

The Oldest National Church in the World.

THERE was vigorous civic life in ancient Greece and strong sense of duty to the State in ancient Rome ; but national life and national enthusiasm, now becoming more and more of a force in human affairs, are historically a product of Christianity. Warring barbarian tribes developed into the clearly defined nations of Europe under the dominance of Latin Christianity, even though it showed itself true heir of the Cæsars in constantly over-riding national aspirations and racial divisions, and regarded men generally as members of one Church, and not as citizens of many States. A generation ago Sir Alfred Lyall characterized Asia as "a great continent in which there are no nationalities." To-day, through contact with European Christendom, Asia is awaking to national life also, and one of her most distinguished Christians can say: "A great Indian Church is needed to form a great Indian nation."

Of peculiar interest, therefore, is the story of the earliest Church which developed a nation and grew with its life. The first arresting fact is that it belongs to a group of Churches which Gibbon, following Jesuit authorities, taught us to class as heretical. For while the heresies condemned by the Church's first two Councils at Nicæa and Constantinople, though frequently reappearing under new names, have not survived in any organized body with a continuous life, those condemned by the two subsequent Councils, have been represented ever since by six ancient Churches. The Eastern Syrian, termed Chaldean or Assyrian by Romans and Anglicans, commonly called Nestorian, and calling itself simply "the Church of the East," seceded when the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius; and the condemnation of Eutyches by the Council of Chalcedon led to the secession of four Monophysite Churches—the Western Syrian or Jacobite Church with which the Church in Malabar is now linked, the Coptic and Abyssinian Churches, and the Church of Armenia.

For explicit statement of the Catholic Faith, one from the beginning, all Christendom is deeply indebted to the four Councils, and generally acknowledges their decisions as authoritative. But now that we know more than our fathers did about the seceding Churches, we begin to suspect that *national* may be a more appropriate term for them than *heretical*. "Shall we call them heretics and schismatics?" asks their latest historian, Dr. Adrian Fortescue, who, as a Roman Catholic, is not likely to condone heresy and schism; and he answers his question thus: "They are martyrs and sons of martyrs." Even if their witness has not always been effectual and enlightened, they have, amid daunting isolation and cruel persecution, remained steadfastly loyal to Christ, have apprehended His teaching well enough and loved Him dearly enough to lay down their lives rather than deny His Name. This is specially true of the most important Monophysite Church, which pleads that but for a misunderstanding it would never have been characterized as Eutychian.

This venerable Church of Armenia appeals strongly for many reasons to Anglican sympathies. It is the autonomous Church of the first nation to adopt Christianity, as a nation, and for 1,600 years it has been bound up with all that is best in their political, social, and intellectual life. They have preserved it as their oldest and most valued national institution, and it has preserved their national existence through a series of almost unparalleled calamities. Its Confession of Faith is the Nicene Creed, and it acknowledges, as we do, the authority of the first three Councils. Throughout its history it has protested against the autocratic claims of both Constantinople and Rome, refusing to be ecclesiastically subject to either of its powerful neighbours. It holds that no Church, however great, represents the whole of Christendom in herself; the privilege of infallibility in dogmatic decisions belongs to the Universal Church alone, and of this Church, every Church which accepts the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Redemption, forms a part.

It professes, therefore, to be liberal, progressive, and

tolerant. Its 4,000 clergy do not form a caste ; only 400 of them are celibates. The administration of the Church is largely in lay hands and its general tone democratic. From earliest days it has paid great attention to education, especially in the vernacular Scriptures ; it survived fierce persecution, first from pagans, then from Zoroastrians, and, lastly, from Moslems ; and in the past it was actively missionary, and founded Churches in Georgia and Caspian Albania.

