least from the fourth century as an organised community, and in the course of time has become more and more conterminous with the Armenians themselves, so much so that it represents today a sizeable share of what constitutes the Armenian national identity.¹⁸ Such a state of affairs was encouraged with the rise of the Ottoman empire and the creation, in 1461, of an Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople that became responsible for all the Armenian subjects of the sultan, in line with the *millet* system. The patriarch was hierarchically inferior to the *catholicos*, i.e. the head of the Armenian church, but in practice his authority within the vast empire (including the Western and larger portion of Armenia) was great and virtually unchecked, especially because, since 1441, the *catholicos* has had his residence in Ejmiacin, in Eastern Armenia, in an area which would remain outside of Ottoman control. Another Armenian Patriarchate existed in Jerusalem, which enjoyed much prestige but was limited in jurisdiction.

It is no surprise, therefore, that missionaries of the American Board dispatched to the Ottoman capital and to Anatolia interacted almost exclusively with the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople when dealing with matters

out by the American Board or exclusively among Armenians, see Chantal Verdeil, 'Introduction', in *Missions chrétiennes en terre d'islam (XVII^e-XIX^e siècles)*, ed. Chantal Verdeil (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 17–23 for a wider prospect. Nor we can say that Protestant missionary activity in the Ottoman empire in general began with the American Board, see Sharkey, *History*, 99–101. However it was pro-American Board Armenians who had a preponderant role in the events that led to the creation of the Protestant *millet*, see Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 12–15. Even later, Armenians formed the majority of the Protestant population of the Ottoman empire, until the Genocide perpetrated by Ottoman authorities in 1915, see Sharkey, *History*, 210–211.

- 18 As a result of this, virtually any general work on Armenian history contains an account and a contextualisation of the Armenian Church. For such accounts, see Gérard Dédéyan, ed., *Histoire des Arméniens* (Toulouse: Privat, 1986); Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times*, 2 vols (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1997). A more focused account on the origins and development of the Armenian Church in the first millennium—the qualification of "Apostolic" became standardised only centuries after its creation—can be found in Pierre Marval, "Les nouvelles frontières", in *Histoire du christianisme: des origines à nos jours. Tome II, Naissance d'une chrétienté (250–430)*, ed. Charles Pietri and Luce Pietri, vol. II, XIV vols (Paris: Desclée, 1995), 937–951; Nina G. Garsoïan, "L'Arménie", in *Histoire du christianisme: des origines à nos jours. Tome III, Les Églises d'orient et d'occident (432–610)*, ed. Luce Pietri, vol. III, XIV vols (Paris: Desclée, 1998), 1125–1167; and Jean-Pierre Mahé, "L'Église arménienne de 611 à 1066", in *Histoire du christianisme: des origines à nos jours. Tome IV, Evêques, moines et empereurs (610–1054)*, ed. Jean-Marie Maveur, Gilbert Dagron, and Christian Hannick, vol. IV, XIV vols (Paris: Desclée, 1993), 457–548.

Armenian. The situation was somewhat different as far as missions to Syria and Palestine were concerned, due to the overlapping religious jurisdictions within the empire and to centuries-long missionary practices:¹⁹ that area, however, remains outside our present scope.²⁰

While the mission of the American Board was addressed towards all the Christian subjects of the Ottoman empire, it proved most successful among Armenians and—to a lesser degree—Syrians. This is particularly evident when we look at the schools opened by American Board missionaries, that counted several hundred students already in 1850 and about 33,000 by 1914,²¹ spread across many provinces of the empire: around 27,000 of them were from schools based in provinces inhabited by Armenians, 6,000 from schools located in Syria. This figure should be read in the context of a generalised effort towards improving education in the Ottoman empire, which was carried out by the Sublime Porte in parallel—and often in contrast—with the action of the American Board.²² Additionally, the schools were not confessional, meaning that not every Armenian pupil of an American Board school necessarily became a Protestant Armenian: many considered the American schools as a first step towards possible emigration to the United States, in search of a better future.²³

19 The different approach in Constantinople and in Syria and Palestine was already tangible in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, as explained by Cesare Santus, “Conflicting Views: Catholic Missionaries in Ottoman Cities between Accommodation and Latinization”, in *Catholic Missionaries in Early Modern Asia: Patterns of Localization*, ed. Nadine Amsler et al., *Religious Cultures in the Early Modern World* (London; New York: Routledge, 2020), 96–109. At that time, this state of affairs affected only Catholic missions to the Ottoman empire, since the privileged relationship with the sultan enjoyed by the Catholic kings of France made the establishment of Protestant missions almost impossible. The situation changed after the French Revolution.

20 For the American missions to Syria and Palestine, see Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*.

21 Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 27.

22 For the attempts at modernising the Ottoman education system, see Selçuk Aksin Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839–1908: Islamization, Autocracy and Discipline*, *The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage* 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2001). For the context in which these reformations took place, and in general about the Ottoman empire in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998). The situation in Syria with regards to schools and education is dealt with in Julia Hauser, Christine B. Lindner, and Esther Moller, eds., *Entangled Education: Foreign and Local Schools in Ottoman Syria and Mandate Lebanon (19–20th Centuries)* (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2016). The effects of the Protestant schools on Armenian education is discussed in Kevork A. Sarafian, *History Of Education In Armenia* (La Verne, CA: La Verne Leader, 1923), 163–192.

