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THE CHURCH'S FORGOTTEN "THIRD LUNG"

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Abstract

The article provides the context of the suggestion made earlier that the Church needs to breathe, not just with Pope John Paul II's 'two lungs' (Latin West and Greek East), but with a forgotten 'third lung' as well, the Syriac Orient, representing the indigenous Churches of West Asia. Since the geopolitical upheavals in West Asia in the last decades have led to large-scale emigration, this has greatly weakened the homeland base of the 'Syriac Orient' in that region, and as a result, it is now the Syriac Churches of India which constitute the most stable *locus* in the world of the Syriac Orient. This carries with it the responsibility for ensuring the appropriate fostering and maintaining of that tradition - a responsibility it owes to all the Christian Churches, and not just to those belonging to the Syriac Orient.

Key Words: Greek East; Latin West; Syriac Orient; Third Lung

Many readers will be wondering and ask, 'What is this "Third Lung"? How is it that, when human beings have only two lungs, the Church can be said to have a third one?'. The concept of the Church breathing through two lungs, Western Christianity and Eastern Christianity, goes back to the Russian poet Vjačeslav Ivanov (1866-1949), and was used especially by the ecumenist Fr. Yves Congar (1904-1995). It became widely familiar, however, when Pope John Paul

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II took over (very probably from Fr. Yves Congar) the image when, following his visit in 1980 to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul, he stated that 'It will be necessary [*sc.,* for the Church] to learn again to breathe fully with two lungs, the Western and the Eastern.'

While the image of the Church breathing again with these two lungs is indeed most welcome, it needs to be remembered that by 'Eastern Christianity' Pope John Paul II will have had in mind only the Greek and Russian Orthodox traditions. Left completely out of the picture were the indigenous Churches of Western Asia and North Africa. One obvious reason for this was the fact that many of these Churches had never accepted or received the Council of Chalcedon (451): as a result of this, they had subsequently been marginalised by both the Greek East and the Latin West, and all too often their very existence has been ignored or forgotten. A further reason lies in the fact that Eusebius' Church History, which was confined to the history of Christianity within the Roman Empire, became the model for almost all subsequent 'Histories of the Christian Church'. In an attempt to help remedy this situation, at least in academic circles, I have introduced on a number of occasions[1] the concept of *three* main tradents of the Christian tradition, by adding to the 'Latin West' (covering both Catholic and Reformed) and the 'Greek East' a third tradition, named for convenience the 'Syriac Orient', seeing that it is only in the Syriac tradition that there are representatives today of the three separate Christological traditions that emerged from the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries, namely the Church of the East, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Maronite Church (subsequently joined by the Chaldean and Syrian Catholic Churches). Though of course the Armenian, Coptic and Ethiopian traditions are quite separate from the Syriac, they have all been influenced at various stages by the Syriac tradition, and doctrinally they belong with the Syrian Orthodox to those Churches whose Christology is Miaphysite (as opposed to Dyophysite), and so can be said to come under the umbrella of term 'Syriac Orient.'

These three tradents, Latin West, Greek East and Syriac Orient, can helpfully be visualised as three overlapping circles, arranged as a triangle. Each circle will be found to contain three elements: first, a central core where all three circles overlap; secondly, an area of common ground with an overlap with one or the other of the two remaining circles; and thirdly, an area without any overlap, where each tradition can contribute something specific to itself for the benefit of the Christian tradition as a whole.

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[1]E.g. "The importance and potential of SEERI in an international context," *The Harp: A Review of Syriac and Oriental Studies* 10 (1997) 45-50.

When, in 2004, I was invited to give the Sir Daniel and Countess Bernadine Murphy Donahue Lecture at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, I took the opportunity to extend the concept of not just two, but three historical tradents of Christianity, and to incorporate Pope John Paul II's image of the Church breathing with two lungs; accordingly, I entitled my lecture 'The Syriac Orient: a third "lung" for the Church?'. In the article where the lecture was subsequently published,[2] I suggested six different areas where it seems to me that the Syriac Orient has something of value to contribute to the tradition of the Church as a whole. These were Semitic roots, poetry as a vehicle for theology, distinctive monastic traditions, a therapeutic approach to penance, a variety of Christological traditions, and a non-Western form of Christianity. In summary form, what I had in mind for each of these was:

1. Semitic Roots

It is a matter of pride to members of the Syriac Churches that their liturgical language is related to the Palestinian Aramaic which Jesus would have spoken; indeed, the wording of the Lord's Prayer in Syriac is virtually the same as that of the Palestinian Aramaic retroversion from the Greek, made by scholars. More significant from a wider point of view is the fact that early Syriac writings preserve a number of features, not found in any other tradition, whose roots in Palestinian Aramaic can be identified. A remarkable case is the Syriac term *aggen* which translates two separate Greek verbs, 'overshadowed' in Luke 1:35, and 'dwelt' in John 1:14, both in the context of the Incarnation. The Syriac term is not an obvious translation of either Greek verb, and must have been chosen for a deliberate reason; that reason becomes clear when it is realised that in the Palestinian Targum to Exodus 12, *aggen* is the term used to render Hebrew *pasaḥ*, which lies at the roots of the terms Pascha, Passover etc. The Syriac translator evidently chose the term *aggen* to bring out the typology of Christ as the Paschal Lamb.[3] A number of other terms of Jewish origin, such as *Shekhina*, can be identified, all pointing to the roots of the Syriac tradition lying, at least in part, in Palestinian Judaism, a feature of importance to remember in all Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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[2]It was published under the same title in *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 71 (2005) 5-20. The article was almost immediately translated and published in Russian in *Stranitsi* 10:4 (2005) 520-35.

[3]This was later to be elaborated, above all, by Ephrem in his Hymns on Unleavened Bread.

2. Poetry as a Vehicle for Theology

The idea that poetry is a *locus* for theological discourse is alien to both the Greek East and the Latin West, despite the presence in both of a great deal of fine religious poetry. For Ephrem above all, poetry was far more appropriate than prose as a vehicle for theology: for him, definitions in theology were unsatisfactory, since the very term 'definition' in Syriac as well as English implied putting a boundary (Syriac *ṭḥoma*, Latin *finis*), or limitation, to some aspect of the Godhead who is limitless and unbounded. Instead, Ephrem's theological tools are essentially the paradox and the mystery (*raza*) or symbol, and with these he portrays the interconnections and interrelationship between the human and the divine worlds, and the modes of interaction between the two.[4] Ephrem's approach of symbolic theology was taken up by later Syriac poets of the fifth and sixth centuries, but with increasing contacts between the Syriac and Greek cultural worlds, especially from c.AD 500 onwards, this early tradition of symbolic theology tended to disappear, and survives today only vestigially in the rich liturgical poetry of all the Syriac Churches.[5]

Poetry also serves in the Syriac tradition as an excellent vehicle for catachesis, thanks in particular to the use of everyday imagery, such as putting on and taking off clothing, in order to convey theological teaching.[6] Another distinctive feature consists of the various sung dialogue poems in which biblical characters conduct a dialogue in alternating verses; these belong to an ancient Mesopotamian genre whose popularity continues to the present day in Modern Arabic and Modern Syriac. These were composed for vigil services for the major dominical feasts, and especially in Late Antiquity, such vigil services drew large congregations, for whom the dialogue poems served as effective vehicles for catechetical teaching for the feast in question. Very often the underlying theme is the tension between reason and faith.[7] As a vehicle for catechetical teaching the genre would seem to be a very suitable one for revival and adaptation today.

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[4]For an attempt to extract the essence of Ephrem's teaching, see my *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World View of St Ephrem* (Kalamazoo, 1992; originally published in 1985 by the Centre for Indian and Interreligious Studies in Rome, under whose auspices the lectures underlying the book were given. See also especially, K. den Biesen, *Simple and Bold. Ephrem's Art of Symbolic Thought* (Piscataway, 2006).

[5]For the contrasts between the earlier and later Syriac tradition, see my 'The two poles of Syriac tradition', in C. Payngot (ed.), *Homage to Mar Cariattil* (Rome, 1987), 58-62.

[6] See my "Salvation history through images and symbols according to the Syriac tradition," in M. Pamploni (ed.), *L'immagine nella Parola, la Parola nell'immagine. Indagini polifoniche sul linguaggio simbolico* (Rome: PIO), 2021), 191-201.

