

# Grigor of Tat'ev

A GREAT SCHOLASTIC THEOLOGIAN AND PHILOSOPHER  
(XIVth C.)

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## INTRODUCTION

Vardapet Grigor Tat'evatsi (of Tat'ev) has been a dominating figure in XIV-XVth century church history of Armenia. As a theologian and teacher he achieved so much that he influenced even the events and orientation of the Armenian Church in the following centuries. His pupils and later Armenian authors generously and of course rightly call him «the great Vardapet» (teacher), «heavenly champion», «the brilliant torch of Tat'ev», «eternally shining sun», «a source propagating the teachings of Christ», «Second Enlightener» (the first being Grigor the Parthev, the first official Patriarch of Armenia), «Second John Chrysostom» etc.

The second half of XIVth century was a very difficult time for the Armenians. The Mongol-Tartar hordes, under the leadership of Timur Lang (1336-1405) were raiding, plundering and destroying Greater Armenia, whereas the Mamelukes of Egypt were continuously attacking Little or Cilician Armenia which finally lost its independence in 1375. The Armenian Church also was suffering due to internal and external conflicts and struggles: the local Patriarchal See of Aght'amar near Lake Van (the present Ahtamar in Turkey) had revolted against the Mother See whose center was still located at Sis, in Little Armenia. At the beginning of XIVth century, according to a missionary program, Rome endeavoured persistently to win the Orthodox Armenians and

Syrians and to bring them under its authority. The Franciscan fathers preached and taught in Cilicia, Northern Armenia and Georgia, whereas the Dominicans laboured in Greater Armenia and Persia. The leaders of the Armenian Church were very disturbed about this challenging situation and sought a solution for the crisis.

#### A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Grigor was born about 1346 in the province of Vayots Dsor at the village T'mkaberd. His father Sargis, originally from Arjésh, had married a girl from P'arpi and settled down in Vayots Dsor, in the country of Siwnik'. After the elementary education, he entered the monastery of Aprakunik' to learn near the famous vardapet Hovhannes of Orotn. According to reliable historical accounts, he studied 28 years with his teacher. This presumably would mean, after completing the Seminary he continued as assistant-lecturer in the monastery. He was ordained a priest in Jerusalem during a visit; in Erzinka he received the title of **Vardapet** (Church doctor), and in 1387 the degree of **Higher Vardapet** at the same monastery of Aprakunik'. Upon the death of his teacher Hovhannes on 13th January 1388, Grigor was elected as rector of the Theological School. He remained only two years in the Seminary of Aprakunik', then because of financial difficulties he was compelled to move to Tat'ev where he enjoyed the support of the prince Sumbat Orbelian, son of Ivané and grandson of Burt'él, as well as of Archbishop Arak'el, his uncle's son. In the Seminary of Tat'ev gathering numerous pupils around him, he taught and trained them, propagated education among the people and promoted cultural activities. In his syllabus, besides the main biblical and theological studies, he gave a prominent place to philosophy, thus emphasizing the importance of Greek philosophers for the Christian doctrine. The writings of Aristotle, Porphyry and Philo were the popular works which provided the fundamental philosophical material for the students. Hovhannes of Orotn and Grigor of Tat'ev themselves wrote commentaries on the books of these philosophers in order to facilitate and deepen the learning of theology. In 1408, Grigor moved to the monastery of Medzop' in the province of Arjésh, this time forced by political circumstances. In 1410 he returned home and shortly after his

arrival in Tat'ev fell sick and died on the 25th December (1410) at the age of 64<sup>1</sup>.

## THE LITERARY WORKS

The literary works of Grigor are numerous and various in their subjects and they can be characterized as erudite, scholarly and comprehensive writings. On one hand he admired and utilized the books of Greek philosophers and theologians, on the other hand he profited of the logical art and methodological system of the western scholastic theologians whose works were brought, translated and spread in Armenia by the Dominican and Franciscan friars. He cites extensively from the classical Greek fathers: Dionysius of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus of Neo Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom, Epiphanius of Salamis/Cyprus, Cyril of Alexandria and Dionysius the Areopagite. From the Latin authors he knows: Augustine of Hippo, Albertus Magnus, Isidorus of Sevilla and specially Thomas Aquinas. Like the scholastics of Europe, Tat'evatsi also made every effort to interpret the mysteries of the Christian faith through formal logic and rational dialectic. Grigor of Tat'ev and his master Hovhannes of Orotn continuing the tradition of their forefathers, intensively worked on the philosophy of Aristotle and prepared new commentaries using them for the explanation and support of the Christian theology. Of course the theology of Tat'evatsi was the

