

A History of Syriac Christianity, Part II

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Dr. Murre-van den Berg presented a series of six lectures at ETSC during the period January 16-19, 2019. Below are lectures two and three in this series, which have been edited for conciseness and clarity. She is professor of Eastern Christianity and director of the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen.

Lecture 2 The Syriac Churches in the Islamic Period 600-1400

Today we will study the Syriac churches in the Islamic period from 600 to 1400. The Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) was the second caliphate after the death of Muhammad, which became very important for the Syriac Christians. After the initial shock of the Muslim conquest, Christians started to realize that in the new Islamic Caliphate they might be freer than they had been under the suzerainty of the Byzantine Empire. The Muslim rulers did not care what the denomination of their Christian subjects was, be it Chalcedonian or Miaphysite or Nestorian, and thus life became easier for those not belonging to the Chalcedonian Byzantine majority, whether East or West Syriac. It was only later that they realized that Islam would present new challenges for Christians.

Though some Christians converted to Islam, most Syriac Christians remained true to the faith. However, they, like other Christians, had to find new ways to relate to the state. With the Islamic conquest, the old boundary between the Persian and the Byzantine empires had disappeared. In this new geopolitical environment, the churches were no longer confined either to the Persian or Byzantine empires. The Syriac Orthodox Church, for example, started to take advantage of this new situation and expanded into north Iraq even though this region previously was mostly dominated by the Church of the East. At the same time, however, the Church of the East had also started to expand; its movement was eastward as well, but into Central and East Asia. In the seventh century it reached as far east as China. Roughly in the same period, the third Syriac group, the Maronite Church, moved westward where it began to rival the Syriac Orthodox Church, with which it had much in common, but from which it also wanted to distinguish itself. In this period, the Maronite patriarchate settled in the Qadisha Valley in Lebanon. In this period all three churches further developed their liturgies. *Qadisha* is a very important Syriac word meaning "holy." If you listen to the Syriac liturgies, this may be one of the first words that you learn. One thing that can be dated to this particular period is that these three churches developed their own liturgies. They may in fact have developed them much earlier, but this is the first period in which we have them in written form.

There were three Syriac rites: West Syriac, East Syriac, and Maronite. Each had its own set of hymns, prayers, lectionaries, and Eucharistic prayers. What we find is that the West Syriacs, which is the Syrian Orthodox, are the closest to the Byzantine liturgy. The Church of the East, which we call East Syriac, until today has retained much of its original form, with elements that are found in none of the other churches. The East Syriac



A sixth century Syriac manuscript with a canon table that tells the reader what to read from the gospels. Insert 1

liturgy, for example, lacks the institution narrative as it was constructed from the texts in the Gospels and in 1 Corinthians. Earlier it was thought that the East Syriac Church "lost" this particular narrative part that is common to all other liturgies in East and West. Currently, however, scholars tend to think that in fact the East Syriac form is older and that other Christians added this particular passage at a later point. The East Syriac liturgy "of Addai and Mari" first refers to Christ's suffering, death and resurrection and then invokes the Holy Spirit to "rest upon this offering."

In this period, liturgy books become more common. The bulk of the manuscripts that have survived until today are from a later period, but we have at least one manuscript from the sixth century—and in fact it may even be older than this (see insert 1). It tells you which part of the gospels you have to read, and how they relate to each other. For example, it shows how the stories in Luke correspond to those in Mark and Matthew. Note the fruit depicted on the page; this is an important part of the imagery the churches employed.

Syriac Literature of Islam, 600 to 1400

In the early Islamic period, Syriac Christians started to write apocalyptic literature. Though they did not necessarily see Islam as a threat to their religion as such, the quick succession of rulers and the violence that came with them made many Syriac Christians think that they were living in the End of Times. Some of their authors connected the threat posed by the Islamic conquests with what they learned from the Book of Daniel—that is, the world would see a succession of kingdoms, inaugurating the end times. Some indeed thought that the Islamic caliphate would be the last kingdom. After



Monastic text from the fifteenth century Insert 2

some decades of living within the Islamic empire, they realized that Islam had succeeded in creating a stable empire and that, after the shock of the conquest, hoped that things would return to normal. Gradually, the interest in apocalyptics disappeared.

Let me now mention a number of important authors of the Syriac Churches. First, there is the polymath Jacob of Edessa (d. 708), who wrote about exegesis, hymns, and history. It is important to study him in order to gain an understanding of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Isaac of Nineveh (seventh century) was from the Church of the East. He was one of the first to write monastic, mystical treatises. In in this period, monasticism, which includes both monks living in monastic communities and those living nearby as hermits, became increasingly important. In this milieu, Isaac became a very popular author not only within the Church of the East but also among the West-Syriac and Byzantine monastics. It is in these two traditions that he is mostly remembered and valued today, while the Church of the East has mostly forgotten about him (although the Church of the East is in the process of rediscovering him now). Another important East Syriac writer of the seventh century is Gabriel of Qatar. He wrote a very important commentary on the liturgy of the Church of the East, and he is one of best sources for understanding liturgical developments in this period. Finally, I want to mention Bawai the Great (d. 627/8). He was one of the most famous patriarchs of the Church of the East, and he is important for giving the church visibility in this period and, as a theologian, synthesizing Church-of-the-East theology.