[7]See my "Disputations in Syriac literature" in E. Jiménez and C. Mittermayer (eds), *Disputation Literature in the Near East and Beyond* (Berlin, 2020), pp. 159-74. A selection

3. Distinctive Monastic Traditions

While all three, Latin West, Greek East, and Syriac Orient, have much in common in the ways their monastic traditions developed, two aspects of the Syriac Orient have proved distinctive. In Syriac writings of the fourth century, that is, before the spread of Egyptian monastic traditions, we learn of the existence of a group of Christians who had undertaken some sort of ascetic vow (perhaps at adult baptism) and were known as 'sons/daughters of the covenant', the 'covenant' being their ascetic vow. Another name given to such people was *iḥidaye*, whose basic sense was 'followers and imitators of Christ the *iḥida*, the Only-Begotten, but bearing various other connotations as well, in particular 'single-minded' and 'single', that is, 'celibate' (whence the Syriac term is sometimes rendered as 'Singles'). In contrast to the later monastic tradition, involving withdrawal from the world, and in contrast with the later equivalence of Syriac *iḥidaya* with Greek *monachos*, 'monk', these *iḥidaye*, or 'members of the covenant' (*bnay qyama*), lived within society, sometimes alongside members of their family, sometimes in small groups.[8] With the spread of the Egyptian monastic traditions, both eremitic and coenobitic, reaching the Syriac area in the late fourth century, this early Syriac approach to living a consecrated life gradually disappeared; though the terminology survived, it did so with completely different senses. This early form of living a consecrated life could well be of significance for modern explorations of non-traditional forms of the consecrated life.

The second distinctive element of the Syriac Orient under this heading lies in the writings of the East Syriac monastic tradition of the seventh and eighth centuries, which happens to be precisely the same time as the emergence of Islam in Western Asia. This period witnessed an astonishing flowering of monastic literature on the spiritual life, fragments of which have now turned up in western China, in the ruins of an East Syriac monastery in the Turfan oasis. The value of this literature soon became appreciated in the other Syriac ecclesial traditions as well. Most famous of these authors is Isaac of Nineveh, or Isaac the Syrian, from the late seventh century. Thanks to a large group of his discourses being translated into Greek at the Monastery of St. Saba near Jerusalem in the early ninth century, he became known

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of these dialogue poems can be found in my *Treasure-house of Mysteries: Explorations of the Sacred Text through Poetry in the Syriac Tradition* (Crestwood, New York, 2012).

[8]See especially G. Nedungatt, "The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-speaking Church," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 39 (1973) 191-215, 419-44; and S.H. Griffith, '"Singles" and the "Sons of the Covenant." "Reflections on Syriac Ascetic Terminology," in E. Carr and others (eds), *Eulogema. Studies in Honor of Robert Taft SJ* (Studia Anselmiana 110; Rome, 1993) 14-60.

to the Greek East and (in the Middle Ages) the Latin West. While Isaac's writings have always proved popular in Greek and Russian monastic circles, it is only in recent years that, thanks largely to the discovery of two further collections of his writings, Isaac has become more widely known, with translations of his various works made available in many different modern languages.[9] Although Isaac was writing for fellow monks, many of his writings have been found to speak to many people today.[10]

4. A Therapeutic Approach to Penance

In contrast to the largely juridical approach to penance found especially in the Latin West, the Syriac tradition makes much greater use of medical imagery in the context of sin and penance. As any reader of early Syriac writings will quickly notice, there is an abundance of such imagery, and prominent among the many titles accorded to Christ is 'the heavenly Physician'. This imagery, like other characteristically Syriac imagery, can be traced back to the New Testament, in this case to Paul's Letter to the Romans (5:6) where the fallen state of humanity is specifically described as a 'sickness'. As is so often the case, different Christian traditions pick up and develop different features in the New Testament writings, and it is interesting to note that, within the Latin West, there has recently been a new emphasis on a therapeutic approach.[11]

5. A Variety of Christological Traditions

It is a notable fact that it is only in Syriac that we have original writings from all three Christological traditions: Church of the East, Chalcedonian, and Syrian Orthodox/Miaphysite. This is in sharp contrast to the situation with the Greek East and Latin West where (apart from some fragments in polemical literature) only the Chalcedonian tradition is represented, a situation which has greatly

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[9]The original Syriac of the 'First Collection' was translated into English by A.J. Wensinck in 1923, an excellent more recent translation from the Greek, but making use of the Syriac, has been published by the Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Brookline USA, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian* (1984; 2nd edition 2011). Chapters 4-41 of the 'Second Part/Collection' are available in my *Isaac of Nineveh (Isaac the Syrian), the 'Second Part', chapters IV-XLI* (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 555; Leuven, 1995), and Chapters 1-3 in *Isaac of Nineveh, Headings on Spiritual knowledge* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, forthcoming). The 'Third Collection' is translated by Mary Hansbury, *Isaac the Syrian's Spiritual Works* (Piscataway NJ, 2016).

[10]It is interesting to note that one of the papers given at a recent conference celebrating the 25th jubilee of *Ephrem's Theological Journal* (Satna) was devoted to precisely this topic.

