

THE CHURCH OF THE EAST

by Mark Dickens

Mark Dickens is a teacher and writer who lives and works in Central Asia. He has written a number of articles on both Central Asian and church history. This article is being considered for publication in the West. Permission is granted to use it as a reference, to quote from it and to copy it for limited distribution to interested individuals, but not to publish it in any form. Please include appropriate credits in any use of this article.

[This is a modified version of the original article with edits and comments in yellow highlight]

Students of church history are very familiar with the spread of Christianity westward from Jerusalem. Indeed, most church history is concerned almost exclusively with the movement of the gospel from Palestine to the Greco-Roman world and thence to the rest of Europe (and many centuries later, to the New World). However, it is not common knowledge that the message of Christ also moved eastward at a very early date and indeed there was a thriving church in Asia until the late Middle Ages, long before Catholic (and later, Protestant) missionaries arrived from the West. This article is the story of that church, the Church of the East,¹ commonly known as the Nestorian church,² referred to by Alphonse Mingana, a scholar who worked in the John Rylands Library during the early part of this century, as “the greatest missionary Church that the world has ever produced.”³

It is not known for certain exactly when the first interaction between the gospel and the East occurred. Ancient traditions maintain that the Magi were in fact from Persia. In writing of them, St. John Chrysostom (c. 345-407) said, “The Incarnate Word on coming to the world gave to Persia, in the persons of the *Magi*, the first manifestations of His mercy and light... so that the

¹ The full name of the modern church is the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East. For simplicity, the terms *Church of the East* or *Persian church* will be used for the time before the advent of Nestorian theology and *Nestorian church* will be used for the time after the adoption of Nestorian doctrine. *[For various reasons, it is not in fact accurate to refer to this church as Nestorian – it is better to call it the Church of the East, although there is no satisfactory adjective to use for its members.]*

² Several sources were used in the preparation of this article, including Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 239-302; Lawrence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967); Gordon H. Chapman, “Christianity Comes to Asia,” in *The Church in Asia*, ed. by Donald E. Hoke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 181-203; Henry Hill, “The Assyrians: The Church of the East,” in *Light from the East*, ed. by Henry Hill (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1988), 100-131, 163; Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953); Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document*, reprinted from *The Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (1925); Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Vol. I: Beginnings to 1500* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998); John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928); Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973); and Nicholas Zernov, *Eastern Christendom* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1961). Of these, Moffett’s book is the most recent and most in-depth treatment of the Nestorians.

³ Mingana, 53. See full bibliographic details in note 2. Mingana was instrumental in bringing the Nestorians to the attention of the academic world in the early part of this century and, as a result of his work with early manuscripts kept in the John Rylands Library, published several articles in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* concerning the early spread of Christianity in various parts of Asia.

Jews themselves learn from the mouths of Persians of the birth of their Messiah.”⁴ Although this cannot be historically verified, we can be sure that Christ’s commission to be witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) was certainly not intended to limit the church to the West.

It is possible that the seeds of the church in the East were sown as early as the day of Pentecost, since “Parthians, Medes and Elamites [and] residents of Mesopotamia” were amongst those who witnessed the descent of the Holy Spirit on the believers and heard the subsequent sermon of Peter (Acts 2:9). All of these Jews, in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost, were residents of the Persian Empire, the future home of the Church of the East. It is not unlikely that some of them were amongst the three thousand who responded to Peter’s message that day, possibly carrying the gospel back to their homes when they returned from Jerusalem. Though there is no definite historical evidence of this, it is probable that many of the early converts in the East were from amongst the Jewish diaspora. There are also ancient traditions, recorded in *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, that, of the apostles, “Thomas preached to the Parthians, Medes, Persians, Carmanians, Hyrcanians, Bactrians and Magians... Bartholomew is said to have preached in India... Andrew preached to the Scythians, [and] Sogdians.”⁵

The Book of Acts follows the journeys of Paul westward from Antioch. What it does not tell us is the role that this great church played in the eastward spread of Christianity.⁶ The church at Antioch became the mother of the Syrian Orthodox Church⁷ and the Assyrian Church of the East, both of which have used Syriac (a Semitic dialect similar to the Aramaic spoken by Jesus) as their liturgical language throughout their long history as independent ecclesiastical bodies.⁸

⁴ Quoted in Waterfield, 16. A later addition to this tradition was the legend that the visit of the Magi (who were probably Zoroastrian priests) was foretold by Zoroaster himself, who had a vision of a new set of divine laws and principles. “His prophecy stipulated, amongst other things, that a number of Magi from his priestly caste should proceed under the guidance of divine light to the great One who was empowered to rule the whole world” (Atiya, 242-243).

⁵ John Foxe, *Foxe’s Christian Martyrs of the World* (Uhrichsville: Barbour & Co., 1989), 5-6. There are also early traditions of Thomas preaching in India, about which more will be said below. Apart from India, all the people mentioned by Foxe lived in the territory between Persia and Central Asia. As noted below, Bactria is in modern-day Afghanistan. The Scythians, also known as the Saka, lived on the great steppes which are now located in Kazakhstan, southern Russia and the Ukraine. The Sogdians (or Soghdians) were the original inhabitants of what is now Uzbekistan.

⁶ When the book of Acts says that “all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (19:10 NIV), it is referring of course to the Roman province of Asia, located in modern-day Turkey. However, it is interesting to note that Paul sends greetings to a woman by the name of Persis in his epistle to the Romans (16:12). Her name means “Persian woman” and he describes her as “my dear friend... who has worked very hard in the Lord.” Nothing more is known of her. Another interesting scripture which begs the question of whether or not Paul had contact with people to the north and east of the Greek-speaking world is Col. 3:11: “Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.” Is it possible that Paul knew some Scythian believers at this early date?

⁷ This West Syrian Church is one of the Monophysite churches that separated from Rome after the Council of Chalcedon in 451. During the fifth century, a Monophysite bishop of Edessa, Jacob Bardaeus, reorganized the West Syrian church by appointing priests and bishops. As a result, that church has come to be known as the Jacobite church. **[Again, it is better to refer to this church as the Syrian Orthodox Church, rather than the Jacobite Church.]**

⁸ For more background on the relationship between these two churches, see Atiya, 239-242, 246-252. The division between the two developed during the time of Bishop Rabbula of Edessa (421-435). It was formalized as a result of the East Syrian Church adopting the theology of Nestorius under Bishop Ibas of Edessa (435-457).

The first centre of the Syriac-speaking church, before the two bodies separated from each other, was Edessa (modern-day Urfa, in Turkey), 160 miles east of Antioch. An early document called the *Doctrine of Addai* (written sometime between 390 and 430) tells the story of King Abgar V of Edessa, who apparently converted to Christianity as a result of the ministry of Addai (or Thaddeus), one of the seventy sent out by Christ (Luke 10:1). According to the legend, Addai and Mari, another disciple, were dispatched by the apostle Thomas in response to a letter sent to Jesus himself by the king, requesting healing from his leprosy. Addai healed Abgar, resulting in the conversion of the king and many of his subjects.⁹ Mari subsequently went on to found a church in Seleucia-Ctesiphon,¹⁰ on the Tigris River near Baghdad. Although the story of King Abgar is generally dismissed as unfounded in fact, there were certainly Christians in Edessa by the mid second century, possibly even as early as the late first century.¹¹ During this time, Edessa also seems to have become home to a number of heretical groups, including the Gnostics. The two most prominent Syriac Christian scholars of this era were Tatian (c. 110-180) and Bardaisan (154-222), both of whom appear to have come under the influence of Gnosticism.¹²

Edessa in the first century was the capital of Osrhoene, a border state between the Roman and Persian Empires which was located on a tributary of the Euphrates River, whose inhabitants spoke Syriac. After several centuries of being in a vassal relationship with either Rome or Persia, the city became first a Roman colony in 214 and then part of the Persian Empire in 258. While the Roman Empire eventually adopted Christianity, the Persian Empire remained solidly Zoroastrian until the Arab conquest of the seventh century.¹³ Unlike their western co-religionists, these eastern Christians were never to know anything but life under non-Christian rulers. The emerging Persian church came to be composed of both Syriac-speakers and native Persians, but it was always regarded with suspicion by the Zoroastrian rulers, especially after Rome, Persia's archenemy, became a Christian empire.

According to the *Acts of Thomas*, written about 200, the roots of the church in India were also laid during the apostolic age, when the apostle Thomas travelled first to northern India and then to the Malabar coast in the south, where he was martyred around AD 72.¹⁴ Eusebius (c.275-340) writes of a visit to India by Pantaenus around 180-190, during which this Alexandrine scholar encountered Christians on the Malabar coast.¹⁵ A bishop David of Basra (in Persia) was reported to have visited India around 300 and another bishop, John, attended the Council of Nicea in 325 and was recorded as coming from India. Theophilus (a native of either Socotra or the Maldives), an emissary of the Roman Emperor Constantius to Arabia and India, claimed that he encountered Christians in India in 354. We have even more certain evidence of a Christian presence in the area in the *Christian Topography*, written by Cosmas Indicopleustes, a sixth century Nestorian

⁹ For a more detailed account of the legend of King Abgar V, see Atiya, 243-245 and Moffett, 47-50.

¹⁰ This city was the capital of the Parthian Empire. It was named after Seleucus, one of Alexander the Great's generals, who founded the Seleucid dynasty in Persia after Alexander's death.

¹¹ King Abgar VIII (177-212) was probably a Christian, as evidenced by the appearance of the cross on coins of the time. In addition, an early Christian book of hymns, called the *Odes of Solomon*, may come from Edessa and may date from as early as AD 80-100 (see Moffett, 52-56 for more details).

¹² For more on these two scholars, see Moffett, 64-69 and 72-77.

¹³ "The religion of Persia was not a dying heathenism, but the highly organised and living religion of Zoroastrianism" (Browne, 2).

¹⁴ For more on this tradition, see Moffett, 26-36.

¹⁵ Though, interestingly enough, he reported that Bartholomew, not Thomas, had preached to the Indians.

merchant from Alexandria who describes “Persian” Christians (complete with bishops, priests and deacons) living on “the Island of Taprobane” (Ceylon), “Male” (the Maldives) and “Dioscorides” (Socotra), all islands in the Indian Ocean.

It is certainly possible that Thomas could have reached the subcontinent during the first century. Indeed, in addition to the *Acts of Thomas*, a number of early Syriac writings, as well as some of the early Church Fathers and the *Didache*,¹⁶ claim that he did.¹⁷ Furthermore, coins dating from the first century have been found in northwest India bearing the name of King Gundaphar, the Indian ruler allegedly converted by Thomas, thus demonstrating his historicity. The church that Thomas supposedly founded is still known as the Mar¹⁸ Thoma Church and continues to use a Syriac liturgy to this day. The St. Thomas Christians have by and large remained a relatively small minority in the sea of Hinduism that is southern India, however, and for most of their history have been treated as a separate caste by the Indian rulers, thus hindering their efforts to evangelize those around them.¹⁹

By the time that Edessa was incorporated into the Persian Empire, the city of Arbela (modern-day Erbil, in Iraq), located on the Tigris in the Persian province of Adiabene, had taken on more and more the role that Edessa had played in the early years, as a centre from which Christianity spread to the rest of the Persian Empire.²⁰ Bardaisan, writing about 196, speaks of Christians throughout Media, Parthia and Bactria (modern-day Afghanistan)²¹ and, according to Tertullian (c.160-230), there were already a number of bishoprics within the Persian Empire by 220. By 315, the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon had assumed the title “Catholicos,”²² thus setting the stage for the later development of the church hierarchy. By this time, neither Edessa nor Arbela was the centre of the Church of the East anymore; ecclesiastical authority had moved east to the heart of the Persian Empire. The twin cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, well-situated on the main trade routes between East and West, became, in the words of John Stewart, a missionary in India who studied the Nestorians extensively, “a magnificent centre for the missionary church that was entering on its great task of carrying the gospel to the far east.”²³

¹⁶ Which dates from about AD 80-130.

¹⁷ The Syriac document, *Doctrine of the Apostles*, dating from about 250, states, “India and all its own countries and those bordering on it even to the furthest sea received the apostles’ hand of priesthood from Judas Thomas who was guide and ruler in the church which he built there” (quoted in Stewart, 87).

¹⁸ *Mar* is Syriac for “My lord” and is often used for “Reverend” or “Saint.”

¹⁹ For more information on the St. Thomas Christians, see L.W. Brown, *The Indian Christians* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982) and Stewart, 85-99. For a discussion of the possible influence of Nestorians on Hinduism in India, see Stewart, 302-304.

²⁰ Various traditions credit the founding of the church in Arbela to Addai, Mari or Aggai, a disciple of Addai.

²¹ “We are Christians by the one name of the Messiah. As regards our customs our brethren abstain from everything that is contrary to their profession.... Parthian Christians do not take two wives.... Our Bactrian sisters do not practice promiscuity with strangers. Persians do not take their daughters to wife. Medes do not desert their dying relations or bury them alive. Christians in Edessa do not kill their wives or sisters who commit fornication but keep them apart and commit them to the judgement of God. Christians in Hatra do not stone thieves” (quoted in Stewart, 78).

²² The title that was given to the leading bishop in a church outside the Roman Empire. The first Catholicos of the Church of the East was Papa (285-326). Later on, at the Synod of 424, the Catholicos was given the title Patriarch. The other patriarchs in the early church were the bishops of Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and later Jerusalem.

²³ Stewart, 13. See full bibliographic details in note 2.

The fourth century brought persecution to the Persian church. In the words of Samuel Moffett, author of the sweeping *History of Christianity in Asia*, “Persia’s priests and rulers cemented their alliance of state and religion in a series of periods of terror that have been called the most massive persecutions of Christians in history.”²⁴ By 225, the Sassanid dynasty had replaced the Parthian kingdom. The new rulers were devout Zoroastrians.²⁵ When Constantine converted to Christianity and later declared it to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, the stage was set for the Persian Empire, suspecting a new “enemy within,” to become violently anti-Christian. Shapur II (309-379)²⁶ inaugurated a twenty-year long persecution of the church with the murder of Mar Shimun, the Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, five bishops and 100 priests on Good Friday, 344, after the Patriarch refused to collect a double tax from the Christians to help the Persian war effort against Rome.²⁷ The next two successors to Mar Shimun also suffered martyrdom. The names of 16,000 martyrs have been preserved, but some estimate that as many as 190,000 were slain during this time.²⁸ Some believers fled to India to join the Malabar Christians. Others moved to Arabia, there to join Christians who had been in the peninsula since at least the third century. There are early reports of a Persian bishopric in Qatar and a Persian monastery was built in Bahrain around 390. At around the same time, Christian influence spread to Yemen. The king of the Himyarites in Yemen was apparently converted in 356 by Theophilus, mentioned above (although the Himyarite monarchs later converted to Judaism). In the early sixth century, the Ethiopians invaded Yemen and, consequently, Monophysitism became the dominant faith in that kingdom.²⁹ In 575, Yemen became a Persian province, as a result of which some Christians there probably became Nestorians. Within a century of Muhammad’s death, however, most of the Christians in the Arabian peninsula had been converted to Islam or forced to leave the area.³⁰

Although the worst of the persecution in Persia was over two decades after it began, it did not come to an end until 399, at the beginning of the reign of Yazdegird I (399-421), thanks to an embassy from the Byzantine Emperor headed by a Mesopotamian bishop. However, as a result of the antagonism of the Zoroastrian priests and the Persian nobility to the growing church, there were subsequent persecutions under Bahram V (421-439), Yazdegird II (439-457), and Khosro I (531-579).³¹ Under Yazdegird II, 153,000 are said to have been martyred near the city of Karkh (modern-day Kirkuk) in 448. At one point, according to the accounts, a senior officer who was in charge of putting the Christians to death at Karkh was so moved by their courage in the face of suffering that he was converted and chose to join them in death. Although some Christians wanted to maintain ties with the West, the perception of the Persian rulers that the Church of the East was an agent of the Roman Empire intensified the desire of Christians to become

²⁴ Moffett, 138. See full bibliographic details in note 2. For more on this period, see Moffett, 137-144 and Stewart, 16-35.

²⁵ For a good overview of Zoroastrianism, see Moffett, 106-109.

²⁶ The dates given for the Persian Shahs are their reigns.

²⁷ The patriarch’s last words to his flock were, “May the cross of our Lord be the protection of the people of Jesus. May the peace of God be with the servants of God and stablish [sic] your hearts in the faith of Christ, in tribulation and in ease, in life and in death, now and for evermore” (Stewart, 18-19).

²⁸ Moffett, 144.

²⁹ See below for more on Monophysitism.

³⁰ For more background on early Christianity in Arabia, see Atiya, 258-259; Browne, 11-23; Moffett, 273-281 and Stewart, 50-75.

³¹ The persecutions under Bahram V and Yazdegird II occurred in 420-422 and 445-448, respectively.

autonomous from the Western church. At the same time, the persecutions played a significant role in the subsequent missionary expansion of the church. The fire that the church had gone through purified it and many of its members who were forced to flee for their lives to distant lands ended up sharing the gospel with those they lived among.

Early on, the Church of the East developed a monastic movement, probably introduced by monks from Egypt, where Christian monasticism started.³² The first evidence of this Syrian monasticism was the *B'nai Q'yama* and the *B'nat Q'yama* (the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant), an ascetic group which began in the third century and gained ascendancy in the church during the fourth century. In some places, baptism came to be reserved only for those who had renounced the world and made a vow of celibacy. The first actual monasteries were built around 330-340. By the following century, the strict regulations of the *B'nai Q'yama* and the *B'nat Q'yama* had been largely laid aside, but monastic communities continued to spread throughout Persia, bound together by an adherence to celibacy, poverty, manual labour, prayer, fasting, study of the scriptures and silence.³³

Monasticism and asceticism were a significant part of the spirituality of the Church of the East throughout the church's long and illustrious presence in Asia, a fact that is noted by some as part of the reason that it ultimately died out.³⁴ Certainly, in a political atmosphere where physical persecution was common, it was tempting to retreat from the world. At the same time, the itinerant monks were also instrumental in the later establishment of Nestorian educational and missionary work. Aziz Atiya, the Coptic author of a masterful overview of the various facets of Eastern Christendom, called them "a powerful army of devotees who strengthened the Church and fearlessly penetrated the vast Asiatic continent in an attempt at large-scale evangelization."³⁵ In contrast to Egyptian monasticism, which tended to value separation from the world much more, Moffett comments that "in the very earliest Christian documents of the East [i.e. Syria], the call to ascetic self-denial is almost always associated with the call to go and preach and serve."³⁶

Perhaps the most important factor in the monastic influence on missions was the high value the monks placed on learning and the system of schools that they set up. A theological school was established by James, bishop of Nisibis, in his home town in 325, when the city was still part of the Roman Empire.³⁷ The Persian defeat of the Romans in 363 resulted in Nisibis being handed over to Shapur II, the inaugurator of the Great Persecution. As a result of this, Ephrem the Syrian, one of the foremost theologians and hymn-writers of the time, moved the School of Nisibis to Edessa, where it was known as the Persian School (it was later to move back to Nisibis in the wake of the Nestorian controversy). This school, where both theology and medicine were studied, was to become the flagship of the future Nestorian monastic educational system which developed. Another major centre of theological learning was the Great Monastery on Mount Izla, founded by Abraham of Kaskar in the sixth century; it eventually went on to take the place of the

³² There is, however, some question as to whether Christian monasticism may have actually started in Syria, rather than Egypt (see Moffett, 76-77).

³³ For more on Syrian and Nestorian monasticism, see Atiya, 291-294; Moffett, 77-80, 96-100 and Stewart, 36-49.

³⁴ See, for example, Browne, 64-70.

³⁵ Atiya, 292. See full bibliographic details in note 2.

³⁶ Moffett, 77.

³⁷ Also known as Jacob of Nisibis, he is the first bishop of Nisibis mentioned by name (about 306). He was also a major leader in the development of the monastic movement in the Church of the East and a representative of that church at the Council of Nicea.

School of Nisibis as the premier Nestorian theological centre. Other important schools were founded later in Seleucia-Ctesiphon and Jundishapur. The latter became a famous medical school where the Nestorians later played a key role in the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic under the Arab Caliphate.³⁸

Prior to adopting both the Nicene Creed (in 410) and the Chalcedonian Creed (in 544), the church formulated its own creed, called *The Creed of Aphrahat*,³⁹ and had its own Syriac harmony of the gospels, called the *Diatessaron*, which had been translated by Tatian around 170.⁴⁰ The *Peshitta* (the Syriac New Testament) replaced the *Diatessaron* sometime before 431.⁴¹ In the early days of the church, the use of Syriac was an important means of spreading the gospel throughout Mesopotamia, where it functioned as a *lingua franca*. Later on, however, the insistence on using it as the primary ecclesiastical language probably made it difficult for Christianity to become permanently rooted in non-Syriac-speaking cultures. A distinctive liturgy, called the *Liturgy of Mar Addai and Mar Mari*,⁴² developed around 200. The call to worship was made by striking hammers on wooden boards, rather than sounding a bell. Although icons and images of the saints were employed in the early days of the church, simple crosses later replaced crucifixes (by the time of the Mongols) and images came to be prohibited. Worshippers prayed standing, with outstretched hands, facing east.⁴³

The Church of the East was originally part of the see⁴⁴ of Antioch, but its presence in the Persian Empire had resulted in a growing autonomy. In 410, after issuing an Edict of Toleration (as Constantine had done in 313 in the Roman Empire), Yazdegird I convened a Synod (the Synod of Isaac, named after the Catholicos) at Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁴⁵ The Catholicos of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was recognized as the head of all bishops in the empire and therefore responsible for

³⁸ In the process of translating the Scriptures from Greek into Syriac, the Syrian Christians became very interested in Greek science and philosophy. As a result, the School of Nisibis was modelled after Greek schools. When the school moved back to Persia from Edessa in 489, the Persian Shah Kavard I (488-531) invited some students to start a medical school, along with a hospital, in Jundishapur. The Nestorians, who brought with them Syriac translations of Greek medical and philosophical works, soon came to hold the most prominent positions in the school. When the Arabs captured Jundishapur in 636, they allowed the Nestorians to continue to operate the school and indeed, received their knowledge of Greek medicine and philosophy through these Christian scholars. This later made possible the flowering of Muslim culture under the 'Abbasids, when the school was moved to Baghdad, the seat of the Caliph.

³⁹ Aphrahat was a converted Persian nobleman. For an English translation of the text, see Hill, 126 and Moffett, 130. For more on the teaching of Aphrahat, see Moffett, 125-130 and Stewart, 332-333.

⁴⁰ For more on the *Diatessaron*, see Stewart, 331-332 and Moffett, 73-74. Some think that the *Diatessaron* was the first translation of the Gospels from the Greek originals.

⁴¹ For more on the *Peshitta*, see Stewart, 330-331.

⁴² For a discussion of this ancient liturgy, including the text in Syriac and a translation in English, see William Macomber, "The Ancient Form of the *Anaphora of the Apostles*," in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. by Nina Gargoian, Thomas Mathews and Robert Thomson (Washington, DC: Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 73-88.

⁴³ For more details on Nestorian rituals, see Atiya, 294-297.

⁴⁴ The jurisdiction of a bishop. Episcopal see cities have a bishop, whereas metropolitan see cities have a metropolitan (archbishop).

⁴⁵ This was not the first synod of the Church of the East. Papa, the first Catholicos of the church, convened the first synod in 314, but at that time, the ties between the Persian church and the church in the West were much stronger. By 410, they had weakened considerably.

the Christian minority (Persian *melet*) under Persian rule.⁴⁶ In addition, the Church of the East officially adopted the Nicene Creed. At a later council in 424 (the Synod of Dadyeshu), the bishops in the empire gave the Catholicos the title of “Patriarch” and, along with it, final authority for the Persian church (in the same way that the pope had ultimate authority in the West); formal submission to any other patriarchs, including those of Antioch and Rome, was essentially brought to an end. This governmental independence was confirmed theologically when Nestorius (c. 381-451) was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Nestorius, a Syrian from Antioch, had become the Patriarch of Constantinople in 428. At the time, the sees of Alexandria and Antioch were in a hotly debated contest over the nature of Christ. The burning question was: “How are the human and the divine aspects of Christ related to each other and combined in one person?” In essence, the Alexandrians tended to emphasize an allegorical approach to the scriptures, accentuating the divinity of Christ, whereas the Antiochenes took an historical approach, focussing more on his humanity. In addition to the theological dimensions, there was a major political rivalry between the sees of Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople, with Alexandria in particular vying for a stronger position vis-à-vis the other two.

Cyril, by most accounts an overly ambitious and vindictive man, was the Patriarch of Alexandria and strongly opposed to Nestorius, who had been preaching against the use of the Greek term *Theotokos* (Mother of God) as applied to the Virgin Mary (Nestorius preferred the term *Christotokos*, “Mother of Christ”). Nestorius’ quarrel was in fact with the implication that Mary’s motherhood embraced the whole pre-incarnational Godhead (rather than merely the humanity of Jesus), but his position was understood by many to be a denial of the divinity of Christ. Cyril, in addition to his theological dispute with Nestorius, was also envious of his position as Patriarch of Constantinople.⁴⁷

The Council of Ephesus, in many ways a disgraceful display of petty politics and acrimonious accusations between those who had been called to “love one another” (John 13:34),⁴⁸ resulted in both Nestorius and Cyril being excommunicated. While the latter continued on in his position as Alexandrine Patriarch, ignoring the decision of the council, Nestorius went into exile in Upper Egypt, where he lived out his remaining days in monastic seclusion (until his death in 451).⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Shortly before the Arab conquest, in 628-29, the Jacobites (the Syrian Monophysites) became a separate *melet* in the Persian Empire. As such, they were no longer considered by the Shah to be under the authority of the Nestorian patriarch.

⁴⁷ It is not possible in this article to go into the Nestorian controversy in depth. Many theologians who have studied the views of Nestorius are of the opinion that he was not in fact a heretic, but that much of the controversy was the result of politics, misunderstanding, and difficulties in translating words between Syriac and Greek. For more detailed accounts, please consult the following sources: Browne, 6-7, 70-74; Everett Ferguson, Michael P. McHugh and Frederick W. Norris, *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* (New York: Garland Publ., 1990), 644-648; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity, Vol. I: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 253-261; Latourette, 164-169; George Maloney, “Dialogues Between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Church of Rome,” in *Diakonia*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1996), 204-214; Moffett, 170-180; Zernov, 58-61.

⁴⁸ Moffett says of the council, “Its legality is questionable. Its conduct was disgraceful. And its theological verdict, if not overturned, was at least radically amended by the Council of Chalcedon” (175).

⁴⁹ From exile, he wrote his memoirs, titled *The Bazaar of Heracleides*. The following quote should suffice to show his disposition while in exile: “Earthly things have little interest for me. I have died to the world and live for Him... As for Nestorius - let him be anathema!... And would God that all men by anathematizing me might attain to reconciliation with God...” (quoted in Moffett, 168).

Interestingly enough, shortly before he died, he was to affirm the Chalcedonian Confession (451) which was responsible for the Monophysite churches (the Syrian, Coptic, Armenian and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches) separating from Rome.

Many of the followers of Nestorius fled to Edessa, where they began teaching at the theological school.⁵⁰ When the school was closed by the Roman Emperor Zeno in 489, they fled again to Nisibis, safely within the borders of the Persian Empire. Since the Persian church at that time was more preoccupied with simple matters of survival and not at all concerned with the Christological controversy that had embroiled the West, those who held to the teachings of Nestorius were welcomed without the stigma of being considered heretics. As a result of this infusion of new theological ideas, the Church of the East came to be known as the Nestorian church (a term which it does not use to refer to itself) and its theology was henceforth identified with that of Nestorius. Although there had been a tendency towards the Antiochene Christology prior to the Council of Ephesus, efforts to impose the views of Nestorius now proceeded with a vengeance, led by Bar Sauma, the archbishop of Nisibis, who used his position as advisor to Shah Piroz (457-483) to persecute bishops with Monophysite views.⁵¹ At synods in 484 and 486, the Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia (the main theological influence on Nestorius) was adopted as the official theology of the Church of the East and the right of priests and even bishops to be married was affirmed (perhaps partly due to the fact that celibacy was looked down upon by Zoroastrians).⁵²

The theological school in Nisibis, along with other Nestorian schools that developed in the Empire, subsequently became a major centre for missionary training.⁵³ Since the Nestorians could not go west, they had no choice but to expand eastward into Asia. Even before the advent of the teaching of Nestorius, Christians in the Persian Empire had begun spreading the gospel south to Malabar, India⁵⁴ (there to join with the existing Mar Thoma Christians) and eastward to Central Asia.⁵⁵ Herat (in modern-day Afghanistan) and Merv (in modern-day Turkmenistan) were both bishoprics by 424. Merv was elevated to a metropolitan see by 544, followed by Herat

⁵⁰ By this time, there were actually three schools in Edessa. The Nestorians taught at the Persian School, which had moved there from Nisibis.

⁵¹ The fact that Nestorians were now regarded by Rome as enemies made them less of a threat to the Sassanids. The antagonism between the Nestorians and the Monophysites was finally resolved in 1142, when there was a formal reconciliation between the Nestorian patriarch and the Jacobite primate.

⁵² For more on the movement of Nestorian theology into the Persian Church, see Moffett, 187-190, 193-204.

⁵³ As noted above, other important schools were located at Seleucia-Ctesiphon (it later moved to Baghdad), Jundishapur and Merv, where, as late as 1340, a college for "Tatars" (the common term for Turkic-Mongols) was in operation. *[I have tried in vain to track down this reference to a college in Merv in the 14th century and now believe it is a misunderstanding of Stewart, who quotes it – I cannot find it in the original sources.]*

⁵⁴ The Indian Christians formally came under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Nestorian Church in the early fifth century.

⁵⁵ The *Doctrine of the Apostles*, written no later than 250, speaks of Christianity spreading to certain tribes southwest of the Caspian Sea (known as Gog and Magog) as early as 120-140, as a result of the work of Aggai, but this is generally dismissed as legend. Mingana speculates that this may be a reference to early Christians among the Turks (8), but this seems unlikely. *[This is undoubtedly Mingana's own idea, as Turks did not exist at this time, and certainly not as far south as the Caspian Sea.]*

by 585.⁵⁶ Merv became a major centre from which Nestorian monks embarked on evangelistic journeys.

[The following paragraph is incorrect, since the Syriac manuscript which describes this mission is referring to the Caucasian Huns, not the Hephthalite Huns. However, the following reference to Mar Aba appointing a bishop for the Hephthalites is factually correct.] In 498, a Nestorian bishop, along with four priests and two laymen, accompanied Shah Kavad I (who had been forced to flee when he was deposed) to Central Asia, where they successfully spread the gospel amongst the White Huns (the Hephthalites). Apparently, the bishop had received a vision in which he was commanded to go to them and instruct them about the faith.⁵⁷ They were later joined by artisans, physicians and scribes who taught them to write their own language; some of these missionaries stayed in the area until at least 530.

By 549, there were enough Christians amongst the Hephthalites that they requested the Catholicos Mar Aba I (540-552) to consecrate a bishop for them. Other Huns and Turks were also evangelized during this period prior to the Arab invasion. By 644, Metropolitan Eliya of Merv, who is reported to have converted a Turkish king and his army, was able to speak of great numbers of Christians living beyond the Oxus River (modern-day Amu Darya).

[I no longer believe that the letter described in the following paragraphs was written in the eighth century, but rather in the thirteenth century. Therefore, although it gives interesting information on Christianity in Central Asia during the Mongol era, it probably cannot be dated to an earlier time.] This is confirmed by a letter supposedly written by Mar Philoxenus, or Akhasnaya, a Monophysite bishop writing in the early sixth century, which frequently mentions Christian Turks. Even if the part of the letter mentioning them is dated later (some think in the eighth century),⁵⁸ it still indicates the presence of large numbers of Turkic Christians at the time of the advent of Islam in the area.

The letter speaks of the Turks coming to Seleucia-Ctesiphon to receive a metropolitan from the Patriarch and comments on various aspects of their religious life: “These Christian Turks eat meat and drink milk.... All their habits are clean, and their beliefs are orthodox and true like our own.... They believe in one glorious nature in the Holy Trinity... and profess that the Divine Word, one of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, suffered, died, and was crucified, and by His death and His resurrection He saved us.... In their gatherings they translate the above Books [the Old and New Testaments] into their Turkish language.... They are true believers and God-fearing folk, and they dwell under tents, and have no towns, no villages, and no houses.... These Christian Turks dwell under tents and pavilions, and have from themselves priests, deacons, and monks. They have many places of worship with them in their pavilions, and they ring the bells

⁵⁶ In Eastern Christianity, the term “metropolitan” is used instead of “archbishop.” In general, Nestorian metropolitans had six to twelve bishops under their authority. Other dates given for the appointment of a metropolitan for Merv are either during the patriarchate of Isaac (399-410) or Yaballaha I (415-420). Note that the dates given for Nestorian patriarchs are for their terms as Catholicos.

⁵⁷ Some claim that these Huns also heard the gospel through Byzantine captives and Jacobite Christians, but the Nestorians seem to have carried out most of the work. The origin of the Huns is still disputed, though they probably came primarily from Mongol or Turkic stock. In some accounts of this story, they are referred to as Turks. *[Mingana is confused here, as noted above – the mission he describes was to the Caucasus, not to the Hephthalites.]*

⁵⁸ Mingana thinks it was written between 760 and 790 (55-57). *[Again, Mingana is undoubtedly mistaken in this – he gives no solid proof for his suggested date.]*

and read the Books in our Syriac tongue.”⁵⁹ Christians were so prevalent amongst the Turks that, when the plague broke out, it became the practice to tattoo a cross on the forehead to ward off that dread disease, a fact discovered by the Byzantines when some Turks captured by the Persians were turned over to them in 581.

Thus, during this period prior to the rise of Islam, Christianity experienced significant growth throughout Asia. Amongst the Arabs, from whom Islam would later spring, there were many Christians: Melkite,⁶⁰ Jacobite and Nestorian. There is even a legend that a Persian missionary came to England during the sixth or seventh century and that the town of St. Ives is named after him.⁶¹ Closer to home, as Moffett comments, “Christianity had become, next to Zoroastrianism, the second most powerful religious force in the [Persian] empire.”⁶² Even the favourite wife of the great Shah Khosro I (531-579) was a devout Christian, as was the favourite wife of his grandson, Khosro II (590-628). In addition, the personal physician to the Shah during this time was usually a Nestorian Christian.

Thus began a long and successful missionary enterprise which encompassed nearly a millennium of expansion into much of Asia. By the time of the patriarchate of Timothy I (779-820), the Nestorian Catholicos already oversaw a greater geographic area (and probably more people) than any pope before the Age of Exploration. Eighteen metropolitans and dozens of bishops represented the church in most of Asia. Timothy, in writing about “all the provinces under the jurisdiction of this patriarchal see,” spoke of “the Indians, the Chinese, the Tibetans, [and] the Turks.”⁶³ During his time as Nestorian patriarch, he appointed a bishop for Yemen (in the otherwise Muslim region of the Arab peninsula) and consecrated the first bishop for Tibet.⁶⁴ In the words of Atiya, “few churches can claim for themselves the Nestorian evangelizing fire that swept all over the continent of Asia in the earlier Middle Ages.”⁶⁵ In light of this evangelistic fervour, one may well ask, “What were the keys to the Nestorian success?”

Certainly, as with all successful missionary work throughout history, the expansion of the Nestorians into Asia was primarily the result of the many dedicated men and women (primarily the former) who were willing to sacrifice their comfort in order to obey the Great Commission. In Atiya’s words, “the backbone of Nestorian expansion lay with its monastic rule, which furnished the church with a great army of dedicated men ready to penetrate unknown regions and expose themselves to every peril to spread the faith in the far East.... They combined with their enthusiasm for their faith a monastic system and hierarchy ready for action and self-sacrifice.”⁶⁶ However, although there were many clergy involved in evangelizing Asia, there were also a

⁵⁹ Quoted in Mingana, 68-71. See Mingana, 49-73 and Stewart, 138-143 for more on this letter.

⁶⁰ Melkite (from the Arabic word for “king” since they adhered to the orthodoxy that was accepted in the Roman Empire) refers to those Christians in the East who agreed to the Chalcedonian confession and were therefore neither Monophysite nor Nestorian.

⁶¹ For more details, see Waterfield, 46.

⁶² Moffett, 231.

⁶³ Quoted in Stewart, 90.

⁶⁴ Some maintain that Nestorian Christianity survives in Tibet in some of the rituals of Lamaism, including the use of holy water and incense. See Atiya, 263. It is not known exactly where the bishop of Tibet had his seat, but some have suggested Tangut, located in the Gansu corridor.

⁶⁵ Atiya, 287.

⁶⁶ Atiya, 256-257.

considerable number of lay people, especially traders, merchants, artisans and teachers.⁶⁷ In particular, the Soghdians, an ancient Iranian people who lived in Transoxiana and who were inveterate traders, were key players in the transmission of Christian teaching along the Silk Road (they also played a significant role in propagating Buddhism, Manichaeism and Islam throughout Central Asia at various times). “Although Syriac was the liturgical language of the Nestorian church, the language in which Nestorian Christianity was disseminated across Asia was principally Sogdian.”⁶⁸

In addition, in the early days of the church, there was a high value placed on literacy and learning. As noted above, theological training schools also played a key role in the propagation of the gospel.⁶⁹ In addition to theology, these schools trained students in medicine, music and other academic subjects. Whenever the Nestorians established a new episcopal see, they also set up a school, a library and a hospital, thus combining educational and medical work with their preaching. Finally, when persecution came, which it did often in the early days, it tended to act as a purifying agent, strengthening the Christian community. All of these were significant factors in the ongoing expansion of the Nestorians into much of Asia.

The rise of Islam in the early seventh century brought about a major change in the way the Nestorian church functioned. In the wake of continuous fighting over the previous century that had weakened both the Persian and Byzantine Empires, the Arab armies that exploded out of the desert upon the death of Muhammad in 632 were able to destroy the Sassanid army and capture Seleucia-Ctesiphon by 636.⁷⁰ Yazdegird III (632-651), effectively the last Sassanid Shah, was killed by one of his own subjects in 651 while fleeing from the Muslims.⁷¹ Whereas Christians had experienced considerable persecution under the Persian Empire, the Arabs looked on them somewhat more favourably.⁷² Like all other minorities (Arab *dhimmi*) in the new empire, they were required to pay the *jizya*, a poll-tax levied in exchange for the privilege of maintaining their religion. They were also prohibited from building new churches and displaying the cross in public.⁷³ As a result of these restrictions, some Christians converted to Islam.

⁶⁷ During the Sassanid period, Christians came to make up a large portion of the lower and middle classes, including significant numbers of “the mercantile and artisan classes... the civil service... [and] the medical profession” (Wigram, *History of the Assyrian Church* (London: SPCK, 1910), 230, cited in Moffett, 222).

⁶⁸ Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 68.

⁶⁹ For an example of Nestorian teaching in the late eighth century, see Sidney Griffith, “Theodore Bar Koni’s *Scholion*: A Nestorian *Summa Contra Gentiles* from the First Abbasid Century,” in *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the Formative Period*, ed. by Nina Gargoian, Thomas Mathews and Robert Thomson (Washington, DC: Centre for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 53-70.

⁷⁰ Interestingly enough, it was a Nestorian bishop, Cyrus, who, as civil governor of Egypt, was responsible for handing that country over to the Arabs.

⁷¹ In actual fact, the Sassanid monarchy continued on in exile in China from 677 to 707, when the last member of that royal line finally died at the court of the T’ang emperor.

⁷² This may be in part due to favourable statements in the Qur’an regarding Christians (e.g. Sura 5:85; 9:113), as well as the existence of a covenant that had reputedly been made between Muhammad and the Nestorian patriarch Yeshuyab II (628-643) and confirmed by the Caliph ‘Umar I (634-644). The Monophysites in Syria and Egypt were also relieved to see the Arab conquest, which “delivered [them] from the cruelty of the Romans” (quoted in Browne, 40). For more information on the treatment of Christians during the Arab conquest, see Browne, 28-43.

⁷³ Further prohibitions included “criticizing the Muslim religion... adultery with or marrying a Muslim woman, robbing a Muslim, evangelizing a Muslim, or helping the enemies of Islam” (Moffett, 345). For more on what was required of religious minorities, see Browne, 45-47 and Moffett, 344-346, 356-357.

The Nestorians in particular were favoured above other Christians in the Caliphate. This was in large part because they had a high regard for education and soon acquired a reputation with the Arabs for being excellent accountants, architects, astrologers, bankers, doctors, merchants, philosophers, scientists, scribes and teachers. In fact, prior to the ninth century, nearly all the learned scholars in the Caliphate were Nestorian Christians. As a result, they came to hold positions of great power at the Arab court. The Muslim 'Abbasid Dynasty defeated the Umayyad Dynasty, thus taking over the Caliphate, in 750. The Umayyad capital of Damascus was abandoned and, in 762, a new one was built at Baghdad, twenty miles up the Tigris from Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In 775, the Nestorian Patriarchate also moved from Seleucia-Ctesiphon to the new Islamic capital. The headquarters of the church was now situated in the very centre of power of the expanding Muslim Empire.

In a sense, this became the Golden Age of the church, as it excelled in scholarship and gained favour at the court of the Caliph. As noted above, the Nestorians were chiefly responsible for transferring the wisdom of ancient Greece to the Arabs, who in turn reintroduced it to Europe.⁷⁴ Scholarship was especially promoted under the patriarch Timothy I, who at one time said, "Remember that the school is the mother and nurse of the sons of the church."⁷⁵ Most of the 'Abbasid caliphs had personal physicians who were Nestorians. At the same time, however, the church leaders understood what was required in order to maintain the favour of their rulers. In the view of some scholars, the church became too wealthy and worldly during this period, constantly concerned with not losing the status it enjoyed and thus gradually decaying from within.⁷⁶ The Patriarchate became subject to corruption, as rival contenders for the throne sought to buy votes from the bishops. In the words of Laurence E. Browne, professor of the University of Leeds who chronicled the plight of the Nestorians under Islamic rule, "not rarely the tempest of persecution was aroused by the mutual jealousy of the Christians themselves, the licence of the priests, the arrogance of the leaders, the tyrannical power of the magnates, and especially the altercations of the physicians and scribes about [the appointment of the Catholicos]."⁷⁷ By the late eleventh century, all Christian bishops in the Arab Empire, whether Nestorian or not, were placed under the authority of the Nestorian Catholicos.⁷⁸ In general, Christians experienced little persecution under the Muslims, except during the reigns of the caliphs 'Umar II (717-720),⁷⁹ al-Mu'tawakkil

⁷⁴ The scientific and philosophical works of classical Greece were usually translated first into Syriac and then into Arabic. This work was done primarily in the *Dar al-Hikmah* ("House of Learning"), established by Caliph al-Ma'mun in 830 and composed primarily of Nestorian scholars. For more information on Nestorian scholars and doctors at the Caliph's court, see Atiya, 270-271 and Moffett, 354-355.

⁷⁵ Quoted in Moffett, 354.

⁷⁶ See, for example, Atiya, 271-273.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Browne, 53. See full bibliographic details in note 2. For more details on the political intrigues of Nestorians who were involved in the Arab court, along with some of the restrictions experienced by the church under the Caliphate, see Atiya, 269-270 and Browne, 53-63.

⁷⁸ There were also Jacobite (Syrian Monophysite) and Melkite (Byzantine Orthodox) communities in Baghdad, each with their own bishop or metropolitan. These Christians had been brought to Persia under the Sassanids, who had captured them during the periodic wars with Rome.

⁷⁹ Again, as with the Persian Shahs, the dates given for the Caliphs are for their reigns.

(847-861), and al-Qadir (991-1031), although there continued to be restrictions on worship and proselytization.⁸⁰

Since the Nestorians were prohibited from evangelizing in the areas ruled by the Muslims, they were once again forced to look eastward in order to find those with whom they might share the gospel. Although there were Nestorian bishops or metropolitans in Damascus, Alexandria, Tarsus, and Jerusalem during this time, most of the new evangelistic efforts were in areas not yet Muslim. Already, at the time of the Arab invasion, there were more than twenty bishops and at least two archbishops located beyond the Oxus River (the latter possibly in Samarkand and Kashgar, although the exact locations are not known). *[There is no clear evidence from the sources that Kashgar had an archbishop at this early date.]* Under the patriarch Yeshuyab II (628-643), at the same time that a new metropolitanate was being created for India, the Nestorians also reached China⁸¹ and appointed a metropolitan for that country, in addition to several bishops. The accomplishments of Nestorian Christianity in China are commemorated on the Nestorian monument, erected in 781⁸² and unearthed in 1625⁸³ by Jesuit missionaries in Hsi-an-fu (modern-day Xi'an). The inscription in Chinese and Syriac records the spread of Nestorian Christianity during the T'ang dynasty.

The monument tells of a Syrian named Alopen who first brought the "Luminous Religion" to the Celestial Kingdom in 635.⁸⁴ *[It has recently been suggested that he was in fact a Persian and his name was probably Artaban, which makes sense phonologically.]* Three years later, the emperor T'ai-tsung (627-649) issued an Edict of Toleration for the Christians. He ordered that the Christian scriptures be translated into Chinese and provided for a church to be built. Subsequent emperors generally favoured the Christians, many of whom rose to prominent positions in society.⁸⁵ More churches and monasteries were built. Although there was some limited

⁸⁰ Meanwhile, to the west, the Shi'ite Fatimid dynasty had been founded in Egypt in 969. Under the Fatimids, Christians - Nestorian, Jacobite and Melkite - experienced considerable religious tolerance, although there was a short period of persecution under al-Hakim (1009-1020), the "mad caliph."

⁸¹ The Breviary of the Syrian Church of Malabar states that "by the means of St. Thomas the Chinese... were converted to the truth" (quoted in Chapman, 196), but there is virtually no historical evidence of this claim. There were probably Nestorians in China as early as the fifth century, but the Nestorian monument gives the first mention of an intentional mission to the Chinese. For more discussion of early stories of Christian influence in China, see Chapman, 196.

⁸² Mingana argues that it was erected in 779 (37-39). The dating of early Nestorian manuscripts and monuments is made difficult by the fact that Eastern Christians did not use the Western calendar at this time. Dates were reckoned according to the calendars in use by the various regimes they lived under, including the Seleucid calendar used in Persia (which began with the inauguration of Seleucid rule in Syria and Palestine in 312/311 BC), the Muslim calendar used in the Caliphate (using the Hejira, the flight of Muhammad to Medina in AD 632, as a starting point), and the Chinese calendar, which usually dated events relative to the reign of the Chinese Emperor. Many Nestorian documents, as well as certain monuments and gravestones, used the Seleucid calendar, but the method of reckoning the starting point for this method of dating was not always uniform, so the year 0 SE (Seleucid Era) can actually vary from 313 to 309 BC.

⁸³ Some authorities maintain that the monument was discovered in 1623 (see Moffett, 314).

⁸⁴ Interestingly enough, this was the same year that St. Aidan carried the gospel from Iona to pagan Northumbria. For the Chinese text of the monument, along with an English translation, notes and a lecture, see James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-Hsi, China* (London: Trubner & Co, 1888, reprinted by Paragon, New York, 1966).

⁸⁵ One such Christian was Yazdbozid, a married monk from Balkh (modern-day Afghanistan) who was a general in the Chinese army with a reputation for serving the poor and healing the sick.

persecution at times, in general, the Christians experienced few difficulties over the next two centuries. However, an imperial edict in 845 against all foreign (non-Confucian) religions brought an end to religious tolerance in China and persecution followed, for the Christians as well as the Buddhists and Zoroastrians. Monasteries were closed or destroyed and monks were forced to return to secular life. The T'ang dynasty eventually collapsed in 907. When some Nestorian monks visited China in 981, they were unable to find any Christians remaining. However, there are records of Arab travellers encountering Christians, churches and even monasteries in China during the tenth and eleventh centuries, though Christianity did not experience a resurgence there until the time of the Mongols, as we shall see below.

There is considerable debate about the degree to which Nestorian Christianity adapted to Chinese culture. Some, such as Henry Hill, see in the Nestorian monument "indications of a considerable degree of accommodation and even assimilation of the popular religions of China in its presentation of Christianity,"⁸⁶ whereas others, including Robin Waterfield, maintain that "the Christianity propagated by Alopen and his monks was not a watered-down version of the Gospels but was in every respect worthy and comprehensive."⁸⁷ Certain passages of scripture, as well as the ancient hymn *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* were translated into Chinese, but the church appears to have still functioned largely in Syriac.⁸⁸ Buddhism and Taoism were so prevalent at the time in China that it was difficult to walk the fine line between appearing to be a purely foreign religion and contextualizing the gospel so much that Christianity ended up looking like a Buddhist sect. At any rate, the church never influenced more than a small segment of the population and its great distance from the Nestorian centre in Persia meant that there was little opportunity for ongoing oversight and input from the better established churches to the west. In the end, the church's very existence was dependent on the whims of the Chinese rulers; when it fell out of favour with the emperor, its demise was certain, since it had not become integrated into Chinese culture.⁸⁹

At the same time, the Nestorians continued to experience success in Central Asia, especially amongst members of various nomadic Turkic tribes. Some converted to Islam from animism in the wake of the Muslim invasions that began in the seventh century and the subsequent work of Muslim missionaries, both traders and Sufi mystics, but many others became Christians as a result of the efforts of Nestorian missionaries and merchants. Amongst other artifacts that have been discovered in Central Asia, many coins with crosses on them have been recovered from around Bukhara (in modern-day Uzbekistan), mostly dating from the pre-Islamic era.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Hill, 108-109. See full bibliographic details in note 2.

⁸⁷ Waterfield, 45. See full bibliographic details in note 2.

⁸⁸ Christianity was known in China as the Ta-ch'in religion; Ta-ch'in was the Chinese name for the area around the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, it appears that Christianity was considered a foreign religion throughout the time that it was present in China.

⁸⁹ Some have also speculated that Persian Christians may have reached Japan in the eighth century, but there is little evidence of any successful evangelization of that land. See P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1930), 444-447. For more on the demise of Nestorianism in T'ang China, see Moffett, 302-314, where the author examines four possible reasons: religious persecution, theological compromise, cultural foreignness and political dependence on the ruling dynasty.

⁹⁰ In fact, more coins with Christian symbols have been found near Bukhara than anywhere else in Central Asia. For more information, see A. Naymark, "Christians in pre-Islamic Bukhara: Numismatic Evidence," in *Annual Central Eurasian Studies Conference, 1994-1996* (Bloomington, 1996).

According to Browne, “the Muslims had begun making raids into Transoxiana⁹¹ as early as A.D. 705, but their power was not consolidated there until well on into the ninth century, and until then Islam as a religion was not a serious rival to Christianity amongst the Turks.”⁹² Samarkand (also in modern-day Uzbekistan) received a bishop or possibly a metropolitan during either the patriarchate of Yeshuyab II (628-643) or that of Saliba Zakha (712-728).⁹³ The Catholicos Timothy I wrote in 781 of consecrating bishops for the Turks and for Tibet: “The king of the Turks with nearly all (the inhabitants of) his country, has left his ancient idolatry, and has become Christian, and has requested us in his letters to create a Metropolitan for his country; and this we have done.”⁹⁴ *[See my article where I argue that the Turks here were the Qarluqs.]* Bukhara was elevated to a metropolitan see city by the eighth century.⁹⁵ In Stewart’s words, the missionaries who thus went out “evangelized and baptized many, worked miracles, and showed signs... built churches and appointed priests and deacons to care for them.”⁹⁶ By the end of the first millennium, there were twenty Nestorian metropolitans, about 250 bishops and possibly 12 million Nestorian Christians in all, about one quarter of the worldwide Christian population at that time.

Prior to the conversion of the Seljuq Turks to Islam, it is possible that there were Christians amongst them; “The first Seljuks may have been Nestorian Christians. Their earliest leader, Seljuk, is said by tradition to have had two sons bearing Christian names, Mika’il (Michael) and Musa (Moses), and a grandson, Dawud (David).”⁹⁷ *[It is actually more likely that these names indicate the influence of the Turkic Khazars, who were Jewish, rather than any Christian influence.]* The principalities of Kashgar, Aksu and Khotan (in modern-day Chinese Turkestan) all became Christian. One of the most celebrated mass movements into the church (reportedly as many as 200,000 at once) occurred amongst the Kerait Turks,⁹⁸ a nomadic group living on the shores of Lake Baikal in western Mongolia, whose conversion in 1007-1008 was recorded in a letter written by Metropolitan Abdyeshu of Merv in the following year.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, only one priest and one deacon were sent to baptize the Keraites. It is questionable whether they received any instruction upon being baptized, but they were still known as a Christian tribe three centuries later, even amongst Muslim historians. Other tribes which converted in part or in whole between

⁹¹ Transoxiana (or Transoxania) was the ancient Greek name for the region that lay beyond the Oxus River (present-day Uzbekistan).

⁹² Browne, 95.

⁹³ His name is Syriac for “the cross has conquered.” Other dates given are the patriarchates of Ahai (410-415) or Shila (505-523).

⁹⁴ Mingana, 12. Moffett notes “The episcopal seats of some bishops appointed to nomadic tribes were probably only tent chapels mounted on wagons, movable ‘cathedrals,’ as it were” (448). *[This is speculation on Moffett’s part – we have no clear evidence of this.]*

⁹⁵ The first mosque in Bukhara (later to become one of the holiest cities in the Muslim world) was not built until 712, the second one not until 771. It is unclear exactly when Bukhara received its first bishop.

⁹⁶ Stewart, 84.

⁹⁷ Moffett, 385. Other sources give the name of Seljuq’s third son as Israel. Since all of these names have their origin in the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) and Christians also used Old Testament names, this could indicate either a Jewish or a Christian influence before the Seljuqs converted to Islam when they moved to Bukhara in the late tenth century. In 1055, they captured Baghdad, established the Seljuq Sultanate, and became the official protectors of the Caliphate. *[Again, I am quite sure this indicates Jewish, not Christian influence.]*

⁹⁸ The modern-day Kalmuks.

⁹⁹ According to contemporary accounts, this people-movement appears to have resulted from the work of travelling Nestorian merchants. For more on the story, see Mingana, 15-17 and Stewart, 143-144.

the tenth and twelfth centuries included the Onguts, the Uighurs,¹⁰⁰ the Naimans, the Merkites,¹⁰¹ the Uriyan-gakit¹⁰² and the Kangli, tribes which later formed an integral part of Chingiz Khan's Turkic-Mongol confederation.¹⁰³

The legacy of these Nestorian missionaries is still preserved in the scripts that they introduced to the area, all based on the Syriac alphabet, including the Soghdian, Uighur, Manchurian and Mongolian scripts.¹⁰⁴ *[This is not correct – they are based, like Syriac, on the earlier Aramaic alphabet, so they are cousins to Syriac, not children of Syriac.]* There are also Christian tombstones preserved in two ancient cemeteries located at Tokmak near Lake Issyq-Kol (close to Bishkek, in modern-day Kyrgyzstan) that bear witness to the faith of a truly cosmopolitan Christian population made up of Syrians, Persians, Indians, Mongols, Siberians, Manchurians, Chinese and Turks, with the latter in the majority. *[With what I now know about the gravestone inscriptions, I would amend this to say that the majority were Turks, with perhaps some Persians and maybe some “Syrians” amongst them, but all the names I know of are either Syriac, Persian or Turkic, with the exception of an Armenian bishop – I know of no Indians, Siberians, or Manchurians – whether or not some of the names are Mongol rather than Turkic is unclear and requires more research.]* In addition to laypeople, there are also many scholars, preachers, priests and other clerics buried there. Many of the graves can be dated from the mid-thirteenth to mid-fourteenth centuries. Most of the inscriptions are in Syriac, though some are in the Turkic script that was used at that time.¹⁰⁵ *[All of the inscriptions date from the 13th and 14th centuries and are written in either the Syriac language or the Old Turkic language, although the latter is also in Syriac script, sometimes referred to as Syro-Turkic.]* As Gordon Chapman says, “so successful were the missionary efforts that it appeared that Christianity might become the dominant faith in the whole region between the Caspian Sea and Sinkiang in Northwest China.”¹⁰⁶

Meanwhile, the Nestorians had continued to expand southward as well. Ties with the St. Thomas Christians on the Malabar coast of India remained strong. Ceylon had a Christian community, including a bishop, as early as the sixth century. A bishop was appointed for the island of Socotra off the coast of the Arab Peninsula as early as the ninth century.¹⁰⁷ Later on, in the thirteenth

¹⁰⁰ The Uighurs had originally adopted Manichaeism as their state religion around 762, while they lived on the Siberian steppe. Conversions to Christianity probably started under the Nestorians of the T'ang dynasty. When they were defeated by the Kirghiz (another Turkic group) and their empire collapsed in 840, they fled west to the Tarim Basin (in modern-day Chinese Turkestan) where they adopted both Buddhism and Christianity before eventually converting to Islam in the mid-tenth century. *[Despite Uighur conversions to Christianity, the majority religion remained Manichaeism, later supplemented by Buddhism – the final conversion of Uighurs to Islam was not until the 14th or 15th century.]*

¹⁰¹ The modern-day Buriyats.

¹⁰² A Nestorian document dating from 1298 indicates that, at that time, this tribe had a Christian queen, called Arangul, the sister of George (probably the Prince George mentioned below).

¹⁰³ It should be remembered that, even at this time, the distinction between Turks and Mongols was not always clear, since there were so many cultural, linguistic and even physiological similarities between those who belonged to the many Turkic-Mongol tribes. For more on the history of Christianity amongst the Turkic-Mongol tribes, see Stewart, 143-156.

¹⁰⁴ The Uighur script, no longer in use, was the basis for the development of the Manchurian and Mongolian scripts, which are still used today. For more on the development of these scripts, see Stewart, 333-337.

¹⁰⁵ The cemeteries were discovered in 1885 by Russian explorers. For details of the tombstone inscriptions, see Atiya, 261, Mingana, 39-42 and Stewart, 197-213.

¹⁰⁶ Chapman, 194-195. See full bibliographic details in note 2.

¹⁰⁷ These Nestorians were later converted to Catholicism by Portuguese explorers in the late fifteenth century.

century, Marco Polo spoke of six great kingdoms in central India, three of which were Christian. Various travellers to India in the late Middle Ages reported encountering Nestorians in Patna, Madras, Bombay, the Punjab and elsewhere throughout India. Some also claimed that they had met Christians from Burma and Siam.¹⁰⁸ There is even speculation that there were large numbers of Nestorians in the Philippines when the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth century and that they were forced to convert to Catholicism, as had happened under the Portuguese in India and Socotra.¹⁰⁹

The Crusades brought the Christians of Europe into direct contact with the Muslims (under the military leadership of the Seljuq Turks) for two centuries, beginning in 1097.¹¹⁰ The capture of Jerusalem in 1187 by the Muslim commander Saladin caused the crusaders to realize that they would need outside assistance to retake the Holy Land. Rumours began to reach Europe of a powerful Christian priest-king, called Prester John, who was said to rule a vast domain in the East.¹¹¹ A supposed letter from Prester John started to circulate around 1145 and the rulers of Europe began to put their hope in this mysterious king, wondering if he would be the one to come to their aid. In reality, Prester John never existed. There was indeed a new empire arising in the East, but it was not Christian and its arrival in Europe brought destruction and plague, not assistance against the Muslim threat in the Middle East.

The new empire was that of Chingiz Khan (1167-1227).¹¹² Born Temüchin, the son of a small chieftain and originally under the tutelage of Toghril Wang Khan, a Christian ruler of the Kerait tribe, he rose to become the khan (or emperor) of all the Mongols in 1206.¹¹³ In quick succession, he conquered Tibet, Manchuria, Turkestan, eastern Persia and Afghanistan.¹¹⁴ After his death in 1227, Mongol troops invaded Russia and Eastern Europe between 1236 and 1241, wreaking havoc wherever they went. Matthew Paris, a European writer of the time, sums up the sentiments of those who experienced the invasion: “A detestable nation of Satan, to wit the countless army of the Tartars... poured forth like devils from the Tartarus, so that they are rightly called Tartari or Tartarians.”¹¹⁵ Western Europe was only spared by the death of Ogetai, the second Great Khan (1229-1241), which necessitated the withdrawal of Mongol troops to the East to participate in the election of a new khan.

¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the traveler Cosmas Indicopleustes reported meeting Christians in Burma and Siam as early as the sixth century.

¹⁰⁹ See Stewart, 100.

¹¹⁰ Pope Urban II issued the call for the First Crusade in 1095, but the Crusaders did not arrive in the Middle East until 1097.

¹¹¹ The original story of Prester John seems to have been based on a distorted report of the defeat of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar in 1141 by the Qara-Khitai, a Buddhist empire based in northern China. For more information on the legend of Prester John, see C. F. Beckingham, “The Achievements of Prester John,” in *Between Islam and Christendom*, ed. by C. F. Beckingham (London: SOAS, 1983), 3-24; and Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1972).

¹¹² Commonly rendered Genghiz Khan in the West, the name means “Universal Ruler.” The dates given for Chingiz Khan are for his life. The dates given for the other Mongol khans are for their reigns.

¹¹³ For a good background to Chingiz Khan’s rise to power, see Peter Jackson, tr., *The Mission of Friar William Rubruck* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), 9-11. Toghril Wang Khan may also have been the historical figure on which the legend of Prester John was based.

¹¹⁴ His conquests destroyed cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, Khwarezm, Merv, Balkh, Herat and Nishapur, all important Nestorian centres. For an overview of the destruction unleashed by the Mongols in Nestorian areas, see Stewart, 256-264.

¹¹⁵ Quoted in Stewart, 266. *Tartarus* is Greek for “hell.”

In an effort to dissuade the Mongols from any further incursions into Christendom, as well as to attempt to evangelize them, a number of Catholic monks were sent on diplomatic missions to the Great Khan at Karakorum, beginning in the mid-thirteenth century and continuing for a century after that.¹¹⁶ John of Plano Carpini, a Franciscan, arrived in 1247. Another Franciscan, William of Rubruck reached the Mongol capital in 1253.¹¹⁷ The famous traveler Marco Polo reached the Mongol capital of Khanbaliq (modern-day Beijing) in 1275, encountering many Nestorians on his way from the Middle East. He speaks of both Nestorian and Jacobite Christians amongst the Kurds and mentions Nestorians living further east in a number of Silk Road cities. In Samarkand, he describes the building of a great church dedicated to John the Baptist which was erected to celebrate the conversion of the Chaghatayid khan¹¹⁸ to Christianity. *[There are serious questions about whether or not Marco Polo ever visited Samarkand and therefore whether he saw this church himself or just heard about it.]* Nestorians are also mentioned in Kashgar, Yarkand, Kara Khoja (in “Uighuristan” - this may be modern-day Urumchi) and Ghinghintalas (possibly modern-day Barkul), all in Chinese Turkestan today.¹¹⁹ In China proper, Polo tells us of Christians in Shachau, Kanchou, Erguiul (possibly Yunchang), Sinju and Kalachan (possibly Ningxia), cities in the Gansu Corridor, as well as in Tenduc (modern-day Inner Mongolia), Khanbaliq, Yachi (in Yunnan province, near Burma), Ho-kien-fu, Pao-ying, Chinkiang and Kinsai (modern-day Hangzhou). He also describes the Christians in Malabar and Quilon, in India, as well as those living on Male Island (the Maldives) and Socotra, all of them subject to the Nestorian patriarch in Baghdad.¹²⁰ Although the accounts of these travellers give us interesting insights into both Mongol life and the state of the Nestorian church amongst the Khans, the embassies produced little hope of cooperation between the West and the Mongols, who consistently demanded submission to Mongol rule and tribute money in exchange for protection from invasion.¹²¹

Carpini and Rubruck brought back to the West news of the Nestorian Christians living amongst the Mongols, where they served as governmental ministers, craftsmen, scribes, doctors and even governors.¹²² In general, these travellers regarded the Nestorians as heretics, unnecessarily subservient to the dictates of the khans and ignorant of the basics of the Christian faith.¹²³

¹¹⁶ See Moffett, 407 for a list of the different missions from the West.

¹¹⁷ For an account of his journey, see Jackson.

¹¹⁸ The Chagatid Khanate was one of the divisions of Chingiz Khan’s empire, encompassing most of Central Asia and ruled over by the line of Chagatai, his second son.

¹¹⁹ There were also Jacobite bishops in Yarkand and Barkul by this time. *[I am now not sure where I got this information from, but I do not think it is accurate.]*

¹²⁰ For an account of his travels, see Ronald Latham, tr., *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: Penguin Books, 1958).

¹²¹ The reply of Khan Güyük to the papal bull of Innocent IV, delivered by John of Plano Carpini, is typical: “By the power of Eternal Heaven we are the ruler of all nations and this is our command: if it reaches thee, thou who art the great Pope together with all the Princes shalt come in person to pay us homage and to serve us... How dost thou know that thy words have God’s sanction? From the rising of the sun to its setting all lands have been made subject to us. Who could do this contrary to the will of God? Now thou shouldst say with a sincere heart “I will submit and serve you,” and we shall recognize thy submission. If thou does not observe God’s command we shall know thee as our enemy” (quoted in Zernov, 122).

¹²² Khan Güyük’s chief minister was a Christian named Qadaq, while the chancellor in charge of finances and domestic affairs at Khan Möngke’s court was one Bulghai, a Nestorian who was probably from the Kerait tribe.

¹²³ Rubruck writes of the Nestorians that they are “ignorant... they chant like the monks among us who know no grammar... they are completely corrupt... they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them... have several wives...

However, as a result of the work of Nestorian missionaries with various Turkic and Mongol tribes, there were Christians amongst the royal family, including the mothers and wives of several of the khans.¹²⁴ Indeed, Chingiz Khan himself married a Kerait princess, gave one of her sisters to his oldest son Jochi, and a third sister to his fourth son, Tolui. This latter Christian woman, Sorkaktani, became the mother of three of Chingiz Khan's most prominent grandsons: Möngke (Mangu), the fourth Great Khan (1251-1259), Kublai Khan (1260-1294), the founder of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China, and Hulagu (1256-1265), the founder of the Il-khanid dynasty in Persia.¹²⁵ Güyük, the third Great Khan (1246-1248), was sympathetic to Christians and there were rumours that he had been baptized. According to several contemporary historians, Sartaq, the son of Batu, the first khan of the Golden Horde, was a Christian. Several Mongol princes were baptized as infants and two of Kublai Khan's brothers were Christians, but Kublai himself never converted, although he was very tolerant of Christianity and, on the first visit of the Polos in 1265, even invited the Pope to send one hundred missionaries to teach him and his people about Christianity, a request that was unfortunately not heeded by the pontiff.¹²⁶ However, it is difficult to determine whether these expressions of interest were genuine or merely in order to secure divine favour through the Christians in the realm (just as this favour was sought through representatives of other religions as well).¹²⁷

After Kublai Khan founded the Yuan dynasty in 1260, his court became home to a number of artisans, doctors and key advisors who were Nestorian Christians. The growing importance of Christians in the area was such that a metropolitan had been appointed for Khanbaliq in 1248. A Nestorian named Mar Sergius was governor of the city of Chinkiang (between Nanking and Shanghai) from 1278 to 1281.¹²⁸ Another prominent Nestorian, a Syrian named Ai-se, was Kublai Khan's court physician, a well-known astronomer and president of the Han-lin Academy, the most prestigious association of scholars in China. In all, there may have been as many as 30,000 Christians in China at this time, but (as had been the case under the T'ang dynasty) most of them were non-Chinese.¹²⁹ Even the Christian tribes who were part of Kublai Khan's empire were all non-Chinese, such as the Ongut Turks, who (as Marco Polo reports) lived in the province of "Tenduc" and were ruled by "a king of the lineage of Prester John, who is a Christian

they are all simoniacs [charging a fee for their religious services]... and... have an eye not to spreading the Faith but to making money... the lives of the Mo'als [Mongols]... are more blameless than their own" (Jackson, 163-164).

¹²⁴ There were also Buddhists and Muslims at the Mongol court.

¹²⁵ Both Muslim and Christian historians speak highly of her: "If I were to see among the race of women another woman like this, I should say that the race of women was far superior to that of men"; "Among the Tartars this lady is... more powerful than anyone else except [Batu, the khan of the Golden Horde]"; "She was extremely intelligent and able and towered above all the women in the world" (quotes from Moffett, 410, 418). Sorkaktani died in 1252, but she was given the title of "empress" in 1310 in a ceremony that included a Nestorian mass.

¹²⁶ Only two Dominican friars accompanied the Polos on their second journey to China, both of whom turned back long before the party reached the court of Kublai Khan.

¹²⁷ Kublai's ultimate choice not to convert to Christianity may have been influenced by his four year civil war with his brother Arik-buka (1260-1264), who was supported by the Nestorians, and the later rebellion of Nayan (1287), a baptized Nestorian who challenged Kublai's rule and went into battle with the cross displayed on his standard. See Browne, 152-154 and Latham, 119-120 for more on why Kublai did not become a Christian.

¹²⁸ His grandfather had been from Samarkand and had apparently healed one of Chingiz Khan's sons through a combination of prayer and medicine.

¹²⁹ For more on Christianity under Kublai Khan, see Moffett, 443-456.

and a priest and also bears the title ‘Prester John’. His personal name is George.”¹³⁰ This George was indeed a historical figure, although he was not, of course, related to the mythical Prester John. Moffett reports, however, that he was “a distinguished general, a highly literate aristocrat... and a devout Christian.”¹³¹ The church never truly gained a foothold in Chinese soil, so that when the Mongol dynasty fell to the Ming dynasty in 1368 and foreign religions were once again persecuted, Christianity once again died out in China.¹³² However, during the heyday of the Mongol Empire, there were Nestorians in all four of the khanates into which Chingiz Khan’s empire had been divided after his death: the Empire of the Great Khan in Mongolia and China proper, the Chaghatayid Khanate in Central Asia, the Golden Horde on the northern steppe and the Il-khanate in Iran.¹³³

When Hulagu, Chingiz Khan’s grandson and the first of the Il-khans, captured Baghdad in 1258 (thus bringing the Muslim ‘Abbasid dynasty to an end), he spared the Christians, since he claimed to be a Christian himself.¹³⁴ Although this is questionable, his mother and his chief wife, Doquz Khatun, were indeed devout Nestorians. The latter was responsible for the presence of a church in the royal camp of the Il-khans. The Christian doctors and scribes who had functioned in the Arab court in Baghdad continued on in service to the Mongols. However, not all the Christians living in Persia had fared so well. The entire populations of both Merv and Nishapur (Christian and Muslim) were virtually exterminated by the Mongols en route to conquering Baghdad. Once the former Caliphate was firmly under the control of the Il-khans, Christianity became the favoured religion. Unfortunately, the Christians used their new-found freedom to antagonize the Muslim majority, even going so far as to drink wine publicly during Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, and to compel Muslim merchants to rise when they carried the cross through the streets of Baghdad and Damascus.

This was the time of the famous *Pax Mongolica*, when roads could be travelled from China to Persia without fear of robbers; there was an efficient postal system throughout the Mongol Empire and numerous *caravanserais* (hostels and inns) were constructed for the travellers who continued to travel along the Silk Road. In the wake of their brutal conquests, the Mongols proved to be extremely capable rulers who were very tolerant of other religions. Indeed, the animism and shamanism that they had practiced for centuries was gradually overlaid and absorbed by the dominant religions of the areas they conquered. In China proper, under Kublai Khan, Buddhism was adopted, while the other three Mongol khanates eventually converted to Islam: the Il-khans under Ghazan (1295-1304), the Golden Horde under Uzbek (1313-1342), and the Chaghatayid Khanate under Tarmashirin (1326-1334). Prior to their conversion to Islam,

¹³⁰ Latham, 105-106. His Turkic name was probably Gorguz or Korguz. His father had married one of Kublai’s daughters and he himself married one of the Khan’s granddaughters.

¹³¹ Moffett, 451. As noted below, when the Franciscans arrived in the late thirteenth century, George converted to Catholicism, a major coup for the Latin missionaries.

¹³² However, apparently there were still some Nestorians near “Cathay” as late as 1440, according to Nicolo Conti, who travelled throughout India: “It would seem as if some tribe of the Kerait or the Uighurs had maintained their Christianity till near the middle of the fifteenth century” (Browne, 173). In addition, the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci found a very small remnant of Nestorians in Hsi-an-fu in 1608, but there is no reference to them after that date. Some have also speculated that there are remnants of Nestorian Christianity in certain religious movements found in China and Japan (see Stewart, 297-302).

¹³³ Il-khan is Mongolian for “subordinate khan,” since these rulers still swore allegiance to the Great Khan in Mongolia (and later China).

¹³⁴ Hulagu was aided in his conquest of the capital of the Caliphate by Armenian and Georgian Christians.

however, although the dominant religion in Persia was still Islam, the Il-khans considered Christianity a definite option for some time, especially in light of the presence of Christians in high places.¹³⁵ Hulagu's general, Kitbuqa, who captured Aleppo and Damascus in 1260, was a Nestorian from the Naiman or Kerait tribe and the khan's son, Abaqa (1265-1282), had two Christian wives, including the daughter of Michael Palaeologus, the Byzantine emperor. Both he and his son, Arghun (1284-1291) had Christian legends on their coins which read as follows: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, One God."

As the Mongols became more established in Persia, efforts were made to make diplomatic contact with the West. Indeed, Arghun sent a mission to Europe that is part of one of the most fascinating stories in church history. It involved two Nestorian monks from China, Rabban Sauma¹³⁶ (an Uighur, 1230?-1293) and his disciple, Markos (an Ongut, 1244-1317).¹³⁷ **[In fact, both were Ongut Turks.]** The two embarked on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land, their prime purpose being to visit the many holy shrines that housed relics of the saints.¹³⁸ Their journey took them from Khanbaliq via Tangut (in modern-day Tibet and Gansu), Khotan, Kashgar and Tus (near Nishapur, Iran) to Azerbaijan, where the patriarch was at the time. Upon their arrival in 1279, they learned that the road to Jerusalem was not safe, so they stayed in the Mongol realm and Markos was made metropolitan of China by the Catholicos, Denha I.

Two years later, the Catholicos died and Markos was elected as the Nestorian Patriarch, adopting the title Yaballaha III (1281-1317).¹³⁹ In 1287, he and the Il-khan Arghun jointly dispatched Rabban Sauma, now a bishop, to the pope and the rulers of Europe, in an effort to seek support for the Mongol campaign to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims. Rabban Sauma visited Byzantium, Rome, Genoa, Paris and Bordeaux.¹⁴⁰ When questioned by the cardinals in Rome as to whether the Nestorian patriarch recognized the authority of the pope, he replied, "Never has any man from the Pope come to us Eastern Christians. The Holy Apostles taught our fathers the true faith and so we hold it intact to this day."¹⁴¹ The Il-khan was so pleased with the mission that

¹³⁵ The Muslim historian Rashid al-Din attests to the favour that was shown to the Christians: "To please his princess [Dokuz Khatun] Hulegu heaped favors upon [the Christians] and gave them every token of his regard so that new churches were continually being built and at the gate of dokuz-khatun's *ordu* [tent] there was always a chapel where bells were rung" (quoted in Moffett, 426).

¹³⁶ *Rabban* is Syriac for "monk." His father may have been an advisor to Kublai Khan.

¹³⁷ For an annotated English translation of the Syriac text of their journey and the subsequent mission of Rabban Sauma, see James Montgomery, *The History of Yaballaha III* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927). Another translation can be found in E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1928).

¹³⁸ Like most Christians of that time, the Nestorians held relics in high regard.

¹³⁹ According to the Syriac *History of Yaballaha III*, Abaqa greeted the news of Yaballaha's election with these words: "Worthy of admiration is this purity of motive and conscience, and God is with those who seek Him and do His will. This man and his companion have come from the East to go to Jerusalem. This [the election] has happened to them by the will of God. We too serve the will of God and the prayers of the Christians. He shall stand as their head and sit upon the throne" (Montgomery, 45). Although Yaballaha could not speak Syriac, it was a politically wise move to entrust the patriarchate to a Mongol-Turk at a time when the Mongols ruled over most of the lands where Nestorians lived.

¹⁴⁰ Although he spent considerable time in conversation with European rulers (including Edward I of England) and church officials, it seems that one of Rabban Sauma's chief interests was viewing the churches, shrines and relics in each place that he visited.

¹⁴¹ Quoted in Zernov, 125-126. For the full text of Rabban Sauma's dialogue with the Roman cardinals, see Montgomery, 57-58.

he had his son baptized and promised to be baptized himself when the Mongols captured Jerusalem. Two more embassies were dispatched by the Mongols, one led by a high-ranking officer in the army who had converted to Christianity. However, Europe never followed up on its expressed intentions of cooperating with the Mongols and the opportunity was soon lost.¹⁴² Arghun died in 1291.

At the time, the Nestorian church still looked strong, with 25 metropolitans in far-flung locations around Asia, including India, Turkestan and China. In addition, there were between 200 and 250 bishops. Nestorians could be found in the outermost parts of Asia, from Siberia in the north to India in the south, from Persia in the west to China in the east. As noted above, there are also varying reports about Nestorians in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, Java,¹⁴³ Burma and Indochina.¹⁴⁴ The patriarch in Baghdad still governed an area that was much larger than that overseen by the Pope. However, the end was near and it was to come swiftly and ultimately with great violence. Although several factors contributed to the eventual conversion of the Il-khans to Islam, a major influence was the Mongol view that victory on the battlefield was the supreme evidence of divine favour, a view which was reinforced when the Muslims defeated the Mongols (led by the Christian general Kitbuqa) at 'Ain Jalut in 1260 and again in Syria in 1280. When the Muslims finally captured Akka (Acre), the last Crusader fortress, in 1291, the Il-khans decided to throw in their lot with the followers of Muhammad, rather than the Christians. Although Arghun's predecessor, Ahmad (1282-1284), had been the first Il-khan to become a Muslim, the final conversion to Islam actually occurred during the reign of Ghazan (1295-1304),¹⁴⁵ an event which foreshadowed the impending demise of the Church of the East. Over the next several decades, persecution increased, churches were closed, destroyed or converted into mosques, bishoprics became vacant, priests were killed, the Patriarch Yaballaha III was imprisoned and tortured,¹⁴⁶ and the Christian population continued to dwindle, as a result of both massacres and apostasy to Islam.¹⁴⁷ In 1318, the last recorded synod of the Nestorian Church in Persia met to consecrate Timothy II as patriarch. James Montgomery, who translated *The History of Yaballaha III* from Syriac, sums up the situation with the following words: "What hope there had been of the Nestorian evangelization of the Mongols was dissipated forever; they became devoted followers of the Arabian Prophet."¹⁴⁸

Meanwhile, Catholic missionaries had begun to arrive in China. The first of these, the Franciscan monk John of Montecorvino, reached Khanbaliq in 1294 and shortly after converted the Ongut Prince George to Catholicism. Despite ongoing opposition from the Nestorians, the work grew,

¹⁴² For an outline of the various embassies and diplomatic letters between the Mongols and Europe during the Il-khanate, see Montgomery, 7-10.

¹⁴³ There is a reference from 1503, after the time of Timur, to the appointment of a metropolitan for Java, but nothing before this time.

¹⁴⁴ For more discussion on the possibility of Nestorians in these locations, see Moffett, 459-461.

¹⁴⁵ Ghazan's two predecessors, Gaykhatu (1291-1295) and Baydu (1295), had both been favourable to Christians, but neither of them were capable rulers. Upon conversion, Ghazan took the Muslim name Mahmud.

¹⁴⁶ In 1310, the Patriarch made his last visit to the Mongol court, saying, "I am wearied with service of the Mongols."

¹⁴⁷ For more on the conversion of the Mongols to Islam and the subsequent persecution of the Christians, see Browne, 159-172 and Moffett, 475-480.

¹⁴⁸ Montgomery, 24. The chronicler of Yaballaha III reports "there befell division, and civilization was disturbed, and the hordes of the Arabs roused themselves upon the Church and her children for their losses through the father of these Kings [Arghun]" (Montgomery, 80).

until Montecorvino was appointed the Catholic archbishop of Khanbaliq in 1307,¹⁴⁹ responsible for a vast area, initially including Persia. Under his leadership, itinerant preachers worked in various locations throughout the Mongol Empire. Montecorvino himself, who worked in Khanbaliq, is reported to have baptized 10,000 Tatars (Mongols).¹⁵⁰ In 1318, the pope appointed an archbishop of Sultaniyah, responsible for Catholic work in Persia.¹⁵¹ In 1326, a Dominican, Thomas of Mancasol, apparently received permission from the Chaghatayid khan Ilchigedai to build a church in Samarkand.¹⁵² Meanwhile, the Franciscans had established a bishopric in the Chaghatayid capital of Almaliq (modern-day Kulja in Chinese Turkestan) in 1320. This was elevated to an episcopate, the seat of an archbishop, in 1334, but four years later, at the death of the last Chaghatayid khan, a Muslim who permitted the Catholics to baptize and teach his son, the Christians in the city were all massacred, including the Franciscans.¹⁵³ The Catholic presence in Persia only lasted until 1348, after which the Romans focussed their efforts on the Christian Armenians and Georgians. In China, the Franciscans vanished with the fall of the Mongol dynasty in 1368. There are records of Ongut Christians converting to Taoism and Confucianism.¹⁵⁴ The Mongols in Mongolia and China converted to Buddhism. In Persia, the last Il-khan died in 1335 and his realm was plunged into anarchy. Similar situations occurred as the direct descendants of Chingiz Khan ran out in the Chaghatayid Khanate and the Golden Horde in 1338 and 1357, respectively. The situation was ripe for the next conqueror to sweep in from the East: Timur (1336-1405), known in the West as Tamerlane. For the Nestorians, the writing was on the wall.

It was Timur who effectively dealt the death blow to the Nestorian church.¹⁵⁵ A Mongol-Turk and a fanatical Muslim, he dreamed of an empire that would surpass that of Chingiz Khan, ruled from his capital of Samarkand. At his death, his realm stretched from Syria in the west to Chinese Turkestan in the east, from Delhi in the south to the gates of Moscow in the north. When he was finished his work of conquering Asia, only the church in Malabar would be left standing, and this only because his campaigns did not reach that far south into India. In his barbarous campaign of conquest, he wiped out most of what remained of the church in Central Asia and Persia. Hundreds of thousands of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and pagans were indiscriminately slaughtered as his troops burned whole cities and left pyramids of skulls as a testimony to their

¹⁴⁹ Montecorvino did not receive this news until 1313, when the bishops dispatched by Rome to consecrate him finally reached China.

¹⁵⁰ Other prominent Franciscans who worked with Montecorvino were Andrew of Perugia and Odoric of Pordenone.

¹⁵¹ Whereas the Franciscans headed up the work in China, the Dominicans were entrusted with Persia.

¹⁵² This church was to be dedicated to John the Baptist. It is not apparent if this is the same church alluded to by Marco Polo, who had visited the area 50 years earlier and whose *Travels* had been written 25 years before Thomas reached Central Asia. This seems highly unlikely, unless there had been such a church there previously and Thomas was seeking to rebuild it. At any rate, when Thomas returned to the pope, he was consecrated as the Catholic bishop of Samarkand. In the end, the church was never built. Even after this time, there must still have been Nestorians in the city; there is a Nestorian lectionary in Paris which, according to Mingana, was “written apparently in Samarkand in A.D. 1374” (43), after Timur had consolidated his rule in Transoxiana and established the city as his capital.

¹⁵³ However, John of Marignolli, the last Catholic bishop of Khanbaliq who actually resided in the city, passed through Almaliq on his way to China around 1340 and was able to build a church, baptize and preach.

¹⁵⁴ For more on this second disappearance of the church in China, see Moffett, 471-475.

¹⁵⁵ For more on the campaigns of Timur and especially his hatred of Christianity, see Moffett, 483-487 and Stewart, 274-281. *[Again, I think Timur's relationship with Christianity is open to more analysis and debate.]*

military prowess.¹⁵⁶ It was a mortal wound from which the Church of the East would never recover. Unfortunately, the tumultuous atmosphere of the time provided little opportunity for writing historical accounts, so virtually nothing is known of what happened to the church during this period. At the same time, many earlier documents of the church were destroyed in the carnage. *[Although the Church of the East still considers Timur to be the great destroyer of their church, I am not entirely convinced that he was as anti-Christian as some maintain. Rather, I think that all who opposed him suffered, whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu or otherwise.]*

In truth, the church had been in a weakened condition for some time before Timur's arrival. How had this come about? There were both external and internal factors, those which reflected the social, religious and political context the church was surrounded by and those which revealed its inner spiritual health. Among the former, perhaps the most basic hindrance to growth was the enormous geographical distances involved in communicating between the church centre in Persia and the outer extremities of Asia, a situation which European Christianity did not share. Nor can we ignore the crippling effects of either persecution or suppression under the Persians, the Arabs and finally, the Mongol-Turks who converted to Islam. Furthermore, the persistent status of Christianity as a minority religion, lacking political power and conceived as a "foreign" faith, left it unable to leave any permanent impact on Asia. Again, these were situations which European Christianity did not share, apart from persecution prior to Constantine.¹⁵⁷

However, none of these, though they each contributed to the ultimate disappearance of Nestorian Christianity in Asia, was insurmountable. If we want to find the most significant reasons for the failure of the Nestorians, we must look at the internal factors. Here, we may find several. Rather than utilizing the local languages of the majority of the people (usually Persian or Turkic), the church insisted on the use of a Syriac liturgy that few understood.¹⁵⁸ It is not surprising that, in many places, they were referred to as "Syrians" and their religion was considered to be a foreign one. In addition, at least among some of the Nestorians who lived further away from the church centre (such as the priests described by Rubruck), the scholasticism of earlier years seems to have given way to superstitious ignorance. Moreover, after centuries of living under non-Christian rulers, the church had developed a habit of subservience to their masters, whether Persian, Arab or Mongol, that made them less likely to stand up for truth and more likely to look for ways to curry favour with those in power, thus communicating that their faith was for the weak only.¹⁵⁹ Another major reason for the decline of the church was the loss of evangelistic fervour; in the words of al-Kindi, a Nestorian apologist living in the ninth century, "the monks today are not missionaries."¹⁶⁰ However, perhaps the primary reason for the disappearance of the church in

¹⁵⁶ At Isfahan, for example, they left 70,000 skulls, at Baghdad, 90,000. An Arab historian of the time, ibn Arabshah, questions how "Muslim" Timur truly was.

¹⁵⁷ As Moffett notes, "Asia never produced a Constantine" (505).

¹⁵⁸ It should be noted, however, that many Nestorian scholars began to write works in Arabic after the establishment of the Caliphate in Baghdad. In addition, Nestorian hymns and lectionaries have been found that were written in Mongolian and Soghdian (a Persian dialect spoken in Transoxiana), but these seem to be an exception to the rule. See Mingana, 42, 44 and Stewart, 163 for more details. *[In fact, there is a considerable amount of Christian Sogdian material that was found in the early 20th century in Turfan, now kept mostly in Berlin – this included lectionaries, commentaries, hagiographies, etc.]*

¹⁵⁹ The chronicler of Yaballaha III freely confesses that "the glory of their Church grew... by the great diligence and good management of Mar Yaballaha and his skill in adulation of the royal household" (Montgomery, 76).

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Browne, 85.

Asia was the idea that God's favour is manifested in worldly success, rather than through the indwelling life of Christ, the God-man. Especially in later years, the church hierarchy succumbed to the lure of worldliness, perhaps best exhibited by the persistent rivalry for and attempts to buy the position of patriarch. In Browne's words, "Church dignitaries on every occasion made use of the civil power for their purposes. The idea that there was in Christ a stronger power than that of earthly might seems never to have entered their minds. This lack is the condemnation of their Christianity, and probably more than anything else the cause of its downfall."¹⁶¹

In the wake of Timur's butchery, the remaining Nestorians fled to northern Iran, near the border with the emerging Ottoman Empire. There, near Lake Van and Lake Urmia, they lived fairly peacefully amongst the neighbouring Turks and Kurds for several centuries. In 1552, several bishops who objected to the system of hereditary succession by which the Patriarchate was passed from uncle to nephew (a system which continued from the fifteenth century to the 1970s) chose to associate themselves with Rome, resulting in the formation of a Chaldean Patriarchate which owed allegiance to the pope. However, as a result of controversy over enforcing clerical celibacy (which the Nestorians did not practice) and changes to the traditional Syriac liturgy, most of those who had gone over to Rome had returned to the Church of the East by 1670, when the Chaldean Patriarch himself cut off ties with the papacy.¹⁶² At the same time, by the seventeenth century, the St. Thomas Christians in India, who had previously related exclusively to the Nestorian Patriarch, had been split into several groups, with some having come under papal authority in 1599, primarily as a result of Portuguese involvement in the area, and many others owing allegiance to the Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) Church, after having been given a Jacobite bishop in 1665.¹⁶³

From 1831 on, American and British missionaries began to work with the Nestorians in northern Iran (also referred to as Assyrians at that time). Both groups had the express purpose of working within the existing structure of the church to bring renewal and restoration (by this time, centuries of neglect had reduced the once-proud Nestorians to living in disease, poverty and ignorance) "to enable the Nestorian Church through the grace of God to exert a commanding influence in the regeneration of Asia."¹⁶⁴ As a result of their work, a number of important Syriac manuscripts were recovered and several were translated into English. The New and Old Testaments were printed in modern and ancient Syriac in 1846 and 1852, respectively. The missionaries established a seminary, boy's and girl's schools, printing presses and medical work. In 1846, a revival broke out in the girl's school established by the American missionaries. The result was a split in the church which culminated in the formation of a Protestant congregation in 1855. More missionaries came at this time from Germany and Norway.

Also in 1846, after years of mounting tension between the two communities, the Kurds invaded from the north and massacred 10,000 of the Assyrian Christians, one fifth of their population. As a result of this event, as well as the realization that they were surrounded by hostile neighbours, the Nestorian Patriarch (known by the hereditary title "Mar Shimun") began to appeal to both England and Russia for help. Conflict with the Kurds continued into the next century, when the

¹⁶¹ Browne, 92. For a full discussion of this factor, see Brown, 87-92.

¹⁶² Just prior to the return of the Chaldeans to Nestorianism, another branch of the church also made a Catholic profession, thus resulting in two Uniate (i.e. united with Rome) Patriarchates for a short period of time.

¹⁶³ For more on the probable conversion of many Nestorians in India to Roman Catholicism, see Stewart, 286-294.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Waterfield, 103.

Patriarch was murdered in 1917. Following World War I, having given up hope of an independent homeland, the Assyrians were relocated to the British Mandate in Iraq. When the Mandate expired in 1935, the Patriarch and many others from his community emigrated to the USA as refugees. Others went to Europe, Canada and Australia.¹⁶⁵ The current Patriarch resides in the USA. Today, the Church of the East has a membership of 500,000. It accepts the ecumenical Councils of Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) and has recently begun to enter into dialogue with both the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches.¹⁶⁶

Although the Church of the East no longer has the territory or influence that it once had, it certainly deserves an important place in the history of Christianity. Christians today can learn much through studying both its achievements and its failures. As Samuel Zwemer, the famous missionary to the Middle East, wrote, "The strength of the Nestorian Church was its love and loyalty to Christ, its emphasis on His great commission and the heroism of its adventure into regions beyond the near East. Its weakness at a later period in history was due to compromise in the face of persecution.... It is a story as fascinating as it is tragic and it holds a lesson for the National churches now arising in the far East and in Southern Asia.... Weakened by persecution, lured from its true goal by compromise, and exterminated in the end by ruthless savagery, a church once on fire for missions ceased to be an aggressive force, and left behind only the imperishable memory of its past greatness. From the dead ashes we know how once the flames rose to heaven."¹⁶⁷

Will the Church of the East, the Nestorian Church, once again have a role to play in accomplishing God's purposes in that part of the world where it was so mightily used in past centuries? Browne, speaking of all of the Eastern Churches, concludes his work with these words, which also seem an appropriate way to end this paper: "At the moment it seems that the return of Christianity to Asia is a task depending entirely on the missionary activities of the Churches of the West. But it may be that the faithful remnants of the Churches of the East, who, through centuries of oppression such as we have not known, have refused to deny Christ, strengthened now with fresh outpourings of the Holy Spirit, will play their part in the new evangelization of Asia."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ For a good overview of the Nestorian Church since the time of Timur, see Atiya, 277-288.

¹⁶⁶ For more on contact with the Catholic Church, see Maloney. For more on contact with the Anglican Church, see Hill, 100-131.

¹⁶⁷ Stewart, vii-ix.

¹⁶⁸ Browne, 185.