

Reclaiming our Christian History

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The following essay represents a further stage in the author's ongoing re-search into the advance of Christianity in Asia. The ample bibliography at the end is of particular help to those wishing to pursue the question through materials available in Western languages. The accompanying map was kindly provided by the author.

The history of Christianity in Asia is often portrayed as belonging to only the last few centuries, when European or North American missionary movements entered the region, sometimes under the protection of Western mercantile or even military presence. Unfortunately, only a few Christian churches in the region have retained a strong sense that their history began in the early centuries of the Christian era. Yet we now know that this is true not only for churches in South India but for many countries throughout the region. These stories of the Spirit's movement in Asia began in the first-century spread of Palestinian and Syrian churches eastward into Mesopotamia and the consequent missions of the churches of the East in a "dozen countries east of Persia by the 8th century" – later leaving active churches in a number of countries for the first Roman Catholic missionaries to discover.

Christianity is therefore an ancient Asian religion not just because of its origins in west Asian cultures and in the life of a Palestinian Jew, nor because of the Asian form of its foundation scriptures, but also because of this long and diverse presence throughout central, south, southeast and northeast Asian countries. This is the tradition in which we as Asian Christians stand; this is our own Christian history and a most rich resource for present tasks of mission and theological education in each of our countries.

Clearly such a history has been consistently neglected – and our understanding of Christian presence and identity within the particular

histories and cultures of the region massively distorted – often for doctrinal, ideological, or even imperialistic reasons. Church history is still often taught as if anything “East of Antioch” was “heretical” from the second century on, and unworthy of study even if it did survive! Once assume that the evidence is marginal, fragmentary, or non-existent, and there is no reason to recognize the extensive materials available. Ethnocentric assumptions regarding orthodoxy and heresy, along with culturally confined criteria in scholarship, then often prevent any adequate study of Eastern Christianity in terms of its own historical and cultural setting. Any view of Christian history which regards the post-Nicene history of Europe as universally normative, while largely ignoring the equally rich history “east of Antioch,” can no more be sustained than the doctrinal and ideological assumptions on which such a view rests (Foster 1972, 85ff; Young 1969, *passim*).

In order to reconstruct a map of medieval Christianity in Asia and the rich stories of the Spirit’s movement it represents, many technical and critical problems must be recognized. Terrain and climate, as well as turbulent histories, have fragmented much of the manuscript evidence, making it necessary to employ a wide range of investigative methods. Texts are extant in an unusually wide range of ancient and medieval languages, with secondary sources in almost every major European or Asian language, making necessary a high degree of cooperative and interdisciplinary study. Geographical and theological terminologies in particular have been confused, often for polemical reasons. Terms such as “Arab,” “Syrian,” or “Persian,” we now know, can refer in the earliest southeast Asian records to many nationalities in west, central, or southern Asia. “India” or “Indian” can be used variously to indicate almost any territories east and south of Iran, or in mainland or archipelago southeast Asia (Colless 1969, 34f Leslie 1981–83). Similarly, “Nestorian” seldom carries any doctrinal reference to the teachings of Nestorius (which in any case were often formerly misrepresented), but embraces a wide range of non-Latin Christian traditions, including East and West Syrian, Monophysite, Jacobite, Orthodox, and Assyrian (Braaten 1963).

The Range of Evidence

Taking account of these and similar issues, and drawing on the range of evidence now available to us, it is possible to outline the presence of Christian communities from Syria in the west to Japan in the northeast

and as far as Java in the southeast by the first half of the 8th century. The accompanying map traces their extent by naming only those locations where material remains have been discovered, i.e., notably inscriptions, crosses, frescoes, and ruins, along with contemporary manuscript evidence. Much of the evidence now available is the work of Syriac and Arabic scholars, or of historians studying the early trade routes linking west Asia and east Asia by land or sea. Unfortunately, few surveys of the many studies are yet available, and only a handful of papers referring to them have appeared in the region (Abu Salih 1894-5; Tibbetts 1957, 1979; Wolters 1967).

The densest concentration of centers – only a few of which are here included – occurs in the Mesopotamian region and represents the many dioceses of the Syrian and Persian churches, suffering frequent persecution as Rome and Persia jostled for dominance. From the 2nd century on, the Syriac-speaking Christians were centered upon Edessa, and later Nisibes. In 280 AD Seleucia-Ctesiphon became the seat for the Patriarch. These churches had grown largely from synagogue and proselyte communities and originated in exchanges with Jerusalem and Antioch Christians (Gibson 1965, 14f, Atiya 1968, 255ff; Latourette 1945-7, 1:101ff; Brock 1979; Neusner 1986, 16ff). Extending rapidly throughout the Persian empire, they had become established in north and south Indian localities in the 1st century, Bactria (north Afghanistan) by the late 2nd century, Sumatra, east China, and Japan by the 8th century, and Burma, Mongolia, Tibet, and Java by the 12th century (Mingana 1926; Pelliot 1930; Dauvillier 1948, 1983; Saeki 1951).

