

The Church of the East: An ancient and endangered church

by Dr. Erica C D Hunter

The cumulative effects of the Gulf War waged in 1991 and the Allied Invasion of Iraq of 2003, together with the rise of *Da'esh* (otherwise known as ISIS), have impacted dramatically on the *Assyrian Church of the East* and its Uniate branch the *Chaldaean Catholic Church*. As well as a great loss of life, the events have precipitated massive displacement with Christians making up an estimated 40 per cent of all people fleeing Iraq. Many settled in Syria only to be embroiled in the civil war that is currently raging. Others took refuge in the territories administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government in northern Iraq (Kurdistan).



In June 2014 *Da'esh* forcibly expelled the entire Christian population of Mosul as well as the villages on the Nineveh plains. Displaced from their traditional homelands, and with little prospect of return, many refugees now continue to live in makeshift conditions whilst they continue their search for stability and security that they see as primarily being available in the West. Thus, whilst the communities in Iraq have waned, the Western diaspora of the *Assyrian Church of the East* and the *Chaldaean Catholic Church* in North America, Britain and Europe has grown considerably. With the uncertain and unsettling situation that continues to unfold in Iraq and Syria, there are now real fears that the ancient Christian communities in those countries will only be an historical memory.

Under the Sassanids (225-635 AD)

The origins of Christianity in Iraq are shrouded in the mists of antiquity. However, Acts II.9 mentions the residents of Mesopotamia amongst the witnesses to the Pentecost. The title of "founding father" traditionally has fallen on the shoulders of the apostle Addai (whom legend associated with the advent of Christianity in Edessa). By the early third century there were sizeable communities. In 225 Ardashir, the incoming Zoroastrian king who established the Sassanid dynasty, founded more than twenty bishoprics in the Tigris-Euphrates area and stretching eastwards, across Iran, to the Caspian Sea. These populations were supplemented by an influx of large numbers of Christians who were deported from the Byzantine realms as a result of military incursions into Syria by the Sassanid monarch, Shapur I, in 256 and 260. Many of these Christians were Syriac-speakers, sharing a common language with their "brethren" in Mesopotamia. They also brought with them the legacy of the classical Hellenistic sciences, particularly philosophy and medicine.

Theodosius I's declaration of Christianity as the official state religion of the Byzantine Empire in 380 had major repercussions for Christians living in the Sassanid territories in the "land beyond the Euphrates". Because of their shared faith the Sassanid monarchs suspected that Christians in Mesopotamia nurtured loyalties with the Byzantines. The two empires or "mega-powers" were mutually suspicious, and on numerous occasions engaged in acts of war, but their boundaries were not

hermetically sealed; trade and cultural contacts continued, as well as diplomatic missions. Theodosius I sent his ambassador Marutha of Maiperqat to the Sassanid monarch Yazdegird I (399-421) to request that the persecution of Christians be ended. The mission was successful and Yazdegird I recognised the Christians as a minority group with Isaac, the bishop of Seleucia (the capital city of the Sassanid empire) as the sect's theocratic head. He was responsible for his community, collected taxes and represented them in state matters. For this privilege, the Sassanian monarch had a say in the ecclesiastical appointment and could (as did happen) veto it.

The Christians in the Sassanid Empire "across the Euphrates" lived under a different, and often hostile, government compared to their Byzantine brethren but accepted the major theological decisions of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) that culminated in the "Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed". At the end of the fourth century Byzantine and Mesopotamian Christians commonly upheld the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed and major festivals, including Christmas. The *Assyrian Church of the East* and the *Chaldaeian Catholic Church* still do today.

Further negotiations between the Sassanid monarchs and the Byzantine emperors led to the signing of a treaty in 422 that guaranteed the freedom of worship to Christians in the Persian realms. In 424 the "Synod of Dadisho" declared the patriarchate in Seleucia-Ctesiphon to be autocephalous and independent of the pentarchy of five patriarchates – Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem and Constantinople – all of which were in the Byzantine territories. This separated the Persian Church from the "western" Byzantine church and preceded the Council of Ephesus in 431 that saw the expulsion of Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, who would become synonymous with the Church of the East (a.k.a. the Nestorian Church).

The theological evolution of "the Church across the Euphrates" into the "Church of the East" was gradual and did not take immediate effect after the decisions of 431. The Diophysite theology of Nestorius, Theodore (the Interpreter) of Mopsuestia and Diodore of Tarsus, which became the hallmark of the Church of the East, only became embedded in the late fifth/sixth centuries when the divisions between the Alexandrian and Antiochean theological traditions crystallised, partially fueled by the political division between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires.

