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CONFESSIONAL DEVIATIONS AMONG ARMENIANS IN TRANSCAUCASIA IN THE NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES: THE GENESIS AND EXTENT OF THE ARMENIAN MOLOKAN PHENOMENON

КОНФЕССИОНАЛЬНЫЕ ОТКЛОНЕНИЯ СРЕДИ АРМЯН ЗАКАВКАЗЬЯ В XIX–XX ВЕКАХ: ГЕНЕЗИС И МАСШТАБЫ ФЕНОМЕНА АРМЯНСКОГО МОЛОКАНСТВА

Abstract:

The article examines the understudied phenomenon of Armenian Molokans, namely ethnic Armenians who joined Molokan communities in Transcaucasia during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. The aim of the study is to identify the historical and sociocultural factors that contributed to the formation of Armenian Molokan communities, to reconstruct the mechanisms of interconfessional interaction in the southern borderlands of the Russian Empire, and to explore the transformation of ethnoconfessional identities in this context.

The study draws on pre-revolutionary ethnographic and missionary sources, materials relating to the history of the Pryguny (Jumpers) movement, and limited contemporary field data. Particular attention is paid to the history of the Armenian Protestant community of Kara-

kala in the Kars region, which became one of the centers of the Armenian Molokan movement and a starting point for the subsequent migration of some of its members to North America. The analysis is supplemented by the results of fieldwork conducted by the authors in Armenian Molokan settlements, where local testimonies concerning the historical presence of Armenians within Molokan communities were documented.

Despite its limited geographical and empirical scope, the phenomenon of Armenian Molokans provides valuable insights into the permeability of ethnoconfessional boundaries and the processes underlying the formation of transcultural religious communities in the borderlands of the Russian Empire.

Keywords: Russian Empire; Transcaucasia; Armenian Molokans; Pryguny Molokans; religious syncretism

Introduction

This article presents a historical and religious analysis of the phenomenon of Armenian Molokans in Transcaucasia at the turn of the twentieth century. It examines the distinctive process through which Armenians became integrated into communities of Russian Molokan Pryguny (Jumpers). At the intersection of these two traditions, a particular religious identity emerged: while retaining their ethnic language and ancestry, these believers fully adopted Russian religious practices and abandoned traditional ecclesiastical rituals. The study demonstrates the flexibility of ethnoconfessional boundaries in the Caucasus and the precedence of individual spiritual searching over national tradition.

Materials and Methods

The study draws on documents held by the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, the works of N. A. Dingelstedt and A. Dunaev, and the authors' field materials from the village of Shoghakat. The research follows the principles of historicism and a systematic approach. Historical and archival research, comparative historical analysis, source criticism, and ethnographic methods were employed to verify the evidence and trace the dynamics of the processes under investigation.

Analysis

Our analysis decisively refutes the view that the Armenian Molokan phenomenon was a myth, establishing its historical existence through documentary evidence. Reasons for changes in religious identity included the rule of strict endogamy, whereby marriage required conversion to the faith, profound personal crises, and difficult life circumstances.

Results

The empirical evidence and field visits to Armenia and Mordovia confirm that no contemporary representatives of Armenian Molokans were identified in the course of our research.

When the bishop asked why he changed his faith so often,
the Molokan replied ingenuously
that his woman (wife) drew him into different sects.
Such is the influence of the much-vaunted freedom

of religious sentiment…[54]

Armenian Molokans constitute one of the least studied phenomena in the ethnoreligious landscape of the southern reaches of the Russian Empire and its contact zones along the Ottoman frontier.

In pre-revolutionary scholarship on the Caucasus, Erivan Province was traditionally characterised as a region with a distinctive ethnoconfessional, economic, and cultural landscape. Describing the sharp sociocultural contrasts among the local population, the researcher A. F. Leister observed: 'What does a Mordvin inhabitant of the village of Alexandrovka have in common with an Aisor, a descendant of the ancient Syrian Chaldeans; or a native Great Russian from the central provinces of European Russia with a devil-worshipper, a Yezidi; or a settled Armenian farmer with a nomadic Kurd, a warlike knight of the mountains; or a Subbotnik, whose ancestors had already embraced the heresy of the Kievan Jew Skhariya in the fifteenth century, with a Tatar, a descendant of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, who has so strictly revered the religion of Muhammad since ancient times?' (Leister 1914: 44).