23 This happened especially at the beginning of the twentieth century, a little outside our

Nevertheless, a good number of students were impressed enough by the teaching imparted to lean towards the Armenian Evangelical Church: already in 1838 there were hundreds of Armenian Protestants in Constantinople.²⁴ Most importantly, converted students could become effective in promoting Protestantism within the Armenian community. Even in a remote area like Ayntab—today named Gaziantep—the number of Protestant Armenians increased dramatically in little more than twenty years (1848–1869): from eight to 350, with thousands of church attendants.²⁵ The Armenian Apostolic Church noted early on, even before 1850, that its flock was particularly responsive to Protestant missionaries, and began to take measures in order to react and to confront the phenomenon through its own theological, ecclesiological and doctrinal framework.²⁶

2 The Armenian Apostolic Church and Protestant Missionaries

Eastern Churches within the Ottoman empire often maintained a cordial—at times even welcoming—relationship towards Western Protestant missionaries: conversely, the attitude towards adherents of those Churches who converted to Protestantism was much less accommodating. Eastern Churches aimed to preserve their flock and maintain their integrity in terms of faith and numbers; in addition, being legally recognised institutions within the empire, they could request that the Ottoman civil authorities imprison or even sentence to death as apostates those who converted to other, non-recognised Christian confessions. This did not always occur in practice, but became increasingly a concern during the eighteenth century—as the issue of the *communicatio in sacris*, i.e. the common participation in worship of Christians of different confessions, became more serious—and in the nineteenth century, when missionary activity—up to then largely limited to Catholic proselytism—began to

scope: in the period from 1905 to 1914, 367,000 people emigrated from the Ottoman empire to the United States, most of them Greeks, Arabs or Armenians, see Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 31.

24 Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 66–67.

25 Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 15.

26 The first systematic actions against Armenians with Protestant sympathies are recorded in 1839 by the leader of the American Board in Constantinople, W. Goodell, see Edward Dorr Griffin Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire, or: Memoirs of Rev. William Goodell, D.D., Late Missionary of the A. B. C. F. M. at Constantinople* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1877), 229–239.

be carried out also by Protestants.²⁷ Cases of “martyrdom” involving the death of Protestant or Catholic converts appear from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and were readily exploited by missionaries of both confessions.²⁸

A result of this dynamic, encouraged by the almost eschatological approach of the first Protestant missions to the Ottoman empire,²⁹ was that missionaries often presented their preaching as a return to the genuine faith of the Eastern Churches, which in their view had been corrupted by centuries of hierarchical oppression and Islamic domination.³⁰ The Eastern Churches themselves, on the contrary, had a tendency to present missionaries as foreigners, alien to the centuries-long tradition of Eastern Christianity.³¹

In the case of the Armenian Church, the long acquaintance with Orthodox and Catholic confessions had produced, over hundreds of years, a wide array of theological, canonical and practical devices for countering Greek or Latin proselytism.³² This process was continued as a result of the “confessionalisation” that engaged Christian communities in the Ottoman empire since the seventeenth century, leading to the production of clear theological, doctrinal,

27 For the issue of the *communicatio in sacris* see Cesare Santus, *Trasgressioni necessarie: comunicatio in sacris, coesistenza e conflitti tra le comunità cristiane orientali (Levante e Impero ottomano, XVII–XVIII secolo)*, Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d’Athènes et de Rome 383 (Roma: École française de Rome, 2019).

28 See for instance the case of the Protestant convert As’ad Shidyay, described by Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 3–6. See also the case of the eleven Christians of Aleppo who, in 1818, were sentenced to death because they proclaimed themselves subject to the Roman pontiff and not to their non-catholic bishops, see Andrea Riccardi, *Mediterraneo. Cristianesimo e Islam tra coabitazione e conflitto* (Milano: Guerini e Associati, 1997), 78–79.

29 For this eschatological approach see Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Nearest East: American Millennialism and Mission to the Middle East* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 15–33. See also Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 6; Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 19–21; and Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven*, 61–63.

30 See the remark about the “degenerate churches of the East” above, section 1. On the negative attitude towards the Armenian Apostolic Church see also Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 39–43.

31 Consequently, Armenian Catholics were qualified as “Franks” in the late seventeenth century, see Anna Ohanjanyan, “Creedal Controversies among Armenians in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire”, *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, 27 (2020): 16–17.

32 Armenians and Greeks (Byzantines) had already developed policies and even canons of coexistence in the ninth century, see Igor Dorfinann-Lazarev, *Arméniens et byzantins à l’époque de Photius: deux débats théologiques après le triomphe de l’orthodoxie*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 609; Subsidia, 117 (Lovanii: Peeters, 2004). With Latins, theological and philosophical instruments of debate were successfully created during the fourteenth century, see Sergio La Porta, “Armeno-Latin Intellectual Exchange in the Fourteenth Century: Scholarly Traditions in Conversation and Competition”, *Medieval Encounters*, 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 269–294.

liturgical and ecclesiological boundaries between the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.³³ Members of these Churches (including converts) were regarded as schismatics, but they could ultimately find legal protection in the Orthodox *millet* (which had existed since 1453) or even in the Catholic *millet* (after its creation in 1834).³⁴

In the nineteenth century, however, the Armenian Apostolic Church was seemingly not prepared to counter the extremely new phenomenon of Protestant missionaries in the same way in which it dealt with Catholic missionaries. Additionally, those who adhered to a Protestant confession had no recognised *millet* that could legally shelter them, at least until 1850. They were therefore more exposed to the retaliation of ecclesiastical authorities, who could treat them as heretics, rather than as members of a “schismatic” (but legally recognised) confession.

Secondly, from a theoretical point of view, that distinctiveness and centuries-long experience that the Armenian Apostolic Church possessed with regard to the Catholic and Orthodox Churches was far less developed in the case of the Protestant Churches. This does not mean that Reformed Christianity was unknown to the Armenian Apostolic Church but, as far as we can tell, there was a certain tendency of the Armenian ecclesiastical authorities to consider Protestantism as a form of heresy, rather than as a separate “Church”—albeit a “schismatic” one.³⁵ In other words, in order to frame the phenomenon of Armenian Protestants, the Armenian Church had initially to resort to its canonical and doctrinal production against heresies, and in particular against two groups: the Paulicians and the Tondrakians.

3 Preaching and Missionary Activity in 19th-Century Armenia: Tondrakians, Protestants and the Key of Truth

The Paulicians, as mentioned above, are known to Armenian and Greek sources at least from the sixth century—possibly even earlier—but their subsequent developments mainly interested the Byzantine empire, then the Balkans and

33 On the issue of confessionalisation or confession-building in the Ottoman empire see Ohanjanyan, ‘Creedal Controversies’, 9–11.