Popular texts from this period include the *Lives of the Saints*, starting with Mat Maryam (St. Mary), Mat Shmuni, Mar Mari, and Mar Thomas ("Mar" means "Lord" but also "Saint," while Mat used for female saints). There are also the lives of the saints specific to the Syriac tradition, such as Mar Benham and Mat Sarah, Mar Augin, Mar Zay'a, and Rabban Hormizd. We also find popular dialogue poems, which built upon the earlier models of Ephrem and Narsai. In these poems there is a very lively going back and forth between two main characters that speak with each other in alternating verses. Because these are written from a first person perspective, the poems can be used to enact plays in which the two parts are presented by different actors. For example, the dialogues between Jesus and Mary or between Jesus and the robber on the cross are often staged on Easter Monday. These were all popular poems intended to help ordinary people understand the stories of the Bible. And like the lives of the saints, they were read, copied, and translated from this period until today.

Some of the names in these stories are familiar and venerated all over the Christian world, but others are more particular to the Syriac tradition, for example the name Shmuni. According to the Syriac tradition, this was the name of the mother of the seven brothers of the Maccabees. They were killed gruesomely by the soldiers of King Antiochus (usually identified with Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ca. 215-164 BCE). Shmuni is a very popular saint especially because she was a mother who suffered intensely because her sons were killed before her eyes. Together with Mary, she became the image of the suffering mother in difficult times. Other popular saints were Mar Behnam, Mat Sarah, Mar Augin, and Mar Zay'a from North Iraq. According to tradition, Behnam and Sarah converted to Christianity and were killed because of it, whereas Mar Augin and Mar Zay'a were monks who were important in establishing monasticism in this region. Another is Rabban Hormizd who founded the famous monastery near present-day Alqosh, Iraq, which until today bears his name.

The names of the saints also appear in the so-called "magic bowls" that were used as protective objects in the Aramaic traditions (Christian, Jewish, and Mandaic) of the region. Some of the formulas that the groups used were similar to one another, as were the things these for which inscribed bowls were supposed to provide protection: illnesses, infertility, the loss of houses and spouses, and whatever other terrible things could happen. The bowls differed from each other in script (using the script that was used in a particular community) and in the use of particular saints – Christians saints in the Christian bowls and others in those of other religions. The bowls, which may have origins in the region long before the rise of Christianity, at some point ceased to be used, but much of what they were supposed to do was later assigned to amulets. These also invokes the saints in protective formulas. One saint in particular stands out, St. George/Gergis (Mar Giwargis in Syriac), who is often portrayed as fighting the devil on protective amulets.

These amulets remind us that in reviewing the history of the Syriac churches, there is always both the official religion and popular or "vernacular" religion, the religion of the liturgy and the nicely written manuscripts, and a less complicated religion that was often transmitted by the priests who emerged from the common people. In fact, it was these priests who often wrote the protective verses on the amulets.

Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258)

In the Abbasid period the period during the Umayyad Caliphate, the Church of the East suddenly found itself in the center of things. Previously, the Church of the East had been on the periphery of the powers that be. However, the Abbasids moved the center of their empire to the newly built city of Baghdad, which was very close to Seleucia Ctesiphon where the Church of the East had long had its center. The patriarchate was then moved to Baghdad, and the patriarch of the East soon became the most important Christian cleric at the court.

It was here that a period of great intellectual and scientific flowering emerged, to which the learned men of the Church of the East, and to a lesser extent also of the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, contributed significantly. They were included in fundamental discussions over theology, language, philosophy, medicine, and science because they were at home in a long tradition of learning and because many of them read Greek, the most important language of science until that time. This Greek tradition of learning became very important in the further development of both Christian and Islamic theology. Syriac Christians contributed by making translations from Greek into Syriac, and then from Syriac into Arabic. It was easier for them to translate from Syriac to Arabic than from Greek directly into Arabic because they were already used to translating from Greek into Syriac. Also, translation from Syriac into Arabic was relatively easy because the languages are so similar. One name to remember is Hunain ibn Ishaq (809-873), the head of Dayr al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), an institution that was central in translation work. But Christians were influential not just because of their learning. Christian leaders like Patriarch Timothy I, who headed the church from the 780s to the 820s, was regularly invited to the court of the Caliph as one as the advisors to the court and as a discussant over theological issues. His letters give us some idea of the importance of his position. In other places, Timothy writes about the expansion of the Church of the East into India, Central Asia, and China.

Though it was especially the Church of the East that benefitted from this period, the Syriac Orthodox Church also profited from the intellectual engagements.



Medieval Syriac metal work from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. Insert 3 Towards the end of the Abbasid period, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Syriac the Orthodox produced a high quality of visual art than the Church of the East, with manuscripts and also with metal work such as the beautiful jar in Insert 3. The art of the time, as one can see, makes use of all the elements of what is usually called "Islamic art," but which perhaps is "Islamic" less than Mesopotamian or, even broadly, the Middle East. As one can see, upon a closer look, the jar has a beautiful image of an enthroned Mary with Jesus on her lap.

As noted above, this is also the period when the Church of the East expanded further into Asia. In the 1620s Jesuit missionaries in China

found a stele (a stone pillar) called the Xi'an Stele (also known as the "Nestorian Stele"), which dates back to 781 (see insert 4). Most of the inscription on the stele is written in Chinese, but at the bottom there are names in Syriac. The stele records that there was a missionary called Alopen who came to China laden with books and successfully converted some Chinese to Christianity. About a hundred years after Alopen, this stele was erected to commemorate his work and praise the then government for its protection of Christians.

When the stele was found in the seventeenth century, few really believed that it was authentic—it was seen as a way for the Jesuits to support their work in China.

