

Tcharakian, Diran (1875–1921)

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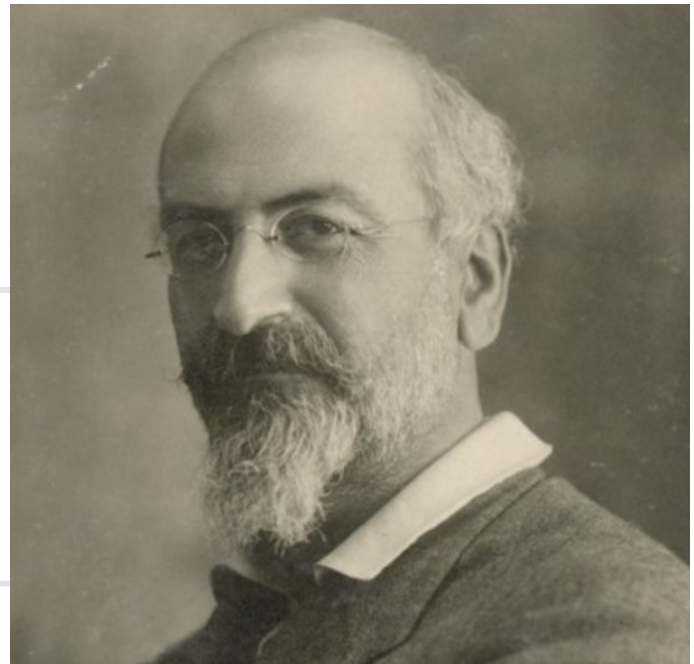
Diran Tcharakian was a poet, artist, author, university professor, and convinced atheist before he became a Seventh-day Adventist minister and modern-day Paul in Turkey's Ottoman Empire. Following in the steps of Adventist pioneers Theodore Anthony and Zadour Baharian, he became known as "the new apostle" to the interior of Asia Minor, where in the end he sacrificed his life for the Adventist cause.

Conversion

Tcharakian (alt. spelling: Chrakian or [Chrakian](#)) was born in Constantinople in 1875. He was educated at Berberian College of Constantinople and graduated from the College of Arts. He also wrote articles, literary research notes, and signed his books with the pseudonym Indra.²

When Tcharakian became a professor at the University of Constantinople, the academic environment only confirmed his atheistic convictions. However, his good friend Aram Ashod managed over time to convince him that God did exist, and Tcharakian joined the Armenian Orthodox Church.

In 1912 a French Adventist missionary, Dr. Aimé-Jacques Girou, arrived from France to set up a dental clinic in Smyrna. While waiting for his orientation, he spent time on the campus of the University of Constantinople and became acquainted with some of the professors. One of them challenged him to a debate in the university auditorium. Ashod and Tcharakian attended the debate together, closely following Girou's arguments. The audience was spell-bound with Dr. Girou's logic and presentation, and many were favorably impressed, including Tcharakian. From that day on, he was a changed man. As he later expressed, the Holy Spirit had been



Diran Tcharakian, c. 1915.

Shared by Hyosu Jung. Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

trying to lead him, but he was slow to obey.³

A fellow professor, Mr. Bezirdjian (also an artist and sculptor), left to work in Egypt, where he became associated with George Keough, a missionary there. From him he learned about Seventh-day Adventists and became particularly interested in the books of Ellen G. White. Bezirdjian sent many of Ellen G. White books to Tcharakian, but to avoid confusion he put them aside for the time being.

One day in August 1914 an Adventist colporteur, Nicolos Tefronides, knocked on the door of Tcharakian's home and presented him with some books. Recognizing them as the same ones Bezirdjian had previously sent him, Tcharakian informed the colporteur that he was in possession of all of them. The colporteur replied, "If you have all these books, I am surprised that you still smoke cigars!" Embarrassed, he put out the cigar he was smoking, realizing from that moment that the habit was offensive to God. Tefronides invited him to attend some meetings in a hall at a certain address.⁴

That Sabbath the 39-year-old professor entered the small Seventh-day Adventist meeting room in the capital of Turkey, quietly sliding into the front pew. Later he admitted, "I had a little difficulty in finding your place because I was looking for an impressive church; but I got here just the same, thank God!"

That morning the Swiss missionary Emil Frauchiger preached in English while a teenager named Diamondola Keanides translated. Tcharakian felt amazed to see members of different ethnic groups, with long histories of conflict between them, worshipping together. But what impressed him most was the beauty and symmetry of the truth presented that morning.