34 For the recognition of Eastern Catholic churches in the Ottoman empire in that year, see Joseph Hajjar, *Un lutteur infatigable: le patriarche Maximos III Mazloum* (Harissa: Imprimerie Saint Paul, 1957), 81–82.

35 A very early account in Armenian about Protestants (late seventeenth century) compares them to Arius and Nestorius, see Ohanjanyan, ‘Creedal Controversies’, 19.

the West.³⁶ The Tondrakians, in turn, are first mentioned in the tenth century, and remained—as far as we can tell—a predominantly Armenian phenomenon. Much has been written, and yet little is known, about these groups, except that they had an aversion for the ecclesiastical hierarchy and for some sacraments—at least in the form in which they were administered by the Armenian Church.³⁷ The Paulicians, at least since the ninth century, seem to have held dualist beliefs: they considered the world and all matter to be the creation of an evil god, the “prince of this world” (cf. John 12, 31), while the true God in Heaven sent Christ to deliver humanity from this material prison.³⁸ The Tondrakians, in turn, seem to have professed a form of Adoptionism, considering Jesus as a man who was “adopted” by God and therefore ascended to divinity; they apparently recognised only two sacraments, i.e. Baptism and Eucharist. Despite these differences, some sources seemingly confused Paulicians and Tondrakians as members of the same group, and some modern authors still do so.³⁹ To the Armenian Church, in any case, they were equally heretics, even though the ecclesiastical authorities, from the eleventh-twelfth centuries, focused on contrasting and prosecuting the Tondrakians.⁴⁰

36 See on this matter Yuri Stoyanov, *The Other God: Dualist Religions from Antiquity to the Cathar Heresy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). See also Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

37 On the difficult issue of the doctrine of Paulicians and Tondrakians, see Nina G. Garsoïan, *The Paulician Heresy: A Study of the Origin and Development of Paulicianism in Armenia and the Eastern Provinces of the Byzantine Empire*, Publications in Near and Middle East Studies, Series A 6 (The Hague; Paris: Mouton, 1967); and Paul Lemerle, “L’histoire des Pauliciens d’Asie Mineure d’après les sources grecques”, *Travaux et mémoires*, 5 (1973): 1–144, for the Paulicians. See Vrej Nersessian, *The Tondrakian Movement: Religious Movements in the Armenian Church from the 4th to the 10th Centuries*. (London: Kahn & Averill, 1987); and the appendix to Annie Mahé and Jean-Pierre Mahé, eds., *Tragédie: Matean otbergut ean: le livre des lamentations*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 584; Subsidia, 106 (Lovanii: Peeters, 2000), for the Tondrakians.

38 See Lemerle, “L’histoire”, 126–132.

39 As reported by Nersessian, *Tondrakian Movement*, 47–54. Nersessian himself, however, is somewhat more cautious (*ibid.*, 54). For a slightly different reading, it is possible to consider my argument that the identification of Paulicians and Tondrakians largely rests on a misunderstanding of one of our sources, see Federico Alpi, “L’identificazione fra tondrachiani e pauliciani e la testimonianza della lettera n. 4 (K67) di Grigor Magistros”, in *Al crocevia delle civiltà: Ricerche su Caucaso e Asia Centrale*, ed. Aldo Ferrari and Daniele Guizzo, *Eurasiatica* (n.s.) 1 (Venezia: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 2014), 51–75.

40 From the twelfth century, when the Armenian sources name the Paulicians, they do so in relation to Byzantium: in Armenia only Tondrakians are mentioned, see Nersessian, *Tondrakian Movement*, 64–65. It remains unclear, however, whether Armenian ecclesiast-

Scholars such as Arpee and Conybeare, however, held very different views about Tondrakians, as we have seen in the introduction of this contribution: according to them, the Tondrakians were the spiritual—or even actual—ancestors of the Armenian Protestant Church. It is important to observe, at this point, that the first author to describe Armenian Protestants as descendants of earlier “heretical” movements appears to have been neither Arpee nor Conybeare, but the Armenian Apostolic scholar, professor and monk Galust Tēr-Mkrtč’ean. In 1892, he published an article in *Ararat*—the periodical of the Holy See of the Armenian Apostolic Church—in which he not only praised the courage and tenacity of the Tondrakians and of their Paulician predecessors, but even claimed that they spread their influence over Western Europe (in the form of Bogomils, then Cathars) and thus became the “true forefathers and the founders of the Reform and of all Protestant-Evangelical churches.”⁴¹ Only six years later, as we have mentioned, the case of the Tondrakians was brought to the international attention when Frederick C. Conybeare published *The Key of Truth*.⁴²

The only surviving manuscript of the *Key of Truth* is presently catalogued as ms 6710 at the Institute for Manuscripts of Yerevan (the Matenadaran).⁴³ According to its colophon, the work was composed in 1782 in the Armenian district of Tarōn, at that time part of the Ottoman empire, even though the manuscript itself may be a later copy, made in 1811 in the same district.⁴⁴

The *Key of Truth* is a sort of handbook that contains several peculiar views on Baptism and Eucharist, with some considerations on Satan and evil in gen-

ical authorities considered the Paulicians to be merely a “branch” of Tondrakianism in the Byzantine empire, or a separate group.

41 Galust Tēr-Mkrtč’ean, “Eraneloy Hawr Ananiayi Gir Xostovanut’ean [The Book of Confession by the Blessed Father Anania]”, *Ararat*, 25, no. 1 (1892): 3 (the translation from Armenian is mine). This fact is noted by Ōhanjanyan, “The Key of Truth”, 131. It is unclear why Tēr-Mkrtč’ean expressed—with the nickname *Miaban*, “monk”—such a view, he may have attempted to promote a reformation within the Armenian Apostolic Church. The rest of his article is very supportive of the Tondrakians, of return to the origins of Christianity, and of Church reformation in general: according to Ōhanjanyan (*ibid.*) this was due to the fact that, having studied and taught in Paris and Munich, he “bore the impact of modern European Protestant ideology”. She does not elaborate further, however, in this respect. Whatever the case, as might be expected, he was soon opposed by more conservative representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church (*ibid.*, 131–132).