The interests of Church and State in the Sassanid territories became interwoven and any show of sympathy with the Byzantine Emperors had serious consequences. A letter sent by Patriarch Babowai in 484 to Emperor Zeno was intercepted. When the Sassanid monarch Peroz (459-484) was informed of the patriarch's vacillating loyalty Babowai received the death sentence. Yet Christians did form a substantial part of the Sassanid population and the capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, boasted various churches and monasteries, including a convent dedicated to Mar Pethion. Some of these sites were excavated in the 1920s.

Early Islamic (Umayyid) – Abbassid periods (636-1258)

When Arab horsemen penetrated the eastern flank of Mesopotamia in 636 they met sizeable Christian communities in Hira, in the heartland of the now Shi'i region, near the cities of Najaf and Kerbala. Hira was a thriving stronghold of the Church of the East. Later Islamic sources record that the region boasted more than forty monasteries and churches, some of which have been excavated. In 762, the Abbassids founded their new capital,

Baghdad and fostered a thrust of Muslim intellectual enquiry where, as part of the spirit of scientific discovery, Christian scholars translated Greek works into Arabic.

The most famous of all scholars was the "Nestorian" Hunain ibn Ishaq (d. 873) who came from Hira. A native Arabic speaker, who was trained in Syriac and Greek, he laid down the basis of accurate translation techniques and the foundations of scientific and philosophical terminology in Arabic. He oversaw the translation of Aristotle and Plato and, reflecting his medical training, translated the works of Hippocrates and almost the entire corpus of Galen from Greek. He also was the personal physician to al-Mutawakkil (d. 861) whose caliphate corresponded with a sustained period of persecution of the Christian communities.

During this period Arabic became the *lingua franca* of Mesopotamia; areas of law and bureaucracy began to be Islamicised – the Islamic code of law, the Sharia, was undergoing a process of codification. On the economic front the *jizya* tax imposed on the Christians was a valuable source of revenue. These factors combined to result in an ongoing diminution of the communities of the Church of the East in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The Mongol Il-Khanate (1258 – 1335) and Timur-Lang (1335 – 1405)

The caliphate was terminated in 1258 when Mongol forces led by Hulugu Khan swept into Baghdad. Hulugu's mother was a Christian princess who had been taken hostage



by Genghis Khan and given to his fourth son Tolui when he defeated the Keraites, a Turkic tribe that had been converted (in part) to Christianity by Church of the East missionaries who were very active in Central Asia from as early as the fifth century. The contemporary Armenian historian Stephannos Orbelian portrayed Hulugu and his mother as the "Constantine and Helen" of the time, for it seemed that they founded a new pro-Christian dynasty (the Khans didn't actually embrace the faith themselves, but still adhered to shamanic belief).

Christian festivals were restored. In 1279 the mother of the third Il-Khan (Tegudar Ahmad 1282-4) revived the procession of the Epiphany that had ceased due to conflicts between the Christians and Moslems. The eighth Il-Khan Oljeitu was baptised as Nicholas in Baghdad in honour of Pope Nicholas IV, but with his conversion to Shi'a Islam in 1291 the Mongol benevolence that had been previously shown to Christians ceased: savage persecutions signalled a major decline for the Church of the East that would continue throughout the medieval period.

The nemesis for the Church of the East came in the figure of Timur-Lang (Tamerlane), a zealous Muslim of Turkish stock who had established his capital at Samarkand. In 1393 he seized Mesopotamia, leaving 90,000 dead in Baghdad alone. In the early fifteenth century, compared



Timur-Lang

to the twenty-four cities that had dioceses at the arrival of Hulugu Khan, the only churches that remained in Mesopotamia, apart from Baghdad, were in Mosul, Erbil, Gezira, Tabriz and Maragha. All these cities, with the exception of Baghdad, were concentrated in the northern regions of Mesopotamia, signalling a dramatic shrinking and redeployment of the Christian population. This demographic pattern was maintained into the early twentieth century.

Christianity in the southern regions, including Hira, had disappeared. All the communities were concentrated in the north, on the Mosul plain and in Kurdistan, between Lake Urmia (modern Iran) and Lake Van (modern Turkey). Mosul and the surrounding villages had large Christian populations but the Church of the East communities were essentially confined to the northern, mountainous reaches of Kurdistan. These Aramaic-speaking Christians lived traditional, subsistence-level lives – sometimes in harmony with, at other times in conflict with – their Kurdish neighbours.

The Ottoman period (1516 – 1919)

In the early sixteenth century, Mesopotamia fell under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Turks whose administration classified Christians in two categories: the Greek rite (*Millet i-Rum*) and the non-Greek or Armenian rite (*Millet i-Arman*). The former applied to the Byzantine Orthodox Christians, the latter to the Armenians. As the main initiative of the “Sublime Porte” (the Ottoman rulers were sometimes named after a gateway in Istanbul) lay in extracting as much money as possible from their various communities, the Christians were able to lead relatively untrammelled lives providing they paid their taxes. In the Hakkari region of Kurdistan the patriarchate of the Church of the East had become a hereditary institution, in effect a theocracy with the title of *Mar Shimun* passing from uncle to nephew. The Patriarch, who was celibate and vegetarian, was the religious and secular head of the community, responsible for collecting taxes and for internal legal jurisdiction.

However, dissatisfaction with the system of a hereditary patriarch led to the emergence of the Chaldaean Catholic Church from the Church of the East in the mid-sixteenth century. At first its existence was tenuous but allegiance or union with Rome was eventually secured in the mid-18th century. The arrival of this Uniate church seriously diminished the numbers of the ancient, traditional Church of the East. However, the early 19th century saw an influx of Anglican and Presbyterian missionaries eager to revive and restore the forlorn and destitute communities of the Church of the East whom they considered to be “proto” Protestants. The Russians also established an Orthodox mission centre, printing press and church at Urmia as well as parishes and schools throughout the region. In 1827 an estimated 20,000 East Syrians, belonging to the Church of the East, crossed the border into Russia where there are still communities today.

Breakdown in the twentieth century

The breakdown of the Ottoman Empire had severe and long-lasting repercussions for the Church of the East. Following the large-scale massacres and episodes of destruction of 1915, which has been dubbed the year of the *Seyfo* (sword), the entire community of the Church of the East left Kurdistan in 1918 and descended to the plains of Mosul. Only about 50,000 survived the long march as many thousands died *en route* of exposure and hunger in the terrible conditions. The community became homeless refugees under the British mandate in Iraq and in the 1920s large numbers

settled in refugee camps at Baquba, east of Baghdad, where during the Mandate period many served in the British forces as the "Assyrian Levies" earning an outstanding reputation for loyalty. They clung to the dream of attaining independence in their old homeland in the Hakkari region of northern Kurdistan and were unable to integrate into the emerging new Iraqi nation.

In 1933, following further massacres, the League of Nations accepted that the community should have a homeland outside Iraq. Various suggestions, including resettlement in Brazil, Cyprus, Sudan and British Guiana came to nothing, but the 1930s opened a new era for the Church of the East. The patriarch, the Mar Shimun XXI, who was educated at Westcott House, Cambridge, was stripped of his citizenship and deported to Cyprus, then settling in Chicago which became the hub of the *Assyrian Church of the East*.

By the mid-twentieth century the *Assyrian Church of the East* had undergone monumental change: great loss both of life and lands had precipitated displacement and dispersal. Large diaspora communities had sprung up in other parts of the Middle East as well as in Europe, Australia and North America. This new map was replacing the centuries-old demography and new trajectories were beginning to be forged. Mar Shimun XXI simultaneously consolidated and expanded the dioceses in the Middle East, making numerous visits to the Assyrian communities in Iran, Lebanon and Kuwait. In 1962, a diocesan seat was established in Teheran. Two years later, Mar Shimun XXI visited Teheran and in the same year, responding to the invitation of Pope John XXIII, sent two delegates to the Second Vatican Council. This was a momentous breakthrough since it was the first time since the Council of Ephesus in 431 that the *Assyrian Church of the East* had participated in a Western council. On the other hand, Mar Shimun's decision to introduce the Gregorian calendar and other so-called "Western" reforms led to schism and the emergence of the *Ancient Church of the East* in 1964.

Following the death of Mar Shimun XXI a new Patriarch, Mar Dinkha IV, metropolitan of Teheran and Iran, was consecrated in 1976 in the Anglican church of St. Barnabas in Ealing in London. Mar Dinkha IV maintained the patriarchal residence was in Teheran until the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 when he was forced to move to Chicago. From this American base he has continued the trajectory begun by Mar Shimun XXI "to lead the Church out of its isolation" and establish it as a global entity. In 1984, he met



Mar Dinkha IV

the Pope, exchanging speeches of goodwill. Further ecumenical developments took place in 1994 when a dialogue was initiated followed by the signing of a common Christological declaration by Mar Dinkha IV and Pope John Paul II in December. Despite accord with the Roman Catholic Church, opposition by the Coptic Orthodox

Church continues to deny the *Assyrian Church of the East* membership of the *Middle Eastern Council of Churches*. Mar Dinkha IV also laboured strenuously to reconcile the 1964 schism involving the *Assyrian Church of the East* and the *Ancient Church of the East*; this reunion was partially achieved in 1995 when a substantial portion of the Indian branch of the *Ancient Church of the East*, under the leadership of Mar Aprem, rejoined the *Assyrian Church of the East*.

