



Aime-Jacques Girou

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Girou, Aimé-Jacques (1885–1977)

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Aimé-Jacques Girou was a dentist, missionary, preacher, administrator, and author who was instrumental in the establishment and consolidation of the Adventist mission work in Turkey, Belgium, Mauritius, Spain, and Portugal.

Early Years

Aimé-Jacques Girou was born in 1885 into a Catholic family in St. Laurent d'Olt (Aveyron), France. He received his education in Montpellier and graduated with a doctor of medicine in dentistry. He joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church and started working as a preacher in Belgium in 1906, and he continued until 1911. In 1912 Girou married a Greek nurse, Eunice Kalfa, of Adana. From 1911 to 1920 he served as a missionary in Turkey.

Turkey

Before his marriage, Girou started conducting meetings among Muslims in Constantinople. Since he could not speak Turkish or the native languages, Ms. Eunice Kalfa was employed to translate and interpret for him. They fell in love and soon married. That same year he started to work as a pastor with Emil Frauchiger, and as a dentist among the French and German people of Constantinople.¹ Frauchiger had earlier established a training school there and held lectures for the Armenians and Greeks. The training school served as a missionary training avenue for workers in Turkey between the years 1910 and 1912. Three languages—Turkish, Armenian, and Greek—were taught to those preparing for mission service among the inhabitants of the Levant Union Mission.²

Girou knew how to contextualize his messages for a specific audience. For example, in mid-1912, he began holding evangelistic meetings in Scutari (the Asiatic part of Constantinople, Turkey) for the Armenian-speaking people. Between 150 and 300 people attended these meetings, mostly young men who followed the way of thinking of the Armenian intellectuals. Knowing that there were “evolutionists” in his audience,³ Girou started on the first day with an exposé on the errors of the theories of evolution. This did not please some of the young intellectuals present. Consequently, they asked for a meeting in which they could present their own views. Girou accepted this challenge on the ground that they rent a hall. The meeting took place on May 4, 1912, in the grand hall of the Armenian Berberian College.⁴ The way the meeting turned out was seen as a Divine intervention as the opponent neither opposed nor spoke against the views of Girou.

Here is a firsthand report of the event given by Diamondola Keanides (later Ashod-Keanides):

While Dr. Girou was waiting in Constantinople for his orientation and government work permits, he spent some time in the University of Constantinople. While there he became acquainted with some of the professors. One of them challenged him to a debate in the university auditorium. The debate was widely advertised and excited considerable interest among the educated people of the city. This was a real opportunity for the Adventists to

make their work more widely known...Among the curious listeners in the packed auditorium that night was a professor of astronomy of the University of Constantinople, Diran Tcharakian, and his friend Aram E. Ashod. Tcharakian had been an avowed atheist, but Ashod had convinced him that God did exist. These two men followed the debate carefully, noting the points that Dr. Girou used to prove that God is a Supreme Being, to whom all men are obligated for life—both present and future. And just as remarkable as the lecture was Dr. Girou's charitable spirit and Christian appearance. The audience was spellbound with Dr. Girou's logic and presentation, and many were favorably impressed. At the close of the lecture the professor who had challenged Dr. Girou could not refute his arguments, so the meeting was dismissed without a rebuttal. From that day on Professor Tcharakian was a changed man. The seeds of truth took root in his heart, and in time he became a powerful witness for God.⁵

Dr. Tcharakian later became a prominent Adventist in the Ottoman Empire. He died a martyr.⁶

While in Smyrna (Izmir) from 1912 onwards, he and his wife opened a dental clinic. He moved there to learn Turkish and around 1914 he received permission to hold tent meetings.⁷ It seems he was the first Adventist to have gotten such permission.⁸

During the First World War, his father-in-law, who worked for the Bible Society, died in a prison in Adana. This was when the Ottoman militia-driven persecution was carried out during the war. After the war, Girou became a Greek citizen so he could more easily do mission work. Then after World War II he became a French citizen again.

Belgium

From the latter part of 1920 until 1929, Girou worked in Belgium. He served as president of the Belgium Conference from 1924 onwards,⁹ working among French-speaking Belgian Catholics. He started Bible studies among the people whom he called "very difficult to reach." The result of his Bible studies generated baptisms among the Flemish population.¹⁰ As president of the Belgian Conference,¹¹ he contributed to its growth and stability as a self-supporting organization.