42 In 1898, see above in the introduction.

43 See the entry 6710 in the short catalogue of manuscripts of the Matenadaran: Ō. Eganyan, A. Zeyt’unyan, and P. Ant’abyan, *C’uc’ak jeṛagrac’ Maštoc’i anyan Matenadaran. Hator B* (Erevan: Haykakan SSR GA hratarakč’ut’yun, 1970).

44 The date of 1811 appears in the opening page of the manuscript, where it has subsequently been altered to 1832 and then to 1882, see the discussion in Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*, 56–63.

eral.⁴⁵ In general, it puts great emphasis on Baptism, but rejects all the sacraments except Baptism itself and Communion. It forbids the Baptism of infants, and rules that only tested adults should be baptised, for which a detailed ritual is given. It describes a three-tier community of believers, made up of catechumens, baptised and “elects” (in Armenian “*əntreal*”); a ritual is described also for the ordination of the “elect”. The book explicitly rejects the intercession of saints, and the cult of images, and it denies the virginity of Mary after giving birth; additionally, it strongly implies that Jesus was created by God, and was then adopted as the Son of God upon baptism: the most explicit passages on the matter, however, have been erased or torn away. Finally, the book is very critical of the Orthodox Church (the “Greeks”, in the manuscript), the Catholic Church (the “Latins”) and the Armenian Apostolic Church. One can well see why Conybeare, finding many similarities between the contents of the *Key of Truth* and the little we know about Paulicians and Tondrakians, published the manuscript as a “manual of the Paulician church of Armenia”, dating it to the ninth century if not earlier. One can also understand, on account of the emphasis on Baptism and Eucharist only, of the rejection of the cult of saints and images, and of other elements, why some Armenian Protestants later considered this “manual” (and, in turn, Paulicians and Tondrakians) to be their predecessors, in a sense.

Despite Conybeare’s claims, however, the *Key of Truth* is much more recent than the ninth century. It appears to be the work of an Armenian priest named Yovhannēs Vahaguni who, in the 1780s and 1790s, preached in the Ottoman town (and district) of Khnus, south of Erzurum.⁴⁶ The Armenian bishop of Erzurum soon attempted to stop Yovhannēs’s activities, accusing him of being a Tondrakian and a heretic, and sent an alarming report to the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople: the priest was eventually sent to Venice, to the Armenian Catholic monastic community of San Lazzaro, where a monk described him as “not a Tondrakian, but rather a Manichaeon, or—better—a manicheo-calvinist and a Lutheran”.⁴⁷ Yovhannēs, however, managed to re-

45 The content of the *Key of Truth* is accessible in English translation in Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, 69–124.

46 The information about this Yovhannēs is collected and analysed (in Armenian) in V. Grigoryan, “Nor telekut’yunner ‘Banali Čšmartut’ean’ erki heġinak Hovhannes erēc’i masin”, *Banaber Matenadarani*, 5 (1968): 333–344. The work of Grigoryan is also summarised in English by Nersessian, *Tondrakian Movement*, 89–96. For the *Key of Truth* as a composition of the late eighteenth century, see the definitive arguments presented by Ōhanġanyan, *Banali*. See also Hovnan Hakobyan, “‘Banali Čšmartut’ean’ grk’i bnuyt’ ew meknut’yun”, *Ēġmiacin*, 64, no. 1 (2008): 43–63.

47 Grigoryan, “Nor telekut’yunner”, 335.

turn to Khnus, where he apparently converted to Islam: in 1793 he was reported dead, although some accounts suggest that he may still have been alive in 1811. As testified by subsequent events, his activity was successful in creating a religious group that held to his preaching, and used his book as a catechism and also as a liturgy, well into the nineteenth century and even far away from Khnus.

In 1837, in fact, an investigation was begun by the Armenian Church in the city of Gyumri and its surroundings (present-day Republic of Armenia, then under the control of the Russian empire), upon being warned that some “Tondrakians” were active in that area: the investigation led to the discovery and subsequent trial of a group of “heretics” who were indeed assessed as “Tondrakians” by the authorities, and used the *Key of Truth* as a ritual and exegetical book: the text was found in their hands and was confiscated, thus eventually becoming ms 6710 of the Matenadaran.⁴⁸ It was found that these “heretics” professed the same beliefs expressed in the *Key of Truth*: curiously, they considered “the Germans” to be true Christians, unlike the “Armenians”, “Greeks” and “Latins”.⁴⁹ In 1845 the trial ended, and some of the alleged “Tondrakians” were condemned to pay a fine.

Although the investigation was carried out in an area of Eastern Armenia administered by the Russian empire, as stated above, it was found that the “heretics” moved there only after the Russo-Turkish war of 1828–1829: prior to that, they had lived in the district of Khnus, in Ottoman territory, due south of the city of Erzurum, and not far from Tarōn, where the *Key of Truth* was composed.⁵⁰ It was in fact the Bishop of Erzurum (who had also moved to Eastern Armenia after the war) who denounced the group to the ecclesiastical authorities; he stated that they were “Tondrakians”, and that he had been acquainted with them when they still lived in the Khnus area:⁵¹ this allows us to identify these “Tondrakians” with the group founded by Yovhannēs Vahaguni.

48 The detailed account of the investigation can be found in Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*, 22–42 (in Armenian), with abundant reference to archival sources (which are also partly published in the appendix of the book). A less detailed account (in English) is given in Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, xxiii–xviii.

49 Ōhanjanyan, “The Key of Truth”, 133.