[11]The significance of the Syriac tradition in this respect is well brought out in Dominic Vechoor, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation. Learning from the East and the West* (OIRSI 394; Kottayam, 2014).

contributed to the marginalisation, over the course of time, of the Syriac Orient. It is only within the last half century or so that dialogue between the Chalcedonian Churches with, first of all, the Oriental Orthodox Churches, and later also with the Assyrian Church of the East, has taken place. This process has led to the realization that, beneath the verbal conflicts over the traditional Christological formulations, there can be discovered a shared understanding of the meaning of the mystery of the Incarnation: no single formulation is adequate, rather, several different ones can be seen as equally legitimate and orthodox.

6. A Non-Western Form of Christianity

At a time when the earlier colonial attitudes of the Churches of the West have come under a great deal of criticism, and when Christianity is sometimes falsely represented as a religion of European origin, the fact that the Syriac Orient is the sole representative of an indigenous non-Western and non-European form of Christianity is a matter of particular significance for Asian and African Christianity. Added to this, there is a further feature of the Syriac Orient of relevance in the modern context: throughout their history the Churches of the Syriac Orient have almost always[12] constituted minority religious communities living under governments whose attitude towards them has at times been openly hostile. This historical experience of the Syriac Orient would seem to be of relevance especially for modern discussion within the Churches of the West concerning the meaning of 'mission'; this is of significance perhaps above all in the case of China, where Christianity is said to be experiencing a notable expansion; in this connection it would seem to be of great importance for the twenty-first-century Christian communities in China to become aware of, and to embrace as part of their own Christian past, the earlier presence in China of the Church of the East, spanning over half a millennium.

Each of the three Christian traditions, Latin West, Greek East, and Syriac Orient has its own distinctive experiences and features from which the other two traditions can learn and, where appropriate, benefit. It is with this in mind that I suggested adapting Pope John Paul's words, urging that the Church needs to learn to breathe with this 'third lung' as well. The very existence of this 'third lung' has largely been forgotten by the Latin West and the Greek East for a whole number of historical reasons, but the long series of upheavals over the last century in Western Asia, starting with the genocide of Armenian and Syriac Christians during the First World War, has resulted in a

[12]The main exception is the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

continuing large-scale emigration of Christians from their homeland in countries of Western Asia to the West, so that today the Syriac Orient has become a visible presence, especially in certain western European countries. This steady stream of emigration has hugely weakened the Churches of the Syriac Orient in their homelands in Western Asia.[13] Although excellent efforts have been made here and there in the diaspora to establish Syriac theological schools and/or seminaries in order to uphold the traditions of the Syriac Orient,[14] it is now a fact that the main *locus* today of the Syriac Orient is to be found in Kerala. The new geo-political situation in West Asia of recent years means that an especial responsibility for transmitting the traditions of the Syriac Orient now lies with the Churches of Syriac tradition in India. This makes it all the more important for the bishops of these Churches to ensure a steady flow of some clergy and laity who are equipped with a deep knowledge of the Syriac tradition and so are in a position to transmit its riches, not only to fellow members of their own Churches, but to others as well. In order to equip clergy and laity in this way it is essential to ensure the availability of appropriate educational establishments, and above all to foster and protect those already in existence, such as the St Ephrem Ecumenical Research Institute in Kerala, which has built up an international reputation for its Syriac scholarship and has produced students of great ability who are well grounded in the Syriac language and knowledge of the Syriac tradition. Just as governments all over the world need to give priority to long-term requirements to reduce carbon emissions in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Centigrade, rather than to focus on short-term issues, so the authorities of the Syriac Churches in Kerala need to attend to the long-term preservation and fostering of the tradition of the Syriac Orient, rather than to look just the immediate issues of the day. This is a responsibility which they owe, not only to their fellow representatives of the Syriac Orient in the rest of the world, but to the other two tradents of the Christian tradition, Latin West and Greek East, as well: just as a flat surface of a table only becomes stable when it is supported by three legs, so too the Church should be seen as requiring three legs in order to stand firmly,—and likewise all three 'lungs' in order to breathe fully.

[13]Some notable efforts in the Syriac homelands to try to remedy the dire situation should be mentioned, such as the Department of Syriac Studies at the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate, or the establishment of the Catholic University in Ankawa, Erbil, founded in 2015 by the Chaldean Bishop Bashar Warda.

[14]Examples are the Syriac Theological Seminary in Salzburg, inaugurated in 2015 through the efforts of Professor Aho Shemunkasho, and the Nisibis Assyrian Theological College in Sydney, established in 2020 under its Principle, Bishop Mar Benyamin Elya.