

## TIFLIS AS A MOSLEM CENTRE



THE cradle of mankind is, it may be said, the Caucasus, which has a population of 10,000,000, consisting of about one hundred nations and tribes. Tiflis is the capital city with more than 300,000 inhabitants, and in its streets are spoken about sixty languages, because it is the Caucasus in miniature and lies at the cross roads of a very important and curious part of the world. The nations of the West and East meet in Tiflis at the feet of the majestic Caucasus mountain chain.

The Moslems in the Caucasus are in number 3,500,000, and are ruled by the viceroy in Tiflis. The city is a Moslem centre, but perhaps one should mention that the Moslem population of Baku is almost twice as large as that of Tiflis. The Moslems in Baku belong in general to the Tatar race, but in Tiflis there are followers of Islam from almost every Mohammedan land. By Oriental customs and circumstances, Tiflis and the Southern Caucasus have close connexions with Persia and Turkey. A railroad line extends from Tiflis to the border of Persia, while another line connects Tiflis with Kars, near the Turkish boundary line. At present more travellers than ever pass through Tiflis on their way to and from Persia, Turkey and Central Asia. The Trans-Caucasian Railway runs from the Black Sea through Tiflis to Baku, on the Caspian Sea, which can be crossed by steamer in eighteen hours. From Krasnovodsk, on the eastern side, to Andischan, near the Chinese border, the long Trans-Caspian Railway touches such important cities as Askabad, Merv, Bokhara, Samarkand and Kokand, all of which have a Moslem population. Every year many thousands of pilgrims from Central Asia travel by this road to Mecca through Tiflis, and I have often met in the city pilgrims from Kashgar and beyond. The pilgrimage to Mecca by this line is increasing year by year.

For some years a reform movement has been on foot among Moslems in the Caucasus and Persia. It is interesting to see how Moslem men and women are trying to free themselves from old traditions and are seeking to adopt modern manners and teachings. For this reason many Moslem families have moved from the Asiatic part of Tiflis, and are now living in the European part of the city. There is much demand for education. A weekly paper, *Mollah Nessereddin*, edited and printed in Turkish by Tiflis Moslems, is striving to remove old prejudices. The editor is an educated Moslem with liberal views, and the paper may succeed in accomplishing its purpose.

There are a number of wealthy Moslems in the Caucasus, and one of them who is a millionaire has built a large college for the education of Moslem girls in Baku, many of whom attend the school.

Among the newspapers printed by Moslems may be mentioned the monthly magazine *Mektob*; *Isheg*, a weekly paper edited especially for Moslem women by Chadisha Chanum Alibekova; and two daily newspapers, *Hakkikat* and *Shariett*. In Tiflis an Arabic-Turkish edition of the Koran has lately been published by Mohammedans, and seems to have a wide sale. The British and Foreign Bible Society has a depôt in Tiflis, which is the headquarters of its colporteurs and book-sellers, who carry the Holy Scriptures from the Black Sea eastward to Bokhara, Samarkand and Tashkent. This deôpt distributes the Word of God in about forty languages, thus enabling almost all the Moslems in Russia to read the Scriptures in their own tongue. At present there is a great demand for the New Testament. Copies of "Pilgrim's Progress" and Christian tracts are distributed in Azerbaijan-Turki, which is the language generally spoken by Mohammedans in the Caucasus.

There is still lack of religious liberty in the Russian dominions, but in spite of government restrictions there are good opportunities for evangelistic effort. Most of the work has to be personal, and it is a great joy to be able to tell the Gospel story to individual Moslems. Since I came to Tiflis about thirty Moslems converted to Christ have been connected with our congregation.

In Tiflis and other cities the Russian government has a number of Moslems as officers in the army and in the civil service. The younger generation are students in colleges and universities. For many years the people of the Caucasus have been longing for a university in Tiflis, and probably the government will soon grant them their desire. A telephone line was opened recently from Tiflis to Baku, and the traveller can also take his seat in a first or second-class railroad carriage in Tiflis, and go without change to St. Petersburg. With all this material progress, the city is becoming more and more important as a strategic centre for mission work among Moslems.

The old coat of arms for Tiflis is a staff of wood held by two hands. The cross is on the upper end, while below is the half moon. One hand holds the cross upright, and another is endeavouring to uplift the half moon. We are not aware of this struggle in Tiflis, but in Northern Persia it is still going on. When religious liberty was granted in 1905, the Mohammedans, who had been converted by force to the Greek Church, returned to Islam. At present the government is trying earnestly to prevent this movement. We need the prayers of all those who love the Mohammedan world that Tiflis may become a powerful centre from which the Gospel of salvation shall be preached to the millions of Moslems in the Russian Empire and throughout Central Asia.

*Tiflis.*

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