Some of the Stories

Behind such bald statements lies a wealth of data and stories which are only now being widely recognized and studied. Amongst them we have accounts of the earliest life of Jesus, the Diatesseron – a harmony of the Gospels written by Tatian c.160 AD and widely used in the next centuries; the first non-Greek version of the scriptures, the Peshitta, which has just been reissued in a complete critical edition; the oldest extant church building anywhere, at Dura-Europas (Mesopotamia); the first theological college, at Edessa (2nd century); the earliest translations of Greek classical writings.

More significantly for us we have the surprising stories of an amazing missionary endeavor, which saw monks and merchants, travelers, pastors, traders, and physicians carrying the “pearl of the Gospel”

across all the trade routes of ancient and medieval Asia. This often meant up to year-long journeys by camel, ass, or even by foot, across the many tracks of the Silk Road, or by equally lengthy sea-trips along the many routes of Arab, Persian, or Indian traders (Yule, 1921, 1:101 ff; Colless 1969–77 *passim*). Such journeyings must also be seen as part of a larger pattern of visits, temporary settlement, semi-permanent residence, or, in some cases, permanent domicile in settlements or cities anywhere between Persia and Japan or Indonesia.

It has long been known that traders, envoys, and monks from west Asia assiduously travelled the land routes to “further India” and China (the many Silk Roads and spice or pearl routes), from at least as early as the 5th century (Tibbetts 1957, 5–7; Wolters 1967, 73; Colless 1969, 13). But although many early settlements, hospices, churches, or monasteries may have been founded by Buddhists, Hindus, Zoroastrians, or Manichees, it is now clear that many were the work of Eastern Christians and that these centers grew wherever “Persian,” “Arab,” or “Indian” trade became established in central, south, or southeast Asia (Mingana 1925, 320–336; Foster 1939, 61 f.; Grousset 1970, 125; Barthold 1977, 387ff; Hopkirk 1980, 27, 61, 123, 130, 184; Hickley 1980, 9, 14, 21; Colless 1969–77 9:31f; Klimkeit 1985).

There is also now agreement that amongst the episcopal and metropolitan sees recorded for the churches of the East, as being within the Persian Patriarchate from the 4th to the 16th centuries, are included those for today’s Syria, Persia, Russian and Chinese Turkestan, Arabia, and Socotra, Afghanistan, Tibet, Pakistan -and India, China, Indo-China and Burma, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, Mongolia, Korea, and Japan (Sacki 1951, Chart I, 349; Vine 1937, 11211). The history of these countless Christian communities shows some to be nomadic, some monastic, some largely expatriate at first, many flourishing in cosmopolitan ports, trading centers, some in the households of tribal Khans or imperial rulers, some in remotest valleys or desert oases. It is a long history of surviving, despite hostile state power and countless martyrs; a mission largely by lay people through education, medical care, state service, and trade, and of friendly coexistence – even mutual borrowing – with, in particular, Buddhists, Manichees and Muslims. The story is not so fragmentary as has been often thought – either in India, where the early traditions were preserved until the Portuguese arrived, or in lands of west Asia, where significant Christian communities remain in half a dozen countries, or in China, where there is evidence of continuous Christian presence in central and eastern China

through the 10th to the 12th centuries, sometimes thought to be a crucial gap (Mundadan 1984, chaps. 1–7; Hajjar 1986, 3-20; Renaudet 1733, 121; Dauvillier 1948, 298f; Atiya 1968, 262f; Saeki 1951, 369; Vine 1937, 135).