However, when this find was connected to the letters of Timothy (referred to above), and when later similar steles and a number of texts (also found in later manuscripts) were discovered that confirmed the presence of the Church of the East in China, more and more scholars became convinced that it was actually genuine. It is now widely accepted that there was a Christian community in this region from the seventh century until about the year 1000. At that point, the political context in China became increasingly difficult for Christians. However, when in the thirteenth century the Mongols conquered most of China, the Church of the East once again was able to flourish in this region.

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Let me add a few notes on the Mongol period in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. During this time, the center of the Church of the East moved from Baghdad steadily northward towards the centers of the Mongol power—areas where there were already many Christian communities. One of their important cities was Maragha, now in the Azerbaijan province of Iran.

In general, in this period Syriac churches were found all along the northern arc of the Fertile there Crescent. and were also Christian communities in Iran, Central Asia, China, and India. Towards the end of the Mongol period, however, things became very difficult for the Syriac Christians of Central and East Asia, and they increasingly became concentrated in the northern areas of present-day Northwest Iran, North Iraq, and Eastern Turkey. The Syriac Orthodox Church, to be found also in North Iraq and Eastern Turkey, maintained some of its presence in large parts of Anatolia and Syria, including areas of present-day Lebanon and Palestine.

The long period of this Caliphate, from 750 to the fall of Baghdad in 1258, also includes the era of the Crusades. For the Syriac churches, this was the first time that they had direct and intensive contact with the Roman Catholic Church, something I will return to later.



The Xi'an Stele, discovered in 1625 near Xian, China. Insert 4



Syriac Gospel lectionary (Mardin, ninth century) (https://www.vhmml.org/rea dingRoom/)

Insert 5

Syriac Literature of the Abbasid Period

The literature from the Abbasid period saw several cultural developments not seen in the earlier period. One thing that becomes very important is grammars and dictionaries. This is the first period-more than in the earlier Greek period-that the Arabic and Syriac languages were used alongside each other in many of the Syriac churches. Consequently, scholars needed grammars and dictionaries in order to be able to teach and to make translations between languages. During this time, many of the learned Syriac Christians wrote in both Arabic and Syriac, and they probably also spoke both Arabic and Syriac (or at least some form of each of these languages). This does not necessarily mean that the church was composed of different ethnic groups ("Arabs" and "Syriacs"), although it is likely that some Syriacspeakers already switched to Arabic in this era. Moreover, people often used different languages for different purposes, and it might well be that texts in Syriac were meant for different audiences than the texts in Arabic. The latter may have been intended for the educated lay people while the former was for the clergy.

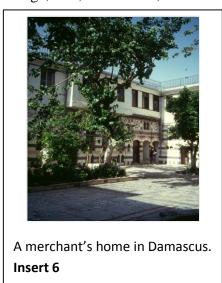
One of the most important authors of this period is Hasan Bar Bahlul, a tenthcentury bishop in Baghdad who wrote a Syriac-Arabic dictionary. Thomas of Maragha, a monk and patriarch of the Church of the East from 837 to 850, gave us an important historical source, the *Book of Governors*. This was about the leaders of the monasteries, and so gave a monastic history. Insert 5 shows a manuscript from this period. This beautiful gospel text is called a lectionary in which the Gospel readings for each Sunday are collected.

Lecture 3

The Ottoman Empire

Today we will talk about the Ottoman period. Among other things, we will discuss the *millet* system; the relationship with the Roman Catholics who were for the first time very much present in the Middle East; and civil law for Christians. We will also pay special attention to the Church of the East, the Chaldeans, and India.

Let me first say a few things about Ottoman studies. Over the last ten to twenty years Ottoman studies has become a very active field. This is because the Ottoman archives have become more accessible and more material has been digitized, which has allowed scholars from all over the world to understand better how the Ottoman Empire ruled its subjects. They were very bureaucratic and so they recorded everything. Towards the end of the class we will read one of the letters in the correspondence of the Ottoman Empire to show you how it worked. I will also pay attention to the manuscripts that were found in the libraries of the Syriac churches, which were the basis of my research. These manuscripts all have colophon (inscriptions at the final pages indicating the author, the place of writing, the clergy in charge, and, sometimes, those who contributed to the costs).These colophons are an



important source for understanding the ecclesial dynamics of the period.

Starting from all the very interesting research that is going on, what we need now is more integration. Individual scholars tend to assume a single perspective: the Ottoman, Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, or some other perspective. What needs to be done now is to combine these perspectives into a single picture in order to gain a better understanding of what the Ottoman period meant for all its subgroups. This is very complicated because you need people who know many different languages, including Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Greek, Syriac, Persian, and others. Therefore,

scholars in the field (most of whom know only a few of these) have to read each other's work and try to understand where we are now. And then we have, as I said in

the first lecture, the difference between historians and theologians. Theologians so far have not been very interested in the Ottoman period. I would argue that they should be interested because the Ottoman period is a crucial step towards the modern period. Put simply, to understand the contemporary situation and theologies of the Eastern and Oriental churches, one also needs to study the Ottoman period.

In the early sixteenth century, the Ottomans expanded their rule to cover the Arab provinces, which were the areas where most of the Syriac Christians found themselves. These include what we today call Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and also the Eastern part of Anatolia and the Hakkari mountains. After the initial difficult years of fighting and regime change, things soon became more stable, and the Ottomans established a fairly strong central rule in Istanbul. They made sure that the provincial governors remained connected to the center because they were regularly changed. Sometimes you had local dynasties, but there was always control from the center. The Ottomans were not interested in converting people to Islam; they were mostly interested in peace and stability. What is more, the income of the *jizya* tax from the Christians made a welcome addition to the Sultanate's income, which also contributed to a certain stability for all groups in the empire.

