

The Hidden History of Christianity: The Church of the East before the year 1500.

England, John C.

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A Book Review

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In this book, John England outlines the “story of half of the world” that was the Church of the East, in an attempt to redirect false Western notions that Christianity in Asia developed only in the last few centuries, with European and American missionaries. England admits this attempt is a challenging one for any scholar, but writes, “The attempt will be made to focus upon both, local and regional, individual and social dimensions of the history, in order to reconstruct a more wholistic portrayal of specifically human qualities and endeavors.” (3)

England divides the book in three parts: The first part traces the movements of Christianity from Syria-Palestine eastward to Mesopotamia and throughout the Persian Empire, to become established in north Afghanistan and northern and southern Indian localities by the late second century, then Central Asia, (China, Sumatra and Japan) by the eighth century, and Burma, Mongolia, Tibet, and Java by the twelfth century. The second part presents selected writings and artifacts found from churches in these areas, in more detail. The third part explores the legacy that remains to us from this extensive history, along with questions it presents to the world-wide church and for all Westernized patterns of beliefs, life, and witness.

According to England, beginning with the first century, Christianity begins in Palestine and Syria and moves eastward into Mesopotamia. By the eighth century, missions of the Church of the East extend to at least 12 countries east of Persia, and in some cases, churches continue their missions in a number of countries until discovered by the first Roman Catholic missionaries in the fourth century.

Christianity, purports England, is an ancient Asian religion, not just because it had started in Asia, but because of its long and diverse presence throughout central, south, southeast, and north-east Asia. The evidence shows that for many centuries the COE (Church of the East) included greater numbers over vastly great distances than the churches of Rome or Byzantium, and this without colonial or imperial domination.

England maintains Christian faith and practice began in Asia for Roman Catholics only in the sixth century and for the Protestants in the nineteenth century. These denominations assumed theirs was the only concept of “The One Living God” and that this concept did not exist before them. He remarks that this assumption dismisses all previous Christian presence and mission in the Asian region along with all the liberating dimensions of related social and religious movements. He points out that anything east of Antioch was considered heretical from the second century on. Hence, the book is an attempt to provide an overview of the history, writings,

and arts of Christianity in Asia before the year 1500 C.E. and prior to later Roman Catholic and Protestant movements. He writes, "This survey is offered in the belief that the evidence is so rich and extensive that it demands a sympathetic reconstruction." (4)

England's narrative attempts to answer such questions as:

1. To what extent is Christianity in Asia, prior to the sixteenth century, a coherent and understandable phenomenon?
2. Can a pre-European, pre-colonial Christian tradition have direct significance for our understanding of church and faith today?
3. Can we find within its history, dynamic resources for contemporary struggle and reflection? And do these require of us a major rethinking of much Western historical writing on church and doctrine?" (4)

In addressing these questions, England begins by reconstructing a map of Christianity in Asia, prior to 1500 C.E., using extensive texts in a wide range of ancient and medieval languages, with secondary sources in a variety of European and Asian languages, as well as archaeological findings in the Asian region. He employs investigative methods to outline geographical and theological foundations of early Christianity, focusing on long-term historical changes and the diversification of languages that contributed to its wide-spread and its eventual decline in Asia. In his reconstruction, England suggests that terms like "Arab", "Syrian" or "Persian" can refer to many nationalities in West, Central, or Southeast Asia. "India" or "Indian" can be used to indicate almost anywhere east or south of Iran. Similarly, "Nestorian" seldom carries a doctrinal reference to the teachings of Nestorius, which was in any case clearly misrepresented, according to England. In fact, he claims, from the fifth century on, "Nestorian" embraces a wide-range of non-Latin Christian traditions native to former Assyria, Syria, Persia, Central Asia, and India. Nestorian is only one, (albeit the most notorious) of the labels given to successive territorial expansions and doctrinal divisions within the eastern churches. The others are "East Syrian," "Chaldean," "Tachin," "Yeh-li-ko-wen," and "Assyrian" are often synonyms for "Nestorian" the way "West Syrian," "Syrian Orthodox," or "Monophysite" are for "Jacobite." England suggests these were all one church before doctrinal divisions separated them. This is true according to the Holy Apostolic Church of the East, which today calls itself the ACOE, (Assyrian Church of the East) to separate itself from Chaldean Catholics and Syrian Orthodox Jacobites.

Drawing on the range of evidence now available, England shows it is possible to outline the presence of Christian communities from Syria to Japan and as far as Java by the first half of the eighth century. Some of the principle locations where material remains have been discovered, such as inscriptions, crosses, frescoes, manuscripts, paintings, and ruins, even monasteries, are Iraq, Iran, Syria, Turkey, China, Japan, India, Burma, Mongolia, Indonesia, Korea, and Malaysia. Beyond the eighth century and into the fifteenth century evidence exists to confirm the activity of Christian communities throughout Russia, Turkey, Mongolia, India, and China.

