

Christians and Moslems in Iraq: Nestorian Attitudes Toward Islam

By Benedicte Landron. From the collection *Études chrétiennes arabes* [Christian Arab Studies], Paris, 1994, Editions Cariscript, 344 pages, 180 francs.

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Editions Cariscript continues to surprise us about the Christians of the East, and in this case, the origins of the religious dialogue between Moslems and Christians. This dialogue is not a recent development, although it has become even more important with the settlement of a sizeable Moslem community in the West. Its origins are ancient, coinciding with the birth of Islam, by way of the Christian communities of the Near East. The Mesopotamian church played the essential role, becoming the champion of these attempts at mutual understanding, in harmony with the influences of the ancient culture and the diverse apologies of the Christian religion.

These elements are brought together in an accomplished work that combines historical clarity with vast knowledge of the Christian milieu, its writers, and its works. The author, Benedicte Landron, using the body of his thesis submitted at the Sorbonne just two years ago, presents a rigorous study that allows us to discover (or rediscover) these "Nestorian" Christian intellectuals and their writings. This trip through time takes us through more than seven centuries of history, from the birth of Islam to the Turkish-Mongol domination, signaled by the taking of Baghdad in 1258, which sounded the death knell for the Abbassids and led to the decline of Arab civilization for some time.

1) The "Nestorian" Church and its reaction to Islam; brief overview of the origin and history of Christians and Moslems in Iraq

The Church of the East, or "Nestorian" Church, known today as the Assyro-Chaldean Church, was founded in the 1st Century, in the very heart of Babylonia (south of modern-day Iraq).¹ Its apostolic headquarters were in [Kokhe], not far from [Seleucie-Ctesiphon], capital of the Persian Sassanid Empire, which reinforced the church's Eastern and Persian identity.

After the conversion of the Eastern Roman Empire to Christianity in 313, the Christians of Persia were accused of conspiring with the Roman enemy. Considered internal "enemies," they were severely persecuted by the Persian state, most notably under the reign of Shah-in-Shah (King of Kings) Sapor II,

¹For more information about this church, see Cardinal Eugene Tisserant, *L'Eglise Nestorienne* (The Nestorian Church), in *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique* (Dictionary of Catholic Theology), volume XI, Paris, 1931, pp. 157-263; see also Monseigneur Francis Alichoran, *Missel Chaldeen: L'Eglise de l'Orient assyro-chaldeen, sa liturgie, son histoire* (Chaldean Missal: The Assyro-Chaldean Church of the East, its Liturgy and History), Paris, 1982, 430 pp.

between 340 and 379. Many tens of thousands of Christians were martyred, including their Catholic patriarch, Mar Shimoun Bar Sabae.² These persecutions did not abate until the 5th Century, following the Christological disputes and condemnation of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople. The Persian Church then separated itself from the mother Church of Antioch and truly became a national and [independent] church.

By the early 7th Century, Nestorian Christianity began sending missions to Asia; its first missionaries arrived in China in 636. The church would become the eastern equivalent of the Church of the West, with 250 archbishops and bishops and some 80 million followers stretching from Cyprus to Manchuria. The Sino-Aramean [headstone] of Si-Ngan-Fou, dated 781, is remarkable evidence of this missionary success.³

At the beginning of the 7th Century, the decline of the Sassanid Dynasty led to chaos in the Empire, which crumbled under the attacks of the Byzantines and the [razzias??] of the nomadic tribes of the Arabian desert. The Arab-Moslem conquest delivered the coup de grace in 637.

The Arab troops undertook the conquest of the Near East and North Africa by way of Egypt. Due to the Arabs' semitic origin, the monotheism they adhered to, and the respect accorded to the people of the Bible (Christians and Jews) by the Koran, the Christians received the Islamic conquerors as true liberators. Mesopotamian Christians, many of them former Persian troops, were now asked to reorganize the conquered territories. The Christian Arabs of the [Ghassanide] and [Lakhmide] realms, recently subjected to beheadings by the Byzantine and Persian emperors, became the spearhead of the Islamic conquest. At times, the first Arab conquests were led -- in a noteworthy paradox -- under a flag bearing the cross. As far as the Christian authorities themselves, they seemed well prepared for the new power. In truth, all their hopes hinged on the religious liberty promised by the Moslems.

These illusions would not last. The new conquerors, who were fairly tolerant toward Aramean Christians as long as they paid their taxes, were much less so toward their Christian compatriots, who were pressured and persecuted so they would adopt the new religion. The century following the Islamic conquest was marked by a massive defection of Christian Arabs; solidarity with the

²Ever since this time the church patriarchs have worn red, which symbolizes the patriarch's martyrdom. For more details about this bloody period of history see Jerome Labourt, *Le christianisme dans L'Empire Perse sous la dynastie sassanide* (Christianity in the Persian Empire under the Sassanid Dynasty), Paris, Lecoffre editeur, 1904, 385 pp., as well as Paul Bedjan, *Actes des martyrs*, (Acts of martyrs), Leipzig, 1890-97, 7 vols.