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1. On the life and literary works of Grigor of Tat'ev see Maghakia Ormanian, **Azgapatoum** (History of the Armenian Nation) (Arm.), 3 volumes, Constantinople, 1912-1927, paragraphs 1366-67, 1378-79, 1397-1404; H. Atjarian, **Lexicon of Armenian Personal Names** (Arm.), Erevan, 5 volumes, 1942-1962, I (1942) p. 599-605; Sen Arevshatian's articles on Grigor Tat'evatsi in **Renown Personalities of the Armenian Culture** (Arm.), Erevan, 1976, pp. 406-416; **Armenian Soviet Encyclopaedia** (Arm.), Erevan, III (1977), pp. 221-23; **The Philosophical School of Tat'ev and the Philosophy of Grigor Tat'evatsi** in «Banber Matenadaran» (Messenger of Matenadaran), No. 4 Erevan, (1958), pp. 121-37 and **The Formation and Development of Nominalism in Mediaeval Armenia** in «Banber Matenadaran», No. 6 (1962), pp. 75-92.

theology of the Armenian Church, but following the way and example of the scholastics, he composed systematic works, exposing syllogistic arguments and always paying attention to exactitude. «Question and answer» is his normal art of inquiry and demonstration: the replies present categorical syllogisms and the disputations are reinforced by rich quotations from the Bible, the early Greek Byzantine theologians and Aristotle. Occasionally he calls for witness the Arab philosopher Averroes/Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) and the Armenian theologian Grigor Lusavoritch (Gregory Enlightener).

The literary works of Tat'evatsi can be divided into four main groups: theological, philosophical, pastoral-liturgical and biblical (commentaries).

## THEOLOGICAL WRITINGS

### 1. **Girk' Hartsnants = The Book of Questions**

The most known work of Grigor is in fact an Encyclopaedia which covers different branches of theology, written in 1397 in ten «volumes» or «books».

### 2. **Girk' P'ok'r Hartsnants (A short Book of Questions)**

A similar writing completed in 1387 upon the request and questions of Vardapet Géorg from Erzinka.

### 3. **Oskep'orik (The Book of Golden Content)**

This is the main theological work of Gregory, really of «golden content», written in 1407 and divided into four books.

**First:** About faith and theology, the existence of God, the Holy Trinity, refutation of the teachings of Arius, Macedonius, Sabellius and of other gnostic heretics (xiv chapters). Chapter xiii is addressed against the doctrine of Filioque.

**Second:** On the Incarnation of Christ (chap. xv to xxiii).

**Third:** Attestations and quotations concerning the Incarnation of the Word from the Holy Scriptures and Greek Byzantine Church fathers (chap. xxiv to xxxiii).

**Fourth:** About the birth, circumcision, baptism, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (chap. xxxiv to xlv). The last four chapters are disputations with Diophysites.

**Fifth:** This book has been compiled at a later date and added to the main work; a collection from the writings of Vahram Rabouni, an Armenian theologian of XIIIth c., and of

Grigor Tat'evatsi (chap. xlvi to l).

**4. Commentary of the Scholia of Cyril of Alexandria**

**5. The Creed of the Armenian Church**

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed is the official confession of faith of the Armenian Apostolic Church. In XIVth century Grigor of Tat'ev, perhaps together with his pupils, formulated afresh the doctrine of the Armenian Church on the text and in terms of the Nicene credo, but additionally utilizing the Armenian theological literature, such as «The Teaching of St. Gregory» in the Book of **Agathangelos** and the **Book of Letters** (theological). Whereas the Nicene is recited at the beginning of the Holy Mass, after the reading of the Gospel lesson, the Creed compiled by Grigor Tat'evetsi is used at the beginning of festival celebrations of the Holy Liturgy and during ordinations. This shows the importance attached to it by the Church. In fact it forms a part of chap. 47 of the fifth volume of the «Book of Golden Content», but it can be found in every Service-Book or in the Ritual of Ordination, entitled «Profession of the Orthodox Faith».

