



# The Church of Shaykh Salih

## *Kurdish People and Armenian People - Turkey*

Shaykh Salih Ziyareti was regarded as a man of Allâh, whatever was the name given to the Most Gracious and Merciful. To the Muslim Kurds of the region he was a *wali*, a 'friend' or 'knower' of Allâh, while to the Christian Armenians who had inhabited the region since ancient times he was a 'saint' of God.

But, as Isa said in the Christian Gospels, 'A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house'. Hence, for some reason that the legend does not reveal, Shaykh Salih was not well loved either in his family or in his hometown of Ziyaret.

The thing is that, one day, the good Salih was found dead at the bottom of a ravine, at the foot of a road. Someone had murdered him and thrown his body to the abyss, perhaps in the hope that no one would find him down there. But a shepherd found him.

As no one from his family came to take care of his body, the *vartabed*<sup>1</sup> of St. George's Church in the village of Ehub accepted responsibility for the saint's remains and buried him in the cemetery of his own church, while the Kurdish inhabitants of the region, Muslims like Salih, proposed the construction of a mosque to house his relics and worship the Compassionate One.

However, historical circumstances delayed the construction of the mosque, while over the years, many pilgrims, both Muslims and Christians, came to Ehub to pay their respects to the *wali*-saint and ask

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<sup>1</sup> Armenian priest.

him to intercede with Allâh-God for their misfortunes. And miraculous must have been Salih's intercession when not only from the surrounding regions, but from all over Armenia, pilgrims came to prostrate themselves at his grave.

The pilgrimage became so widespread that the new *vartabed* of St George's Church finally proposed to the Kurdish Muslim faithful that the remains of the Muslim saint be moved from the parish cemetery to the interior of the church, until they had the means to build their mosque. In order to convince them, the priest argued that it was not acceptable to keep the relics of Shaykh Salih in the damp earth during the rainy season or under the scorching sun during the summer months. In view of the haste of his words and, above all, of the good neighbourly relations between Muslims and Christians, Kurds and Armenians, both communities accepted the *vartabed*'s proposal and the remains of Shaykh Salih were placed in the interior of St George's Church.

Years went by and, in view of the impossibility of building the longed-for mosque, custom eventually turned into tradition the use of the church for the worship of the faithful of two different religions, who fraternally cared for the tomb of the *wali*-saint who had united them in the spirit of the one Allâh-God they both worshipped. □

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## Comments

The ancient village of Ehub, or Eyub as the Armenians called it – Eskar to the Kurds – is today's Yaylak, a village of just over 200 inhabitants at the foot of Dorşin Mountain in the province of Diyarbakir in the Eastern part of modern-day Turkey. This is the location of the legend, which must have been forged starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the Armenians, the only inhabitants of the region until then, saw the arrival of nomadic Kurdish tribes who eventually settled in the area.

Unfortunately, both Armenians and Kurds had already suffered, and have suffered until today, the vicissitudes of the geostrategic politics

of a region of the world situated between Europe and Asia, between Mesopotamia and the Eurasian steppes, on the land bridge between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. This is why this legend, about tolerance, encounter and fraternity between two different ethnic groups and two different religions, takes on an extraordinary dimension in this part of the world.

The conflicts between the various empires in the region – the Persian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire – and then between the world powers after World War I in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have led Kurds and Armenians to a situation of a mere struggle for survival.

The Kurdish people have not relented in their quest for a territory to live in and a state of their own, their greatest achievement being the recognition in 2005 of the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan within the borders of Iraq, a US-sponsored recognition in response to the Kurds' support for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. However, the Kurdish people continue to suffer in other countries where they are found – Turkey, Syria and Iran – and have even maintained a fierce struggle against the Islamic State, which also invaded their territories in 2014. This fight won them the sympathy of the international community – above all, and once again, the United States – and the possibilities of creating their own state have increased since then, although 'nothing guarantees that they will not be "betrayed" once again' (Garzón-García, 2017, p. 108).

Meanwhile, the Armenian people, although they have their own state, are once again facing, as we write this (3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023), a new threat of genocide, with the invasion of Nagorno Karabakh by the troops of the Azerbaijani government, supported by Turkey. History will remember the immense tragedy of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923), in which the Ottoman Empire deported around two million Armenians living in the empire to the Syrian desert by forced marches in extreme conditions. By 1922, less than 400,000 of them were still alive. But the genocide was not hidden beneath the sands of history, for the Ottoman government could not prevent foreign missionaries, diplomats, journalists and military officers from witnessing such a great extermination. Indeed, *The New York Times* reported the following in August 1916:

Witnesses have seen thousands of Armenians deported under tents in the open air, in moving caravans, down the river in boats and in

all phases of their miserable lives. Only in some places does the government issue rations, and those are quite insufficient. Naturally, the mortality rate from starvation and disease is very high and is increased by the brutal treatment of the authorities, whose relationship with the exiles as they are driven from one side of the desert to the other is not unlike that of slave drivers. (Sadurní, 2021)

However, the first signs of the genocide perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire had occurred two decades earlier, with the Hamidian Massacres between 1894 and 1896, in which between 200,000 and 300,000 Armenians were killed, and in 1909, with the Adana Massacre, in which the Ottomans killed between 20,000 and 30,000 Armenians.

It is striking that even today, in the same part of the world where such atrocities were perpetrated, Armenian and Kurdish pilgrims still visit together a church where, at the tomb of Shaykh Salih, they take their oaths while lighting a candle.

## Sources

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### *Associated text of the Earth Charter*

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- We urgently need a shared vision of basic values to provide an ethical foundation for the emerging world community. Therefore, together in hope we affirm the following interdependent principles for a sustainable way of life as a common standard by which the conduct of all individuals, organizations, businesses, governments, and transnational institutions is to be guided and assessed.

### *Other passages that this story illustrates*

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The emergence of a global civil society is creating new opportunities to build a democratic and humane world.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 12a: Eliminate discrimination in all its forms, such as that based on race, color, sex, sexual orientation, religion, language, and national, ethnic or social origin.

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

The Way Forward: The arts, sciences, religions, educational institutions, media, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments are all called to offer creative leadership.