Despite several inaccuracies in its characterisations, this historical assessment vividly demonstrates that a wide range of seemingly isolated groups coexisted within the province's relatively limited territory. Yet this apparent separation sometimes concealed far-reaching processes of interethnic and interconfessional interaction. Situated within a common administrative and geopolitical space, these communities inevitably influenced one another. In some cases, marginal religious movements, particularly the Molokans, acted as catalysts for the diffusion of identities.[55]

Within the context of these insufficiently studied processes, the phenomenon of so-called Armenian Molokans represents an exceptional example of syncretism, in which traditional Armenian Christian culture encountered the religious practices of Russian sectarianism. Once regarded primarily as a historiographical myth, this phenomenon subsequently became the subject of several studies, including works by descendants of Armenian Molokans (see below). In any event, research conducted in recent decades unequivocally confirms that a distinctive ethnoconfessional group emerged in Transcaucasia at the turn of the twentieth century: ethnic Armenians who joined the Molokan sect. Having left the Armenian Apostolic Church, they adopted communal readings of Scripture in Russian and the devotional practices of the Molokan Pryguny: they sang psalms in Russian, entered prayer-induced trances, and rejected the veneration of icons, justifying these practices as a return to 'pure Christianity'.

[54] I. I. Vostorgov, The Journey of His Eminence Alexy, Exarch of Georgia, through Kars Oblast and the Provinces of Erivan and Tiflis (Vostorgov 1916: 124).

[55] On the Molokans, see, in particular, Kozlov/Pavlenko 1992; Mohoff 2004; Kalnev 2024; see also Malakhova 1970; Conovaloff 2021. On the Molokans of Armenia, see Andreeva 2021; Shuvaeva 2023; Shuvaeva/Arakelova 2024; on the Molokans of Kars, see Suvari 2013; Çelikoğlu/Atiş 2020; Yangaykina 2026.

At the turn of the twentieth century, distinctive processes of religious syncretism resulting from the close proximity of different ethnic groups were observed in Transcaucasia, primarily in Kars Oblast and the provinces of Erivan and Tiflis. Some of these processes are documented in detail in the reports of the priest Aleksandr Dunaev, diocesan missionary of the Georgian Exarchate of the Holy Synod (Dunaev 1911). In conducting anti-sectarian missionary work in the field, he recorded the dynamics of transformation and mutual influence among Christian and Muslim movements outside established dogmatic traditions, thereby leaving a valuable primary source for the religious history of the Caucasus. The Pryguny movement, in particular, spread among the Armenian population.[56] Over time, however, as the initial ecstatic impetus subsided, a crisis developed among Caucasian sectarians. As a result, in the early twentieth century, some Pryguny, including their prominent leader Yakov Avetisovich Kassababyants (see Photograph 1), joined communities of Jehovahists (Bible Students). This new Western movement attracted disillusioned Armenian Molokans through its strict discipline, rational and literalist study of texts, and readily comprehensible eschatology (Dunaev 1911: 189–190).



N. A. Dingelstedt also examined these processes. Unlike members of the clergy, whose accounts were largely confined to recording deviations from established doctrine, Dingelstedt approached the subject as a professional ethnographer. An Actual State Councillor, he spent an extended period living alongside Transcaucasian sectarians in the 1870s. This enabled him to study in detail their everyday and religious customs, traditions, beliefs, spiritual and material culture, and the internal social organisation of their communities. His foundational work, Transcaucasian Sectarians in Their Family and Religious Life (Dingelstedt 1885), is an extensive study that takes a systematic approach to the subject. In discussing Armenian conversions to Molokanism, Dingelstedt did more than record changes of faith: he described in detail how Armenians adopted unfamiliar customs and adapted to life within a traditionally Slavic community. According to his account, Molokan Pryguny

[56] The Pryguny movement (Molokan Jumpers) is a branch of Molokanism that developed between the 1830s and the 1850s under the influence of eschatological expectations and charismatic religious practices. The movement took its name from ecstatic forms of worship in which believers entered a religious trance accompanied by jumping, rhythmic bodily movements, prophecies, and other manifestations of the ‘descent of the Holy Spirit’. Unlike the more moderate branches of Molokanism, the Pryguny placed particular emphasis on direct mystical revelation and the activity of charismatic leaders (see, in particular, Dingelstedt 1885; Dunaev 1911; Kalnev 2024).

gatherings were distinguished by their particular solemnity and duration, especially when new members joined the community, an occasion accompanied by ‘spiritual’ exaltation (ibid.: 10).