50 After the Russian victory in the war of 1828–1829, when a sizeable part of Eastern Armenia fell under Russian control, many Armenians moved there from the Ottoman empire to enjoy the protection accorded by the Russian Tzar.

51 Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*, 23.

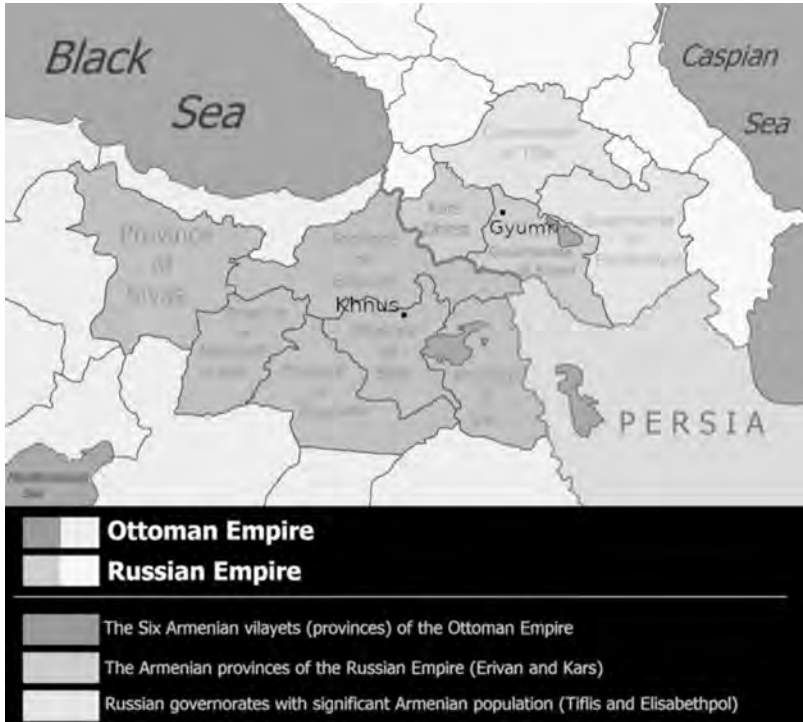


FIGURE 9.1 The border between the Ottoman and Russian empires after the Russo-Turkish war of 1828–1829

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4 The Reaction of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Protestant Millet

The episode related to the *Key of Truth* reveals that, since 1782 and even more after the investigation of 1837–1845, the Armenian Apostolic Church had been aware of the existence of a group of “heretics” often (but not always) qualified as “Tondrakians”, whose faith had much in common with the tenets ascribed to tenth-century Tondrakians, but who were also occasionally described as Protestant—see the qualification of “manichaeo-calvinist” mentioned above.⁵² The acquaintance of the Armenian Church with Calvinism arguably increased

⁵² The individuals prosecuted by Armenian ecclesiastical authorities in 1837 were also accused of being “Calvinist”, even if they are more often described as “Tondrakians”: see *ibid.*, 29.

after 1824, when the Basel Mission missionary society started operations in Shushi, in Russian Armenia.⁵³ The alleged Tondrakians prosecuted in 1837–1845 were, in fact, also suspected of having ties with the “Calvinists and Lutherans” of Shushi:⁵⁴ this implies that the ecclesiastical authorities were already concerned about Protestant proselytism in Russian-controlled Armenia. In the Ottoman empire as well, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople was interested in monitoring the activity of the American Board. The leader of the mission in Constantinople, W. Goodell, met the Patriarch Step’anos III in 1832, and reported that:

both he and his vicar received me very graciously, and conversed with much apparent interest about America, schools, etc. The patriarch was very inquisitive respecting our religion, and wished to know whether we followed Calvin or Luther, the vicar having previously laid it down as an incontrovertible proposition that all Protestants were followers either of one or of the other [...]. [Inquiring about Protestant missions in China] he was very anxious to know what kind of Christians our missionaries made them, what sect they were made to follow, what name they took, etc.⁵⁵

53 See German Missionary Society, “Missionary Labors among the Armenians”, in *The Missionary Herald, Containing the Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, vol. 26 (Boston: Crocker and Brewster, 1830), 186–187. See also Uwe Feigel, *Das evangelische Deutschland und Armenien: die Armenierhilfe deutscher evangelischer Christen seit dem Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts im Kontext der deutsch-türkischen Beziehungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 23–24. Oddly enough, some Armenian denominations today regard the Basel Mission as a “Baptist” mission, see Öhanjanyan, “Evangelical and Pentecostal Communities”, 101–102. The mission, however, was non-denominational, unrelated to Baptist churches and tied instead to the Calvinist and Lutheran context of Switzerland. See also the current internet page of the Basel mission https://baselmission.org/?page_id=97, last accessed on 2/07/2021.

54 “[In 1838] the [Armenian Holy] Synod informed the [Russian] governor of Caucasus that the teaching of the sect that spread in Gyumri is close to the doctrine of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of which some missionaries had founded a school and established a press in Shushi”, Öhanjanyan, *Banali*, 29 (the translation from Armenian is mine). According to Öhanjanyan, the text of the *Key of Truth* reveals the influence of early Protestant missionary activity in Armenia (Öhanjanyan, “The Key of Truth”, 135–136). However, in this case, she may have pushed her argument a bit too far: the manuscript was written in 1811 at the latest, in the Ottoman empire, while the earliest evidence of Protestant missions in Armenian territory is dated to 1824, when the Shushi mission was founded in Russian-controlled Armenia, hundreds of miles away from where the *Key of Truth* was composed.

55 Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*, 132–133.

Despite the somewhat inquisitorial nature of the encounter, the patriarch and his vicar seem to have displayed a cordial attitude.⁵⁶ Whatever their actual knowledge of Protestant confessions may have been, they clearly did not consider them equal to the alleged Tondrakians (whose presence was made known to the Patriarchate merely 40 years before), even though the curiosity about “what kind of Christians our missionaries made them” betrays a bit of suspicion.

