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Brief Studies

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BRIEF STUDIES

EDITORIAL NOTE:

This brief study is one of a series of articles on religious organizations and denominations in America. It was prepared by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, graduate professor of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST AND OF THE ASSYRIANS (THE HOLY AND APOSTOLIC CATHOLIC CHURCH OF THE EAST)

Among the church bodies of North America the most ancient schism is that which divides the Church of the East from the church of the fifth-century Roman Empire and its modern descendants.

The existence of a Christian community in Urfa (Edessa) is historically demonstrable in the second century. Traditions committed to writing in the fourth century have Christianity brought to Urfa by SS. Peter, Thomas, and Bartholomew, as well as by St. Addai and his disciple St. Mari. Some of the fathers of the Church of the East describe both SS. Addai and Mari as members of the company of 72 disciples that Christ sent out, while others identify the former with Saint Thaddeus the Apostle. In the official "Table or Tree of Life of Apostolic Succession of the Catholicos-Patriarchs of the East," the first name after St. Mari's is that of Abris, "relative of the virgin Mary," while the third is that of James (Yaqob) I, "relative of Yosip [that is, Joseph] the Carpenter," Christ's foster father.¹

Politically the territory occupied by the

¹ Iskhaq Rehana, "Table or Tree of Life of Apostolic Succession of the Catholicos-Patriarchs of The Church of the East, Namely, Those Who Served on the See of Khuky in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Babylon," in (Mar) O'dishoo, *The Book of Marganitha (The Pearl) on the Truth of Christianity*, translated by Eshai Shimun XXIII (Ernakulam, Kerala, India: Mar Themotheus Memorial Printing and Publishing House, 1965), pp. 109—110.

early Aramaic-speaking Church of the East was under Parthian rule until 226, when the Sassanian or Persian period began. Because of the Sassanians' endemic and inveterate hatred of the Roman Empire, the conversion of Constantine to the Christian faith immediately made the loyalty of the Christians of the eastern regions suspect, just as by the same token the persecution of Christianity as an illicit religion by the Roman emperors had won for the Christians of the East at least a limited measure of toleration. For a century, from Sapor II in the 330s to Yezdegerd II the Wicked in the 440s, the persecutions went on intermittently. One of the martyrs under Sapor was the Catholicos (as the metropolitans of Seleucia-Ctesiphon had called themselves from 280 on) Shimun-bar-Sabbai, while under Yezdegerd tradition has 150,000 Christians executed at one time at Kirkuk in modern Iraq.

The third ecumenical council (Ephesus, 431) decided against the Byzantine patriarch Nestorius because he rejected the title of *theotokos* ("Mother of God") for the Blessed Virgin Mary — although he was willing to concede to her the title of "Mother of Emmanuel" — and because he insisted that she be called nothing more than *christotokos* ("Mother of Christ"). It also unjustly charged him with having taught that there are two persons in Jesus Christ as well as two natures. The Church of the East was not represented at the Council of Ephesus because of the political conditions of the time. It subsequently refused to condemn Nestorius, and it protected his disciples who fled into Persian territory. This was especially true after the emperor Zeno closed the famed Christian college at Urfa in the 480s and the teachers fled to Nusaybin [Nisibis], where they established a no-less-influential center of learning. For this reason the

Church of the East came to be known to Christians in the Roman Empire as Nestorians.