Diversity and Extent

Some of the diversity and extent of such Christian presence can be seen in stories from west China, southern U. S. S. R., and south India. Shui-pang is a small town on one of the many routes of the old Silk Road, near Balayik, Turfan, in Turkestan. And if we had been among the many travelers seeking rest or trade there, a thousand years ago, we would have come upon a fruitful oasis with farms, hostelries, and monasteries, both Buddhist and Christian (as throughout many of the silk routes). We would find, too, an earth-and-stone church with a stupa tower, Nestorian crosses, and murals reminiscent of Byzantine art. Here we could attend worship led by a Syrian priest, reading the Peshitta version of the scriptures and celebrating the ancient Syrian liturgy. Our co-worshippers would be merchants and traders from Persia or China or any country in between, a few farmers and families, soldiers and muleteers, most of whom would understand Syriac, which was closely related to Aramaic, Sogdian, Mongol, and Uighur languages. And if we stayed behind in the coolness to leaf through the collection of prayer books and scriptures used there, we might be surprised to discover among them a Psalter in the Pahlavi of the 5th century; a translation in mid-Turkish of the Georgios legend and Christian apocalyptic writings; in Sogdian and other scripts, parts of the Nicene Creed, the Gospel of St. Matthew, the legend of Helena and the Holy Cross; and in Syriac, liturgical and other Nestorian manuscripts – between them all, spanning many centuries (von le Coq, 1928, 1985, 100).

The story of Christian settlements near the salt lake of Issyk-kul – now in the southern U. S. S. R. – is yet to be told, but its fascinating outlines emerge from the two ancient cemeteries there, containing over 600 cross-engraved tombstones. The oldest date was 858 and the latest 1342. The inscriptions on many were in the Syriac script but the names indicate that these people were native converts. One inscription reads, “This is the grave of Pasak – The aim of life is Jesus, our Redeemer.” Another states, “This is the tomb of Shelicha, the famous Exegete and Preacher who enlightened all the cloisters with Light, being the son of Exegete Peter. He was famous for his wisdom, and when preaching his

voice sounded like a trumpet.” Among the names are those of nine archdeacons, eight doctors of ecclesiastical jurisprudence and of biblical interpretation, 22 visitors, three commentators, 46 scholastics, two preachers and an imposing number of priests” (Young, 1984, 17).

The stories of St. Thomas Christians of Kerala – coexisting peacefully with Hindu and Jewish neighbors from the 1st century, and that of the “Nestorian” Monument recording in deeply contextualized form Christian presence in central China from the 6th century, are to some extent known. But too little attention has yet been given to the accumulated evidence for the Apostolic foundation of Indian churches (see, e.g., Mundadan 1984, 64) or to the extensive remains throughout China, parallel to, and enlarging, the story of “Nestorian” Christians there (Moule 1930, 82, 129ff; Foster 1939, 1–25; Leslie 1981–83, 281ff; Saeiki 1951, 42911).

For southeast and northeast Asia, I have outlined the evidence elsewhere (England 1988). Here there are stories (documented) of Christian officers at the service of Sinhala Kings in the 5th and 6th centuries, Christian artists working in Pagan, Burma, in the 12th century, Christian Indian and Persian traders in peninsular Malaya from the 6th century, others at the courts of Buddhist or Hindu rulers in Sumatran and Javanese kingdoms, and churches growing from the work of Syrian and Persian missionaries in 8th-century Korea and Japan.

So the evidence, and the stories, of Christian presence and activity is found not only in rare manuscripts, but also in church buildings – some now partially restored on site, priceless frescoes and silk paintings scattered now in more than 20 museums (though in a few cases still to be seen in cave, chapel, or ruined temple, e.g., in Tien Shan and Gobi areas), extensive village ruins or cemeteries remaining from Christian settlements or graves in many centers in eastern Turkestan and Mongolia; collections of inscriptions and crosses in southern India central and eastern China, and throughout northeast and southeast Asia.

To underline the fact that here we are handling the story of an Asia-wide movement of God’s Spirit which has left tangible evidence of widespread exchanges and genuinely contextual Christian thought, we should note that one of the Japanese manuscripts, now held in the Nishi Hogan-ji temple in Kyoto, is “The Lord of the Universe’s Discourse on Almsgiving” (Saeiki 1951, 206–47), a copy of the manuscript discovered originally in Dunhuang, west China, which preserves the Sermon on the Mount and other Matthaean passages, translated in the language and thought-forms of 9th-century Turkestan. This is not surprising when

we remember that the cities of Nara, and later Kyoto, were two of the final destinations for many travelers on medieval silk routes and hold many relics of that long-continued trade and travel. Collections of Syriac manuscripts held now in Trichur (South India), Chinese manuscripts from east Turkestan and coastal China, and the range of seals and inscriptions from Mongolia, all give similar evidence of widespread yet localized Christian creativity.