Tcharakian continued week after week to attend the Sabbath school and church services as well as the prayer meetings. Later in the year, Pastor Zadour Baharian, the senior national pastor in Turkey, held evangelistic meetings, and Professor Tcharakian brought many of his friends to hear the truths that he had accepted and learned to love.⁵

When Tcharakian professed his Adventist faith, his wife left him, his friends shunned him, fellow professors at the university considered him crazy, and even his trusted friend, Aram Ashod, no longer spoke to him. He lost his tenured position at the university, and, as World War I expanded, was conscripted into the Turkish military. Tcharakian shared his newfound faith with his fellow soldiers, and his desire to keep the Sabbath and refusal to bear arms soon put him at odds with his superiors. Payment of a tax at last exempted him from military service, and once out of the army, he finally had opportunity to be baptized by Pastor Frauchiger.⁶

Ministry

The Levant Union Mission offered Tcharakian employment as a minister, and he poured himself into his labor for souls, spending entire nights in prayer. A powerful preacher, his ministry drew many to the church.⁷

One fruit of his efforts was the conversion of his friend Aram Ashod. As he wrote, "I have prayed so much for him. I could no longer communicate with him personally when he became angry with me for becoming an Adventist. But I asked God to send the Holy Spirit to speak to him, and he began reading the Bible through to prove that I was wrong about the Law and the Sabbath. When he got to Psalm 119, he broke down. He said that the Spirit of God convicted him so strongly of the importance of the law, that he simply destroyed all the notes he had collected as proof against Sabbath observance."

The next Sabbath, Aram Ashod attended an Adventist church, and after several weeks was baptized.⁸ But there were consequences, and as the sole supporter of his sister and old father, he lost his well-paid job. Still, he remained faithful to his newfound faith, and later became a steadfast worker in the church. Meanwhile, Tcharakian shared his faith in the villages of western Turkey.⁹

When news reached the Adventist Mission that Zadour Baharian had been shot by the Turks for refusing to renounce Christianity, Tcharakian took his place in the interior of Asia Minor, sharing the gospel with all who would listen.¹⁰

On August 1, 1916, Tcharakian was arrested and imprisoned, accused of plotting against the government by spreading subversive teachings. He took the opportunity to witness for his faith to the many men jailed with him. Freed after a month thanks to influential friends, he begged the guards to allow him to finish preaching before departing.¹¹

Drafted into the army once more, Tcharakian again experienced severe trials, and boldly testified of his faith before the highest military tribunals. At war's end in November 1918, he encouraged Turkish Adventists to stand strong, and worked to establish new groups of believers.¹² He received his ministerial license from the Levant Union Mission. There is no record of him ever being ordained, but he worked as dedicated and sacrificial as any ordained minister.¹³

Tcharakian visited the scattered believers to encourage them and reorganize the groups and churches where possible. Many members had lost their lives in the war, and others had been deported, while a good number had left the country. Refugees from the interior streamed to Constantinople for food and shelter.

Meanwhile, the young Diamondola Keanides, who was working as secretary-treasurer in the union office, caught typhus and died. She had sent Adventist Bible lessons and literature to Tcharakian and thus assisted him in learning and growing to become an Adventist. He was a close friend of the family and had stayed with them a short while when homeless.

Tcharakian visited the Keanides home six hours after the death of the young woman and met two mourning women, one of whom was Diamondola's mother. Tcharakian was shocked to hear that Diamondola was dead. When he had recovered from the shock, he said, "This is not the time for her to die. I cannot believe that it is God's will for her to die now. She is needed at the Mission."

Tcharakian reminded the women about the apostle Peter who prayed for Dorcas and raised her from the dead. He knelt with the two ladies and pleaded with God for the life of Diamondola. Taking hold of her lifeless hand, he closed his prayer with the words, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I say unto you, arise!" She sat up in the bed, rubbed her eyes and saw Tcharakian standing by her side.¹⁴

The Last Journey

Tchakarian was working in Iconium (Konya), when the Kemalist forces suddenly surrounded the city on June 21, 1921. The Christians had no time to escape or send messages to friends. Tcharakian was captured along with other Christians and forced to march 1,000 kilometers into exile. As they walked along the rugged trails on the death march into the Syrian Desert, Tcharakian comforted his companions. He preached the love of Jesus to his captors who at bayonet point drove the starved and weary sufferers across the snow-clad mountains and blistering deserts and plains.

Near the Tigris River, Tcharakian was unable to drag himself further. After a night of camping at the river side, they knew that he would not live. In the morning his companions laid him gently in the grass. His last words to them were to love one another, have faith in God, and forgive their persecutors. He died on the bank of the Tigris River at Diyarbakir on Friday afternoon, July 8, 1921. A non-Adventist paper had this to say of him: "During the whole journey, Diran Tcharakian was inspired by the words of God. He was against any spirit of revenge... he showed forgiveness to his persecutors. His faith was never shaken, and he never let the Bible leave his hand."¹⁵

¹⁶

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