In 484 Barsoma, one of the teachers at Nusaybin, succeeded in committing the Church of the East to the formula that resolved the Christological problem by affirming the eternal and inseparable union in Christ of the two natures (*kyane*), the divine and the human, in two hypostases (*qnume*), and in one person (*parsūpa*).² This dissociation from the Christology of the church in the Roman Empire had the merit of emphasizing to the Persian overlords the difference between the Christianity of their subjects and the Christianity of the Roman imperial church. But at the same time it evoked a reaction that looked toward reconciliation, even to the extent of formal acceptance of the Chalcedonian formula by the Church of the East during the catholicate of Awa I (536—552), a distinguished administrator and a convert from Zoroastrianism.³ The rapprochement failed when Constantinople posthumously condemned two teachers whom the Church of the East had admitted to its canon of saints, Theodore of Mopsuestia and his mentor Diodore of Tar-

² *Qnuma* reproduces the Greek *hypostasis* (in Hebrews 10:1 of the Peshitta translation, for instance); it means "solid existence, substance (as distinct from a shadow), self," and is used to describe the three hypostases of the Trinity. *Parsūpa* is a transliteration of the Greek *prosōpon*, literally "face," the equivalent of the Latin *persona*; in the theological language of the Greek church fathers *prosōpon* is a synonym of *hypostasis*. On the differentiation between *qnuma* and *parsūpa* in the thought of the Church of the East, see the excerpt from *The Harmonious Texture* by a contemporary of Odishu, Rabban Yokhanan Bar-Zubi, in O'dishoo, pp. 82—91.

³ William Ainger Wigram, *The Assyrians and Their Neighbours* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1929), pp. 56—57. The acceptance of the Chalcedonian decree has never been formally rescinded.

sus. The Muslim conquest in the early seventh century made further efforts at reconciliation between the Church of the East and the church in the Roman Empire impossible.

The unparalleled missionary expansion of the Church of the East that ultimately carried it across all of Asia from Arabia to the Pacific Ocean is traceable back at least as far as the beginning of the fourth century, when the catholicos sent Bishop David of Basra to India as a missionary. The persecutions of the fourth and fifth centuries helped scatter the members of the Church of the East. By the middle of the sixth century their congregations were found in Ceylon, India, Burma, Thailand, and Indochina. By the early seventh century the Church of the East penetrated China, where the stone stele at Hsian-Fu, erected in the late eighth century shortly after the catholicate of Khnani-shu II (died 778), is one of the most important documents pertaining to the missionary outreach of the Christian faith in the Orient.⁴

⁴ For the text of this important document, see James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-Hsi, China, Relating to the Diffusion of Christianity in China in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries, with the Chinese Text of the Inscription, a Translation, and Notes, and a Lecture on the Monument* (New York: Paragon Book Reprint Corporation, 1966, a reprint of the 1888 London edition), and P. Yoshio Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China*, second printing (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1928). See also Frits Vilhelm Holm, *My Nestorian Adventure in China: A Popular Account of the Holm-Nestorian Expedition to Sian-Fu and Its Results* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1923). The stele summarizes the chief tenets of the "Luminous [or Illustrious] Religion" and chronicles the progress of Christianity in China from 635 to 781. The creedal statement emphasizes the Trinity and the incarnation but says nothing specific about Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. There are indications of a considerable degree of accommodation and even of assimilation to the popular religions of China in the form in which the stele presents

During the catholicate of Dadisho in the fifth century the catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon took the title Catholicos-Patriarch of the East. The monastic life of the Church of the East was placed on a firm foundation especially through the efforts of Auraham of Kashkar (491—596), founder of the great monastery on Mount Izla near Nusaybin, and of Bawai the Great (569—628). Bawai's great theological work, *The Book of the Union*, is the definitive statement of the Christology of the Church of the East during this period. After the completion of the Arab conquest of Persia in 651 the Christians of the Church of the East received reasonably good treatment at the hands of the Muslims most of the time, punctuated by periods of persecution. With the removal of the catholicate from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to Baghdad in the catholicate of Khnanishu II, the catholicos-patriarchs became political figures of considerable prominence for a number of centuries. During the early Mongol period, before the Mongols had decided definitively for Islam and were disposed to be friendly toward Christianity, the Church of the East achieved the zenith of its extent and influence. But it shared in the general decline and eclipse of Asiatic civilization that followed in the wake of the Tatar invasions of the late 13th and 14th centuries.