This stability also included increasing trade with the West as well as with Iran and India. Western traders often made use of Ottoman Christians and Jews to help them navigate the local rules, language, and culture. In turn, these Christians and Jews profited from better tax regimes than those who did not work for westerners. Overall, this meant there was more money in the Christian and Jewish communities than formerly. Compared to the fourteenth century, the fifteenth century brought the Christians stability, a bit more wealth, and not as much local oppression as there had been earlier.

Despite these generally favorable circumstances, there remained a fundamental difference between Muslims and non-Muslims. The rules governing non-Muslims are often referred to as the *millet* system, about which we will speak in a minute. However, we should know that the Ottomans made another distinction that is of importance for our discussion, the distinction between raya (flock) and ashiret (semi-independent tribes). The rava were the people, mostly Christians, which in the millet system were the subjects treated as dhimmi (the "protected people" of the book). The term ashiret referred to the independent tribes, which included the Kurds but also Christians. They lived in areas that were mostly outside direct Ottoman control and that were governed by local rulers who paid tribute to the Ottomans. This was also true in the Kurdish areas, where Kurdish Agha's ruled over the Kurdish tribes. Most of the Christians in this region were also considered as tribes and were part of the Kurdish tribal federations. Like the Kurds, they were allowed to carry weapons (something forbidden to Christians under *millet* regulations) and could fight alongside the Kurds if needed. Overall, despite the fact that the Kurds were generally in charge, the Hakkari Christians of the Church of the East were allowed more independence than their co-religionists elsewhere in the Ottoman or Persian Empire. Note that to some extent this worked the same way for the Maronites in the Lebanon Mountains and for some of the Christian Bedouins in Jordan.

The Three Millets and Their Millet Bashi ("head of the millet")

The *millet* system is something that the Ottomans built on the older *dhimmi* system.

They divided the non-Muslims into three big groups. First, there were Jews, which included those in Istanbul—who had been expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492—and elsewhere. The second group is that of Eastern Orthodoxy. The "Greek" Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul became the ruler of the all the Eastern Orthodox churches, including those under the patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria. Third were the Armenians, whose patriarch became the head of all Oriental (Miaphysite) Orthodox Christians. The leaders of these three groups were considered to represent all non-Muslims in the empire.

The Syriac Christians, therefore, were not directly represented at the court. The Syriac Orthodox Christians were considered to be part of the Armenian group. The Church of the East was not really part of any of these groups, and in fact because most of them were in the Hakkari Mountains and were dealing more with the Kurds, they also were never really part of the Greek Orthodox group. However, although the *millet* system looks like a very neat and organized system, in practice it worked fairly pragmatically.



Hagia Sophia, Istanbul Insert 7

In fact, many religious leaders just came to Istanbul to put their complaints and plead their causes to the Sultan. Sometimes the Syriac patriarchates would use the offices of



Greek Orthodox Patriarchate Istanbul Insert 8

the Armenian Patriarch; but if they were engaged in a quarrel with the Armenian Patriarch, then they would just go directly to the Sultan. The Ottoman system had very clear rules, but there were many ways to follow the rules. During the course of the Ottoman Empire, corruption and bribery became increasingly important. If you had a lot of money, it was always possible to arrange something that worked to your benefit. For example, if you wanted a new patriarch (who always needed approval from the High Porte in Istanbul), you might use your influence to have your candidate approved. Of course, there are lots of downsides to a system like this because you

never knew if the right person would be in the right position. But, at the same time, it also allowed Christians quite a bit of negotiating space to organize their communities without being ruled directly by the Ottomans.

A note about the pictures (inserts 7-9). The first is of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (insert 7), which became a mosque when the Ottomans conquered Istanbul (and later the Turkish Republic changed it into a museum). The Blue Mosque, the main mosque of Istanbul which was built soon after Constantinople was captured by the Ottomans, was built after the model of Hagia Sophia. In turn, the Blue Mosque became a model for Turkish mosques all over the world.

Insert 8 and 9 are of the current center of the Greek Orthodox Church, which remains in Istanbul, being also the residence of patriarch Bartholomew. It includes the patriarchal church, which is small but beautifully decked in gold.

Religion, Community & (Civil) Law

You are all no doubt aware that in the pre-Ottoman system, one's community defined

one's civil status. So if you were a Christian, you were subject to the rules of the Christian especially community. regarding weddings. custody, divorce, and inheritance. It was the same in the Ottoman period, so basically it was the Christian clergy that decided many issues of civil law. However, what people are not always aware of is that in the Ottoman period the shari'a law courts were also visited by Christians, especially when they did not get the outcome from their bishops that they wanted. This was especially so in cases of divorce, which in the Christian communities were almost never granted. A person who failed to secure a divorce from his bishop would go to the *qadi* (*shari'a*) court judge to get a divorce. Christians did not have to convert to Islam for this; they remained Christians. So the *qadi* courts functioned as general courts for the entire community. The *qadi* courts were also used when there was a conflict between litigants from two different churches. So the legal system was more flexible than people tend to think.