In particular, the author describes the atmosphere of a gathering at which new members were received: ‘The newly converted Armenian Pryguny sat on the front benches, closer to the readers and the Bible. Two of them arrived at the very beginning of the gathering and, taking their places on the benches, immediately showed that they had entered into communion “with the spirit”.

They closed their eyes and began swaying, continuing for about an hour. The third convert appeared almost at the end of the gathering. When the prayer service was already halfway through, an Armenian, armed and covered in dust, galloped into the courtyard on an exhausted horse. He left the horse in the yard, rushed into the gathering, cast off his weapons, made his way to the front, to the table where the readers sat, and collapsed onto the floor. Ten minutes later, “the spirit descended” upon one of the converts. At first, he began breathing heavily, flaring his nostrils widely. His face turned pale; then he began swaying as he sat on the bench. … Several times he placed his hands behind his head and stretched vigorously, as though awakening from a pleasant sleep. When everyone stood up to listen to the prayers, Khachatur—as this Armenian was called—began swaying more intensely, then bending backwards; on one occasion, he lost his balance, fell, and lay on the floor for about five minutes with his eyes closed and his arms crossed. He then rose, stood briefly, and resumed his contortions. He did not, however, jump or leap at all, but, to the sounds of “ponivestone”, began walking about the room—there were only three or four paces of free space—and shouting something in Armenian. Sometimes he cried out in Tatar: “Allah! Allah!”’ (ibid.: 11–12).

‘At almost the same time, the spirit descended upon Petrovna, the beekeeper’s wife, a woman approaching forty; then upon Ekaterina Novikova, the blacksmith’s wife, a woman in her early twenties; and then upon another woman, over sixty. When Petrovna began jumping, Khachatur stood aside and raised his hands, for there was no longer enough room for both of them. When Petrovna, thoroughly exhausted, returned to her place, Khachatur began moving about again and enacted a scene in which evil forces were vanquished through the action of the Holy Spirit. He represented this as follows: first, Khachatur stopped and stared intently at a single spot; as though discerning something on the ground, he opened his eyes wider and wider. Having opened them as wide as their sockets permitted, he raised his right hand and shook it in the air, as if preparing to strike. Then, joining both hands above his head as though grasping a stick or some other implement, Khachatur began miming blows at the spot at which he was staring. As he struck, he made the sound commonly uttered when chopping wood or splitting stone: a rapid expulsion of air from the chest, which, as is well known, makes the blow easier to deliver. This sound is familiar to everyone, and all the more so to Khachatur, a stonemason by trade. Having chopped to his satisfaction, Khachatur seemed to cast aside the implement he had been using, stamped on the spot over which he had performed all this, shouted something in Armenian, and several times strode jauntily across the empty space he had hacked to pieces (ibid.: 12–13).

After a long interval, the researcher writes, those assembled replaced their singing with vigorous dancing, accompanied by clapping and movement within the confined space. In the dusty cottage, the jumping continued for more than twenty minutes, leaving participants utterly exhausted and causing them to collapse onto the floor. Amid the general frenzy, the newly converted Armenian stood motionless in prayer, the reader Novikov lost his strength, and the

beekeeper Menshov beat his chest. Despite this five-hour ecstatic ritual, all the participants began working in the fields the following morning (ibid.: 14–15).

Dingelstedt also notes that 'prophecy', as an element of ecstatic practice, was integral to Pryguny gatherings. He points out, however, that those prophesying were not expected to make infallible predictions, and that the failure of a prophecy to be fulfilled did not give rise to complaints (ibid.).

The multiethnic composition of Molokan communities is also confirmed by data collected in Russian settlements in Armenia during the 1980s by the ethnographer I. V. Dolzhenko. The researcher observes: 'A Molokan religious community could include not only Russians but also members of other ethnic groups, provided that they accepted its religious teachings. In the Novobayazet district of Erivan Province, religious communities included Mordvins who had been exiled from the Volga region in the 1850s for rejecting Orthodoxy. Published sources also record cases, albeit rare, of Armenians adopting Molokanism (Archive of the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography, National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Armenia, No. 177, fol. 14).