The East Syrian core of the Church of the East survived precariously in the mountains of Kurdistan and Azerbaijan and around the shores of Daryācheh-ye Rezā'iyeh (Lake Urmia). After the sack of Baghdad by Hulagu Khan the seat of the catholicate was established at first within the headquarters of the

Christianity. For a general survey and appreciation of the missions of the Church of the East, see John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928). The tradition of the Church of the East places the penetration of China in the fifth century.

conqueror; then it moved to Marāghe in Iran, finally to Al-Qosh, near Al-Mawsil (Mosul). The Catholicos Eshuyo Shimun VIII,⁵ who ruled from 1538 to 1551, transferred it first to Azerbaijan, then to Qudshanes. It was about this time that political developments cut off communication between the metropolitan of Malabar and the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East.

About this time too the course of events began that finally diverted all the St. Thomas Christians of the Malabar Coast to Roman Catholicism or to the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch. In 1553 a segment of the Church of the East in the Middle East accepted the authority of the Bishop of Rome⁶ and thereby paved the way for the ultimate establishment in 1828 of the Roman Catholic Chaldean Rite as a Roman Catholic community parallel to the Church of the East. Its prelate, who resides at Mosul, has the title of Patriarch of Babylon. Proselytization of members of the Church of the East by other denominations was undertaken on a considerable scale during the 19th century. Between 1874 and 1907 a segment of the Roman Catholic Malabarese Rite in India withdrew from papal authority and placed itself under the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East, who is represented in India by a metropolitan. Since World War I the Church of the East and the "Assyrian"⁷ na-

⁵ Since the catholicate of Shimun III (1369 to 1392), all but two of the acknowledged catholicos-patriarchs have borne the name Shimun (Simon); since the 16th-century catholicate of Eshuyo Shimun VIII each catholicos-patriarch has prefixed Shimun with another name. The present catholicos-patriarch, Eshai Shimun XXIII, began his rule in 1920; he is accounted the 119th catholicos-patriarch.

⁶ Some members of the Church of the East had gone to Cyprus and there had accepted the authority of the Bishop of Rome and the Latin Rite in 1340.

⁷ This designation, popularized by Anglicans, became common only in the 19th century.

tion of which it is the religious embodiment have been the victim of Near Eastern power politics.

Individual "Assyrians" began to come to the United States as early as the mid-1700s, but immigration in fairly large numbers did not begin until after World War I. Those who had belonged to Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Presbyterian congregations in the Middle East were usually absorbed into the counterpart communities in North America. Until 1940 immigrant members of the Church of the East maintained their religion as best they could with the minimal episcopal supervision that the church could supply. In that year the Catholicos-Patriarch of the East moved his "patriarchal cell" to the United States; he established himself first in Chicago, then in Modesto, California, and finally in San Francisco. In addition to the congregations in the United States and the congregations on the Malabar Coast of India, there are organized congregations of the Church of the East in Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The worldwide membership of the Church of the East is estimated at 60,000.

Since the early fifth century the Church of the East has recognized the ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

"The Creed of the 318 Fathers who assembled in the city of Nicaea, in the days of King Constantine, because of the blasphemy of Arius" — in reality the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed — reads in the form that the Church of the East confesses it:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things, visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten and first-born of all created, begotten of His Father before all worlds and not made, very God of very God, of one essence with His Father; by whose hands the worlds were established and everything was created; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and became

man, and was conceived and born of the Virgin Mary; He suffered and was crucified in the days of Pontius Pilate; He was buried and He rose again on the third day as it is written and ascended into heaven and sat down on the right hand of His Father; and He shall come again to judge the dead and the living. And in one Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, the life-giving Spirit, and in one holy [and] apostolic catholic church; and we confess one baptism for the remission of sins; and the resurrection of our bodies, and the life for ever and ever. Amen.⁸

The Church of the East continues to affirm its traditional Christology. A typical liturgical formulation occurs in the matins hymn by Bawai the Great that is sung from Advent to the Epiphany, *Brikh khannana* ("Blessed is the Compassionate One"):

One is Christ, the son of God,
Worshipped by all in two natures,
In His Godhead begotten of the Father,
Without beginning, before all time,
In His manhood born of Mary,
In the fulness of time, united in a body.
Neither the Godhead is of the nature of the
mother

Nor the manhood of the nature of the Father.
The natures are preserved in their *qnumas*
In one person of one sonship.⁹

The Church of the East rejects the designation "Mother of God" (*yaldath alaha*) for the Blessed Virgin Mary and insists on "Mother of Christ" (*yaldath mshikha*) instead.¹⁰

⁸ *The Liturgy of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East*, translated by Eshai Shimun XXIII (Chicago: The Patriarchate of the East, 1949), pp. 9—10.

⁹ Cited in V. K. George, *The Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East and Mar Nestorius* (Ernakulam, Kerala, India: Mar Thomeus Memorial Printing and Publishing House, 1960), p. 46. On the meaning of *qnuma* in the second-last line, see note 2 above.

¹⁰ The Church of the East nevertheless holds the Blessed Virgin Mary in high honor, affirms her perpetual virginity, and calls her by such titles as Second Heaven, the Arc of Light, and the Mother of Light and Life (*Messianic Teach-*

Since the 13th century at least it counts seven sacraments: "(1) The priesthood, which is the ministry of all the other sacraments; (2) holy baptism; (3) the oil of unction; (4) the oblation of the body and blood of Christ; (5) absolution; (6) the holy leaven, namely, the 'King'; [and] (7) the sign of the life-giving cross."¹¹

The priesthood has nine ranks that correspond to the angelic hierarchies: Patriarchs, metropolitans, and bishops are the counterparts of the cherubs, seraphs, and thrones (in that order); archdeacons, vicars general (or episcopal visitors or archpriests),¹² and priests are the counterparts of virtues, dominions, and powers; deacons, subdeacons, and lectors are the counterparts of principalities, archangels, and angels. The patriarch is above human judgment.¹³ The Church of the East holds rigorously to the doctrine of apostolic succession of the

ings of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East (Yulpana m'sbikhay d'eta qaddishba washlikhaya o'qatbuliqi d'mathnkha), translated from Malayalam by M. P. Francis [Ernakulam, Kerala, India: Mar Themotheus Memorial Printing and Publishing House, 1962], p. 31).

¹¹ O'dishoo, p. 45.

¹² The Syriac is *piryadota*, that is, the Greek *periodontēs* ("once called *Corepiscopa*," that is, the Greek *chorepiskopos*). "He may do all the services that a priest does. In addition to these he may visit the villages as the representative of his bishop and preach to them. He could also direct and send priests to other places where necessary" (*Messianic Teachings*, p. 64). The Adam who erected the Hsian-Fu stele was a "presbyter and chorepiscopos, and pope (*papas*) of China" (Legge, p. 3).

¹³ "Under no circumstances may a man say that the Catholicos of the East can be judged by those under him or by patriarchs like himself. He will be the judge of all those under him and his own judgment will be reserved to Christ" ("Decree from the Synod of Mar Dadishu the Catholicos [424 A.D.]," quoted in *Rules Collected from the Synodos (Canonical Law) of the Church of the East and Patriarchal Decrees* [San Francisco, Calif.: The Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, 1960], p. 7).

episcopate and teaches that apart from the apostolic succession "there are no sacraments, no church, and no operation of the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ Since the sixth century celibacy is expected of those in bishop's orders.

Baptism is administered by threefold immersion, usually 40 days after birth, and is followed by the "seal," or chrismation ("drawing the sign of the living cross [with] the holy ointment on the forehead of the recipient of baptism"),¹⁵ and the first Holy Communion. The church is conceived of as the company of all baptized persons.