Greek Orthodox Church

Insert 9

My last point concerns how this system functioned in the Ottoman period. This was a communal system with an important position for the clerical leaders. However, secular leaders played distinct roles, because they were the ones to back financially and politically—these clerical leaders. This made for a complicated interaction between the religious and secular domains in leading the Christian



Graves of the Church of the East patriarchs of Rabban Hormizd Insert 10

communities. In the nineteenth century, following the reforms, the Ottomans stipulated that the Christian communities should have a "Lay Council" that ruled their communities in cooperation with the bishops and the patriarch. In the cities and in the rural countryside, lay leaders were mostly the local merchants and nobles from a given area, while among tribal Christians, the leaders were the tribal leaders who were the counterparts of the bishops and patriarchs.

Here you see (see image 10) the gravestones of the patriarchs of the Church of the East in Hakkari. These are from the Ottoman period up to the seventeenth century. The monastery where they now exist is the monastery of Rabban Hormizd near

Alqosh, now part of the Chaldean (Roman Catholic) Church.

The Ottomans & the West

During the Ottoman period, the West became increasingly important in the region. Some people have said that from the seventeenth century onwards, the Ottoman Empire was in decline because of this Western influence. Or, to put this the other way around, because the Ottomans were so weak, the West was able to advance quickly into the East. However, I think that things were more interesting and complicated than that. First, it is clear that the Ottomans benefited from the exchange between East and



Syriac Catholic church, Damascus Insert 11

West. Second, the word *decline* is a difficult term to use in a scholarly context because you then have to be very precise as to what aspects exactly were at their top and then later declined. However, one can say that the Ottomans became weaker militarily and diplomatically mostly in the nineteenth century, and not in this earlier period—that is, the seventeenth century. In the early period that we are talking about here, Catholic missionaries, diplomats, and various kinds of merchants entered the region. The Ottomans decided to include the Westerners (at this time the French) in the communal system as their own "Frank" group. This group, however,

received special privileges compared to other Christians. This meant that the French would have a higher status than the native Christians in the Ottoman Empire. Most important, they were not required to pay the *jizya* taxes. This was a way to encourage trade between the West and the Ottoman Empire. One of the things that happened was that local Christians and Jews started working for Western companies and were often allowed the same tax breaks as the Westerners. This made it very advantageous for these Christians to become involved with the Westerners.

Let me make a small linguistic point: these people were called *dragoman*, which means "translator." Notably this word originates in Aramaic from the root word *targem* (cf. also "targum"—from the Jewish Aramaic Bible translation) that via Arabic had ended up in Turkish. These translators, which in many respects became intermediaries between two cultures, had to know Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and European languages.

Through these contacts, some of these dragomans and their families decided to become Catholics. Some people have said that they became Catholics because of the money, which in some cases was true, but quite a few other Christians who were not directly involved with foreign diplomats or merchants also converted. Thus, I think that the economic aspects do not explain all the attraction that Catholicism held for Middle Eastern Christians. One thing was that Catholic missionaries paid more attention to in their preaching and writing at the time than the Orthodox was women. Also, local Christians liked the way the Catholics venerated Mary, including the use of the rosary and the beautiful images. Notably, some of the learned people, such as priests and bishops, converted to Catholicism. There is no doubt that they understood what Catholicism had to offer to the Orthodox Church.

Rome & the Middle East

Gradually, the increasing power of Westerners in the Ottoman Empire led to their involvement in Ottoman politics, especially regarding the Christian and Jewish communities. Along larger geopolitical lines, the different European countries started to "protect" different groups in the Empire. The French protected the Catholics; the British protected the Jews, Druzes, and later the Protestants; and the Russians protected the Orthodox. Thus, conflicts between these groups and between any one group and the Ottoman government was no longer a local issue; now religious conflicts could be seen as part of a large geopolitical context because there were many nations involved. For example, the French consul in Aleppo was involved when there were conflicts concerning Catholics; and when there were boundary disputes in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, the French and the Russians consuls would be involved. In the nineteenth century that becomes a real problem.

The Catholic missionaries had a very clear aim when they came to the Middle East. From their perspective all the Christians in the Middle East were schismatics and heretics, and they thought that the only way to save them from their heresies was to bring them into the mother church, that is, the Roman Catholic Church. They tried, therefore, to convert not just individual people but whole communities of another denomination, and they expected bishops and patriarchs to submit to the pope as the head of the true church. Often they succeeded in converting a whole church or part of a church. At the same time, however, the Catholic missionaries were fairly flexible in the pursuit of their goals. They allowed new Catholic communities to keep most of their rites and the use of their liturgical language. Married priests were accepted into the fold, and all kinds of other things that were specific to these churches were also permitted as long as they did not contradict Catholic teachings. Consequently, many of the ordinary people would hardly notice if a local church had become Catholic because the changes were quite small. But of course they were big because in the end this church and community would belong to another group; they would be separated from the Orthodox Church; and inevitably there would be all kinds of money and power struggles. It is understandable, then, that the Orthodox community became very angry about these mission activities and started to push back. Notably, the Russians began to support the Orthodox in the region with education and money to help them resist the Catholics.



Good Friday procession at the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem Insert 12

Another reason for the Catholic Church to be very active in the Middle East was the Holy Places. For this reason it was very important for the Catholics to be present in the Middle East, especially in Palestine. They sought to make space for Catholic pilgrimages at all the holy places. However, because the holy places were also very important for the Orthodox churches, this became an important point of contention during the Ottoman period.

One final reason for the extensive missionary work of the Catholics in the Middle East was because of the wars of religion in Europe, which made the Catholics lose ground. The Reformation split Christianity in Europe, which stimulated the Catholic Church to engage in missions in the Middle East as well as in America, the Philippines, China, and India.

