

**EPISODES FROM THE HISTORY OF THE ACTIVITIES OF PROTESTANT  
PREACHERS IN WESTERN ARMENIA  
(End of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century)<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Beginning with the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Catholic and Protestant preachers appeared in Ottoman Turkey. However, unlike the representatives of other nations, the propaganda of the new doctrine was accepted mainly by the Armenians, which was conditioned by the awful socio-political, economic and spiritual situation of Armenia.

Protestant preachers used the plight of Christians, particularly Armenians, for the realization of their religious-political goals and interests<sup>2</sup>. They were the ones who for the first time encouraged the idea among Armenians that Europe and the Pope could support the liberation of Armenia, but only on the condition of accepting Catholicism or Protestantism. It was under their direct influence that the Armenian Catholicos traveled to a number of European countries in the 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

From the beginning, the Protestant preachers were of the opinion that the Armenian Church operated applying an “idolatrous” system<sup>3</sup>. However, after long contacts with the people in the Western Armenian reality, their mentality gradually changed and they became closer to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Starting from the 50s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian Protestants were recognized as a separate community by the Ottoman state and a separate diocese was established for them. After the Protestant preachers settled in Constantinople, they started to open branches in the provinces as well<sup>4</sup>. One such branch was also established in Van.

**Keywords:** Western Armenia, Van, missionary work, Protestantism, “Port” company.

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<sup>2</sup> NAA, fund 1120, inv. 1, file 93, sheet 18.

<sup>3</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 293.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, read Gevorgyan 2015.

## Introduction

In 1872 two Protestant preachers, Physician-Pastor Reynolds and Burnham, founded the American “Port” Company in Van<sup>5</sup>. Since then, many Protestant figures have been sent to Van by this company. However, none of them could do the work until the end. Some of them left Van prematurely due to personal reasons and others out of desperation. The only exception was Dr. Reynolds and his wife, who settled in Van since 1872 and engaged in the preaching of Protestantism for about 44 years.

## The beginning of educational and preaching activities

As in other regions, in Van as well, the Protestant preaching began in the field of education. At that time, Van's national-educational work was in a poor state. Within a short period of time, the Protestant preachers started the task of opening female and male schools in Aygestan and the City. At first, the residents of Van were indifferent to their activities. But gradually the preachers, in an attractive way, begin to win the interest and trust of a part of the people.

There were many cases when Protestant preachers contributed to the success of the Armenian school work. Thus, when Van's Yeramyian College was in a difficult financial situation, the English Protestant preacher Grace Kemble wrote a letter in 1895 to the English society and asked to organize a fundraiser for the Yeramyian College<sup>6</sup>.

Along with the educational work, they also gave a boost to the evangelical-preaching and medical fields. Proficient in Armenian, Reynolds held the position of inspector of the Van school on the one hand, and on the other hand, performed the role of Protestant preacher in the Sunday meetings. At the same time, as a physician, he “ran every day to cure the sick or to send them to Jesus”<sup>7</sup>. As a result of work, in the 90s of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 1-2 families in Van had already officially accepted the Protestant faith<sup>8</sup>.

But Protestant figures were generally not happy with their outcome. In 20-22 years of operation, they had barely recruited 22 members, yet thousands of dollars had been spent. “Each time, the preachers complained against the ungrateful behavior of the Van residents, they criticized them, they were saddened to see that despite their efforts and enthusiasm, they do not want to come on the right path.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Yeramyian 1929: 91-92.

<sup>6</sup> Van Yeramyian College: 9-15.

<sup>7</sup> Tseruk 1904, N 12, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Tseruk 1904, N 12, p. 59.

<sup>9</sup> Tseruk 1904, N 12, p. 59.