Armenia, known to Jeremiah as Minni and to Ezekiel as Togarmah, lies between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea, between the Caucasus and Caspian Mountains. Ararat rises in its centre, and it therefore claims to be the original home of the human race, as it certainly is of the vine and the rose. Its highest peak is 1,000 feet higher than Mont Blanc, and it may be called "the Switzerland of Asia." Its story, however, is a contrast to that of the long unchallenged independence and tranquil prosperity of "Europe's Playground." For its configuration had two disastrous results. Many mountain ranges break it into isolated cantons, whose inhabitants communicated with difficulty, and never learnt to understand and work with each other. Lack of well-defined natural boundaries made it a highway trodden by many alien feet, and only too often, like Belgium, a battle-ground of contending Powers. As Afghanistan lies between the British and Russian Empires now, it lay, as a "buffer" State, between Rome and Parthia, and became tributary to all the great Empires of the world in turn, from Egypt in the seventeenth century B.C. to the collapsing Turkish realm now. It is at present divided between Turkey, Persia, and Russia.

The Armenians, a European people of the same Aryan stock as ourselves, may be akin to the Kelts, whom they resemble in character, and probably migrated from Thrace into Asia. Their people's history has been characterized as "one long martyrology." The untiring industry and genius for commercial enterprise, the indefeasible national and religious spirit of this exiled race, remind one of the Huguenots, and still more

of the Jews. Jews and Armenians alike once formed free States under victorious kings. But for ages both have been widely scattered, suffering incessantly wrongs and oppressions such as no third race has survived. Both are still homeless, if not landless, yet obviously distinct and indestructible; not only patiently enduring, but diligently trading, playing so useful and generally so honourable a part in the countries of their dispersion that they have gained influence out of all proportion to their numbers. In both cases extraordinary vitality and tenacious hold on national life in adverse circumstances has been due to strong faith in God, constituting their irrefragable bond of union as a race. Dean Stanley, who called them "the Quakers of the East," Dr. Cutts, Dr. St. Clair Tisdall, Mr. F. C. Conybeare, and Mr. H. F. Tozer, have written of the Armenians, and their Church has recently been fully described by Monsignor Ormanian, for twelve years Armenian Patriarch at Constantinople.

The story of its foundation is romantic enough to make those who deny that truth is ever stranger than fiction doubt its veracity. Even if the correspondence of King Abgarus with our Lord is a myth, even if tradition errs in saying that the Gentiles who came to St. Philip desiring to see Jesus were Armenians, and that the Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew were the first evangelists of Armenia, the rapidity of its conversion in the early fourth century indicates that there must have been Christians in Armenia long before it had a Christian king. The figure of its great apostle, Gregory, who bears the unique title of Photistes (Illuminator), stands out in strong relief.

At the instigation of Ardashir, King of Persia, whom he had defeated and compelled to fly into India, Khosrov, King of Armenia, was treacherously assassinated by his own familiar friend and distant kinsman, Anak. From the massacre of Anak and his family which followed only two little boys escaped. One, three years old, named Gregory, was saved by Sophia, his Greek nurse, and her brother, who were Christians,

and then adopted by a Christian lady of Cæsarea in Cappadocia, who gave him a first-rate education. Meanwhile, Ardashir marched into Armenia and ruled the whole land, putting the family of Khosrov to the sword, save Tiridates and his little sister Khosrovidoukht, who were rescued by loyal nobles. Tiridates grew up in exile, and, by defeating in single combat a Gothic Goliath, won the favour of the Emperor Diocletian, who placed on his head the crown of his ancestors and sent him into Asia with a Roman army. It conquered the Persians, and established him as King of Armenia for fifty-three years. He had no more trusted and devoted servant than his kinsman Gregory, who, discovering his parentage when he came to manhood, desired to atone for his father's crime by serving Khosrov's heir faithfully. One day he was commanded to wreath with flowers the altar of the goddess Anahit, to whom a sacrifice of thanksgiving for a great victory was to be offered. He refused, in spite of promises and threats, and Tiridates presently found out that he was Anak's son and a Christian, loaded him with fetters, threw him into a dungeon, and left him to die of starvation. Then he persecuted all Christians remorselessly until, after the atrocious slaughter of a band of virgins, his torture of remorse led to madness like unto the madness of Nebuchadnezzar. And Khosrovidoukht had a vision of an angel, saying that Tiridates could be healed only by Gregory. For a dozen years he had lain in his dungeon, given up for dead, yet surviving because a humble Christian widow had secretly baked a little cake for him day by day. He was released, Tiridates was cured, and fell at his feet, imploring forgiveness. Then Gregory baptized in the Euphrates Tiridates, his sister and his wife, Ashkhen, daughter of the King of the Alans. This was twenty-two years before the Emperor Constantine made public profession of the Christian Faith; so Tiridates, who had still forty years of his long reign to accomplish, was the first Christian King and his Queen was the first "barbarian" convert whose name we know.

Under their fostering care Gregory, ordained by the Bishop

of Cæsarea as "Catholicos" of Armenia, gathered a multitude into the Church and guided it wisely and well; his son and immediate successor attended the Council of Nicæa, and for six generations the primatial see remained in his family. Of this long line of Bishops the present Armenian Patriarch at Etchmiadzin is the 127th. On the head of each at his consecration has been laid, together with the hands of living Bishops, the mummied hand of Gregory.

These "chief priests of the Armenian nation," as they are significantly termed, have exercised a moral ascendancy in political affairs, upholding and sometimes rebuking their kings in a way which reminds us of Lanfranc, Anselm, Becket, and Langton, in our own history. And just as we look back gratefully not only to Theodore of Tarsus for organizing our parochial system, but to his younger contemporary, Bede, for bringing us light and learning by his labours as teacher and writer, so Armenia remembers that she had no literature worthy of the name—not even a fit alphabet for her tongue—when Gregory Photistes founded her Church. He put the Greek and Syriac Scriptures into the hands of preachers and teachers, charging them to expound these in the vernacular. And tenth in succession from him as Patriarch came Sahak, who with the help of Mesrop devised the Armenian alphabet, and under the active patronage of King Vramschapouh did for the Armenians what Jerome was at the same time doing for Latin Christendom. For Mesrop's work as an itinerating preacher of the Gospel had shown him the need of giving his flock the Bible in their own tongue if their religion was to endure. Like Jerome, he retired to a hermitage with some of the best scholars of the day, many of them his own pupils, and translated the Old Testament from the Septuagint and the New from the original Greek, making large use of Syriac versions also. He began his task in 404, the year before Jerome completed the Vulgate, and ended it in 433. In this way the vigour and permanence of the Church was safeguarded, the golden age of Armenian literature and culture was inaugurated, and the people were

knit together in the bond of a common faith intelligently apprehended, and were therefore able to weather many a storm in years to come. Sahak and Mesrop gave them their Bible about 900 years before Wycliffe gave us ours, and exactly 1,100 years before Tyndale's Bible became the undefiled well of our finest English literature. Incidentally, we owe something to these scholars also, for less than twenty-five years ago Tatian's "Diatessaron," known hitherto by name only, was discovered in an Armenian translation, and other early Christian works have been preserved in the same way.

The last King of Armenia died in exile at Paris in 1393. The short-sighted policy of the Emperor Basil II. 300 years before and their own lack of prudence had gradually brought about the political extinction of the Armenians, and dispersed them almost as widely as the Jews. As early as the Paulician heresy of the ninth century many had removed to Bulgaria; Tamerlane in the fourteenth century drove many as refugees into Russia, Hungary, and Poland, the free Armenian towns in the two latter countries becoming centres of progress for Eastern Europe, whilst some of the greatest victories of Russian armies have been gained by Armenian Generals. Just 200 years ago the Armenian Mechitar, educated under Jesuit influence, established the convent on the Venetian island of San Lazaro, which has ever since been famous for its literary activity. Paris, Marseilles, and London also have their considerable Armenian colonies. What is loosely called the *Oriental* art of the finest architecture in the Turkish Empire is a genuine offspring of Armenian genius, and to them Turkey also has been largely indebted for the control of her finances and the administrative services of her army. Eight years after the Turks took Constantinople a second Armenian metropolitan see was established there, which has since claimed more Bishops and parishes and nearly as many members as the original see at Etchmiadzin.