Hovhannes Hovhannisyan presents noteworthy evidence in his article on Armenian Molokans: 'Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, the tsarist authorities expanded the presence of various Russian religious groups in Kars, including Molokans, Doukhobors, Subbotniks, Baptists, and others. There is evidence that Armenian Molokans lived at that time in the village of Kara-kala ("Black Castle") in Kars Oblast. We have no precise information as to when Armenians settled in Kara-kala or when the Russians established their military outposts in the village (Oganisyan 2007). Hovhannisyan cites the research of Sirakan Kaloian (Kaloian 1950), himself a member of the Armenian Molokan community, as the most reliable source.

S. Kaloian states that, before migrating to Kara-kala, this group of Armenians lived in the village of Gezeachkhlar, whose location has not been established. They were compelled to leave because of confessional conflicts with fellow villagers arising from their adherence to Protestantism (Kaloian 1950: 10).

Writing about the circumstances preceding the relocation of Armenian sectarians to Kara-kala, M. Musheghyan drew on the account of the priest Perumyan. He noted that village troublemakers harassed, insulted, and abused the Protestants, dug up graves, and desecrated the bodies of their deceased by hanging them from trees. They therefore addressed a letter of complaint to Nicholas II, who proposed that they relocate to the site of a Russian military outpost. It was as a result of this resolution that the Armenian Protestants settled in Kara-kala (Oganisyan 2007).

Kara-kala merits particular attention in the context of Armenian sectarian communities. Almost all their members emigrated to the United States, and descendants of immigrants from this small village now constitute a disproportionately large share of the Armenian community in California.[57] American passenger lists and naturalisation records identified the village as being in Russian Armenia, that is, Kars Oblast of the Russian Empire (1878–1917).

[57] An interesting detail concerns the contemporary ethnography of Kara-kala and genealogical lines associated with the village. The lawyer Robert Kardashian, father of the well-known American media personality Kim Kardashian, was also a descendant of emigrants from Kara-kala. His great-grandparents, Samuel and Khorom (Horomsim-Hripsime) Kardashov, emigrated from Kara-kala to the United States. On the Historic Armenia Tours Facebook page, Armenian tourists from California who had visited the village left the following comment: 'It is the village where Kim Kardashian's ancestors came from. When the villagers heard that some of us are from California, they wanted to deliver a message to Kim K. saying "we wish that she could

Although several settlements in Kars Oblast bore the same name, Armenian Kara-kala can readily be identified through the detailed population censuses of the Russian Empire and geographical reference works. The village lay 17.5 km south-southeast of Kars.[58]



Photograph 2. The village of Kara-kala. Armenian Molokan Pryguny.
(Source: Armenian Kara-kala, Kars | bluebirdmaps)

F. S. Yanovich, who visited Kara-kala in 1903, noted that a substantial number of Armenian Protestants lived in the village.[59]

According to his account, the villagers were prosperous and owned well-built houses arranged along a long street. The population was engaged primarily in agriculture. The settlement had an Armenian school, a piped drinking-water supply, and two factories, one producing butter and the other cheese (Yanovich 1904: 8–11).

It should be noted, however, that whereas most Armenian settlements in Kars Oblast experienced rapid population growth in the years preceding the First World War, through both natural increase and the arrival of new settlers, Kara-kala was an exception. In 1902, the village had 464 inhabitants in 43 households; in 1908, there were 400 inhabitants, and in 1910, 408. By 1914, the population had increased to 489, living in 79 houses. All the inhabitants were Armenian. The population decline in the mid-1900s and the village's comparatively slow growth are attributable to substantial emigration to North America.

The overseas migration of Armenian Molokan Pryguny is examined in the research of Joyce Keosababian-Bivin. A descendant of one of the emigrant families, she, together with Andrei Conovaloff, reconstructs the history of the community and its migration to Southern California from the family archives of the Keosababian, Perumyan, and Shakarian families and from oral testimony. Their work also identifies links between the Armenian Pryguny of Kars Oblast and the Armenian Protestant communities of Los Angeles (Keosababian-Bivin/Conovaloff 2009).

send us some financial help to improve the streets, school, and life overall in their village."' (www.facebook.com/historicarmenia/posts/karakaleis-the-village-where-kimkardashians-ancestors-came-fromwhen-the-village/816632681740878/).

[58] According to the Geographical and Statistical Dictionary of the Russian Empire, the village occupies the site of ancient Yervandakert (Semenov 1865).