### **Mission of Physician-Pastor Reynolds**

It was 1895, when the horror of the massacres and the economic distress in Van reached its peak. In the name of the Van branch of the “Port” company, money was sent from America and Europe (Switzerland, England, Germany) to help the homesick people of Van, to care for and teach 500-600 orphans (boys and girls)<sup>10</sup>. Schools were opened in Van, Armenian Valley, Gavash, Shatakh, Archesh<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, Reynolds established a factory in Van and began providing benefits to those in need. That situation continued until 1898. Until then, the protestant preachers who were mocked and reproached become “saints” and “saviors” among the representatives of rural and urban society of Van. As a result, the number of followers of Protestantism reaches 100, and the number of families reaches 10<sup>12</sup>. Speaking about the activities of Reynolds H. Ter-Mkrtchyan assures that he “slowly resisting the persecutions and scorn of the enlightened people at the time, during the medical visits to the houses, started his preaching work with people, who accepted his preached faith”.<sup>13</sup>

In 1905 Reynolds founds a church-congregation in Van, where he invites David Pakhchoyan<sup>14</sup> as a permanent preacher. Two American preachers, Armenian preachers and assistants were working under his leadership, but the main work was done by Reynolds<sup>15</sup>. With the help of the “Port” company, he also managed to build an orphanage, a cemetery, a medical center, a pharmacy, a workshop, a vegetable garden, a windmill, and a flower garden on the eastern hill of Aygestan to spread science, enlightenment, and Protestantism.

Highly appreciating Reynolds’ moral, intellectual and material role in the life of the Armenians of Van, on the initiative of the locals, with the participation of the spiritual leader of Van, Archbishop Hovsep Sarachyan, on September 30, 1912, the jubilee dedicated to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his activity was held in the newly built oratory of Van. The speakers, Hambardzum Yeramyán, the director of Van Yeramyán College, Avetis Terzibashyan, the mayor of Van, young preacher Ussher and others appreciated his contribution in the life of the people of Van<sup>16</sup>.

Criticisms against Reynolds were also not few. Thus H. Ter-Mkrtchyan, speaking about preaching of Protestant, notes: “How much the poor, oppressed people have benefited from these benefits, let’s just say that the officials’ profit has always been

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<sup>10</sup> Geghuni 1900: 5.

<sup>11</sup> Harutyunyan 2012, N 10, p. 30 and 33.

<sup>12</sup> Tseruk 1904, N 12, p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> Gorts, November 4, 1908, N 46.

<sup>14</sup> Gorts, November 4, 1908, N 46.

<sup>15</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 293.

<sup>16</sup> Avetaber, November 16, 1912, N 46, p. 1091.

more than what was distributed, and that profit has been subtracted from the money and benefits to be distributed to the poor”<sup>17</sup>.

Based on the testimonies of political figures from Van Mkryan and Tutunjan, A-Do singles out anti-Armenian practices by Reynolds, noting that during the 1896 pogroms, he handed the Armenians who took refuge with him into the hands of the Turkish governor of Van<sup>18</sup>.

By the way, a similar reality was also recorded during the 1915 April heroic battle of Van. When Armenian women and children turn in terror to the representatives of the American Protestant mission in Van in the hope of finding safe shelter from Turkish torture, as witness E. Buranyan mentions Dr. Reynolds, who always preached “humanity” among the population, carelessly and without feeling a twinge of conscience rejects and expels them<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, the American Protestant preacher Reynolds, who lived and worked in Van for 44 years, highly appreciated the Van-Vaspurakan. In his speech at a gathering in London in 1913 he said that Van is so beautiful that it would be a misfortune to die without seeing it.

Fortunately or unfortunately, some of Reynolds’ dreams remained unfulfilled. He wanted to establish a higher educational institution in Van, hoping to find funds for its construction. The Protestant preacher traveled to England and the USA in 1913 and received the support of the “Port” company. But the disaster of 1915 left his goal unfulfilled<sup>20</sup>. In 1916, after visiting and distributing benefits to the refugees of Yerevan, he died after returning to America. Like Catholicos of All Armenians M. Khrimyan, Reynolds had willed that his remains be moved to Van at the first opportunity. E. Rshtuni wrote about it in a 1925 letter to H. Yeramyán. “Remains have been handed over to me and I hope to take the caravan of Van residents back to the villages and settle there in our beloved Van...”<sup>21</sup>

His wife played a major role in the education of Armenian orphaned girls. When Reynolds was in America in 1915, she did all of her husband’s errands. However, in 1915, during the Great Migration of Van, she died of exhaustion in Tiflis, where grateful Van residents organized his funeral<sup>22</sup>.

