

Armenian Orthodox Church's 1700th (sic!) anniversary plus other churchly tidbits

Colleagues,

Today's ThTh posting offers you 4 separate items under the broad rubric of "Ecclesiology." The most important one is the Armenian item, I think. Don't stop until you have at least gotten to that one. My own education about Armenian Christianity came primarily through my friendship with an Armenian Orthodox priest, Khoren Habeshian, whom I mentored through his graduate program at Seminex. [FYI Mt. Ararat is in Armenia!]Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. ASM 2001Last weekend I attended the 3-day annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology [ASM]. I've been an ASMer for 20-plus years ever since Bill Danker, the Missouri Synod's first missiologist and eventually our Seminex missiology prof, introduced me to the group and nominated me for membership. "He's actually a systematic theology prof, but I've 'converted' him to the cause of missions," Bill said more than once when introducing me to his ASM colleagues. One of my tasks this year was to give the tribute for Bill, who died last month just a few days short of his 87th birthday. Bill was a founding father of the ASM when it began back in the 70s.

The ASM is a marvelous ecumenical blend. All boards,

committees and officers are chosen according to a revolving paradigm that parses today's American churches—like Caesar's Gaul—into three groups: Roman Catholic, Conciliar (=World Council of Churches-type) Protestants, and Independent Protestants (Evangelicals and Pentecostals). Sure there's overlap, but no big fights. Some folks twitch a bit under these specs: Anglicans ["We're Catholic and Protestant"], some Lutherans ["We're evangelical Catholics"], and the Orthodox ["We're none of the above"].

This year's gathering started with an Orthodox keynoter from Alaska, who led us through the Russian Orthodox mission history of Alaska. 'Twas mind-blowing; as were other presentations and seminars. But I'll relay to you now just a few items from one other colleague's input. It was the report by Michael Jaffarian [=an Armenian family name] on his work for the 2001 edition of WORLD CHRISTIAN ENCYCLOPEDIA (Oxford Univ. Press). Look at these statistics:

1. Two billion, almost exactly 1/3 of the world's current 6 billion people, claim to be Christian today. Christian being defined as: "followers of Jesus Christ as Lord, of all kinds, all traditions and confessions, and all degrees of commitment."
2. Of these 2 billion, 58% are in Asia, Africa and Latin America; 42% are in the Western world.
3. In the average year of the 1990s, the number of Christians in the world increased by 25.2 million; 22.7 by natural increase and 2.5 by conversion. If the question is: How many people convert to the Christian faith each year, from other religions or no religion?" the answer for the year 2000 is about 19 million. There were also 16.5 million defections

from Christianity that year.

4. In 1900 there were 10 million Christians in all of Africa; by 2000 that number is 360 million. In 1900 only 9.2% of Africans were Christian; in 2000 45.9% were.
5. Europe began the 20th century 94.5% Christian and ended it 76.8% Christian. Most of the decrease came from those who left the faith of their parents for no faith.
6. In the USA and Canada in the 1990s, the number of people leaving Christianity each year was 338,000 greater than the number of people converting to Christianity.
7. The second largest religion in the world, after Christianity, is Islam with 1.2 billion adherents in 2000. That is 19.6% of the world's population. In the decade of the 1990s Islam was the fastest growing major religion in the world, largely driven by the high birth rate in many predominantly-Muslim nations. 96% by natural increase, 4% by conversion increase.
8. The Independents. Christians unrelated to, and generally disinterested in, the churches and structures of historic, traditional, denominational Christianity are categorized "Independents" in the Encyclopedia. Another word for them is "postdenominational." In 1900 Independents accounted for 1.3% of all Christians. In 2000 they account for more than 20%. They are the second largest bloc of Christians in the world after the Roman Catholics. They outnumber all Protestants, Orthodox, and Anglicans in today's world. They are the only Christian bloc growing at a faster rate than the global population, and the only bloc growing faster

than Islam. Thus they are the fastest growing major religious movement of any kind in the world today.

9. Today's Pentecostal/Charismatic movement cuts across all the ecclesiastical blocs of global Christianity. In 2000 this represented 524 million people, 26% of all Christians.
 10. Ecclesiastical crime. Trusted Christian pastors, treasurers, and other workers steal more than US\$16.7 billion (sic!) of church and mission funds in an average year around the world. This is a larger figure than the total amount given by all Christians, globally, for foreign mission in an average year, US\$15 billion. After that jarring statistic, something lighter, call it ecclesiastical whimsy.
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II. From the Reports and Memorials Workbook for the 2001 Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod convention next month here in St. Louis

Memorial 3-45

TO INCLUDE COMPANY OF HEAVEN IN COMMUNION FELLOWSHIP

Whereas, the LCMS only communes those who are members of the LCMS and are in fellowship with it; and

Whereas, Jesus and many of the saints in heaven were on earth long before the establishment of the LCMS; and

Whereas, During the Lord's Supper we celebrate the holy meal "with angels and archangels & with all the company of heaven" (LW pp. 146-48); therefore be it

RESOLVED, That we make all the company of heaven honorary members of the LCMS, even if they were not Lutheran in this life, so that we are not breaking our own rules when we come to the Lord's Table; and be it further RESOLVED, That we declare Jesus the Christ to be an honorary member of the LCMS so that in His second coming He will not be

turned away from a Lutheran altar.[Submitted by Grace Lutheran Church, Queens Village, NY]

III. News from the ELCA

Three Seminex alumni were elected to the office of bishop in the ELCA this month—

Central States Synod: Gerald L. Mansholt (class of '74)

NW Washington Synod: Wm. Chris Boerger ('75)

Grand Canyon Synod: Michael J. Neils ('76)

These additions bring the total number of ELCA bishops who are Seminex alums to 6. Seminex grads already serving as ELCA bishops are Robert Rimbo (SE Michigan Synod), Marcus Lohrmann (NW Ohio Synod), and Murray Finck (Pacifica Synod).

IV. The Armenian Church Celebrates Anniversary of 1700 Years.

Article from current Washington Report on Middle East Affairs.

This year marks the 1,700th anniversary since the country of Armenia officially adopted Christianity. More familiar to Western Christians is the story of the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. The date 313 CE when the Edict of Milan offered toleration for Christians in the Roman Empire is often cited as the turning point in church-state relations. After three centuries of persecution and minority status, the transformation into European Christendom was underway. However, Constantine was not the first ruler to adopt Christianity. In 301 CE, King Tiridates III declared Christianity as Armenia's state religion. In celebration of this watershed event in church history, Armenians have marked the year 2001 for

special celebrations, commemorating a rich heritage and calling for renewal among Christians in Armenia and those in the Armenian diaspora including over one million in the United States.

Legends of Christian Origins in Armenia

The story of Christian origins in Armenia is filled with colorful legends. Two of the early Apostles of Jesus, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, are said to have preached the gospel in this mountainous country already in the first century. Converts, however, were faced with persecution for several centuries as in other locations of the church. In 301 CE, King Tiridates III was converted through the intervention of Gregory the Illuminator. At the time, the Roman Empire was facing a severe wave of persecution under the emperor Diocletian, causing a migration of Christians seeking refuge in Armenia. Among them was a young woman named Hripsime who attracted the attention of the king and was sought after as his wife. Rebuffed because of his pagan beliefs, Tiridates then tortured and executed Hripsime along with thirty-seven other Christian virgins.

When the king was afflicted with leprosy and madness (he envisioned himself as growing a pig snout) a connection was made with his actions against the women and other Christians. One Christian who had escaped punishment was his own sister Chosroviducht who suggested that he make amends by releasing Gregory, a former employee of the King who had been sentenced to thirteen years incarceration in a deep pit for refusing the king's demand that he sacrifice to a pagan goddess. Through the prayers of Gregory, King Tiridates was healed and then baptized with his whole royal household. This was followed by his declaration in 301 CE that Christianity would be the state religion of Armenia. Gregory was then consecrated as the

first Catholicos of the Armenian church and the cathedral was built in Etchmiadzin in 303 CE on the site of a pre-Christian temple.

The name Etchmiadzin means the place where the Only-begotten One descended, a reference to a vision of Gregory. On the site of the cathedral, Gregory saw the heavens opened and a parade of angels descending to the earth enveloped in light culminating with the descent of the glorious figure of the resurrected Jesus. According to the legend, the Lord struck the ground three times with a golden hammer resulting in the sudden appearance of a magnificent church built around a large golden column. Although the vision soon faded away, Gregory was impressed with the form and lines of the church and thus directed the construction on this spot of the cathedral which still stands today.

The Armenian Church

The Armenian Church has long been isolated from the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches. Although it was actively involved and accepted the fundamental doctrines from the first three ecumenical councils (Nicea, 325 CE; Constantinople, 381 CE; and Ephesus, 431 CE), it was not part of the Council of Chalcedon in 431 CE which defined the two natures of Christ. The Armenian Church is thus known as a monophysite (one nature of Christ) church and has close affinities to the Syrian Church of Antioch, the Coptic Church, and the Ethiopian Church. In the 4th century, a monk named Mesrob developed the unique Armenian alphabet with 36 letters (two more were added in the twelfth century) so that the Bible could be translated into language understood throughout the country.

Likewise, the Armenian Church developed its own distinct liturgy. Like Roman Catholics and Greek Orthodox, the Armenian Church administers seven sacraments. The head of the Armenian Church is the Catholicos of Etchmiadzin, His Holiness Garegin II Nereseyan, who was elected in October, 1999. He is known popularly as the the Catholicos of all Armenians. The Catholicos of Cilicia is located in Antelias, Lebanon and oversees the two million Armenian Christians in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and other regional countries. His Holiness Aram I Keshishian thus plays a prominent role in the Middle East Council of Churches. In addition, the Armenian patriarchates in Istanbul and Jerusalem play significant roles.