Characteristics of the Tradition

The life and witness of these Asian forebears in the faith is of special interest to us, of course, for although this also has been tragically neglected, it offers rich resources for our present work. For their theology was initially rooted in Antiochene traditions and so stressed a more historical and “simple” exegesis of the scriptures, preserving many of the features of Semitic monotheism and of Syrian Christology, in which the unity of Godhead and manhood in the one nature of Christ was stressed. Some of their scholars have in fact left the results of extensive critical study of the Bible which antedates some methods we class as “modern.” The humanity of Jesus, which was nonetheless revealing God, was strongly emphasized in many of their traditions, and their understanding of the Trinity was largely “economic,” stressing complementary function rather than the absolutes of philosophical categories. This was later to develop in richly symbolic theologies of Christ and the church (Murray 1975, 2 and *passim*). Many in the early churches of the east were therefore either untouched by the controversies of Nicaea or Chalcedon or rejected such definitions and also in consequence frequently suffered persecution for such deviance (Brock and Harvey 1987).

In the Indian traditions which were to influence those further east, it is clear from inscriptions, documents, and songs that the Cross remained central to devotion, as did the loving concern of Christ known directly in human affairs. There is also evidence that for these traditions the faith was expressed in daily work and social justice (Kuriakose 1982, 9,21ff, 73f, Moule 1930, 22811).

Their liturgies, which are still in use in many communities between Syria and south India, enshrined early Syrian and Semitic forms, such as those in the Liturgy of SS. Adai and Mari. Here can be recognized a strong focus upon the experience of salvation received, and the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, to re-create the world, establish the

Kingdom, and fulfill all things (Dix 1949, 18311). The Eucharist, along with sacraments for Initiation (when the whole body was anointed) and Ordination (by laying on of hands), all gave central place to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit (Murray 1975, 210).

Some patterns of their piety were often strongly ascetic, and grew from strong monastic movements, both in Persia and also in China, Turkestan, and India. Yet it was a piety which nourished the trader and traveler, the artisan and physician, teacher, presbyter and administrator – many of whom spent a period in one of the many colleges or monasteries famous for their missionary outreach (Colless 1969).

Perhaps most surprising to us will be the attitude of these Christian forebears to those of other faiths, for the judgment of Mundadan regarding St. Thomas Christians could be made also of those in Turkestan and much of China: the Indian Christians had already been living for centuries in a positive encounter with the high-caste Hindus and had developed a theological vision of the Hindu religion which was more positive and liberal” (Mundadan 1984, 494).

Clearly, we have yet to take seriously the extensive bodies of literature which have been left to us from the many-sided life and mission of these early Christians. As Shui-pang shows, these are not only diverse in content but in form and language. Perhaps the largest body extant is found in Syriac, which over many centuries was used as far east as coastal China, as far north as Korea, and as far south as Kerala. But collections have survived also in such languages as Turkic, Chinese, and Malayalam (Wright 1894; Aprem 1982, 1983; Saeki 1951). These Asian Christian writings include hymns, poetry, treatises, homilies, chronicles, scholia (commentaries), letters, liturgies, parables, biographies, epitaphs, and of course Bible translations. Many have yet to be translated into contemporary vernaculars and also freed from the misunderstandings imposed by later Roman Catholic and Protestant interpreters.

Implications of the Legacy

It must be stressed again that this is part of our history, and the stories of early “Nestorian,” “Jacobite,” “Monophysite,” Orthodox, “Assyrian,” or Armenian Christians in our countries are our forebears’ stories and part of the story of the Spirit’s movement in Asia. It must also be recognized that the stories include not only those of survival but also those of slow decline, not only of “success” in mission but also of “failure,”

and this for many political even military reasons. Eventually the local divergencies, partly because of communication over great distances, became very wide and the administration, centralized on Persia(!), less and less effective. Rapid changes in state policy, or in nomadic and migrant communities, sometimes greatly weakened the churches so that it became possible for their creative traditions and history to be largely absorbed by later Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Protestant missions. Yet this far-flung network of Christian churches remained largely in place over immense distances for more than 12 centuries. And this in itself carries deep significance for our own work in education, theology, mission. Their courageous missionary endeavors, monastic movements, state service, education and medical care, their mutually beneficial coexistence with neighbors of other faiths, their survival despite repression and persecution, and their theology and spirituality – offer rich resources for the present life and thought of Asian Christians.

And whatever access we might have to some of the primary materials, we can now study their legacy in many sources. The literature from Tatian to Bar Hebraeus, and on to Yabh-alaha, has been presented by scholars like Wright, Budge, Murray, Aprem. The tradition of monastic and missionary education, by Wensinck, Latourette, Colless. The emerging continuity within the larger church history of Asian countries is dealt with by Foster, W. Young, Mundadan. The wholistic character of faith and witness which embraced in these traditions, the life of monastic and lay person, craftsman, merchant, and government servant, appears in Stewart, Colless, and many others.