**6. Summa Contra Gentiles**

The original title of this theological book is called: **Against the Tajiks**. The name **Tajik** derives from Pahlavi and means «Arab», but it is generally applied for muslim peoples, Arabs, Persians and Turks, and consequently signifies also «Muslim». In fact this theological tractate forms a part of Grigor's larger **Book of Questions** (vol. I, chap. 3), but since the edition of 1729/30 was printed in Istanbul, the publishers have cut it out in order not to excite the anger of the Sultan or of the Muslim faithful. It was later edited in Vienna in 1930.

PHILOSOPHICAL WRITINGS

The main philosophical writings of Grigor are:

1. **Brief Commentary of the Isagoge of Porphyry**
2. **Brief Commentary of the Philosophy («Definitions of Philosophy») of David (Invincible)**

**3. Brief Commentary on the Virtues of Aristotle**

He has also collected and compiled two books of his teacher Hovhannes of Orotn, namely:

4. **Commentary on the Categories of Aristotle, and**
5. **Brief Commentary on the Interpretations of Aristotle.**

## THE SCHOLASTIC THEOLOGIAN AND THE NOMINALIST PHILOSOPHER

The heritage of the neoplatonist David Invincible (VIth century) has influenced the philosophical thought and tendency of the Armenian writers throughout the centuries. In Xth century a new interest in the ancient Greek philosophy began through the writings of Grigor Magistros (c. 990-1058) and was continued by Hovhannes **Sarkavag** («Deacon») the Philosopher (XIth century) and catholicos Nerses Klayetsi (1166-1173), called **Shnorhali** («Full of Grace»). Vahram Vardapet/Rabouni (XIIIth century), a contemporary author to Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274), studied the Aristotelian philosophy and wrote a few tractates:

1. **Commentary on the Categories of Aristotle**
2. **Commentary on the Isagoge of Porphyry**
3. **Commentary about Aristotle's Book on Cosmos**

Esayi Vardapet of Nitch († 1338), from the country of Sasun, developed a movement of learning and theology and founded the School of Gladsor on the level and program of a university, gathering around him about 350 students. At that time the Dominican friars had already arrived in Armenia and started a strong missionary-educational and literary activity. During 1320-1350 most of the works of Th. Aquinas, Bartholomew of Bologne and of Peter of Aragon were translated into Armenian, specially through the efforts of Hovhannes from Dzordzor and Hakob and Hovhannes of K'rni. Naturally, discussions and disputations between the Latin missionaries and the leaders of the Armenian Church were inevitable, as it was in case of the Byzantines. Hovhannes Vardapet of Orotn (1315-1386), a pupil of Esayi, settled down in the monastery of Tat'ev and continued there the School of Gladsor (his main philosophical treatises are mentioned above). Under Hovhannes and his student and successor Grigor, a lively movement of education and learning was spread in Armenia and the confrontation with the Latins at the end found a positive solution. In this long-lasting and critical process, Grigor of Tat'ev together with his numerous pupils, played the most important rôle, teaching, preaching and writing erudite studies. In between the devoted followers of Dominican fathers, and those who were faithful to the national Church tradition, Grigor succeeded to master the situation and skilfully brought

about an «Armenian Reception» of the Latin Scholastic theology. His **Book of Golden Content** together with the **Book of Questions** corresponds to *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas, whereas the tractate **Against the Tajiks** is similar to **Summa Contra Gentiles** of the same theologian. Without exaggeration, he can be regarded «Thomas Aquinas of the Armenians» and at the same time may be compared with the Byzantine Nilos Kabasilas († 1363).

I would like to introduce here as an example the arguments of Grigor concerning the existence of God. In his **Book of Golden Content**<sup>2</sup> he makes the following theological discussion. He speaks first against those who say: «The thinking (Intellect) can not prove the existence of God; only by Faith we can attest that God exists!» Plato and Aristotle were not believers, but by rational examination they showed that God exists. Then he brings forward the argument of the cause; from the caused things and phenomena one can conclude the existence of the cause or the First Cause: from the creatures we can understand that there is a Creator. The next argument is similar to this: according to Aristotle «whatever moves — is moved by someone else». Going infinitely from one movement to the other mover, we arrive at the first Mover who does not move, that is God. Continuing his process of reasoning, Grigor quotes Averroes, «the commentator of Aristotle», that «it is impossible for contrary and disorderly things to come into correlation (co-existence), if there were no ordering power». Now we see in this world the corporeal (material) and the incorporeal are contrary to each other, just as the four elements, but yet they are correlated in nature and don't corrupt each other. Then Tat'evatsi returns to the characteristics of substances or existences: the created have beginning and end, consequently there should be a Reason/Cause without beginning and without end. Likewise other «natures» are relative or imperfect: Goodness, Righteousness etc. Moreover, «all created who have the good and righteousness, they don't possess these by nature, but have received them from somebody else. Consequently, there should be such One who possesses Righteousness and