The Armenian community in Jerusalem traces its roots to pre-Christian times. With the Roman expulsion of Jews following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, the Armenian presence continued, eventually forming the nucleus of the Armenian Quarter of the old city around the Church of St. James. Thus the Armenian Patriarch was established, also with Catholic and Orthodox churches, as guardian of the Christian Holy places with a special place in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

Struggles of the Twentieth Century

The Armenian Church has just completed a century of intense struggle. During the first World War, the Ottoman Empire inflicted upon Armenians atrocities which led to the death of perhaps half of its people and exile for many others (See sidebar below). Shortly thereafter, Armenia came under the domination of the Soviet Empire which led to conflict between historic Christian beliefs and political atheistic ideology. Just at the time when this was ending on Dec. 7, 1988, Armenia suffered from a major

earthquake which left dead an estimated 50,000 to 80,000 persons and half a million homeless. One quarter of the industrial base for Armenia was destroyed.

A Revitalized Church for a New Millennium

Anniversary celebrations will symbolize the rebirth of the church and the revival of church life. Catholicos Garegin II notes that the church has trained over a thousand new teachers in Christian education in the last decade and it is pushing forward in efforts to increase numbers for the priesthood. Already results are evident. The anniversary has also brought unchurched people back to the church, says Garegin.

June 17th [*Ed: Sorry I'm a week late with this information.*] has been declared International Armenian Church Day—the Feast of Holy Etchmiadzin. Beginning at 2:00 p.m. on Saturday, June 16, the church bells will ring at the refurbished Cathedral in Etchmiadzin to mark the occasion. Churches will be invited to join in the bell ringing at 2:00 p.m. in each time zone going westward around the globe culminating in the return to Etchmiadzin at 2:00 p.m. on Sunday, June 17.

To mark the central role of the Church in Armenia, a new cathedral, the largest sacred building in the country, is being built in the capital city of Yerevan. The new cathedral, dedicated to St. Gregory the Illuminator, will be consecrated on the weekend of September 21-23, the tenth anniversary of independence from Soviet rule. A major part of the anniversary celebrations will be a renewal of pilgrimage. Historians note the important role that pilgrimage has had for Armenians to various sacred sites. In the fifth-century writings of St. Cyril, he notes seeing 400 Armenian pilgrims on the road to

Jerusalem. A contemporary observed 800 Armenian pilgrims at Mount Sinai. Numerous Armenian monasteries dotted the landscape of the Holy Land by the seventh century.

Already in July, 2000 Catholicos Aram I led one such pilgrimage to the church of the martyrdom of Thaddeus in Iran to show solidarity with the 200,000 Armenian Christians there and to increase dialogue with political leaders. Church leaders are inviting residents of Armenia to embark on pilgrimages during this period and for members of the Armenian diaspora to visit their homeland. Various activities including a pan-Armenian youth festival have been scheduled during July.

For further information on the anniversary celebrations see www.etchmiadzin.com or www.cathcil.org. For information on the American Armenian church see www.armenianchurch.org.

Sidebar

The Armenian Holocaust

April 24 is remembrance day of the genocide of 1915 in which massacres by the Ottoman Empire left dead one and a half million Armenians as well as 750,000 Assyrians and 400,000 Greeks. Eighteen states, most recently Maryland and Pennsylvania, have passed resolutions honoring the victims. However, the U.S. Congress, as recently as last year, has refrained from declaring these deaths as genocide. In a recent article in Via Dolorosa, Mary Cook notes a June 2, 2000 written campaign promise by then candidate George W. Bush to characterize this atrocity as genocide. In a letter to the Armenian Assembly of America, he wrote, Armenians were subjected to a genocidal campaign that defies comprehension.

This past April, President Bush followed through on his promise to commemorate this event with a signed statement, saying: Today marks the commemoration of one of the great tragedies of history: the forced exile and annihilation of approximately 1.5 million Armenians in the closing years of the Ottoman Empire. These infamous killings darkened the 20th century and continue to haunt us to this day.

American Armenian leaders were disappointed in the omission of the term genocide from the president's declaration. Cook quotes Assembly Board Chairman Van Krikorian as saying, While Armenian Americans appreciate that President Bush has recognized the significance of the 1915 Genocide in such a thoughtful and heartfelt way, they are surprised and disturbed that he would break a campaign promise and give such weight to the pressure of Turkey's denial campaign.

Armenians in Jerusalem have likewise long sought recognition of the Armenian genocide in the Israeli school curriculum, yet to no avail. In fact, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was quoted April 10 in the Turkish Daily News, "We reject attempts to create a similarity between the Holocaust and the Armenian allegations. Nothing similar to the Holocaust occurred. It is a tragedy what the Armenians went through but not a genocide."