"Syriac" Catholic Churches

Here is a list (insert 13) of the Syriac Catholic Churches: the Chaldean Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, the Maronite Church, and the Syro-Malabar Church (in India). These are four Catholic Churches that emerged from Catholic mission work.

- Chaldean Church
 - 1552: Yohannan Sulaqa
 - 1681: Yosep I
 - 1830: Yohannan Hormizd Algosh
- Syriac Catholic Church
 - 1551: Ignatius Abdallah
 - 1662: Adreas Akhijan
 - 1783: Michael Jarweh
- Maronite Church
 - 1736: Synod of Mount Lebanon
- Syro-Malabar Church (1599 Synod of Diamper)
- Insert 13

The most successful one was the Maronite Church because among the Maronites no separate church remained outside the Catholic Church: all of the Maronites became part of the Catholic Church. The move of the Maronites to the Roman Catholic Church had already started during the Crusader period, but it was in the eighteenth century that this connection was confirmed and strengthened.

The second most successful Catholic effort was with the Chaldean Church, even though its beginnings were rather complicated. The first attempt at a union was in the sixteenth century, but at that time the protagonist from the Church of the East did not

understand exactly what was involved in becoming part of the Catholic Church. After about thirty years, the effects of this first attempt disappeared, and the patriarch and bishops were back in the Church of the East. In the seventeenth century, there was a second attempt. Although this attempt was very small and local, Bishop Yosep who became the new Chaldean Church's first patriarch really understood what was happening theologically, and he and his successors actively published in order to further the local understanding of Catholic theology. In 1830, Patriarch Yohannan Hormizd-Alqosh took a large part of the Church of the East and brought it into the Catholic Chaldean Church, and from that time the Catholic Chaldean Church was almost as big as the Church of the East.

This never happened to the Syrian Catholic Church, which emerged from the Syriac Orthodox Church: until today it is much smaller than its Orthodox counterpart. There were three important leaders who tried to make part of the Syrian Orthodox Church a Syriac Catholic Church. These individuals were Ignatius Abdallah (1551), Andreas Akhijan (1662), and Michael Jarweh (1783). Each of them succeeded in a small way, so that by the eighteenth century you had a stable Syriac Catholic Church though quite



Chaldean church in Diyarbakir Insert 14

stable Syriac Catholic Church, though quite small. It was concentrated in Lebanon

and Northern Iraq rather than Eastern Turkey and Northern Syria.

There were two French scholars, Youssef Courbages and Philippe Fargues, who suggested that because of the stability of the Ottoman period Christians actually grew in number faster than other communities—both in absolute numbers and relative to others. It is indeed interesting to see that the Christians were doing relatively well, but after this was published, many scholars started to wonder if this was correct. Their interpretation was based on Ottoman records, and these records only counted people in certain areas. What we now think is that most of the increase of numbers of Christians in certain areas can be accounted for by Christians migrating from the countryside to the cities. It seems that while they were in the countryside, they were not counted at all, but when they moved into the cities they were counted. This suggests that the number went up, but in reality it was internal migration rather than real growth. The issue has not been completely resolved, but most scholars now agree that Christians were doing relatively well but not as well as Courbage and Fargues had thought. Their figures, however, clearly show that Christians were moving into the cities more than in earlier periods. During the Ottoman period, the movement of people to the cities accounts for the fact that today most Christians in the Middle East live in cities. The exception to this is Egypt where there are still a considerable number of Christian communities in the countryside. But in other places, such as Svria, there was a slow movement in the Ottoman period that continued into the twentieth century that resulted in the vast majority of Christians living in cities. Because they lived in cities, Christians often tended to be professionals; and when Western missionaries began to enter the region, they encountered local Christians in the cities in which they chose to reside. Later, when the missionaries opened schools, Christians had easy access to these schools and at higher percentages than other

communities. Finally, because Christians lived in cities, they generally tended to enjoy a higher level of prosperity in this period than they had in previous ages.

This is a house (see insert 15) of a rich merchant in Aleppo that today is in Berlin. Nearly the whole house was moved to Berlin. We see here an Islamic style of decoration, but some of the images are very clearly Christian.

India is verv important for the development of Catholicism in the Middle East. It was in India that the Portuguese encountered the Syriac Christians. When they started exploring around 1500, they also ended up on the west coast of India where they encountered Syriac Christians. They reported back to Portugal about these large groups of Christians. At the same time, these Christians wrote letters to Iraq to report about the Portuguese, observing that the Portuguese were a powerful Western people who were very positive towards the Christians and were supporting the Christians vis-à-vis other groups. There were



Insert 15

several exchange of letters between 1500 and 1550 that all contributed to a positive image of the Portuguese and the Catholics. So when the first monk from the Church

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of the East and went to Rome to become the first Chaldean Patriarch, I think it was because he knew about these letters. This is supported by the fact that he went to meet the Portuguese ambassador in Rome and later sent one of his metropolitans to India. From this time onward, more or less at the same time as their co-religionists in Iraq, the Syriac Christians in India became closely connected to Catholics.

The Portuguese missionaries in India were less subtle and less careful than the missionaries in the Middle East. Later in the sixteenth century, they started to put pressure on the Syriac Christians to follow closely the Latin rites rather than their Syriac rites. By the end of the sixteenth century, the missionaries forced the Indian Christians to burn many of their Syriac books to make the church completely Roman Catholic. This led to a fierce conflict, and a portion of Syriac Christians in India left the Catholic Church to start their own church.