### **The activities of Protestant preachers Greene and H. Allen**

Young Green came to Van with Reynolds as his assistant to give impetus to the preaching and educational work. At first, he had bad ideas about the Armenian people

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<sup>17</sup> Gorts, November 4, 1908, N 46.

<sup>18</sup> A-Do 1917: 159.

<sup>19</sup> Buranyan 2013: 26.

<sup>20</sup> For more details about the events of this period, read Harutyunyan, Balyan 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 295.

<sup>22</sup> For more detail see Kochnak, 1915, October 23, N 43.

of Van. However, communicating with representatives of different segments of society, he changed his wrong beliefs and got a pro-Armenian orientation. Being against the division of the Armenian Apostolic Church, he attracted the admiration of the Armenian “brothers”, but on the other hand earned the displeasure of the conservative Reynolds, who soon removed him from Van<sup>23</sup>.

In 1895 Green assumed the position of secretary of the pro-Armenian committee of New York, which he managed successfully until 1918, always having as his motto "I came from America to Van as a preacher and now from Van I will go to America as a preacher from Van."<sup>24</sup>

In 1894 another young Protestant preacher Herbert Allen came to Van, who was the son of former editor of the periodical “The Herald” (Constantinople) Allen and the superintendent of Van school. Born in Kharberd, he spoke Armenian fluently and loved Armenians. The events of 1894 in Sassoon, the 1895-1896 Abdul-Hamid massacres, the death of his paralyzed father, who fell victim to the Kharberd massacre, left a deep trace on his mental condition.

In 1897 Herbert Allen returned to Van from America and at the same time undertook the task of restoring the rights of the Armenian peasants robbed by the Kurds. In the spring of the same year, accompanied by the American vice consul of Van and veterinarian Shahen Shatakhtsyan, H. Allen acquired draught cattle from Payajuk village in Salmast to distribute it among the villagers of Van.

Soon, returning to America in 1900, H. Allen founded the periodical “Kochnak of Armenia” (Church Bell of Armenia). He also assumes the positions of the inspector of the American School of Partizak, and then the editor of “The Herald”.

H. Allen died in 1911 at the age of 46, bequeathing the motto<sup>25</sup> “Tell my nation (we are talking about the Armenians - **V. H.**) to love each other and not stray from the path of truth.” His funeral took place at the initiative of the Armenian people, in the oratory of Van<sup>26</sup>.

### **The role of Clarence Douglas Ussher, Ernes Earo and Creasy**

In 1900 physician Clarence Ussher arrived in Kharberd and then Van from America, who diligently started the useful work of free medical care and distribution of medicine to many patients. The love and respect for C. Ussher was so great among the population of Van that when the missionary assembly convened in Karin in 1912 decided to transfer him from Van to Karin, the residents of Van immediately prepared a

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<sup>23</sup> Yeramyan 1950: 282-286.

<sup>24</sup> Yeramyan 1950: 295-296.

<sup>25</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 297.

<sup>26</sup> Avetaber, November 16, 1912, N 46, p. 1090.

request and, turning to the participants of the missionary assembly in Karin, asked them to leave him in Van<sup>27</sup>.

Clarence Ussher believed that the destruction of the Christian Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was planned long before Turkey entered the war<sup>28</sup>. According to him, “religious fanaticism played a fleeting role in them (we are talking about pogroms - **V. H.**), and only after the pogroms started, having nothing to do with that program”<sup>29</sup>.

The information of Clarence Ussher, who lived in Van for 18 years, about the April heroic battle of Van is also quite valuable<sup>30</sup>.

In the summer of 1915, he went to Yerevan with the refugees, taking over the affairs of the Relief Society of the Middle East<sup>31</sup>.

Ernes A. Earo, who was a school teacher, inspector of Armenians operating in the missionary circle, and president of the Van Missionary Higher School, also carried out missionary activities in Van.

