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East Syriac Christianity
in Mongol-Yuan China

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Li Tang

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Preface

1. On the Subject

“Christianity in China” is such a topic that many find enthralling and some keep wrestling with the questions it poses. Contemporary theological and religious studies have always concentrated on the notable Catholic/Jesuit Mission (16th–mid 20th centuries) and the Protestant missionary endeavors undertaken in, what Kenneth Scott Latourette called, “The Great Century” in church history (19th–mid 20th centuries). The stories about Matteo Ricci, Robert Morrison, Hudson Taylor and many others have been told repeatedly, whereas names such as Alopen, Jingjing, Sorkaktani Beki and Mar Sargis are just unfamiliar and sometimes hard-to-pronounce for many.

To better appreciate the situation of Christianity in China today, a retrospective study of its history is never irrelevant. The very beginning of Christian mission in China, as proven historical and archaeological evidences have demonstrated thus far, is traced back to the middle of the 7th century when Alopen, the first missionary from the Church of the East arrived in China from “the Land of Daqin” of what was then the Roman Orient roughly perceived by the Chinese. The arrival of Alopen in China not only marked the beginning of Christianity in China but also had a great significance in early East-West encounters. Christianity in its East Syrian (or East Syriac) form flourished in China in two historical phases respectively: first during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.) for a period of 210 years from the arrival of Alopen in 635 A.D. to the religious persecution under Emperor Wuzong in 845 A.D.; and secondly during the Mongol-Yuan Dynasty in the 13th–14th centuries.

When it exists at all, the study of the history of East Syriac or East Syrian Christianity has remained a small discipline in the academic world. Some bigger universities in Europe and North America would place it under the section on Oriental Studies, whereas others, not all theological colleges and faculties would teach this part of the church history as a side dish. The historical and theological attention given to this subject weighs far less than the impact, which Syrian Christianity has had in history and the rich cultural-religious relics and heritage it has left behind.

Since many prominent Syriac and Patristic specialists have undertaken studies of Syriac Christianity, the following work focuses on East Syrian Christianity in the eastern part of Eurasia and especially in China during the Mongol period (12th–14th centuries). In regard to this geographic area, relatively more studies have concentrated on the ancient period, i.e. 7th–10th century. The aim of this investigation study is to reconstruct a history of East Syrian Christianity in Mongol-Yuan China within its political, social, economic, cultural and religious environments. It deals with the relevant histori-

cal backgrounds, the ethnic Christian groups involved, the philological and theological studies of the East Syrian Inscriptions, the Migration of Christian populations, the Mongol religious policies, as well as the missionary activities on the Mongolian Steppe and in China proper.

2. On the term “Nestorian” or “Nestorianism”

The term “the Nestorian Church” has been inappropriately employed in history books or in general to label the ancient Oriental Church, although it was called in the past “the Church of the East” by its own members. During the course of history, the Church of the East has borne many other names depending on the particular contexts and geographic locations, e.g. the “East Syrian Church”, the “Persian Church” (Persia and China), “Chaldean Syrian Church” (India), “Holy Apostolic Catholic Church of the East”, “Assyrian Church of the East”, etc.

“Nestorianism” is connected to the person Nestorius, bishop of Constantinople (428–731 A.D.). The origin of this term rests in the fifth century Christological debates within the Church. Nestorianism is the doctrine supposedly held by Nestorius that there are two separate persons in the Incarnate Christ, the one divine and the other human, as opposed to the orthodox doctrine that the Incarnate Christ was a single Person, at once God and man. The Nestorian controversy included also the debate over the Virgin Mary, whether she was the bearer of God (*Theotokos*) or better entitled, the bearer of Christ (*Christotokos*). Nestorius was condemned as heretical at the Third Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in 431 A.D.. Twenty years later, the Fourth Ecumenical Council held at Chalcedon in 451 A.D., aiming to end all the dogmatic controversies over the natures of Christ that had arisen, produced a “final” dogmatic definition. However, this definition of faith was rejected by the Oriental Orthodox Churches.¹

The Church of the East in Mesopotamia and Persia that had existed long before the Nestorian controversy had nothing to do with Nestorius, but did not object to be called “Nestorian”. On the contrary, in 486, at the Synod in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Persian Church officially adopted the Nestorian confession of faith.²

However, this term has become more controversial, especially in recent years. Being labeled as “Nestorian” was regarded as “unjust” by some prominent figures in the Church of the East, for instance, the Metropolitan of Šoba (Nisibis) ‘Abdišo’ († 1318 A.D.) and the present Patriarch Mar Khania Dinkha IV.³ It is seen as a Mainstream misconception about the Oriental Churches. Such being the case, it is advisable to avoid using this term. In

1 For the Christological debates in the early church, see ALOIS GRILLMEIER, *Jesus der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, Band I: *Von der apostolischen Zeit bis zum Konzil von Chalcedon (451)*, Freiburg: Herder 1990.

2 For a detailed discussion on the controversy over the term “Nestorianism”, see SEBASTIAN P. BROCK, “The ‘Nestorian’ Church: A Lamentable Misnomer”, *Bulletin of John Rylands Library* No. 3 (1996), pp. 23–35.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

the following work, the author tries to employ the term “East Syriac Christianity” or “East Syrian Christianity” instead of “Nestorian Christianity”. The term “Nestorian” is only used with restraint and is written in quotation marks.

East Syrian Christianity in China was named differently in the Tang and the Mongol-Yuan periods. Early missionaries from the Church of the East reached imperial China in 635 A.D. and introduced for the first time Christianity to China. The religion was known in China from the 7th to the 10th century as “Jingjiao 景教” (meaning “the Luminous Religion”), the Persian Religion (since it came to China from Persia) or the Daqin Religion connected with the Roman Orient. Jingjiao enjoyed a two-century flourishing in ancient China, but its adherents were persecuted and expelled from China under the imperial edict in 845. In the 13th century, as the Mongols conquered China, East Syrian Christians mainly of Turkic-speaking origins migrated to different parts of China and therefore spread Christianity in the country. During this period, Christianity was called the Religion of Yelikewen (ärkägün/Erke’un).

Being aware of the controversy involved, I have tried to use “East Syrian” as an adjective in place of “Nestorian”. The word “Nestorian” is kept in some places within quotation marks when the use of the term is deemed unavoidable. It does not imply any theological positions.

3. Transliteration of Turco-Mongolic and Chinese Words

This book entails many names, titles and much jargon from different languages such as Turkic, Mongol, Syriac, Persian, Chinese and others. Of course, every language has its own way of transliterating foreign names.⁴ The situation is so garbled that even among scholarly efforts in the English language, there has been no standard way of transliterating “foreign”, especially Turco-Mongol names. For instance, the traditional and popular English rendering of the title of the Turco-Mongol ruler was “Khan”, yet, there have been, especially in recent scholarly work, different ways of rendering it, e.g., *Qaγan*, *Qaqan*, *Qaqhan Kaan*, *Han*, etc. While quite aware of all these variant versions, I have decided to employ the most popular way of transliteration, i.e. Khan, for the main text. Other versions of transliteration are kept when they are cited. Complete consistency in transliteration is hard to claim or maintain. Instead, I have provided various alternative forms of both personal and place names in brackets.

For the Chinese terms, the Mandarin *Pinyin* system is used for transliteration. Chinese characters are provided as reference to important terms, personal and place names. Since this work deals with pre-modern history, the Chinese characters are given in the traditional form instead of the modern simplified form.

⁴ For recent discussions on the Turkic languages, see LARS JOHNSON – ÉVA Á. CSATÓ (eds.), *The Turkic Languages*, London – New York: Routledge 2006.