

The Contribution of Ancient Syrian Christianity to West European Culture

by Professor Arthur Vööbus

Historical research has been dominated by a one-sided orientation. Much of this is due to Hegel's philosophy of world history which has clouded a clear vision.

According to Hegel, the world's history goes from the East to the West: Europe is the end of history while Asia was only the beginning. How eloquently he has formulated his position: In "Asia the physical sun rises - and it sets in the West. However, here, in the West the inner sun of self-consciousness emerges, something that surpasses even the brilliance of the physical sun. As a result, historical research has lacked the true perspective without which its proportions are out of focus. Not only does historical research need a wider perspective, it needs a fuller spectrum also. It needs to take into account the positive contributions, which were made by ancient Syrian Christianity whose efflorescence cannot but evoke admiration from the student of history.

For the following presentation I select three areas where the cultural impact of the ancient Syrians is tangible.

Monasticism

As we all know, the role of monasticism in the history of culture in Europe is, indeed, inestimable when we think of all the levels of its enrichment of life: piety, charity, education, schooling, mission, scholarship, plus contributions in every occupation fostering civilization.

Where are the roots of this dynamic ferment? Discoveries of the new sources compel us to rewrite the entire history of monasticism. This I have done in my *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of Culture in the Near East*, vol. I-II (Louvain 1958-60). According to this evidence the cradle of monastic movement stood in mesopotamia where the first anchorites appeared near Nisibis. From there this form of life moved to Egypt. Ascetics in the deserts in Egypt betray their true origin through their name *abba* "father" which is a Syriac term. And the Greek term is a literal translation of the Syriac *ihidaya* "a single one."

Thus the ancient Syrian community was the hotbed of such vital stimuli which swelled into a mighty stream, fertilizing life in so many countries. However, this was not enough. The pulsating and superabundant energy of the dynamics of the Syrians continued to emanate impulses in order to fertilize monasticism which in Egypt and Europe had been modified according to Western taste.

Such impulses are graphically illustrated by interesting portraits preserved on the pages of medieval annalistic works. Gregory, who became bishop of Tours in Gaul in 573, has preserved the portrait of Abraham who had come from the banks of the Euphrates. After he had been in Rome, Ravenna and Milano, he settled down at Clermont, a center of religious life in Gaul. Here in a small valley he founded his monastery and propagated monastic life according to the Syrian pattern. As a typical Syrian with a passionate psyche he made a deep impression on the people. Even Appollinaris, the bishop of the town, became seriously interested in him. After his death, he honored Abraham with an epitaph.

Many Syrian monks, among them also recluse, who were ascetics who enclosed themselves for lifetime - a characteristic form of Syrian monasticism - inundated Italy, Gaul and Germany. A typical figure of such an ambassador of Syrian spirituality in monastic garb appears in the person of Severus of whom his biography has come down to us. He settled down at Agde, Gaul. Also Severus was a man with fire in his soul, a man with a magnetic charisma, able to exercise profound influence over the people. His fame grew so rapidly that soon his hut had to be replaced by a large prayer-house which he wisely erected just side by side with the basilica.

All this considerable contingent of monks from Mesopotamia in Europe conjures up a stream emanating from the ancient Syrian community, fertilizing the domain of spirituality.

More light falls upon their success when we direct our look towards Ireland where the conditions for the Syrian mission were particularly suitable. The reason is that after the break-up of the Roman civilization, Ireland became comparatively isolated from the rest of Christendom. The Syrians did not wait in using these opportunities. A peculiar physiognomy of church life which developed here speaks very loudly because all these features are typically Syrian.

An enormous spread of monasticism took place about 520. The land was inundated by monasteries so that it was called the *Insula sanctorum* "the island of saints." An extraordinary veneration of monasticism is reflected through the practice which subordinated bishops to the abbots and abbesses. Hermits appeared along with the coenobitic communities in monasteries. Schools were attached to the monasteries. Learning was cultivated in the monasteries so that the island called *Insula sanctorum* became an *Insula doctorum*. Also calligraphy and book production were eagerly cultivated. The artistic decoration of manuscripts and miniatures reflect the well-known patterns in Syriac manuscripts. And the figures of these steadily restlessly wandering missionaries like St. Columba to Scotland and St. Columban to the continent, conjure up the heirs of the practices of the wandering missionaries in Mesopotamia.

Mysticism

The Syrians have produced many mystical works. An impressive number of these works has exercised a far-reaching influence on the rest of the Christian world.

Such is the case with the works of the most celebrated among them, Ishaq of Ninive. His works were translated from Syriac into Greek in the 7th and 8th century. He became the great master of Byzantine spirituality. Translated from Greek into Russian, the writings of Ishaq have found among Slavic Christianity an enormous favor. His work has nourished the mystical piety of the Russian people for centuries.

It is very appropriate here to remember the old servant Grigori in "Brothers Karamazov" by Dostojevski, an uneducated man, reading with diligence the treatises of "our saintly Father Ishaq, the Syrian", even though he comprehends almost nothing.

Ishaq enjoyed the same favor among the intelligentsia as well. Kireievsky, one of the promoters of the Russian Slaphile movement in the 19th cent., through the reading of Ishaq experienced a total change of his life. He saw in Ishaq the most profound of the philosophers.

Besides Ishaq of Ninive, another luminary appears in the person of Johannan Dalyatha. Some of his writings were translated not only into

Latin but into several Romance languages, including French. These two have become most celebrated among many other Syrian mystical authors.

These Syriac mystical works of unique quality have made the deepest impact on the great luminaries in the Byzantium throughout centuries. This I have demonstrated in my work *On the Historical Importance of the Legacy of Pseudo-Macarius: New Observations about the Syriac Provenance* (Stockholm 1972).

Still more amazing is the meteoric flight of these works in the West. In fact, it is something like a marvel.

The Syrian mystics have made deep inroads into the Protestant Christianity. Johann Arndt, a forerunner of Pietism, is a good example with his main work: *Vom wahren Christentum* (1605-09). Through Johann Arndt the Syriac mystical writings reached Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and my own homeland, Estonia.

We should not overlook Gottfried Arnold, the Champion of Pietism, the famous author of a unique work: *Unparteiische Kirchen - und Ketzergeschichte* (1700). He was so deeply influenced by the Syrian mystics that he thought that he discovered the purest form of primitive Christianity in these writings.

Higher Learning

Historically speaking a very important event took place soon after the year 470, namely the founding of the first Christian university by Narsai in Nisibis, on the bank of the Tigris River.

A particular interest of my research in this university is demonstrated by an extensive, nearly 400 page work: *History of the School of Nisibis*, published by the University of Louvain, Belgium, in 1965. I also have discovered very important manuscripts in Syriac with the statutes of this university in two sets, and edited them under the title: *The Statutes of the School of Nisibis*, Stockholm 1962.

It can be expected that the spirit of such an atmosphere of learning as exhibited in the first Christian university in Nisibis, aroused attention

even outside the Empire of the Sassanide dynasty in Persia - yes, even far beyond the confines of the Syriac idiom.

Creative forces and dynamic insights and perceptions always provoke stimulation and galvanization. There is an astounding piece of evidence, a very ancient exponent, waiting for us. We are very fortunate that a textbook written by Paulos, one of the professors in the School of Nisibis, can open very important historical perspectives. What we are allowed to see here, is, indeed, amazing. This manual fell into the hands of Junilius, the highest civil servant in Constantinople, who became enthusiastic about this text-book on hermeneutics which Paulos was accustomed to give in the form of lectures to his students.

We are informed that about 542 Junilius translated this manual into Latin. Thus information about the first Christian university was set in motion. And it had wings on it!

Attention for academic accomplishments in Nisibis appears even in distant places. The dedicatory preface of the translation of the manual of Paulos is addressed to Primasius, bishop of Hadrumentum in North Africa. Also he had become interested in the work of the university in Nisibis.

The tracing of these vestiges leads us to still greater surprises. The curtain of history is suddenly lifted and phenomena which crown our investigation emerge before our amazed eyes. These vestiges lead us still farther in the West - to the heart of Europe.

The work performed in the School of Nisibis made an immense impact on Cassiodorus, the first scholar in the Empire of the Eastern Goths in Italy. He was a senator and a member of a noble Roman family, chief of the civil service, and then a praetorian prefect. What we learn from his work *Institutiones* tells us more of his deep admiration for it. The university in Nisibis did not only win his attention but also inspired a dream to establish a similar school, "schola sicut in Nisibi civitate Syrorum", a place of higher learning in Rome. He planned to establish it in cooperation with Pope Agapatus.

To be sure, the difficult political circumstances prevented him from materializing his efforts. Nevertheless, though his dreams remained dreams since the times were too rough for such a tender plant, the fact

remains that the incentive to found the first center of higher learning in Europe came from the university of Nisibis.

Cassiodorus, however, did not give up his efforts, and himself founded a monastery at Vivarium in Calabria: "as an asylum of literature and the liberal arts" where he became a monk when he retired from public affairs in 540. He made his Vivarium a kind of academy and made in it secular as well as theological learning and the copying of manuscripts mandatory.

All this had incalculable consequences for European culture. Thereby has he not only moved the order of the Benedictines to entirely new directions in introducing scholarship into monastic traditions, but historically speaking, this is his great merit that the monasteries in the following centuries in the midst of all the deeds of the barbarians tended the fire of scholarship and salvaged the antique - classical culture from perishing during the Dark Ages.

Still further - besides the inspiration for the founding of a center of higher learning, Cassiodorus also received from the first Christian university in Nisibis stimuli for a similar literary creation.

That which was created in the quietness of his Vivarium, namely his *Institutiones*, a manual of studies of the seven liberal arts, is extremely instructive. What he produced became the standard text book of the monastic schools for centuries during the middle-ages in Europe. In fact, it became a classic.

In his work Cassiodorus explicitly refers to the source of his inspiration. The work to which he himself owed so much was the manual of Paulos. This manual he used for instruction and he recommended it for study to his monks.

This reference to the importance of the manual of Paulos is something we can investigate still farther. The role of this work in the following centuries can be placed in a proper perspective. An unmistakable indication regarding the popularity of the manual of Paulos appears in the number of manuscripts. The large number of manuscripts of this work speaks for itself. Additional information can be drawn from the catalogues of the medieval libraries in the monasteries in Europe.

In the light of these facts the manual of Paulos appears as a text-book which for centuries was extensively used in the monastic schools during the Middle Ages all over the continent of Europe and in England.

Thus the stimulation for higher learning generated by the first Christian university in Nisibis was so forceful that it could exercise its power on a wider geographical scale in Europe. There it could ripen for fuller development until the time was ready for founding the first university.