It was an Armenian trading company who established a commercial position in India with civil and military powers, to

which the H.E.I.C. eventually succeeded; and the old cemetery at Agra is full of Armenian tombs. It was they who first built churches and set up printing-presses in Calcutta and Madras in the seventeenth century, and 500 years ago they were building churches in China.

Through all the vicissitudes of their troubled history they have clung not only to their national solidarity, but to their ecclesiastical independence. For all these ancient Churches of the East, the two things so absolutely involved each other that adherence to the distinctive teaching of a particular Church became the badge of membership of a particular race whose language and racial ideas that Church preserved, while every man of that race acknowledged allegiance to the Church as a matter of course. The nation gained cohesion thus, but the Church inevitably suffered loss of strong personal conviction and spirituality of life. It does not, however, become us, members of a dominant race and of a Church which has known little about the alternative of death or denial of Christ, merely to point in a self-satisfied way to the superstition and formalism of these fellow-Christians and to the inadequate provision for their instruction now that their old tongue is no longer understood when used in their services. We should rather seek to impart some strength and encouragement to them by our sympathy, and to learn lessons for ourselves from their resistance to apostasy even unto blood, and from their successful protest against encroachment on their ecclesiastical autonomy from three different quarters.

When the Byzantine Emperors conquered Armenia, just twenty years before the Dukes of Normandy conquered England, they tried to compel subordination to the Greek Church by leaving the Patriarchate vacant. So successfully did the Armenians withstand this, that when, 400 years later, Constantinople fell into the hands of the Turks, they had to recognize as equal heads of the two great Christian communions in their Empire, the Greek and Armenian Patriarchs in Constantinople. Three times at least Rome has hoped to

absorb the Church of Armenia. When it was ruled by the Lusignans in the thirteenth century it maintained its administrative and doctrinal independence with difficulty. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when Armenians flocked into Europe to profit by the intellectual awakening of the Renaissance, the innovations of Latin scholasticism were urged upon them, and in the eighteenth century the Propaganda College established an Armenian Patriarchate, officially subject to the Roman Curia. Probably not more than 200,000 out of the 4,000,000 Armenians—that is, not more than one-twentieth—have actually submitted to Rome, and we hear of many of these returning to their former allegiance.

American Protestantism has done much for the enlightenment of the Near East by its mission schools. Armenians constitute a large proportion of the pupils in these, and we can understand the apprehensions roused by the efforts of missionaries whose own traditions give them little sympathy with the standpoint of an archaic Church, to proselytize from it to communions thirteen or fourteen hundred years younger. But the fact that they regard our Church as the one important Reformed Church, which can be classed as ancient, the fact that we can desire their spiritual welfare without desiring to make Anglicans of them, and respect their independence because we have maintained our own, should enable us of all people to hold out to them a helping hand of fellowship.

That the Armenians are obviously destined to play an important part in the reconstructed Near East is not the only reason for doing so. Resurrection of national sentiment long in abeyance will be rightly emphasized by future historians as a striking feature of our age—Italy and Germany suddenly ceasing to be mere geographical expressions; at least seven new thrones set up in Europe to represent newly asserted nationalities. We look to an even greater movement stirring hearts to-day. We are often told that if the Jews, scattered everywhere, acclimatized everywhere, conversant with many tribes and tongues, were evangelized, they would evangelize all

nations as no other people could. What could not the Armenians, Christian already for sixteen centuries, honouring a long roll of named and unnamed martyrs for the Faith, do when contact with the most vigorous spiritual life of the West reawakens the missionary zeal that once distinguished them? Their survival and the place they have made for themselves and kept, witness to the preserving power of Christianity. May we not hope that hereafter they will be among the most potent agencies through which the aggressive power of Christianity is transforming the world to-day?

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