[59] The reference is undoubtedly to Armenian Molokans.

For details, see Armenian Karakala, Kars, BlueBirdMaps, 15 July 2017, 'Armenian Kara-kala, Kars | bluebirdmaps' (accessed 10 October 2026).

The mass migration of both Armenian and Russian Molokans from Kars Oblast, driven primarily by the desire to avoid military service and the hope of finding employment in Canada and the United States, also has a legendary explanation in popular tradition. The story concerns Efim Gerasimovich Klubnikin, a member of the Pryguny community in the village of Romanovo in Kars Oblast. From an early age, while still living in Erivan Province, he became known within the community as the 'boy prophet'. Beginning in 1855, he reported visions of an impending great catastrophe and urged his fellow believers to leave their homes and migrate to a 'place of refuge' (Sherrill et al. 1972).

During fieldwork in the village of Shoghakat (formerly Nadezhdino) in June 2024, the authors of this article also identified traces of the historical presence of Armenians among the Molokans of Armenia.

The authors' guide and informant was the local resident E. I. Sandykov, who identifies himself as an ethnic Mordvin and an eighth-generation Molokan. Sandykov pointed out a tuff gravestone in the Molokan cemetery marking the grave of Arzuman Ivanovich (Oganesovich), an ethnic Armenian from Kars and a member of the Molokan community. According to the oral testimony of Efim Ivanovich Sandykov, drawing on the recollections of his father, Ivan Efimovich, a blind Armenian lived in Nadezhdino at the turn of the twentieth century, around 1900. He maintained friendly relations with the local population and was known among the villagers for his prophecies. The respondent shared his father's recollections, noting in particular that 'Arzuman's period of enforced residence in local Molokan communities resulted from the severing of family ties and his lack of real property; these circumstances contributed to his conversion to Molokanism'. During one ecstatic ritual, according to Sandykov's account of his father's testimony, Arzuman uttered an eschatological prediction while in a religious trance. Using the metaphor of a 'heap of stones', he foretold the 'global dispersal of the community's members', which the informant himself regards as a 'fulfilled prophecy'. Former residents of Shoghakat—A. E. Skorokhodova (born 1952), E. E. Solovyova (Sandykova) (born 1936), and L. I. Sandikov (born 1960)—confirm the Armenian ancestry of the Molokan Arzuman Ivanovich. Further information about Arzuman Ivanovich appears in a recent letter (2025) to Tatyana Yangaykina from the Molokan Isai Grigoryev (born 1952, Yerevan; a photograph of the letter is included). Citing people who remembered Arzuman, Grigoryev writes that he was reputed to be a 'powerful besednik', that is, a preacher. He nevertheless observes that Arzuman's reputation as a 'powerful besednik' was exaggerated and that 'according to some accounts, he was a "rogue"'.

Nevertheless, the biography of this Armenian Molokan clearly suggests that his conversion to Molokanism may have been an individual case determined by life circumstances.

Authors' field materials: E. I. Sandykov, born 1969, village of Shoghakat, Republic of Armenia; records from 2024–2025.



Photograph 3. The gravestone of Arzuman Oganesovich (Molokan cemetery in the village of Shoghakat)