Regrettably the *Assyrian Church of the East* was not included in the consultations sponsored by the *Pro Oriente Foundation* between 1971 and 1988. However, the ecumenical initiatives that took place in 1990 between the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Dinkha IV and Mar Raphael Bidawid, the Chaldaean patriarch, led to new initiatives. In 1994, the "Common Christological Declaration" by Mar Dinkha IV and Pope John Paul II put the erstwhile differences between the two Churches into their historical and linguistic perspective, admitting that failure of communication and ecclesiastical politics were to blame. Eventually the two prelates met at the Vatican in October 2014. However, Mar Dinkha IV died in the US in 2015, aged 79.

Despite the accord established with the Roman Catholic Church, robust opposition, principally by the Coptic Orthodox Church, has to date continued to deny both branches of the *Church of the East* membership of the *Middle Eastern Council of Churches*. In October 1998, Pope Shenouda III, the late Patriarch of the Coptic Church presiding over the executive committee of the Middle Eastern Council of Churches, rejected the membership of the Assyrian Church of the East on the grounds of its adherence to the "Nestorian heresy".

The situation in Iraq, 2003 onwards

Until 2003 an estimated 8-9 per cent of the population of Iraq was Christian. In mid-2006 the level of violence escalated following the bombing of the al-Askari mosque in Samarra and all Christian communities have endured a never-ending cycle of terror: churches have been bombed, while priests and citizens have been kidnapped and killed. This level of violence – which persists today – has caused an



Mar Dinkha IV meets Pope Francis in 2014

exodus from Baghdad to safer environs. Although the Church of the East has traditional communities in Iran, people prefer not to go there, but have headed to Syria where many have applied for asylum either in the USA, Canada, Australia or Europe where the UK and Sweden host large communities. Of all refugees leaving Iraq 40 per cent are Christian. Those who cannot leave Iraq, due to limited economics means, go to Kurdistan where the KRG authorities have permitted a

limited “right of return” on the basis of historic tribal and family affiliations.

There has been tremendous growth at Dahuk in the north and in the capital, Erbil, which already hosted a Christian diocese in the second century. However, the recent influx of refugees from Mosul and the Nineveh plains in 2014 has strained the resources of the KRG beyond capacity. The onus of supporting the tens of thousands of homeless people has largely fallen on the shoulders of various churches and organisations. *The Assyrian Church of the East Relief Organisation* (www.theacero.org) actively raises funds amongst the expatriate communities in the diaspora to help the displaced members of its communities; the building of Sawra camp village in the Dohuk region of Iraq is amongst the latest achievements.

Circumstances in Iraq are still very bleak and are compounded by ongoing strife in Syria where many of the faithful have taken refuge. However, the *Assyrian Church of the East* might be sustained by the great trajectory that has seen it through all the vicissitudes of the past two millennia. It has always lived under the dominion of political masters of different religious persuasions.

These lessons of resilience and stamina, in the face of adversity – lessons that have been practised countless times – might hold good, as might also the memory of mutual collaboration and enrichment that has taken place down the centuries. These historic memories, as hard as they might be to sustain in the current dark days, demonstrate an innate capacity of the *Assyrian Church of the East*. Hopefully this trajectory might provide a cue for its survival in its ancient homeland: Iraq.

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Concerning Circles

New Members

Recruitment has gone well during the summer and as a result we can welcome the following new members, who have been elected at recent Council meetings. They are attached to Circles as shown.

Mrs C. Cadogan (Cleveland), Mrs J. P. Garbet (Eastbourne & Bexhill), Mrs V. Grant (Hertfordshire), Professor H. Höpfl (Cleveland), Ms L. Kennedy (Glasgow), Mr C. P. Lynch (Edinburgh), Dr A. A. Macdonald (Aberdeen), Dr S. M. Martin (Hertfordshire), Mr P. E. & Mrs G. M. McGivern (Wrexham), Mrs E. Petch (Cleveland), Mrs K. A. Rush (Cleveland), Mrs C. Sergeant (Eastbourne & Bexhill).

Requiescant in Pace

Your prayers are asked for the following members who have died recently:

Miss M. V. Artis (Worcester), Mr G. B. F. Freeman (Coventry), Mr M. Hammond (Coventry), Mr P. V. Hazlewood (Coventry), Mrs J. Mackie (Hertfordshire), Dr J. Markham (York),

Mr L. Page (Worcester), Mrs B. Toomey (Croydon).

Subscriptions

There are just a few subscriptions outstanding for this year. The Membership Secretary will shortly send out reminder letters for these.