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2. **Book of Golden Content** (Arm.), Constantinople, 1746, part 1 chap. 4. It is interesting to note that Grigor Tat'evatsi's arguments concerning the existence of God are very similar to those of Thomas Aquinas.

Goodness in full, that is God».

Grigor Tat'evatsi as a nominalist philosopher emphasizes the importance and value of the individual («**anhat**» = **individuum**). For him the general ideas («**endhanour imatsut'iun**» = **universalis**) are only names («**anoun**» = **nomina**). «The individual above all forms the real and first existence»<sup>3</sup>, he says. The generals don't exist in the external world like the special, but they come into existence in our Thinking and continue to exist. They are not even like our thoughts — since they have no analogy in the external world, as do these ones; in fact we deduce the general from external individual existences. He criticizes the Stoic philosophers, who according to him considered every thing as being bodily and claimed that the universalis have the definit(ion) and the nature of the special. He criticizes also Plato, who — again according to him, like the Stoics regarded the general «changeable». He adheres to Aristotle, declaring that only the special has body and therefore it is changeable, and that the general can not be substantiated and/or separated from the sensible («**zgalik'**» = **sensualis**) or from the tangible<sup>4</sup>. Such arguments of Grigor incidently have been misinterpreted by some scholars in Armenia who take him as a philosopher of materialist tendency. As to the relation of the genus and species to the individuum, Grigor explains that «the individual is the first existence and then come the species («**tesak**») and the genus («**ser**»)». Genus and species exist by the power/energy (of the individual), and actually the individual operates on them. Then he adds: «And the individuum is better, since when the individuals gather together — species and genus come into existence, and when the individuals disappear, they also cease of being existent»<sup>5</sup>.

Let me conclude this study with a pedagogic-philosophical view of Tat'evatsi. It was the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704) who accepted «sensation» and «reflection» as sources

3. **The Book of Questions** (Arm.) Constantinople, 1729, p. 550.

4. **Commentary on the Isagoge of Porphyry** (Arm.) Madras, 1793, pp. 327-34 ff.

5. **Commentary on the Philosophy of David**, MS No. 1695 of Matenadaran, p. 47a.

of knowledge and perception. The soul or the mind of a new-born child is intact and plain like a *tabula rasa* which later receives impressions and perceptions from the external world and accumulates experiences. Interestingly Grigor also expresses the same opinion. In his **Book of Homilies** he writes: «The thinking/rational soul of man is like an unwritten tabula of a washed parchment — whatever is written, is impressed on it»<sup>6</sup>.

Unfortunately, the life and writings of Tat'evatsi are very little known in the West. Larger studies in European languages indubitably may ascertain an international recognition for him.

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6. **Book of Homilies** (Arm.), the «Summer» volume. Constantinople, 1741, p. 454.

## ԳՐԻԳՈՐ ՏԱԹԵՒԱՅԻ

ՄԵՍՐՈՊ ՎՐԴ. ԳՐԻԳՈՐԵԱՆ

(Ամփոփում)

Աստուածաբան, փիլիսոփայ եւ մանկավարժ Գրիգոր Տաթեւացի ուշ միջնադարու հայ եկեղեցւոյ ամենէն հեղինակաւոր դէմքերէն մէկը կը հանդիսանայ: Անոր մեկնաբանական, աստուածաբանական եւ իմաստասիրական երկերը՝ քելագրուած Հայաստանեայց եկեղեցւոյ գերագոյն շահերէն եւ ժամանակի մտաւորական պահանջներէն, կը ներկայացնեն հայ իմացական աշխարհի լաւագոյն ստեղծագործութիւններէն ոմանք: Գրիգոր Տաթեւացիի երկերուն եւրոպական լեզուներու քարգմանութիւնը անկասկած անոր պիտի բերէ միջազգային նանայում եւ հռչակ: