ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 10, No. 3, September 2016
Pages: 441-450

ASIAN CHRISTIANITY: THE NEED FOR A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Sebastian P. Brock[♦]
Reader (Emeritus), Oxford University

Abstract

Any discussion of Asian Christianity needs to keep, at least in the back of the mind, the historical dimension, and the fact that Christianity is a product of Western Asia, and that in the early centuries of its history it spread East, as well as West. Unfortunately, owing to the widespread perception of the Christian tradition as having just two basic constituents, the Greek East and the Latin West, the early eastwards expansion of Christianity, which can for convenience be termed the 'Syriac Orient,' has all too often been forgotten. In the context of Asian Christianity it is of the greatest importance to realise that the Christian tradition is in fact tri-partite, and not just bi-partite, since the Syriac Orient constitutes the only indigenous Asian Christian tradition; moreover, it has a number of distinctive features which are of particular relevance today, both for Asian Christianity and for the other two traditions as well. Six features identified here and each briefly discussed.

Keywords: Greek East, Latin West, Syriac Churches, Syriac Orient, 'Two Lungs'

[♦]**Sebastian P. Brock** has taught in the Universities of Birmingham, Cambridge, and Oxford, retiring from the last in 2003 as Emeritus Reader in Syriac Studies. He has written widely on many different aspects of the Syriac tradition and was one of the editors of the *Gorgias Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Syriac Heritage* (2011), and of *The Hidden Pearl: The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage* (3 volumes with 3 Documentaries). Among his books and translations from Syriac are *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem, The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life, Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition,* and *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*; he also has four volumes of articles in the series Variorum Collected Studies. He has been associated with the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute, Kottayam (Kerala), since its foundation, and he was the recipient, from the late Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, of the Medal of St Ephrem. Email: sebastian.brock@orinst.ox.ac.uk

Any discussion of Asian Christianity needs to keep, at least in the back of the mind, the historical dimension, and the fact that Christianity is a product of Western Asia, and that in the early centuries of its history it spread East, as well as West. Unfortunately this early history of indigenous Asian Christianity has been largely forgotten in the West, including in almost all theological education. Since Greek and Latin have, over the centuries, played a predominant role in the history of western culture, it is not surprising that today most people have become accustomed to thinking of the Christian tradition as having just the two main lines of transmission, the Latin West (consisting of both the Catholic and the various Churches which emerged at the time of the Reformation) and the Greek East (consisting of the various different Orthodox Churches). This bi-partite model, however, leaves no place for the indigenous Churches of Western Asia whose cultural and liturgical languages were *not* Greek. What is required, instead, is a *tri*-partite model, one which would also include them.[1] Because it was Syriac which was the language primarily involved in the early eastwards spread of Christianity in Asia, this forgotten third trident of Christian tradition can for convenience be designated the 'Syriac Orient.'

There are a number of reasons for the amnesia in the Latin West and Greek concerning this third tradition; among them one might isolate the following:

- Since the early eastwards spread of Christianity employed languages other than Greek and Latin, knowledge of the Syriac Orient consequently failed to gain any part in western education: although the Council of Vienne in 1312 had specified that the leading European universities of the time should teach 'Chaldean' (that is, Syriac), as well as Greek, Latin and Hebrew, this has never been meaningfully implemented.

- In the early fourth century Eusebius of Caesarea composed the first History of the Christian Church. In fact what he composed was the history of the Christian Church *within the Roman Empire*, thus paying no attention to its spread eastwards into the Persian Empire. Unfortunately this model of Church History has proved extremely influential in subsequent centuries, right up to the present day,

[1]The analogy of a stool might be adduced: only once it has three legs does it become stable!

although in recent years there have been some laudable attempts to remedy this imbalance.[2]

- The Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries ended up in effecting a three-way fragmentation of Eastern Christianity, as a result of differing understandings of the main terms used in the doctrinal definition on Christology produced by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. This definition of faith, controversial from the first in the eastern half of the Roman Empire, was in due course imposed as the norm by the emperor Justinian in the sixth century, and it has remained the standard in both the Greek East and the Latin West. Those who found the Council's doctrinal formulation unsatisfactory (or even, on their understanding of the terminology, heretical) were thus marginalized, with the result that when eastern Christianity became fragmented, with the emergence of the various Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Church of the East, polemical writers on the Chalcedonian side designated these Churches as 'monophysite' and 'nestorian'. In the seventh century the Arab invasions cut off most of western Asia, where area where these non-Chalcedonian Churches were located, from the Roman/Byzantine Empire and from the Latin West; as a consequence, the misleading polemical designations became fossilized and have regrettably been retained even today in most academic literature on the subject.[3] All this has meant that these indigenous Churches of Western Asia came to be largely forgotten in the collective consciousness of both the Greek East and the Latin West. It has, in fact, only been in the last half century that ecumenical dialogue involving them has brought about a more

[2]S.H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, I. *Beginnings to 1500,* San Francisco: Harper, 1992 (2ndedn New York: Maryknoll, 1998); J.C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East before 1500*, Delhi: SPCK, 1996; I. Gillman and H-J. Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, Richmond: Curzon, 1999; C. Baumer, *The Church of the East. An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, London: Tauris, 2006; P. Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity. The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia – and How it Died*, New York: 2008; D. Wilmshurst, *The Martyred Church. A History of the Church of the East*, London: East and West, 2011. J. Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity. The Tang Christian Monument and other Documents*, Strathfield NSW: St Pauls, 2014.

[3]For a protest, see my "The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer," in J.F. Coakley and K. Parry, ed., *The Church of the East: Life and Thought*, Manchester: John Rylands Library, 1996, 22-35, and "Miaphysite, not Monophysite!," *Cristianesimo nella Storia* 37 (2016) 45-52 (this number contains some other articles on the topic).

objective understanding, and an acceptance, of the differing Christological formulations of the non-Chalcedonian Churches.[4]

One obvious consequence of this situation is the general unawareness, on the part of Christians in the Latin West and the Greek East, of very existence of this third tradition, the Syriac Orient and its continuing presence today in Western Asia (to them, the Middle East), let alone of the presence of eight different Churches of Syriac liturgical tradition in the Indian State of Kerala. Likewise there is widespread ignorance of the past expansion eastwards of the Church of the East to China, where the famous Chinese-Syriac stele in Xi'an / Chang'an, dated 781, records the arrival there of monks of the Church of the East in 635;[5] and of the manuscript finds of Christian writings in the oasis of Turfan (western China), with texts mainly in Syriac and Sogdian,[6] and in the caves of Dunhuang, with texts in Chinese.[7]

There is clearly a need to redress this imbalance, and to incorporate the indigenous Asian 'Syriac Orient' into people's conception of the constituents of the Christian tradition. Shortly after Pope John Paul II's visit to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in 1980 he spoke of the necessity for the western Church "to learn again to breathe fully with two lungs, the western and the eastern." While fully recognizing that this was a most welcome recognition, on the part of the Latin West, of the equal importance of the Greek East in the self-awareness of the Church, one can at the same time regret that the image of the 'two lungs' of the Church (which can be traced back through the great

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[4]For an overview concerning the Syriac Churches, see my "The Syriac Churches in Ecumenical Dialogue on Christology," in A. O'Mahony, ed., *Eastern Christianity. Studies in Modern History, Religion and Politics*, London: Melisende, 2004, 44-65.

[5]See now J. Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity. The Tang Christian Monument and other Documents*, Strathfield NSW: St Pauls, 2014; a translation of the stele will be found on pp. 359-75. This book includes a helpful survey of earlier literature on the subject. An excellent example of *haute vulgarisation* in Italian is provided by M. Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l'oriente*, Magnano: Qiqajon, 2006. Another welcome recent development has been a series of conferences Salzburg (Austria) on early Chinese Christianity, involving both western and Chinese scholars: see, for example, D.W. Winkler and Li Tang, ed., *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters. Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia*, Münster: LIT, 2009.

[6]Catalogues of these have recently been published by E.C.D. Hunter and M. Dickens (for the Syriac fragments) and N. Sims-Williams (for the Sogdian fragments). An edition and translation of the longest Syriac text, a *Hudra* or collection of texts covering the liturgical year, translated by J.F. Coakley, with a Foreword by E.C.D. Hunter, is shortly to be published.

[7]See Ferreira, *Early Chinese Christianity*, chapter 4.

ecumenist, Fr Yves Congar, to the Russian poet Vjačeslav Ivanov, who died in 1949) would seem to perpetuate a bi-partite view of the Christian tradition as a whole. It was with this in mind that I took as a title for a public lecture in the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome in 2004 "The Syriac Orient: a 'third lung' for the Church?"[8] There I suggested that with a tri-partite view of Christian tradition as consisting of, not only Greek East and Latin West, but also Syriac Orient, it is helpful to visualize these three traditions as overlapping circles, forming a triangle. Each circle thus contains three different elements: (1) an area which all three share in common; (2) an area where each circle shares with one other circle; and (3) an area which does not overlap at all. The first area consists of the central teachings of Christianity (which may be expressed in different ways), while the second area represents aspects shared by just two of the three traditions, while the third area constitutes the distinctive features or emphases of each individual tradition — features which in fact contribute to the richness and variety of the Church as a whole.

At this point I take the liberty of quoting from another earlier article:[9]

> This tripartite view of Christian tradition allows for a much more adequate picture of the richness and diversity of the Christian tradition as a whole. It is also of great significance in the context of Asian Christianity in the post-colonial modern world, where it is of vital importance to distinguish between the core of the Christian message, often (but not of course exclusively) brought by European missionaries, and the European cultural clothing in which that message was often dressed. It is here that a proper understanding of this third element of Christian tradition, the Syriac Orient, can be of great assistance, for here is a Christian tradition which is authentically Asian and which is independent of the European cultural tradition. It is thus a task of some urgency to recapture a proper understanding of this distinctive tradition.

What, then, are the features, or emphases, of the Syriac Orient that are particularly distinctive and which are of relevance for all three traditions of Christianity? In the article of 2005 six different areas were suggested: 1. The Semitic roots; 2. Poetry as a vehicle for theology; 3. Distinctive monastic traditions; 4. A therapeutic approach to penance; 5. A variety of Christological traditions; and 6. A non-

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[8]Subsequently published with the same title in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005) 5-20.

[9]"The Two Poles of Syriac Tradition," in C. Payngot, ed., *Homage to Mar Cariattil. Pioneer Malabar Ecumenist*, Rome: Mar Thoma Yogam, 1987, 58-62, here 58.

Western form of Christianity. Here it will suffice just to touch on each of these briefly.

1. The Semitic roots. While all three traditions have their common roots in Judaism and the Semitic world of the Hebrew Bible, it is in the early Syriac tradition that one finds writings whose modes of discourse and whose thought patterns reflect those of the Old Testament Bible most closely. Whereas the overlay of Greek and Latin rhetorical tradition can be a barrier to modern readers of early Christian writers who used those languages, the absence of this particular cultural baggage in early Syriac writers makes them much more accessible to the modern reader, and perhaps especially so in the case of Asian and African readers.

2. Poetry as a vehicle for theology. To many people, especially in the West, it comes as a surprise that poetry, rather than prose, could be a vehicle for theology. While the idea of *religious* poetry is of course very familiar, that of *theological* poetry is definitely not. This restriction of theological writing to prose is, however, unfortunate and in fact poetry is capable of a profound expression of theology. In the Syriac tradition a supreme example of this is to be found in the poetry of St Ephrem, who died in the same year as the much better known St Athanasius, in 373. Only in last forty or so years has something of the profundity of Ephrem's symbolic theology begun to be appreciated.[10] Two further distinctive features of the Syriac poetic tradition deserve mention, since they both have great potential for use in catechesis (and elsewhere) outside the Syriac tradition. Just as one does not expect theology to be written in poetry, so one does not expect sermons to be given in verse, yet Syriac tradition provides at least two wonderful practitioners of the genre of verse homily, Narsai in the Church of the East, and Jacob of Serugh in the Syrian Orthodox Church, both living in the latter part of the fifth (and in Jacob's case, the early sixth) century. Jacob's verse homilies, in particular, are largely based on biblical lections and they provide wonderfully

[10]The starting point for this was R. Murray's *Symbols of Church and Kingdom. A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. Explorations in English of Ephrem's theology can be found in my *The Luminous Eye: the Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem,* Rome: Centre for Indian and Inter-Religious Studies, 1985 (revised edition, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1992); S. Griffith, "A Spiritual Father for the Whole Church," *Sobornost/Eastern Churches Review* 20, 2 (1998) 21-40 , and in *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies* 1, 2 (1998) 197-220; K. den Biesen, *Simple and Bold. Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006; T. Koonammakkal, *The Theology of Divine Names in the Genuine Works of Ephrem,* Moran Etho 40; Kottayam: SEERI, 2015.

imaginative and perceptive expositions and re-creations of the biblical episodes with which they are concerned.[11] The second of these distinctive feature consists in verse dialogues between two biblical characters, with the protagonists speaking in alternative verses. The mainly anonymous authors of these poems have very successfully adapted an ancient Mesopotamian literary genre whose origins can be traced back to c. 2000 BC, and which still continues to enjoy popularity in Arabic today.[12]

3. Distinctive monastic traditions. Syriac writings of the fourth century reveal that Syria-Mesopotamia had already developed a distinctive form of the consecrated life, with its own terminology. The 'sons and daughters of the Covenant,' as they were called, evidently made some sort of ascetic vow at baptism (this was a time when the norm will still have been adult baptism); this vow, or 'covenant' with God, concerned leading a life of 'singleness' and single-mindedness in imitation of Christ the 'Single One' (*Ihidaya*, a term which also translates Greek *monogenes*, 'Only-Begotten').[13] These 'sons and daughters of the Covenant' did not live in communities, but individually or in small groups among the rest of the Christian community. The nearest modern equivalent would be members of a Third Order. It was only in the late fourth century that Egyptian monastic, either in its cenobitic or in its eremitical form, reached the area of Syriac-speaking Christianity (approximately modern Syria and Iraq), but once it had arrived, it very soon replaced this earlier 'proto-monastic' tradition. Nevertheless, this less formal approach to the consecrated life has its own place in the Christian life, as can be

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[11]A fine collection of Jacob's verse homilies for the main dominical feasts is available in T. Kollamparampil, *Jacob of Serugh. Select Festal Homilies*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1997. The Gorgias Press (Piscataway NJ) has a bilingual series, Syriac-English, gradually publishing Jacob's verse homilies: the most recent volume (2016) contains five verse homilies on Gospel episodes where Jesus heals different women.

[12]Examples can be found in my *Bride of Light. Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches*, Kottayam: SEERI, 1994, (2nd edition, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press, 2010), and in *The Treasure-house of Mysteries. Explorations of the Sacred Text through Poetry in the Syriac Tradition*, Yonkers NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2012 (includes twelve dialogue poems).

[13]On them see especially G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the early Syriac-speaking Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973) 191-215, 419-444; S.H. Griffith, "'Singles' and the 'Sons of the Covenant,'" in E. Carr and others, ed., *Eulogema. Studies in Honor of Robert Taft SJ*, Studia Anselmiana 110, Rome, 1993, 141-60; also the chapter "The Ascetic Ideal: Saint Ephrem and Proto-monasticism," chapter 8 of my *The Luminous Eye* [see note 9].

seen from analogous developments in western Christianity in the Middle Ages and in modern times. It is a remarkable fact that the early centuries of Arab/Islamic rule in West Asia witnessed a truly remarkable flowering of monastic writing in Syriac on the spiritual life, above all in the Church of the East. The name of Isaac of Nineveh, or Isaac the Syrian, has long been known in both the Greek East and Latin West, thanks to a Greek translation of the first part of his writings;[14] this was made c. 900 in the Chalcedonian Orthodox Monastery of St Sabas, south of Jerusalem, thus indicating the ease with which monastic texts could cross ecclesiastical boundaries. Other writings by Isaac, which have only turned up in recent times,[15] and writings by a whole number of other East Syriac monastic authors of the seventh and eighth centuries, still remain very largely unknown outside more specialist circles, yet they are full of insights into the human psyche that are just as relevant today as they were to contemporaries.[16]

4. A therapeutic approach to penance. A recurring title of Christ in Syriac liturgical and other texts is 'the heavenly Doctor,' or 'Physician'. Medical imagery in connection with sin is likewise pervasive in a great many Syriac writings. This is in marked contrast to the much more juridical approach characteristic above all of the Latin West. Clearly this is an area where a balance of approaches is desirable, and the Syriac tradition can provide some valuable insights towards the recovery of a more therapeutic approach to sin, to offset what can be seen as an over-emphasis on the juridical approach in the Latin West.[17]

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[14]An excellent English translation (from the Greek) is provided in *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984; new edition 2011.

[15]An English translation of much of the 'Second Part' is given in my *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian). 'The Second Part', chapters IV-XLI*, in the series *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, vol. 555, 1995. There is now also an English translation of the 'Third Part' by Mary Hansbury, in M. Kozah and others, ed., *An Anthology of Syriac Writers from Qatar in the Seventh Century*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2015, 281-440 (a separate edition is shortly to be published).

[16]Selections in translation can be found in A. Mingana, *Early Christian Mystics*, Cambridge: Heffer, 1934; my *The Syriac Fathers on Prayer and the Spiritual Life*, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989; and B.E. Colless, *The Wisdom of the Pearlers. An Anthology of Syrian Christian Mysticism,* Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 2008. The fervent spiritual correspondence of John of Dalyatha is translated by M. Hansbury, *The Letters of John of Dalyatha*, Piscataway NJ: Gorgias, 2006.

[17]A helpful study is to be found in D. Vechoor, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation. Learning from the East and the West,* Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies,

5. A variety of Christological traditions. It is only in Syriac that writings from all three Christological traditions, Chalcedonian Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox, and Church of the East, are to be found. Modern ecumenical dialogue has rightly realized that the verbal conflict between the Christological formulations of these three traditions is due to different understandings of some of the key terms, notably 'nature' and 'hypostasis'. As a result, it is now possible to see another Church's Christology, no longer as heretical, or potentially so, but rather as a legitimate, though different, way of looking at the question of how best to describe the relationship of divinity and humanity in the incarnate Christ. Since this is essentially a mystery, no single formulation or definition is ever going to be adequate, for if only one were to be insisted on, this would be seeking to provide a limit (Latin *finis*) to the Limitless.

6. A non-Western form of Christianity. The Syriac Orient possesses two valuable features which are not present in the case of either the Latin West or the Greek East. Firstly, and most importantly, it alone can claim to represent a genuinely Asian form of Christianity throughout its entire history, free from the negative associations of European and Western domination with which both the Greek East and the Latin West are not infrequently tarred. And secondly, it has always existed in a minority role under Islamic rule, and has never been in a position of domination; this has not only allowed the Syriac Orient to avoid the triumphalism which has at times marred the Latin West and the Greek East, but it has also led to a greater empathy with, and better understanding of, the oppressed.

A further point is worth making. Whereas early Syriac Christianity remains close to the Semitic background out of which Christianity emerged, over the course of the fifth to seventh centuries it became more and more under the influence of the Greek-speaking world and the Greek culture of the Eastern Roman Empire. This gradual 'hellenization' of Syriac culture can be charted in various different ways,[18] and some writers are much more influenced than others. What is important to observe is that the process had certain consequences which are of momentous significance. It was the skill

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2014. For Ephrem on the subject, see A. Shemunkasho, *Healing in the Theology of St Ephrem*, Piscataway NJ, 2002.

[18]See my "Charting the Hellenization of a Literary Culture: The Case of Syriac," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 2 (2015) 98-124, and earlier, "From Antagonism to Assimilation: Syriac Attitudes to Greek Learning," reprinted in *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquity*, London: Variorum, 1984, chapter V.

developed over centuries by translators from Greek into Syriac which made possible the earliest translations from Greek (by way of Syriac) into Arabic, commissioned by the 'Abbasid Caliphs as part of the 'translation movement,' involving the taking over into Arabic of Greek philosophical, medical and scientific knowledge. Scholars writing in Arabic subsequently developed these disciplines, and in the twelfth century many of these writings, above all works by Aristotle, were translated in Spain from Arabic into Latin, effecting the blossoming of scholastic theology in Paris and other numerous European cities. This meant that a common intellectual heritage and philosophical language, in which Aristotle played a central role, was shared by both Christian and Muslim scholars of that time, and on the Christian side, it was a heritage shared by all three traditions, Greek East, Latin West, and Syriac Orient. As witness to this one need only place Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae* side by side with the theological compendium, entitled *The Lamp of the Sanctuary*, by his Syrian Orthodox contemporary Barhebraeus: it will quickly be observed that their scholastic procedure in theological writing is identical.

One final observation: since the Syriac Orient possesses two poles, the one more Semitic in character, the other more Greek, this means that it also has the potential today of usefully serving as a helpful bridge between European Christianity and Asian Christianity.

All this suggests that it is of great importance to provide space for instruction concerning the Syriac tradition in all theological education in Asia, placing an emphasis on the various distinctive aspects outlined above. An awareness of this indigenous Christian tradition, and what it has to offer, would seem especially important in the context of mission. Clearly the Syriac Churches themselves also have an important role to play here, not only cherishing and fostering their own tradition, but also serving as resource providers for others. Since the very existence of these Syriac Churches in Syria and Iraq is under dire threat today as a result of the present conflicts and violence in those countries, it is all the more important that the Churches of Syriac tradition in India should be aware of their special responsibility in preserving and making more widely known the existence of this third tradition, the Syriac Orient.[19]

[19]Here the work of the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute (SEERI) in Kottayam (Kerala) in promoting knowledge of the Syriac Orient is especially to be commended.