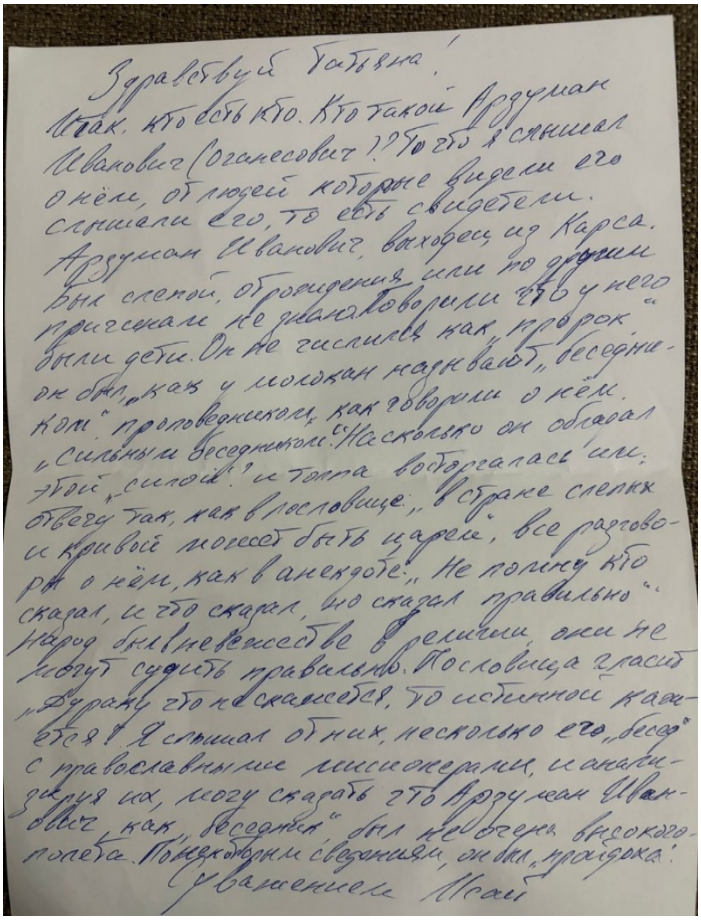
Photograph 4. E. I. Sandykov, village of Shoghakat, Gegharkunik Province, Armenia

Conclusion

Overall, the study of the Armenian Molokan phenomenon calls for certain revisions to the historical ethnoconfessional map of the region. It also demonstrates that boundaries between peoples and religions in the southern contact zones of the Russian Empire were sometimes considerably more permeable than is generally assumed. Armenian conversions to Molokanism

were certainly not a mass phenomenon and were shaped by a combination of factors that requires further, in-depth investigation. Contemporary field research records the absence of Armenian Molokans in the territory of the Republic of Armenia today.

The findings highlight the importance of examining religious conversion as a complex historical and sociocultural process involving interactions between religious beliefs, ethnic identity, and local community dynamics. The Armenian Molokan phenomenon also illustrates how religious affiliation could transcend established ethnoconfessional boundaries, creating distinctive forms of communal identity in the multicultural borderlands of the Russian Empire. Further research based on archival documents, comparative historical analysis, and expanded fieldwork in regions associated with Armenian Molokan communities and their migration could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, including its historical development, patterns of migration, and long-term implications for the study of religious and cultural interaction in the South Caucasus.



Здравствуй Татьяна!
Итак, кто есть кто. Кто такой Арзуман Иванович (Оганесович)? То что я слышал о нём, от людей которые видели его слышали его, то есть свидетели. Арзуман Иванович, выходец из Карса. был слепой, от рождения, или по другим преданиям не знаю говорили что у него были дети. Он не числился как пророк он был, как у молокан нарицают, „беседником" проповедником, как говорили о нём. „Сильным беседником". Насколько он обладал этой „силой" и тогда подвергалась сомн. обвеяв так, как в пословице „в стране слепых и кривой может быть царем, все разговор о нём, как в анекдоте „Не помню кто сказал, и что сказал, но сказал правильно". Народ был невежество велико, они не могут судить правильно. Пословица гласит „Дураку что не скажи себя, то истинно кажется". Я слышал от них, несколько его „беседа" с православными миссионерами, и анализируя их, могу сказать что Арзуман Иванович, как „беседник" был необычен высокого полета. По некоторым сведениям, он был, проходка. Уважением Исай

Photograph 5. Letter from the Molokan Isai Grigoryev to Tatyana Yangaykina (2025)
Hello, Tatyana!

So, who is who? Who was Arzuman Ivanovich (Oganesovich)? Here is what I heard about him from people who saw and heard him—that is, from eyewitnesses.

Arzuman Ivanovich came from Kars. Whether he was blind from birth or for some other reason, I do not know. People said that he had children. He was not regarded as a prophet; he was what the Molokans call a 'besednik', a preacher, or, as they described him, a 'powerful besednik'. As to how much of this 'power' he possessed, and the crowd's admiration for him, I would answer with the proverb: 'In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man can be king.' All the

talk about him reminds me of the joke: 'I do not remember who said it or what he said, but he was right.'

The people were ignorant in matters of religion and could not judge correctly. As the proverb says: 'Whatever a fool is told seems true to him.' I heard about several of his 'discussions' with Orthodox missionaries, and, having analysed them, I can say that Arzuman Ivanovich was not a particularly accomplished 'besednik'. According to some accounts, he was a 'rogue'.

With respect, Isai

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