Individual confession in the presence of the priest alone is permitted but not generally practiced. Individual absolution is imparted on request or when the priest deems it necessary, and a general absolution is imparted to the whole congregation before the administration of the Holy Communion.

The Church of the East teaches that in the sacrament of the Holy Communion the true body and blood of Christ are received through faith¹⁶ under the form of leavened

¹⁴ *Sermon Delivered by His Holiness, Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII, Catholicos Patriarch of the East, on Sunday, August 22, 1954, in the Cathedral of Mar Sargis, Chicago, Illinois* (Chicago: The Patriarchate of the East, 1954) (16-page multilithed document), p. 7. Nevertheless the Church of the East belongs to the World Council of Churches.

¹⁵ *Messianic Teachings*, p. 76.

¹⁶ This formulation probably reflects 19th-century Anglican influence. In the 13th century Mar Odishu wrote: "Through this divine command [Christ's words of institution] the bread is changed into His Holy Body and the wine into His Precious Blood and they impart to all who receive them in faith and without doubting the forgiveness of sins, purification, enlightenment, pardon, the great hope of the resurrection from the dead, the inheritance of heaven and the new life" (O'dishoo, pp. 56—57). The translator glosses the word *changed* with this footnote: "The change which the author refers to, however, is not physical, but rather [refers] to the power inherent in this Holy Sacrament for the remission of sins of them that partake it in true faith." (P. 56, note)

bread and wine. Communicants fast before receiving the Holy Communion. They drink the sacramental blood of Christ directly from the chalice. As an oblation the sacrifice of the Eucharist is identical with the sacrifice of the cross and not a repetition of it.

The holy leaven (*malka*, that is, "King") reflects the tradition that SS. Addai and Mari brought with them to the East a portion of the original bread that Christ consecrated at the Last Supper in the cenacle. By leavening the flour from which the sacramental bread is made with a part of a loaf consecrated at a previous celebration, the Eucharists celebrated in the Church of the East today are seen as in a continuous material succession with the first Eucharist.

In the sign of the cross the thumb and the first two fingers are joined to represent the Trinity. Touching his mouth the worshiper says, "Glory"; touching his forehead he says, "to the Father"; touching his breast he says, "to the Son"; and touching in succession his right and left shoulders he says, "and to the Holy Spirit."

The Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints (among them Nestorius) are venerated and their intercessions solicited. The faithful departed are remembered in prayer. Images and icons are forbidden, and the only licit object of veneration is a simple cross. The decalog is divided into four and six commandments, the Our Father (at the end of which the doxology is always said) into three or ten sections.

The Eastern Syriac form of the Peshitta

version of the Bible, which contemporary scholarship assigns to the fourth century but which the Church of the East regards as the original from which the Greek Bible was translated, is used; the Old Testament apocrypha are accounted noncanonical. The primary liturgy is the fourth-century rite named after SS. Addai and Mari and attributed by the Church of the East to St. James of Jerusalem. Anchorites and hermits observe seven periods of prayer daily, but the common people are obligated to only four: at early dawn, just before sundown, after supper (or before retiring) and at night; women are excused from the obligation of the night prayer. Fasts play a prominent role in the calendar of the Church of the East: The 25 days of Advent, the 3-day Ninevite Fast (which begins 21 days before the First Sunday in Lent), the 50 days of Lent, the 50 days after Pentecost, the 50 days of the "Prophet Elijah's Fast" (September 8 to October 20), the 15 days of St. Mary's Fast (August 1—15), and all Wednesdays and Fridays throughout the year. Advent, Lent, and the Ninevite Fast are especially insisted on. The faithful whose health permits are expected when fasting to refrain from all flesh meat, fish, milk products (including ghee), eggs, and similar food of animal origin; during the periods of fasting they are restricted to one vegetarian meal a day.

The international headquarters of the Church of the East are at 554 Arballo Drive, San Francisco, California. There are 12 churches and missions in the United States with an estimated 5,000 members (1970).

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