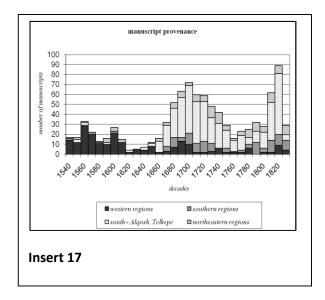
This complicated matters for the history of the Syriac Christians because some of them became part of the Syriac Orthodox Church rather than return to the Church of the East where they came from. The result was that today there is a large variety of Syriac churches in India that all derive from the Church of the East: the Chaldeans (the Syro-Malabar), the Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox, and the Syriac Catholics. Later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other groups split off from these churches. Some of them became Protestant and others remained independent. So today you have almost ten different Syriac churches in India. Note that India has a large population, which means that there are many



An Indian church that originated from the Church of the East **Insert 16**

Syriac Christians. So, for example, the Syriac Orthodox Christians in India are larger in number than the Syriac Orthodox Christians in the Middle East.

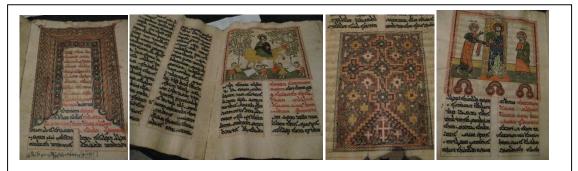
In this picture (insert 16) you see one of these Indian churches with a cross before it. This is the type of cross they had in India before the Catholics arrived. If you look closely at its base you will see that it looks Indian, with elephants and lotus flowers. Also, on the church building itself, there is a decoration of animals that you would not find on Syriac churches in the Middle East.



Let us return to the Church of the East and Iraq. One of the reasons for me to start researching this period was the huge number of manuscripts that were produced in this time. Before 1500 there were very few manuscripts, but the number increased in the sixteenth century and increased even more in the seventeenth century and more still in the nineteenth century. (See insert 17.) The fifteenth century was a difficult century and probably the cost of producing manuscripts in the fifteenth century was very high. In

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addition, many manuscripts from this period were destroyed during wars. From the late fifteenth century onwards, the situation started to improve and people had money to replace the manuscripts that were lost, restocking their churches and monasteries. In the earliest period, the scribes who produced the manuscripts were mostly monks, but later they were mostly married priests who made a family business out of manuscript production. Scholars today have identified family trees that include as many as thirty people over three or four generations who were all scribes. So apparently there was a great demand for their labors. All kinds of people contributed money to produce these manuscripts: sometimes individual people, sometimes groups of people, sometimes a mother and her daughter, sometimes two couples, or sometimes a bishop. So there were all kinds of different people who contributed the money needed to produce these manuscripts. Many of these manuscripts are very modest, but this Gospel Lectionary (see insert 18) is one of the most beautiful manuscripts of this period. The manuscripts they produced employed the beautiful eastern script and were nicely illustrated and decorated. About half of these manuscripts are about the liturgy, which was the most important thing for people to write and to copy and to invest their money in. The other half of the manuscripts include commentaries, grammars, and so forth.



Gospel Lectionary, Algosh 1679 (Ms Jer. Syr 1, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate).

Insert 18

Many people think that the Church of the East does not allow images. This is true to some extent. For example, they do not have icons in their churches like most other Orthodox churches. But they do have images in their manuscripts. Scholars think that they used icons in their churches in earlier periods, but at some point decided no longer to use them. In the Ottoman period, it was mostly the simple cross that was used as the focus point of veneration during the liturgy, often in combination with the Gospel lectionary that would be put out on a stand before the altar.

Texts & Colophons

For our understanding of this period and culture, colophons are very important. Colophons of manuscripts (whether in the Middle East or in Latin Europe) are brief or sometimes long notes of the scribes in which they tell the reader about the production of the manuscript and often add other information. The set-up of colophons differs from one manuscript tradition to another. Scribes of the Church of the East would state that the manuscript was finished at a particular date, in a particular place, under the reign of this or that patriarch and bishop. Usually his own name and family pedigree and the name(s) of the sponsor(s) of the manuscripts would be added to it.

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Scribes used forms of the Syriac term for "blessed" *brīkha* (cf. Arabic *baraka* [blessing]) for clergy, for places, for dates ("in the blessed month Iyar"). We thus learn from these colophons that the writings themselves were considered a *Baraka* for the people, and paying money for manuscripts to be written was considered a *baraka*. The colophon shown in insert 19 is so long that it extends over several pages, and the scribe used smaller letters to produce it. In this particular manuscript, there are also some later notes, which often occurred when there were empty pages at the end of a manuscript. In the colophons of this period, a manuscript that was important and had



been produced by a noted scribe included colophons that were long and elaborate in their praises of God, the patriarch, and the place where the manuscript was produced. Altogether, colophons of this period give us a sense of what people then thought was important and beautiful.

Sometimes visitors to a church or monastery would add their own notes to a manuscript, and people who looked at the manuscripts might add something to them as well. The manuscript shown in insert 19 was produced to be brought to Jerusalem. Later, when pilgrims from Iraq would come to Jerusalem, they would see this manuscript and write a few notes in it. This underlines how important the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was thought to be.

