

FEAST OF THE THEOPHANY
(Christmas in the Armenian Church)
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It is misleading to use the word “Christmas” for the feast which the Armenian Church celebrates on the sixth of January all over the world, and which for reasons of convenience, is celebrated in America on the Sunday following the sixth of January. It is misleading to call this feast Christmas, because it is more than Christmas. It is the celebration of the two important events in the life of Christ, namely, *His Nativity*, and *His Baptism* in the River Jordan.

This combined celebration of Nativity and Baptism we call with a long compound Armenian word, “Asdvadz-a-haydnootyun,” which means, “appearance of God” (among men), Theophany or Epiphany in English. The Baptism of Christ is as important as His Nativity as far as his “appearance” among men, as the Son of God, is concerned. As Christ’s Birth is the starting point of His public life, so also His Baptism is the starting point of His public life, and ministry. Besides, it was at His Baptism that the divine voice from heaven revealed, “*He is My Beloved Son*, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3: 17). Therefore, the first thing we have to know about the so called “Armenian Christmas,” is that it is celebrated on the sixth of January, secondly that it is the celebration of all events connected with the Birth of Christ, up to His public ministry; the *Birth* and *Baptism* holding the chief place among these various events. In the Armenian Church, on this holy day, a popular ceremony is performed. It is called “Chur-orhnek,” “blessing of waters.” It is performed in commemoration of Christ’s Baptism.

The question which I am sure will be asked by almost everybody in this connection will be: Even granting this united celebration of the Nativity and Baptism of Christ, why is it that Armenians are the only Christians celebrating this feast on the sixth of January and not on December twentyfifth, as all the other Christians do? The answer briefly is this:

The exact day and year of Christ’s birth have never been satisfactorily established, because nothing definite is said about the date in the Gospels. *But it is a historical fact that the celebration of Christ’s Birth on January sixth in all the Christian Churches goes further back than that of December twenty-five.*

A Catholic book, defending the Catholic form of Christianity, while giving the approximate dates of the institution of various church festivals, mentions Christmas in these words: “Christmas celebrated first on January sixth, kept on December twenty-fifth in Rome about 340.” The reason for changing is given as follows, again by another Catholic author: “The Lord was born in the month of January on the same day on which we celebrate Epiphany, (i.e., on the sixth of January), for, of old, the feast of the Nativity and Epiphany were kept on one and the same day. The reason why our Fathers changed the solemnity celebrated on the sixth of January, and transferred it to the 25th of December is as follows: It was the custom of pagans to celebrate the birthday of the Sun on this very day, December 25th. In these solemnities and festivals the Christians too were tempted to participate. The leaders of the Church, therefore, decided that the Birth of Christ be kept on this date (i.e., 25th of December) to overshadow the pagan festival, and on January sixth, the feast of Epiphanies. (Catholic Encyclopedia: Articles, “Christmas” and “Epiphany”).

This change, having begun in Rome, spread very quickly to the East and all over the Roman Empire. The change did not penetrate into Armenia, because the Armenians, having no such pagan festival on December 25th to suppress, did not see any reason for following the new practice; besides, as they were living almost isolated in their own mountains, no practical inconvenience was arising from their not following the general change. Most of all, however, the Armenians wanted to remain faithful to the ancient custom; so they have kept the old date through the centuries to the present day. Therefore, the Armenians have a good historical reason for celebrating this festival on the sixth of January. They may have a practical reason, too, in America.

Christmas, as people celebrate it in America, although a most joyous occasion, is nevertheless, so full of excitement and commotion, that they are in danger of losing the real meaning of the day. We have always to keep in mind that Christmas is a religious and spiritual festival, and social festivities connected with it are incidental. To give more prominence to these worldly aspects of the feast than to the real thing is like, cultivating cotton for its seeds rather than for that white precious stuff, the cotton itself. After everything has calmed down and even the New Year has gone by with all its distracting attractions, we can in true spirit, settle down to celebrate the feast which in Armenian is "Asdvadz-a-haydnootyun," the appearance of God among men; always remembering that it is the "appearing" of a God on earth which has brought to this world that wonderful spirit with which almost everybody feels himself filled.

The briefest and maybe the most complete message of Theophany would be this: The Son of God has appeared on earth, becoming a son of man, in order that sons of men may someday appear in heaven as sons of God. May the Good Lord make us worthy of this glorious destiny.