

Histoire de l'Eglise d'Orient: Chretiens d'Iraq, d'Iran et de Turquie
(History of the Church of the East: Christians of Iraq, Iran and Turkey).
By Raymond Le Coz. In French. Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1995. 407 pp.
No Index. 198 FF.

Reviewed by George Yana

This is a book rich with facts and events. The style of the author and the way he develops his story can be characterized as magnetic; once you begin reading, it's hard to stop.

The author starts by defining "The Church of the East" (p.11). He warns the reader not to confuse "The Church of the East" with those we in the West commonly know as the Oriental Churches. For Rome, he adds, all the churches that don't belong to the Latin rite, (i.e., the orthodox churches such as the Copts, Armenians, Maronites, Syriacs and, of course, the Church of the East) fall under this category. But Le Coz also notes that from the point of view of The Church of the East, all the other communities belong to "the church of the west" since, unlike her, they were born in Roman territory, and she alone is the Church of the East. Therefore, Le Coz continues, this work is precisely about this church, born outside the Roman world, which in our times is located in the north of Iraq in the region of Mosul, near Lake Ourmia north-west of Iran, and in the province of Turkish Hakkari, approximately in what is called Kurdish territory.

From the outset it is evident that, notwithstanding his commitment to objectivity, the author is a passionate champion of the Church of the East, and of its adherents the Nestorians. In his Introduction (p.16), he refers to the modern exodus of this people, prompted by failed Western promises and by their genocide:

"...One part of the survivors therefore decides to emigrate throughout the world to avoid the physical destruction of their Church. But as a result of this dispersion and the integration of its members in the host country, the Assyro-Chaldean Church, heir of the glorious Nestorian Church, which since the third century had been able to resist the assaults of external enemies, now finds itself seriously threatened by extinction, unable able to preserve its cultural identity. In the Middle East forgotten people are many : the Palestinians, the Kurds, and Armenians, to name a few. But there are those who are forgotten more than others. The Assyro-Chaldeans are among those. May this work participate in redressing this injustice and incite a momentum of sympathy towards those among them who have come to seek refuge in our country."

But, despite his compassion, the author does not believe in a link between the modern Assyro-Chaldeans, and the ancient nations that were known by the same names. Le Coz quotes J.M. Fiey, another French scholar who similarly did not believe in this link; it may well be that one inspired the other. Here is how Le Coz puts it in his Introduction (p.13):

“... [I]n our times, some refer to an “Assyro-Chaldean nation”. [But], one should not assume any link, other than geographic, with the two nations of antiquity known by the same names -- Assyria, with its capital of Nineveh, in upper Mesopotamia; and Chaldea, the home of Abraham, in the south of Iraq – notwithstanding that the local Christians do not always resist the temptation to use these names to assert their lineage to those ancient people and to claim the rights of original occupants.”

But we know that not all historians think the same way. For example, H.W.F. Saggs, in his book *The Might that was Assyria*,¹ maintains:

“The destruction of the Assyrian empire did not wipe out its population. They were predominantly peasant farmers, and since Assyria contains some of the best wheat land in the Near East, descendants of the Assyrian peasants would, as opportunity permitted, build new villages over the old cities and carry on with agricultural life, remembering traditions of the former cities. After seven or eight centuries and various vicissitudes, these people became Christians.”

For their part, Patricia Crone (University of London) and Michael Cook (School of Oriental and African Studies), in a book titled *Hagarism*,² contend that the Assyrians, anxious to preserve their identity under pressure from Zoroastrian Persia, had to have a religion that would set them apart from Zoroastrians, and Christianity was such a religion. But to differentiate themselves from Orthodox Greeks they needed a heresy, and Nestorianism fit the bill. So as we can see, Nestorianism was, in a sense, the reflection of Assyrian nationalism, and of the desire of this people to preserve its identity.

As to the name Assyrian, Le Coz (p.13) says:

“The term Assyrian dates from the last century: this is how protestant missionaries designated the Nestorian tribes, independent

¹ H.W.F. Saggs, *The Might That Was Assyria*, Sidwick and Jackson, London, St. Martin's Press, New York 1984), p.290

² Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism, The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press (1980), p.56

from the Roman Pope, and having taken refuge in the mountains of Kurdistan.”

Yet there are documents showing that the name Assyrian was used by the local Christians as far back as the second century. In his seminal opus, Aziz S. Atiya,³ once the Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Utah, refers to Tatian and his monumental contribution to Syriac religious literature, adding also:

“A native of Assyria of pagan birth, Tatian, went to Rome after 150 A.D. where he was converted to Christianity before 165.”

In the same vein, we learn from Xavier Koodapuzha⁴ that, after some members of the Church of the East united with Rome in the 16th century A.D., Roman documents, initially, referred to the Chaldean patriarch as *the elected patriarch of “the Assyrian nation.”* In short, it is incorrect to say that the name Assyrian only came into use with the advent of the modern missionaries.

Le Coz divides his book into five unequal segments (p.15). The first takes place in Persia essentially under the Sassanian dynasty; the second begins with the onset of Islam; the third begins with the arrival of Mongols and ends with the devastation of the Nestorian population by Tamerlane. Part Four, which spans from the 16th to the dawn of the 20th century, is characterized by the author, quoting from Joseph Yacoub, as the time of the “great tear up” (*la grande déchirure*). Finally, Part Five, the contemporary period, is called a long martyrdom for the Assyro-Chaldeans.

An important issue discussed by the author (p.21) is the penetration of the Christian Church in Persia (more precisely, Mesopotamia, which at the time was in the Persian empire): Around the end of the 2nd century the first missionaries came from Edessa, where Christianity was firmly installed and, under King Abgar IX (179-214), it became the state religion.

With reference to church tradition, the author pushes the evangelization of Persia back to the time of the apostle Saint Thomas who, on his way to India, stopped at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, or to his disciple Addai, accompanied by Aggai and Mari. Then the author speculated that if legend attributes the founding of the patriarchal see of Seleucia to Addai or Thomas, is it actually aimed at proving that this Church too is apostolic in nature, equal to those of Antochia and Alexandria? Le Coz refers to J.M. Fiey who, by use of geographic data, sought to shed light on this question. According to Fiey, Seleucia and Ctesiphon were separated by the River Tigris and, in the past, the district of Koke, was on the

³ Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity*, Methuen & co. Ltd., London (1968), p.247

⁴ Xavier Koodapuzha, *Faith and Communion in the Indian Church of Saint Thomas Christians*, Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, Kerala, India, p.59

same bank of the Tigris as was Ctesiphon. But in 116 A.D. the river changed its bed, and since then it flows between Ctesiphon and Koke which, as a result, has become a suburb of Seleucia. However, an old text now reveals that Mari came close to Ctesiphon (and not close to Seleucia), on the hill of Koke, indicating that his arrival is anterior to 116 A.D. This detail, according to J.M. Fiey, permits us to push back the evangelization of this region to the beginning of the 2nd century.

Le Coz says that the communities being evangelized are not known, but that it would be reasonable to think that the first people to be converted belonged to the Jewish population very numerous in the whole of Mesopotamia, even beyond the Tigris River, since the time of their deportation to Babylon, by Nebuchadnezzar. In support of this premise, he cites some traditional customs of the Church of the East which can be regarded as the heritage of Jewish practices of that era. Thus, in imitation of the Jews, Christians adopted the marriage in two stages, as written in the Mishna. The first stage begins with the engagement, followed later, with the second stage, the communal life, after a dinner party, a banquet.

In connection with the founding of the school at Nisibis, the author writes (p.89):

“Upon his return from the council of Nicea, Bishop James of Nisibis -- a city which since 298 was under Roman domination -- decided to open a school to educate Aramean Christians living on both sides of the border, and to prevent them from falling into the traps of the heretical interpretations of the Arian question [on Trinity], which had been recently condemned by the meeting of the bishops of the Roman empire... In 363, following a disaster that fell upon his predecessor, Roman emperor Jovian agreed to return to the Persian king the five provinces conquered a few years earlier, including the city of Nisibis. However, the emperor decided to relinquish the city evacuated of its inhabitants, who withdrew to Edessa, where teachers and students took refuge. The establishment was then baptized by the inhabitants as the ‘school of the Persians’.”

As just noted, the ‘school of the Persians’ was so dubbed in 363 A.D., but it seems that the school of Edessa was under the influence of ‘Persians’ long before that. The authors of the book Hagarism say:

*“Only Edessa, which had kept up a precarious independence on the Assyrian pattern until A.D. 216, retained the memory of its local kings ...”*⁵

⁵ Hagarism, p.61

Here we see that until the year 216, a century and a half before the date given by Le Coz, Edessa was under the influence of Assyrians, and that the name 'Persians' is misleading. Therefore, it may be safe to say that, based on the latter authors, both the 'Aramean Christians' and the 'Persians' mentioned above were Assyrians.

In his discussion of the intellectual and religious life in Islamic Baghdad, Le Coz, (p.150) describes the flow of knowledge, resulting from the translations of Syriac-speaking Christians, begun in the 6th century, whether Jacobite or Nestorian, as follows:

Greek Heritage → Syriac translations → Arabic translations → Latin translations

Here we see the immense role played by Assyrians in the dissemination of knowledge in Europe.

A sad development ensuing the arrival of Moslems is recounted by Le Coz as follows (p.187):

“With the arrival of the Moslems, boundary barriers between the two Christian families of Aramaic expression were removed. With the free circulation thus established, favoring the mixing of the two communities, one might assume this would result in a rapprochement between these two churches. But in actual fact, it is precisely in this period that the Nestorians and Jacobites chose to intensify their antagonism, even so far as the alphabet utilized, each opting for a written consonant different from the other.”

History, with its unpredicted turn of events, sometimes provides people with favorable conditions. If these opportunities are not grasped, the consequences may be calamitous. Certainly, the opportunity provided by the disappearance of boundaries between the different factions of Assyrians could have yielded a more solid union among them. Such a union would have helped channel the talents into creative enterprises, enriching Assyrian culture rather than weaving ever deeper internal schisms resulting in the fragmented and alienated community of today. The Assyrians are now provided yet another rare opportunity to unite. Unity would increase their numbers, providing a correspondingly greater voice, and enlarging the potential for their creativity. In this cyber age when the internet permits instantaneous worldwide communication, this reviewer for one warmly welcomes the recent steps taken by the Church of the East and others towards a common end.

Covering Nestorian literature under the Mongols (pp.282-3), Le Coz mentions Abdisho, also known by his Latinized name Ebedjesus.

“The principal author of the Mongol period is indisputably Abdisho, one of the greatest scholars of the Nestorian Church, thanks to whom the Syriac language was able to shine for the last time. After having embraced the monastic life, he was elected bishop, then elevated to

the metropolitan see of Nisibis and Armenia in 1290-1291... Abdisho, who had assimilated all the sciences of his time and expounded them in his writings encompassing domains as diverse as theology, exegesis, liturgy and history, ended the long line of the great writers of the Syriac language....Of all the books of Abdisho which have been preserved, the prize of originality goes to the Paradise of Eden, a collection of fifty homilies in verse. He composed these in imitation of the Maqamat of al-Hariri, determined to surpass the latter's technical feats, perhaps to try to prove for the last time the superiority of Syriac over Arabic. As an example, the third homily is composed of verses made of sixteen syllables which can be read equally from left to right or right to left, or further, the twenty first, where each verse contains the twenty two letters of the alphabet. Finally, the sixth is written with verses of seven syllables which are transformed in verses of six syllables if we remove in each of them a word written in red and which is possible to eliminate without changing the meaning."

The events of the 20th century are described at length, rich with names of persons and places. The conditions of life of Assyrians and Chaldeans in Iran, Turkey, Iraq and the diaspora are depicted in considerable detail. Still, the author's tableau of the modern-day Assyrian community, particularly in the diaspora, is sketchy and incomplete. Le Coz says (p.388-390):

"The oldest colony of immigration in the West, and by far the largest is settled in the U.S.A. Its birth is connected with the coming of American missionaries in Persia during the last century. The largest concentration of Assyro-Chaldeans is in the city of Chicago, which become the residence of the Nestorian Patriarch as far back as 1940. Their number, estimated at four thousand in 1916, is seventy thousand today. They are particularly well organized in the U.S., where there are at least forty five diverse organizations in their ranks. The oldest, The Assyrian National School Association, was founded in 1897 by Christians coming from Turkey. Each city has its own, such as The Assyrian American Association of New Jersey or the one of Chicago which date, respectively, from 1915 and 1917. Younger in age is the Assyrian Foundation of America in San Francisco (1954), which has published the review Nineveh since 1978. Most of these groups are affiliated with the Assyrian American National Federation. Also in the Americas, other groups exist in Canada, Argentina and Brazil. Far away Australia also has its share of the refuge-seeking Eastern Christians, particularly in the cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Assyrians, emigrating there since 1963, now

number some thirteen thousand and five hundred, alongside one thousand five hundred Chaldeans. There too, we note the existence of some ten associations, the largest of which is the Assyrian Australian Association, founded in 1969.”

While Le Coz refers to Canada, Argentina and Brazil, interestingly he elaborates only about Australia. He provides no evidence to support his claim that there is an Assyrian population in Argentina or in Brazil, nor does he elaborate on the Assyrian organizations which we know to exist in Canada. The case of Brazil reminds this reviewer of a previous historical note,⁶ whereby “*[i]t has been authoritatively learned that the League of Nations approached various governments (including that of Canada, which for climactic reasons and owing to its proximity to other Assyrian colonies would have been very suitable), but no government other than that of Brazil offered to open its doors until now. For this humanitarian act, every Assyrian owes deep gratitude to the Brazilian government.”*

There is ample anecdotal evidence to indicate that some Assyrians took up Brazil’s offer and moved to that country. However, their number is not known.

Le Coz also comments about the Assyrians who have settled on his own continent.

“Europe has not been outdone. Numerous nations of this continent have accorded political asylum to these refugees, originating mainly from Turkey. Germany has more than twenty thousand of them, and their recent misfortune has caught the attention of that country’s intellectuals. Many publications have been devoted to the genocide of 1915, as well as to the different repressions that this people has experienced. A review, called Chayada (union) [should be Khuyada, G.Y.], provides the link between the members of their association. An exhaustive study on the genocide of the Assyro-Chaldeans has been written by G. Yonan in German.⁷ As for Sweden, she took in sixteen thousand refugees in 1981.... Lastly, there is an association of Assyro-Chaldeans in London and another one in Greece for the two thousand Christians of the East who have come to that country, from the U.S.S.R.’

“There were Assyrian kolkhoses in the Soviet Union and their language was recognized and taught. Since the war, 1939-1945, their

⁶ *The Assyrian Tragedy*, Anonymous (but believed to be authored by the late Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII), p.72

⁷ Gabriele Yonan, *Ein Vergessener Holocaust: Die Vernichtung der christlichen Assyrer in der Türkei*. Reihe bedrohte Volker, Berlin (1989)

community produced at least three generals for the Soviet army. Finally, the most recent evidence pointing to their integration in that society is the representative of that country at the United Nations who, for some time, has been an Assyrian named Malek Yacoub.”

As for France (p.390):

“There are actually five thousand refugees on our soil. The Chaldeans have chosen to settle mainly in Sarcelles, Clichy-sous-Bois and Montluçon, while those outside of the region of Paris can be found rather in Toulouse, Lyon and Marseille. Most of them originally from Turkey, are considered the subjects of that country by the [French] administration; they usually come from the villages of Meer and Hoz in the Hakkari, as well as from Betspen and Harbol in the Bohtan. The descendants of general Petros, assembled in Toulouse, had founded an Association of Assyrians and Friends of Assyrians of France and had a review, Mathibana. Both are now dormant. The Assyrophile Association of France has taken over and has given itself a cultural mission.”

As noted above, Assyrians arriving in Western countries are not the heroes who for two thousand years sacrificed their lives, endured persecution and humiliation, to preserve Christianity, nor the small community, who lost most of its members fighting on the side of the allies in world war one, only to be betrayed and forgotten. Ironically, today they are ‘from Turkey’, ‘from Iraq’, etc., and stripped of their true identity.

“Small in numbers, scattered over all continents of the planet, the extreme fragmentation of the Assyro-Chaldeans poses a real threat to their sense of belonging to a ‘nation’, in the Ottoman meaning of that term. Henceforth, only the persistence of their ‘Church-rite’ seems capable of helping these uprooted people not to forget the glorious hours of their history and the richness of their traditions, by perpetuating the practice of the Syriac liturgy that their ancestors had elevated to the rank of a language of civilization.”

Does this reviewer recommend the Le Coz book to the JAAS readers? Yes, by all means. The book has certain shortcomings, and one of these is that it is available only in French. Yet for those interested in the sad but glorious history of the Church of the East, the author has assembled an impressive body of knowledge, and he has presented it in a compassionate style.