Another colophon (Cambridge Add, Alqosh 1729) begins: "Completed is, with the help of the venerated and the praiseworthy Trinity [...], this book of the teacher Khamis with many other hymns besides. Praise be to the Father [etc.]." In the first sentence of the colophon, the scribe would always mention the title of the book. Then he would say when it was completed: "This book was finished and completed on Thursday, on the 18th of the blessed month First Kanun, of the year two thousand and forty-one of the blessed Greeks, Amen." Until the nineteenth century, the dating system used by Syriac Christians was the Greek Byzantine system. The scribe notes that "It was written in the days of the father of fathers and the head of the pastors, Mar Eliya Catholicos Patriarch of the East [etc.]." It was written "in the blessed and blissful village, strong in the Christian faith, Alqosh, village of Nahum the prophet, which is situated near the very holiest of monasteries of Rabban Hormizd the Persian [etc.]." Many of these manuscripts were written in the village of Alqosh, a name that appears in the Bible. Most scholars think that the Alqosh mentioned in the Bible is located in Palestine, but these Iraqi Christians believe that it is located in Iraq. A

similar claim is made for the village of the prophet Nahum. This suggests that the scribe was attempting to establish a link between the Church of the East and the people and history of the Bible. Then the scribe mentions a holy place near his village, writing that it "is situated near the very holiest monasteries of Rabban Hormized the Persian, [etc]." This is a practice we see in many colophons.

Finally, the scribe would mention his name. The scribe would present himself as very humble, writing that he is a corrupt and sinful man who sullied this book. This is interesting because in Western manuscripts scribes would often leave out their names. But in these manuscripts and indeed in a lot of the Middle East manuscripts, they would mention themselves and their family line: "Q. Yosep, son of Q. Giwargis, son of the deceased Q. Israel, son of Q. Hormizd of Alqosh [etc.]."

Some of the manuscripts will also tell you who paid for the work. Here is an example:

He then commissioned and heeded to the writing of this book of Khamis, the upright believer [etc.] [In this case he is a deacon] **Sh. Yosep, son of Sh. Maroge**. He had it written from what is his, for the holy church and wonderful shrine of **Mat Maryam**, mother of Christ, which is in the blessed and blissful village, strong in the Christian faith, **Dergani** [etc.].

The deacon who wrote this came from another village and went to Alqosh because there were many scribes there. Perhaps he had this book written for the church in his village. It is a book of hymns that were probably intended for congregational use.



Floor plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher Insert 20

Practicing the pact – church buildings and ritual practice

Much of the correspondence from the Syriac churches with the Ottoman rulers was about holy places or about the restoration of churches. One of the issues among the Syrian Orthodox was about the little chapel in the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, opposite the Coptic chapel, which the Armenians thought was theirs. The conflict between the two churches over the chapel probably started in the Ottoman period, but the

quarrel continues today. (See inserts 20 and 21.)

Here are some examples of Ottoman texts (see insert 22). On the left you see the *tughra*, a calligraphic monogram that was used by the Ottoman government. On the right you see how the Christians signed their important documents. In the middle you see a document that was important in a dispute between the church and the government. This looks like a map of a church and a road, perhaps to illustrate the situation, so that the legal details might be clear. So here



Church of the Holy Sepulcher, Jerusalem Insert 21

we have a text whose date is uncertain. It probably was in the nineteenth century because it talks about the Syriac *millet*, which was only established in the nineteenth century.



Various documents from (Syriac Orthodox) church archive in Mardin (presentday Turkey) (Akyuz, text 5-1737, 57 and 87)

Insert 22

This letter (the middle document in insert 22) was written by Es-Seyyid Mustafa, the Muslim governor of the town of Karzan. He writes to the Ottomans in Istanbul on behalf of a Christian community, beginning with a nice phrase: "We hope for the continued existence of the life of the exalted state." The governor continues,

Our request is the continued existence of the life of the exalted state.

Priest Hanna together with others from the people of Syriac Millet subject to the Gatzan Village linked to the city of **Diyarbekir** came to the **Sharia council** and narrated the following motion: The stones of the [West]-side wall and the outside of the old church known as Zira Zirek, which was in the mentioned town since the times of the conquest, have been falling for two years. It is about to be ruined and derelict. If it stays like this for two more years, it will completely slant to the ground. It is evident that it will **not be possible to perform Christian rituals** and recite the **incorrect Bible** inside. The mentioned wall needs to be repaired immediately.

They insisted and demanded by presenting and submitting to the gracious Governorship of Diyarbekir a request for the permission to repair and restore the mentioned wall to its previous state **without [building] anything in excess to its former condition**. After examination, it has been observed and inspected that the said wall of the aforementioned church is **in need of repair**. And, through the information about its old state by a **few trustworthy persons from the Muslims**, the previously stated is the case. By your leave, this has been presented and submitted to your accomplished and enlightened presence. Everlastingly, on this matter, the final issue belongs to your Excellency.

The subject whose prayer is for the continued existence of the life of the exalted state.

Es-Seyyid Mustafa, the governor of the town of Karzan. [Tekst Akyuz 157, undated]

We can see some interesting points here. One is that the governor put the request of the Christians before the High Porte in Istanbul, which suggests that he is convinced that they have a case. He supports this by asserting that Muslims have

testified that they have a case, and he affirms that this church has been there from the conquest. Under the Pact of Umar (see insert 23), Christians therefore had a right to this church. Yet he must also make clear that he was a Muslim and not a Christian. So he includes a sentence about the Bible being inaccurate. In the Ottoman government, if government officials spoke about Christians and Christian rituals, they would always make sure to identify themselves as Muslims and that they were only representing the case of Christians. The letter makes it clear that the governor does not believe in the Christian Scriptures but that, nonetheless, he is convinced that they have a case that should be put forward. This is a very interesting presentation, one that acknowledges rights and subjection and negotiation.