Mauritius (Including Seychelles and Rodrigues Island)

From 1929 onwards, Girou served as a missionary to Mauritius, where he worked as superintendent of the Adventist mission.¹² The mission in Mauritius was part of the Latin Union Conference at that time, which spanned to the Seychelles and the Island of Rodrigues.¹³ He worked along with Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Ignace (Mauritians), and the Adventist mission recorded rapid growth.¹⁴ The Ignaces were the missionary couple who carried out the pioneer mission work in Seychelles.¹⁵ Two years after the work in the Mauritius mission, Girou organized several Sabbath School groups, with an attendance between 750 and 800.¹⁶ During this period the

mission paper *Le Flambeau de l'Océan India* was published.

Back to Europe and Later Life

After serving in the Indian Ocean Islands for six years, he was called to Madrid, Spain, to serve as mission president from 1935 to 1939. Major challenges of the period were the Spanish Civil War, which broke out in 1936, and the staunchly Catholic tradition of the country. In fact, there was no freedom of worship during that time, and church services were stopped as a result.¹⁷ While doing his work there, Girou was careful in his approach to Catholic believers. Girou believed that Catholics needed to be reached in their own religious, cultural, and social context: "I believe we must be Jews with the Jews, and Greeks with the Greeks, in order to save them. And we must also adapt our methods to the Catholic background and way of thinking in order to help bring Catholics nearer to the Saviour they love, but know so little."¹⁸

For example, Girou reported that he employed the Catholic expression of "Our Lord Jesus Christ" or "Our Savior Jesus Christ" whenever he spoke of Christ. On the person of Mary, he concluded: "Catholics will not speak of Mary, the mother of the Lord, without saying: 'The holy virgin Mary' or at least 'The virgin Mary.' The word 'virgin' sounds very sweet to their ears; and if it is not used by the speaker, he is soon known as an apostate."¹⁹ He even argued that "Singing and praying, as well as the use of the words "brethren and sisters," are all right in their proper time and place, but not in a lecture delivered to Catholics."²⁰ Interestingly, he thought that some Adventist books "are suited enough to close doors to the hearts of some people."²¹ He argued: "A book that is good for England, Germany, the United States, and other countries of Protestant culture and mentality, may not be a good one for other countries with a different culture and mentality."²²

Until 1939, he was the leader of the Adventist church in Spain, even as poverty and civil war threatened the Spanish Adventist communities. With his diplomatic skills, he rescued the Adventist church property from the access of the fascist authorities²³ and helped to set up a seminary in Lisbon.

As leader of the now defunct Iberian Union he was also responsible for Portugal. In September 1939, at the instigation of Girou, the Adventist municipalities in this country were formed into an independent union. Girou took over the leadership of the new union.

From January 1940 to January 1941 he was president of the Portuguese Union. However, for the most part of that year he had to remain in France because of traveling limitations caused by the Second World War.²⁴ He published two works in Portuguese: *Harmonias da Natureza* (*Harmonies of Nature*, 1938) and *Filhos do Macaco ou Filhos de Deus?* (*Sons of the Monkey or Sons of God?*, 1940).

After his retirement in 1947,²⁵ he was appointed director of the Adventist food factory, "Pur Aliment," in Paris, which was reopened that year.²⁶ His wife, Eunice, died in 1968 at the age of 82. Girou died May 15, 1977, in Dieulefit, France, and was buried in Marolles-en-Hurepoix near Paris.

Contribution

Through the work of Girou, Adventism was established in some parts of the Ottoman Empire, notably Turkey. His mission work of acculturation in Turkey was beneficial to breaking down prejudice about Adventist Christianity among Armenians. His work as a missionary in Belgium, Spain, and Mauritius (Seychelles and Rodrigues Island) provided the Adventist mission with stability in those countries. As a former Catholic, he learned how to contextualize the Adventist message to Catholic believers in Spain. His method proved viable in reaching people with a staunch Catholic background.

As a leader with vision, he saw the need for expansion in administrative structures in Portugal and Spain. As a trained dentist, he used a combination of health work and evangelism in reaching people for Christ. Moreover, Girou used his scholarly gifts in furthering the gospel by publishing tracts, mission pamphlets, and two books in Portuguese as well as one in French. He also wrote three songs in the Adventist French hymnal, *Hymnes et Louanges*.²⁷

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NOTES

1. Emil Frauchiger, "The Levant Field," *ARH*, December 7, 1911, 10.
2. Emil Frauchiger, "Constantinople," *ARH*, February 29, 1912, 13-14.
3. According to Eunice A. Girou, "The schools are taught by materialists, and as a result, many are becoming infidels." See Experience among Mohammedans in Turkey," *ARH*, August 8, 1912, 10.
4. Ibid. At the meeting an Armenian writer was introduced as the one to debate with Girou. This writer, Diran Tcherakian, was a well-known Armenian evolutionist, poet, and a delegate of the (Ottoman) Turkish government on political affairs. When Girou asked for an interpreter, his opponent offered to interpret. After about an hour and a half of speaking to more than 200 people, Girou ended his side of the debate. His opponent excused himself from speaking further, since he was tired from translating. Even when urged by the students, he only spoke for about ten minutes where he questioned why Girou was fighting evolution. At the end, the president of the college closed the meeting with "very nice words of approval of the faith he had seen lying behind the words of" Girou.
5. Mildred Thompson Olson, *Diamondola* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1966), 80.

6. Daniel Heinz, "While Justice Lingers: A Nearly Forgotten Story of Armenian Adventists," *ARH*, December 9, 2015, accessed July 23, 2020, <https://www.adventistreview.org/1527-26>.
7. While working in Scutari, Girou faced some difficulties in carrying out tent meetings. According to his report, some of the efforts to carry out tent meetings failed because the political conditions in Turkey at that time did not favor public meetings. This was the period when Turkey was carrying out its war against the Balkans. This war caused internal hostilities among the Greeks and Turks. After a train collision, which killed about 300 soldiers, a number of Greeks were massacred. At the climax of this, Girou was encouraged by the leaders of the church to study the Turkish language. To achieve this, he needed to be at a place where only the Turkish language was spoken. Thus he moved to Smyrna around November 1912. But he could not hold religious meetings because of the curfew as a result of robbery and extrajudicial killings. See Agapios J. Girou, "News from the Levant," *ARH*, December 19, 1912, 20. Agapios was the translation of Aimé into Greek, which Girou adopted during his time in the Middle East.
8. Based on a postcard sent to the editors of *ARH*, July 9, 1914, 24.
9. M. Ellsworth Olsen, *Origin and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1925), 615.
10. See report by Eunice A. Girou, "Who Would Have Missed it?" *ARH*, March 2, 1922, 20-21.
11. M. Ellsworth Olsen, *Origin and Progress of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1925), 615.
12. Steen Rasmussen, "Mauritius—The Pearl of the Indian Ocean," *Missions Quarterly*, Second Quarter, 1932, 12.
13. The Girou family arrived in Mauritius on June 29, 1929; see Clairemonde Salzmänn, *Perles des Mascareignes* (Librairie Vie et santé, 1981), 85.
14. Upon arrival he visited the Island of Rodriguez to conduct seven baptisms and supervise the mission work started by a certain E. Michael and his family. He kept traveling between Mauritius, Seychelles, and Rodriguez. Daniel Ignace, who assisted with the mission, had gone through missionary training in India. Three to four months after his missionary work in Mauritius (and the Seychelles), there were some converts because of his work. See O. Montgomery, "A Visit to the Seychelles Islands," *Australasian Record*, August 10, 1931, 2-3.
15. See A. M. Dickey, "Entering Unoccupied Territory – the Seychelles," *Quarterly Review*, December 1930, 14-15.
16. Unfortunately, the three chapels which were built in Port-Louis, Rose-Hill, and Rose-Bella were too small to accommodate the Sabbath School attendees. Moreover, Sabbath School rally days were organized. These rallies served as opportunity for mission since Sabbath School members were encouraged to invite their friends to attend. Agapios J. Girou, "Mauritius Mission," *The Missionary Leader*, July 1930, 7-8.
17. Agapios J. Girou, "A Letter from Spain," *Eastern Tidings*, November 15, 1936, 6-7.

18. A. J. Girou, "Effective Approach to the Catholics," *The Ministry*, September 1937, 4.
19. A. J. Girou, "Effective Approach to the Catholics," *The Ministry*, October 1937, 14
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. A. J. Girou, "Word from Spain," *ARH*, May 20, 1937, 18-19.
24. Under his leadership, the Portuguese Union membership grew to about 668 members.
25. "Franco-Belgian Union Conference," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1947), 197.
26. "Here and There," *Quarterly Review*, June 1948, 8.
27. See for example, "Il est là-bas, plus haut...," *Hymnes et Louanges: Recueil de Cantiques á l'usage ded Eglise adventististes de langue francaise* (Dammarie-Les-Lys: Éditions Les Signes de Temps, 1946), 79.

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