With the success of the Protestant mission among the Armenians, the relationship between the patriarchate and the growing Evangelical community began to deteriorate. Already in 1839, Armenians with Evangelical sympathies were interrogated and occasionally exiled.⁵⁷ Eventually, in 1846, the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople Matthew II (1844–1848), hostile to the missionary activity of the American Board,⁵⁸ excommunicated the Protestant Armenians. In a system like that of the Ottoman empire, where the Patriarch had full control over the internal affairs of the Armenian *millet*, this had serious repercussions. Armenian citizens of the empire had to rely on the Armenian Apostolic Church for almost any interaction with the state due to the *millet* system: being cut off from the Church meant the loss of almost any means of engaging with the Ottoman state. Any excommunicated Armenian, furthermore, was prevented from interacting with the “orthodox”: it was forbidden to meet, employ or even buy from the excommunicated. It was mandatory, additionally, to denounce to the Patriarch any Armenian (even a family member) who was suspected of being a Protestant.⁵⁹ Finally, in order to be readmitted to the Armenian Apostolic Church, Armenian Protestants had to sign a “Paper of Recantation,”⁶⁰ much like, in the tenth century, individuals suspected of Tondrakianism had to produce a declaration of faith in order to testify their orthodoxy.⁶¹ In other words, Matthew II applied the same set of rules which were applied against heretics—and specifically Tondrakians—in Armenian canon law:

56 Goodell writes that the patriarch “expressed for me and for America much of the Oriental kind of love, of which every man here seems to keep always a large stock on hand” (ibid., 133).

57 As reported by W. Goodell (ibid., 133).

58 Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 62–63.

59 For the dispositions of Matthew II against Armenian Protestants see the contemporary report by Goodell in Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*, 307–314.

60 Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 81–82.

61 See Mahé and Mahé, *Tragédie*, 55–56.

If in the house of a nobleman the shameful sin [of heresy] be discovered, and the wife, or daughter, or son, or even himself are responsible for it, and he does not deliver his family to the bishops nor turn to holiness [...], let him be excommunicated with all his house, children and goods. Let him not dare to appear in public, let his friends in the country not have any more intercourse with him, until he has repented [...].⁶²

The leader of the American Board mission in Constantinople, W. Goodell, was quick to react, supporting the Protestants, appealing to the Ottoman government, and condemning what he considered as a persecution by the Armenian Apostolic Church:

On the one side stood up the whole Armenian hierarchy, excited to the utmost pitch of hate and fury, and armed with all the sacredness of antiquity, with all the authority of the entire nation, and with all the panoply of civil and ecclesiastical despotism; on the other was neither Urim nor Thummim, neither tabernacle nor ark, neither priesthood nor church; On the one side were falsehood and cursing and blasphemy; [...] On the other side sat patience and meekness, peace and truth.⁶³

The Armenian Protestants also engaged in public demonstrations that Goodell praised in almost hagiographical terms. He wrote that:

their songs of praise from the whole congregation went up like the sound of many waters, and reminded me of the singing of the ancient Bohemian brethren amidst the raging fires of persecution,⁶⁴

thus drawing a parallel with the followers of Jan Hus in the fifteenth century. It was in these circumstances that Goodell came to the decision to establish an Armenian Evangelical Church, separate from the Armenian Apostolic Church, on the 1 July, 1846:

62 Shahpivan, canon 20, original text from Vazgen Hakobyan, *Kanonagirk' Hayoc'*, vol. 1 (Erevan: Haykakan SSR Gitowt'yownneri Akademiayi Hratarakč'owt'yown, 1964), 462–463. The English translation is mine. Originally, the canon was intended for a mysterious heretical group of the fifth century, but later it was applied especially to the Tondrakians. See Garsoïan, *Paulician Heresy*, 202–213.

63 Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*, 310.

64 *Ibid.*, 311.

forty persons, of whom three were women, voluntarily entered into covenant with God and with each other; and we, in the name of all the evangelical churches in Christendom, rose and formally recognized and acknowledged them as a true church of Christ. They then chose by ballot a pastor and two deacons, together with three others, who are to hold office for the term of one year, and who with the pastor and deacons form a standing committee or church session, for the examination of candidates, the bringing forward of cases of discipline, etc.⁶⁵

Eventually, the Ottoman government granted recognition to the Armenian Protestants in 1847, and even established a Protestant *millet* in 1850, as mentioned above.⁶⁶ This made life much easier for the Protestant citizens of the empire, since they were no longer subject to the authority of their former Churches. The tension between Apostolic and Protestant Armenians also began to ease, but nevertheless the stage was set: the two churches were in competition, with the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople applying to the Protestants the canonical dispositions designed against heretics, while the Protestant missionaries claimed to be persecuted for their pure faith “with all the panoply of civil and ecclesiastical despotism”.⁶⁷

In this context it could seem almost natural for missionaries to compare their stance to the persecuted Christians of the first centuries, or to the medieval movements of religious reformation condemned for heresy, as Goodell himself makes evident. The existence of such a movement—namely, the Tondrakians—not only in Armenian history, but even—allegedly—in contemporary times could easily become an important asset in missionary activity: yet, it did not happen, at least not until several years had passed.

5 The Elusive “Tondrakians”

It is important to note that up to this point (i.e. 1850) the American Board seems to have been completely unaware of the Tondrakians, either in the past or in the present. In 1830, two American Board members, Eli Smith and Harrison Dwight, travelled throughout the Armenian Highlands in Ottoman, Russian

65 Ibid., 317.

66 The influence of American Board missionaries and the mediation of the English consul in Constantinople were key factors in securing the recognition of a new *millet* by the Ottoman government.

67 Prime, *Forty Years in the Turkish Empire*, 310.

and Persian territory, in order to collect information about the potential for missionary activity among Armenians in that area.⁶⁸ They arrived in Erzurum shortly after the Armenian population had left for Russian Armenia, in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish war of 1828–1829. Despite this, they were able to acquire detailed information about the number of Armenian households, both Armenian Apostolic and Catholic (whom they called “Papal Armenians”): no mention of other groups (either Tondrakians or even “heretics” of any sort) appears in their record.