The surprising degree of coexistence and exchange, possibly “dialogue,” between Christians and their neighbors in pluralistic communities, is treated by others like Barthold, Klimkeit, Lieu, and Khodr (refer Select Bibliography).

The conclusion to be drawn, that for us as for our ancient forebears, western Christianity is not normative, is very clearly applied by Kim Yong Bok, Thomas, Kappen, Song, Pieris, Suh Nam Dong, Yagi, de Ia Torre, and Wickremasinghe – to mention only a few contemporary Asian writers. And many of these, notably Song and Pieris, have published extensively on the theological leap from Israel to Asia in which Asian theologies are engaged.

These then are some of the implications of the history and its wealth of stories – as they are of the more recent stories of the Christian movements where they are rooted in the life situations and cultures of

particular peoples. This is the tradition in which we stand, and which we must each rediscover and amplify as we seek to be participants in the Spirit's movement in Asia.

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Events

The Religion and Culture Research Center in Bangkok has organized a nation-wide seminar on evangelization and dialogue. The week-long event, to be held in June of this year, will attempt to sharpen awareness of the aims of "Evangelization 2000" and their relationship to interreligious affairs.

§§§

BIRA IV/12, the final consultation in the BIRA IV series on the theology of dialogue, was held at Huahin, Thailand from 21 to 26 February of this year. In attendance was Francis Cardinal Arinze (president of the Pontifical Council for Intrerreligious Dialogue), along with staff members and Asian consultants of the Pontifical Council.

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From 2 to 8 June, a Joint Planning Meeting of the Offices of the FABC was held in Hong Kong, followed by a two-day meeting of the newly formed joint CCA-FABC Task Force.

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Interreligious colloquia at Sogang University's Institute for Religion and Theology in Seoul have continued regularly. They have included the following: Kim Ch'oon-ho on "Salvation in Liberation Theology" (13 April); Kim My -ong-soo on "Eschatology in the Logia of Jesus" (27 April); Kim She-yoon on "Understanding the Death of Jesus in the New Testament" (25 May); Shu Mae-boon on "The Present Condition of the Chinese Church" (1 June); and Chong T'ae-hyun on "The City of God in Jesus" (8 June). Kim Sung-hae of the Institute delivered a presentation on "Confucius and His Disciples" at the annual congress of the Korean Association of Confucian Studies (1 May). She will also be attending the Confucian-Christian conference to be held at Berkeley University in the second week of July of this year.

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On 18 May of this year, the semi-annual gathering of interreligious institutes in Japan (EGSID) met at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya. The guest speaker for the occasion was Kadowaki Kakichi, director of Sophia University's Institute for Oriental Religions. He spoke on "The Meta - physics of Tao," the subject of a recent book of the same title, now being translated into English.

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Under the direction of Prof. Aramaki Noritoshi of Osaka University, a Buddhist study group at the NCC Center for the Study of Japanese Religions in Kyoto has been studying Vasubandhu's "Doctrine of Consciousness-Only." The group completed a year of bi-weekly sessions in the spring of this year. In May, Ueda Shizuteru, professor emeritus of Kyoto University, began directing the group in a study of the "Ten Oxherding Pictures."

Recent talks at the NCC Center included a presentation by the associate director, Take Kuniyasu, on Omu-kyō, one of Japan's more controversial "new new religions," and Matsuoka Akiko's report of her experiences of a voyage on the Peace Boat.

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Moctar Matuan, director of the Gowing Research Center in Iligan City, Philippines, and John Raymaker of the Oriens Institute for Religious Research in Tokyo are working together with the Muslim and Christian communities in Marawi Iligan City and Xavier University to collaborate with representatives from the Konkōkyō Risshōkōseikai, and other Japanese religious groups in the establishing of a World Interfaith College project in the southern Philippines. 12 Filipino and 12 Japanese students and leaders are expected to meet 10 days in March of 1992.

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Michel Christiaens, director of the Oriens Institute, in Tokyo recently underwent an operation for skin cancer of the ear. He is recuperating well in his native Belgium.

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On 25 October, 1990, Yves Raguin of the Ricci Institute for Chinese Studies in Taipei spoke at Hong Kong's Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre on Chinese and Christianity Spirituality. Some 15 Protestant ministers from Norway and Denmark were among those in attendance.

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In the first week of February of this year, the Asian section of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians), held a consultation on Christology from an Asian perspective. The event was hosted by the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture in Hong Kong.

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