In 1915 in Van, he greatly assisted orphans and the poor. Later, on December 20, 1915, Earo was given the certificate N 1405 of the American Committee for Emigration Assistance, which gave him the opportunity to live and work in Yerevan as well. The protestant preacher was awarded with the medal of the Armenian government for his works<sup>32</sup>. E. Earo died in 1940.

Creasy also did much in Van, who in 1916 distributed 1,200 head of cattle, as well as beds and clothes to the population in need in the regions of Armenian Valley, Norduz and Gavash alone<sup>33</sup>.

On September 18, 1913, during the most intense period of Armenian reforms, Noel Buxton, the Balkanian and later the president of the Anglo-Armenian Committee, accompanied by his brother Harold Buxton and the editor-publisher of the English "Ararat" journal, published in London, Aram Raffi, the son of the famous Armenian novelist Raffi, arrived in Van via Tabriz<sup>34</sup>. Buxton's goal was to “study the Armenian life and see the sufferings of the Armenian people.”<sup>35</sup>

The delegation meets the governor of Van, Tahsin Bey, and visits the Armenian schools of Varag, Aghtamar, and returns to England via Erzurum and Tiflis on September 22.

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<sup>27</sup> Avetaber, November 16, 1912, N 46, p. 1090 pp. 9-15.

<sup>28</sup> Ussher, Knapp 1917.

<sup>29</sup> Somakian 1995: 76-77.

<sup>30</sup> Yusaber, 1916, December 24.

<sup>31</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 299.

<sup>32</sup> NAA fund 50, inv. 1, file 127, sheet 25.

<sup>33</sup> Arev, June 17, 1916, N 131.

<sup>34</sup> Ashkhatank, 1913. October 30/ November 12, N 37.

<sup>35</sup> Mshak, 1913. October 12, N 226.

### **Arsen Keorkizyan's pro-Armenian activities**

Armenian Arsen Keorkizyan, who was born and received his primary education at Van's American Higher School, was also carrying out protestant preaching in Van. He together with G. Petrosyan, founded the City male high school in Van, where after 4 years in office he was sent to "Anatolia" college in Marzvan, then he moved to Germany, where he studied theology at the "Alliance" seminary in Berlin. Returning to Van, in 1912-1915 he served as the deputy supervisor of American schools for boys and girls and pastor of churches. After the emigration of July 1915 until 1917, A. Keorkizyan was a teacher of the school for refugees in Baku and preacher of the local Evangelical Church. In 1917-1918 he served in the Near East Relief Administration as a Home Relief Supervisor. And in 1918, he held the position of pastor of the Armenian Christian Church in Tabriz. During the migration of Van in March 1918, with the assistance of the British military authorities, A. Keorkizyan establishes nutrition stations for the Vaspurakan exiles on the Hamadan-Kermanshah-Baghdad line.

At the end of 1918, he was sent to the British in Baghdad as a representative of the National Council of Tehran to help the 20,000 Armenian refugees sheltered there. Together with Musegh Archbishop Serobyanyan, he founded the "Vaspurakan" and "Araratian" orphanages for boys and girls of AGBU in the desert of Bakuba, which were later moved to Jerusalem<sup>36</sup>.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, established religious relations with representatives of other churches also existed in Van province. Thus, the leader of the Anglican Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury, presents to the mayor of Van and the representative of Van's trading society, Petros Gapamachyan, several church-artistic vessels with the inscription "in confirmation of his sincere friendship"<sup>37</sup>.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, starting from the 70s of the XIX century, the Protestant preachers, in various regions of Western Armenia, as well as in Van, undertake evangelical-preaching, educational, medical activities, as a result of which a school, a college, an orphanage, a cemetery, a medical center, a pharmacy, a workshop, a vegetable garden, windmill and flower garden were built. Protestantism in Western Armenia had both positive and negative consequences. It was obvious that the ultimate goal of the preachers was the ideological transformation of the Western Armenian population. Under the guise of science and enlightenment, the final goal of the foreign doctrine was hidden. However, it should be noted that their activities were also distinguished by many charitable and humanitarian initiatives.

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<sup>36</sup> Gazanjian 1950: 301-302.

<sup>37</sup> Mshak, 1911. January 11, N 4.

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