Of the Christian inhabitants, 50 houses were Greeks, and 645 papal Armenians, leaving 3,950 houses, or about 19,000 souls, belonging to the proper Armenian church. [...] The Armenians were under the spiritual government of a bishop, whose diocese embraced the whole pashalik.⁶⁹ His previous departure prevented our seeing him, but we received from others an interesting account of his character. He had a seminary for the education of candidates for the ministry, and would ordain none who had not enjoyed its advantages.⁷⁰

The bishop mentioned here was the same who denounced the presence of the Tondrakians to the ecclesiastical authorities in Russian Armenia in 1837 (see above). We can therefore suppose that the affair was known about in the area, yet the American Board missionaries were not aware of it: either no one informed them, or they did not consider it worthy of attention. Furthermore, on 27 June, 1830, Smith and Dwight met the inhabitants of Khnus—the town from which the alleged Tondrakians issued—on their way to Gyumri, in Russian territory: even in this case, they failed to report the existence of any sect of sort.

On coming again in sight of the road from Azáb, which we had left three days before, we found it crowded for a long distance with carts; and that on which we were travelling, also, was after a while filled with the Armenians of Khanoos [= Khnus]. We had elsewhere been informed that the

68 On this journey see Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy*, 8–9.

69 A *pashalik* was an administrative unit of the Ottoman empire, that can be translated as “governorate” or “province”.

70 Eli Smith, *Researches of the Rev. E. Smith and Rev. H.G.O. Dwight in Armenia: Including a Journey Through Asia Minor, and Into Georgia and Persia, with a Visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas* (Boston; New York: Crocker and Brewster, 1833), 127.

Armenians in that sanják⁷¹ were more numerous than the moslems, and amounted to 700 houses, and we were now told that all had left. They seemed more uncivilized than any company we had passed, as might be expected from their vicinity to the Kürds. Among them we first observed the custom, that afterwards became so familiar to us, of using oxen and buffaloes as beasts of burden.⁷²

Finally, on their way back to Constantinople, Smith and Dwight passed through the vicinity of Khnus, where they obtained a detailed report about the local religious situation from a priest whom they describe as a Catholic Armenian: even in this case, no mention is made of the alleged Tondrakians.⁷³ The priest was either unaware of their existence, or he considered them irrelevant.

It is only in 1852 that the “Tondrakians” became known to the American Board missionaries, and even in that case they are not recognised as “Tondrakians”, nor they are related in any way to the distant Armenian past. As reported by A. Ōhanjanyan,⁷⁴ on 10 September, 1852 Josiah Peabody, in charge of the Board mission in Erzurum, wrote a letter that was summarised and partially published in the 1852 issue of the *Missionary Herald*, the journal of the American Board.⁷⁵ The document makes reference to the life and preaching

71 Another administrative unit in the Ottoman empire (smaller than the *pashalik*) that can be translated as “district”.

72 Ibid., 161.

73 “The village consisted of about 25 papal Armenian families, of whom our host was the priest [...]. He manifested no prejudice against us as protestants, and even seemed to consider us, from the mere fact that we were Franks, more like himself than his neighbors [...] We conversed with him, at some length, respecting the present state of his sect in these parts, and some of his statements are worth reporting. In the town of Moosh, and in the neighboring villages of Norshén, Arinj and Oghúnk, the papal Armenians amount, he assured us, to 150 families, and have one priest. The district of Alashgérd contains, besides those of his own village, 25 families in another named Khastor, and 10 in a third named Iritsoonkegh. Khanoos formerly contained one village, and in Pásin there were some, both at Hassan-kúlaah and Mejengérd; but they all retired with the Russian army to the Georgian provinces, and now there only remain in Pásin, 15 families at Khorasán, 12 at Aljakrák and 10 at Bash kegh. Add to these the few that have assembled at Erzroom since its former papal Armenians left with the Russians, and you have a list of all the adherents of that sect in this part of Turkish Armenia, of whose existence he was aware, and of whom we were able to hear from other sources.” Ibid., 288–289.

74 Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*, 37–38.

75 Josiah Peabody, “Letter from Mr. Peabody, September 10, 1852”, in *The Missionary Herald, Containing the Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions*, Press of T.R. Marvin, vol. 48 (Boston: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1852), 359–361.

of Yovhannēs Vahaguni (the author of the *Key of Truth*, even though Peabody never mentions him by name, nor makes any reference to his book) and to his followers. They are identified as having Protestant ideas:

About fifty years ago—Mr. Peabody says—an Armenian priest in Khanūs [= Khnus], while traveling in Europe, fell in with some Protestant Christians, from whom he learned that the only rule of faith and practice was the word of God. He soon began to compare his religion with that which is set forth in the gospel; and he found, of course, that his church was full of error and corruption. He returned to his people, and began to preach this new way. A terrible persecution burst upon him, not, however, till he had convinced some fifteen families of the truth of the evangelical doctrines.⁷⁶

There follows a short account of the conversion and demise of Vahaguni, and of the investigations against his followers in the Russian empire, after which some of the alleged Tondrakians returned to their former houses in Khnus, in Ottoman territory. It is noteworthy that Peabody had been in Erzurum since 1841, yet he heard nothing of these persecuted “Protestants” until “rather more than three years ago”, i.e. somewhat before 1849. Thanks to the work of Ōhanjanyan, who consulted archival documents pertaining to the area of Gyumri, we now know that the return of the “Tondrakians” to the Ottoman empire must have occurred around 1847, thus confirming Peabody’s account.⁷⁷

We do not know what moved the followers of Yovhannēs to return to Ottoman territory, or to make contact with Peabody. One could speculate that, in the first place, they moved to the Russian empire in 1830 for the same reasons that convinced other Armenians to migrate, namely the hope of finding better living conditions. After experiencing the hostility of the Armenian ecclesiastical authorities and of the Russian governors, however, some of them may have become disaffected with their new home. As we have seen, in 1847 the Ottoman government granted some rights to Protestant citizens, thus allowing Armenians to exist outside of the Armenian *millet*, and eventually created a Protestant *millet* in 1850. This may have played a role in the decision of some households to return to Ottoman territory, and to beseech the protection of the Protestant mission claiming—without any support of evidence, as far as we can tell—that Yovhannēs Vahaguni “fell in with some Protestant

76 Ibid., 359.

77 Ōhanjanyan, *Banali*, 38–39.

Christians".⁷⁸ Of course this can only be a working hypothesis, at the moment, but nevertheless it has the merit of accommodating the few pieces of information in our possession: further research may shed more light on the issue.

What we can say for sure is that, in the years after the contact between Peabody and the "Tondrakians", Armenian Protestants quickly established a link between the newly established Armenian Evangelical Church, the medieval Tondrakians, and the followers of Yovhannēs who were accused of Tondrakianism. By the beginning of the twentieth century this link was strong enough to be picked up by Arpee, in the shape that we have seen above. Interestingly, however, that same link does not seem to have been established, or particularly supported, by American missionaries themselves: Peabody, as we have seen, only speaks of Protestants, and there is no evidence that, even after becoming aware of the issue, the American Board encouraged the view that these "Tondrakians" descended from those who had been, in centuries past, "preparing the soil for the great Reformation to come". Rather, the ascendancy seems to have been established and supported by Armenian Apostolic believers who supported a reformation of the Church (such as Tēr-Mkrtč'ean), by independent thinkers who are difficult to categorise, such as Conybeare, or by Armenian Protestants (such as Arpee). This may reflect, on the one hand, the strength of the deep bonds that exist between religion and identity in the Armenian nation, so much so that Armenian Protestants suffered "the evil of schism"⁷⁹ to the point that they felt compelled to justify, support and even claim the "Armenianness" of their confession; on the other hand, it testifies to the deeply eschatological (and ultimately extrinsic) approach of American Board missionaries, unable or unwilling to understand those bonds.⁸⁰

Conclusion

What can be observed in the light of available evidence is that the "foundation myth" of the Armenian Evangelical Church appeared only in the late nineteenth century, and that it emerged as a sort of by-product of missionary activity, resulting from the interaction of several factors. Protestant preaching in

78 One should not forget that, in the Russian empire, the "Tondrakians" had become acquainted with Protestantism thanks to the Basel mission in Shushi, and therefore considered the "Germans" to be "true Christians", see above.

79 Ibid., 37.

80 On this, see Chopourian, *Armenian Reformation*, 36–37.

the Ottoman empire pushed the Armenian Apostolic Church to adopt drastic measures against those of its flock who adhered to the Protestant confession; missionaries of the American Board reacted by denouncing those measures and equating Armenian Protestants to medieval reformation movements that were persecuted as heretic; when a group of non-orthodox Armenian Christians became known, it was accused of Tondrakiansim, and only then Armenian Protestants established a link between themselves, that group, and the ancient Tondrakians. It took only a small step, then, to affirm that Paulicians and Tondrakians were the actual trunk from which the Reformation sprang: the myth became therefore a powerful tool to root Protestantism in Armenian ecclesiastical history, but it was adopted by Armenian Protestants rather than by missionaries.

American Board preachers, for their part, do not seem to have insisted on the “myth”: consistently with their view, they just counted the “Tondrakians” as Protestants, for the simple reason that they shared with those “Tondrakians” the principal articles of faith. They seemingly did not feel the need to investigate further their *credo*, and they may have even not been aware of the differences between Protestantism and Tondrakianism.

What remains a mystery is the nature of the preaching of Yovhannēs Vahaguni and of his followers: what was the content of his preaching, how did he develop it, and in which context?⁸¹ This is all the more surprising, since we are in the rather unusual condition of possessing a book used and composed by a group condemned as heretical by the Armenian Apostolic Church, namely the *Key of Truth*. It is obvious that its composition cannot be attributed to the Tondrakians of the ninth century, as Conybeare claimed. At the same time, it is also very difficult to consider it as purely the product of early Protestant preaching among Armenians in the Ottoman empire, as some have proposed,⁸² for the simple reason that we have no evidence of such preaching.⁸³ Even if we admit that—as Peabody was told—Yovhannēs Vahaguni was influenced by Protestant thought, it remains to be explained why his followers never identi-

81 It is remarkable that, in the late eighteenth century, Yovhannēs Vahaguni may not have been the only one preaching a doctrine radically different from the one defended by the Armenian Apostolic Church, *ibid.*, 57–58.

82 Such as Ōhanjanyan, “The Key of Truth”, 134–136.

83 Nonetheless, a promising avenue of research about early traces of Protestantism has been opened by A. Ōhanjanyan: it is only thanks to her work that we now have hints of anti-Protestant polemics within the Armenian community of late seventeenth-century Constantinople. See Ōhanjanyan, “Creedal Controversies”, 18–19.

fied themselves as Protestants, nor made contact with Protestant missionaries, at least until—after 1847 and even more after 1850—it became convenient to do so.

Actually, the very fact that the Tondrakians existed in medieval times, and that they were still known to Armenian ecclesiastical authorities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should remind us that Armenian Christianity was not monolithic, and could well be capable of producing doctrines that were non-orthodox (or perceived as such) by itself. There is no need to posit a direct dependence of the *Key of Truth* from either medieval Tondrakians or eighteenth-century Protestants: Yovhannēs Vahaguni, the man who composed this book, could have been aware of Tondrakianism as well as of Protestantism without having been instructed by a Tondrakian or a Protestant. In any case, there is no way to understand the place of his book in the history of the Armenian Church, unless we base our study on the book itself and its author, and not on the value that we want (or need) to attach to them.

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