³On this subject see Paul Pelliot, *Recherches sur les chretiens d'Asie Centrale et d'Extreme Orient II: La stele de Si-Ngan-Fou* (Research on the Christians of Central Asia and the Far East II: The [Headstone] of Si-Ngan-Fou), Paris, 1984, 108 pp., with appendixes.

victorious armies, the desire to escape the imposition of beheading, and the intolerance of Moslems, for whom Islam was considered the only legitimate religion, did not permit any other alternative. Certain Moslem authorities, such as Omar, prohibited Christian Arabs from remaining in Arabia. The Gulf countries, Christianized since the 3rd Century, suffered defections, most notably from west bank of the Persian Gulf. The Arabian peninsula would progressively become Moslem territory.

The Christians' task was never easy and they had to remain careful. For example, in 691, at Koufa, the Nestorian [catholicos] Hnanicho encountered the Ummayyad Caliph Abdel-Malik, who questioned him as follows: "What do you think, [catholicos], of the Arab religion?" Hnanicho responded: "It is a reign established by the sword, and not a faith confirmed by divine miracles, as with the Christian faith and the ancient Mosaic laws." Indignant, the caliph ordered Hnanicho's tongue cut off; but others interceded and set him free. However, the caliph ordered that he never again appear in his presence.⁴

Certain Abbassids were equally intolerant. An anecdote reported by Saliba Ben Yuhanna describes Caliph Haroun al Rachid questioning the [catholicos] Timothy: "Christian Father, give me a succinct answer: What is the true religion that is nearest to God?" Timothy responded, "The one whose laws and commandments resemble the way God acts toward his creatures." The caliph said nothing; when he left the room, he noted: "By God, if he had said Christianity, I would have punished him, and if he had said Islam, I would have asked him to convert; he answered in a perfect and irreproachable fashion, all the while thinking to himself of his religion ..."⁵

Another anecdote concerns the illustrious Bukhticho family, which constituted a veritable dynasty in the service of Arab sovereigns; 15 members of the family were reknowned until the 11th Century. George Gabriel, the family's ancestor, and director of the School of medicine at Gondichapour (Persia), was summoned to Baghdad by Caliph al-Mansour in 765. He could write in Syriac, and at the request of the caliph, made translations of Greek and Arabic medical works. The caliph offered George three Greek slaves, but he refused them, saying that Christians only had one wife, and he was faithful. Old and sick, he asked the caliph for permission to return to his village, near his family, so he could die and be buried next to his fathers. The caliph invited him to become Moslem in order to attain paradise. George replied, "I prefer to die with the religion of my fathers and go where they have gone. That is where I want to be,

⁴Benedicte Landron, in the book discussed here, p. 28.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 49.

whether in paradise or hell." The caliph laughed and let him leave.⁶

But in general, the treatment of Nestorians up to the 7th Century was favorable. In a letter, the [catholicos] Icho Yab III affirmed that the Moslems "do not attack the Christian religion, but instead [recommend] our faith, honor the priests and saints of the Lord, and are benefactors of our churches and monasteries."⁷

II) The authors, works and ideas [exchanged] between Christians and Moslems; general outline of the work

Early in Landron's work, the author gives us (through nine chapters) an edifying panoply of names, works, dates, and events that enable us to situate the role of Christianity in the early years of Islam. This period focused on covers more than seven centuries of common Islamic-Christian history. The first chapter of this early section, entitled "Syrians and Christian Arabs," is quite interesting and instructive. For example, who is aware today that many Arabs were Christians before the advent of Islam? And although much of the public is unaware of it, there is an entire Arab Christian literature, which certain researchers have made their specialty. That is the case with Father Khalil Samir Khalil and professor Gerard Troupeau.⁸ Through their work, these researchers, and many others, have brought to light this often misunderstood literature. The almost automatic association of Arab with Moslem must be reconsidered in light of this chapter and the ones that follow. Although the study focuses on Nestorian authors, others are equally cited: Monophysite Syriacs (Yahya Ben Adi, Berhebraeus, etc.), Melkites, Maronites, etc., the variety of which proves the universalism of the Christian dialogue with Islam.

The second part of the work, focused on religion and theology, is also

⁶Certain Christians were highly esteemed by Islamic leaders. This was the case with the doctor of caliph Haroun Al-Rachid, Gabriel Bukhticho, who practiced medicine for 23 years, commencing in 791. The caliph, it is said, loved him as if he were family, and to those who were astonished at the favor accorded to a Christian, he responded: "The fate of the empire depends on my fate, and my fate depends on Gabriel." *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷On this subject, an Assyro-Chaldean prayer stated, notably, "... In memory of all those who abundantly gave donations and who have nourished orphans and widows: Emir Matte, Emir Masoudbeg, Emir Hassan and Emir Najmaldin ...", in *Missel Chaldeen* (Chaldean Missal), p. 190.

⁸The former is a professor at the Eastern Pontifical Institute of Rome, specialist in Christian Arab manuscripts, and author of numerous publications on the subject. The latter is Director of Studies at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (Practicing School of Higher Learning), and has published, among other things, the *Catalogue des Manuscrits Arabes* (Catalog of Arab Manuscripts), Christian Manuscripts of the National Library, Paris, 1974, 2 vols.

quite enlightening. In another nine chapters, the author relates the ideas discussed by intellectuals from the two communities. The Christian authors were not content to just reject certain ideas proffered by the Moslems (the accusation of falsified writings, most notably the Gospel; the "lax" attitude of Christians toward purification, circumcision and polygamy; and incomprehension of a Christian God formed from the Trinity); for example, the Moslems considering the veneration of the cross as simple idolatry, or not understanding the notion of Christian paradise.

Faced with these Moslem critics, the Christian authors displayed a great competence and a vast knowledge of Judeo-Christian and Moslem texts. The Christian apology sought plausibility, to be as scientific and rigorous possible, by basing itself in texts. "In certain theological works (treatises on the Trinity or Resurrection) intended for Moslems, which were in fact reprises of works intended for Christians, the Moslem context reveals itself, whether the authors wanted to respond to Moslem objections, or they wished to protect their Christian readers against the influence of Moslem ideas."⁹ Thus, far from being described as falsified, the Gospel, considered the ultimate revelation, was glorified.

Personalities such as Huneyn Ben Ishaq, author of *Kitab al-Majdal* (The Book of the [Tower]), Elie de Nisibe, Aboul Faraj Ibn-Al Tayeb, the celebrated Al Kindi, Icho Yab Ibn Malkun, Abd-Icho de Nisibe, Ammar Al-Basri, and many others displayed a great zeal in the area of the Christian apology. Certainly, the need to refute their Moslem counterparts, and their great competence in theology, led to their great literary creativity.

At times, certain authors fell into a more or less virulent polemic against Islam, addressing the Koran and its origin, the personality of Mohammed, the role of Bahira the monk, Moslem mores (polygamy, ablutions, prayers, the practice of fasting, etc.), and the notion of Jihad, as well as that of Moslem paradise. With the Koran promising "to virtuous men, a paradise full of fine things: streams of milk and honey, wine, [houris], and beautiful children, the Christian apologists were perpetually opposed to such a conception of Paradise and sometimes even mocked such an inferior ideal."¹⁰

In effect, the Nestorian literature written in Arabic was born from an encounter with a more developed Moslem world, when the Nestorians were more numerous and enjoyed a more elevated social status than in times since. ... The Nestorian works in Arabic were mostly devoted to theology and apologetics, while the ascetic or liturgic works continued to be written primarily in Syriac. In

⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 243.

effect, these latter works had been destined for the internal use of the community, while contrarily, the apologetic works were addressed to Moslems. The polemic was limited by the fact that the authors were writing under Moslem domination, and constantly frequented the Moslems, which facilitated a certain mutual comprehension. The only truly polemic works appeared anonymously. The use of Arabic, accessible to Moslems; the conciliatory tone; and a good knowledge of Islamic religion were thus the principle characteristics of these works, compared to Byzantine or Latin texts addressing Islam, in which the authors could much more easily denounce Moslems, because they knew they would not be read by Moslems.¹¹

The relations between the Nestorians and the conquering Arabs were in general quite positive, despite occasional Moslem flare-ups, often the echoes of ancient times or sovereign personalities. This collective existence persevered despite the vicissitudes of history.¹² Today, the two communities live in quasi-complicity, with Christians enjoying the relative liberty of a cult, without liberty of conscience. At less than one million, facing 17 million Moslems, Christians have made themselves indispensable to the life of Iraq, of which they are an integral part. As with their ancestors, their intellectual and social elite constitute an essential part of the population. Even today, the Chaldean patriarch, as with his predecessors in the Middle Ages, is an esteemed figure, whose authority is recognized among the collective Christian communities of Iraq.

In principle, since 1972 a presidential decree has granted Christians in Iraq cultural and minority rights; however, they cannot exercise these rights openly due to cultural and social constraints. The relative liberty which Christians enjoyed due to the current (secular) regime seems to have disintegrated since the Gulf War, with Moslem compatriots making Christians the scapegoats, accusing them of being "agents of Western nations," because of the misfortunes caused by the inhumane embargo that has been continually imposed on the country. Yet the Christians of Iraq, along with their compatriots, have suffered cruelly and are equally part of the country's tragic destiny. Just the same, they do not lose hope ...

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 11. On this subject it is useful to consult the work of Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, in *Studi e Testi* 133, zweiter Band SS.103-219, Vatican City, 1947, of which Father J. Sanders translated the portion devoted to Eastern Syrian literature. See Jean Sanders, *La littérature Nestorienne* (Nestorian literature), Netherlands, 1985, 192 pp.

¹²On this subject, it is useful to consult Ye'or (Bat): *Les chretiennes d'Orient entre Djihad et Dhimmitude* (The Christian world of the East between Jihad and [Dhimmitude]), 7th-20th Century, Paris, 1991, Editions du Cerf. See also the superlative work of Jean-Pierre Valognes: *Vie et mort des chretiens d'Orient* (Life and death of the Christians of the East), Paris, 1994, Editions Fayard, 972 pp.