As with all movements, England maintains that Christianity spread through trade on the Silk

Road, and reached settlements throughout various regions of Asia. In this process of migration, rivalry and exchange, each tradition gave and received major influences, both in encounter with each other and with diverse local cultures.

The foundational beginnings of Eastern churches, according to England, were formed amongst Aramaic and Syriac-speaking (Assyrian-speaking) Jewish communities in Syria and former Assyria, (Mesopotamia). England purports that Jews from Media, Arabia, and Parthia, stretching to India, had been amongst the crowd at Pentecost, (according to Luke). He further claims that Christianized Jews were said to have fled eastward to Mesopotamia, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., and that Eusebius, writing before 324 C.E., declares that Thaddeus, (Mar Addai in Assyrian) one of the 70 disciples, worked in Edessa, (Urhay), and chronicles that the provincial Assyrian king Abgar of Osrhoene had exchanged letters with Jesus. England supports this claim by citing extensive evidence for the movement of Christianity eastwards in the earliest centuries C.E. to the bases of the Assyrian Arbella, (today's Arbil in northern Iraq) and Edessa in Osrhoene, forming Christian communities by 100 C.E. He traces details of bishops in Arbella from 123-316 C.E. The Assyrian Church of the East claims it was first established in Edessa in 33 C.E. by Mar Addai, and that Abgar was the first Assyrian provincial king to have converted to Christianity and to influence the Assyrians to do the same. This would coincide with what Eusebius has written about Mar Addai being in Osrhoene in 70 C.E., but to date, the story of these letters is thought to be an Assyrian tradition to the extent these letters have never surfaced. England's evidence for the existence of these letters is a footnote, referencing Moffet (1992, 46ff).

According to England, cotemporary records show that by 114 C.E., Christianity was established in former Assyria, (Mesopotamia) and Parthia. By the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180) Christianity had spread from the Assyrian provincial capital of Edessa to the Persian Gulf. England states sources of these movements are found in many early Assyrian manuscripts such as Bardaisan's "Book of Laws," (2nd century) the "Doctrina Addai," (5th century) the "Edessa," (2nd -6th century) and the "Arbella Chronicles." (6th century). England reports that in 197 C.E. a Synod regarding the date of Easter was held in Osrhoene, and Ardashir, the first Sassanian king, found strong Christian communities throughout the empire upon his conquest of Parthia in 225 C.E. Bardaisan also reports that Christians were found in Bactria, (northern Afghanistan).

England reveals that during the third century, more than 20 bishoprics were established on the Tigris-Euphrates, including that of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Churches such as the ones discovered in Dura-Europos (Mesopotamia) dating back 235 C.E., were built widely in the following centuries. That until the eighth century C.E. the densest concentration of Christian congregations would still be between the former Assyria to the north, and the Persian Gulf to the south. Christianity was thus established and prospered within the Persian Empire, comprised largely of native Assyrians, Iranians, West Syrians, and the Greeks that were deported from Roman border provinces. By the fourth century, according to England, hostilities between Rome and Persia had crystallized, largely due to the establishment of Rome as a "Christian Empire," casting Christians in Persia into the role of Roman agents living within the borders of the Persian Empire. Any contact between them and the Western Roman church had to cease. As a reaction to the installment of an Imperial Roman "Christian Empire", the Christian Assyrians of COE within the Persian Empire were now automatically linked to Roman Imperialism in Persia

through their Christianity, and this in turn led to their harsh life in Parthia, then, later, and now.

Founded in the third century, Seleucia lay near Babylon, on the eastern bank of the Tigris, sixty miles from Baghdad. In the following centuries it quickly became the center of trade between Europe, West Asia, Persia, India and China. Roads from Antioch, Palmyra, and Basra (southern Iraq) and from Merv and Herat all converged on the Tigris, which was navigable and linked to the Euphrates by canals. By the fourth century, Seleucia and its twin city, Ctesiphon, the former Parthian capital, had become the Persian Sassanian king's capital and a center for philosophical and scientific scholarship, as it had been in Seleucid times. From 410 to 780 C.E. Seleucia-Ctesiphon would become the home of the patriarch of the Church of the East, as far as Sumatra and Japan.

According to England, following the establishment of Seleucia as the Christian center, the Christian community in Arbella, Edessa, and Nisibis grew rapidly, and bishops and metropolitans were appointed by 290 C.E. At the first Council of churches in Seleucia in 315 C.E., Papa Bar Aggai seeks primacy, but primacy is only granted by the Synod to Mar Isaac in 410 C.E. By 424 the Catholicos patriarch was appointed the head of all churches of the East outside the Byzantine Roman Empire.

A clergy school was established in Seleucia by Mar Bawai (457-484) on the model of academics at Edessa and Nisibis, and convents for women as well as monasteries for monks started to multiply throughout the Persian Empire. Seleucia became the center for training of missionary monks and lay people who were penetrating central and south Asia. By 410, many churches and monasteries in Eastern Mesopotamia had infirmaries, and physicians at the emperor's court were mostly Christian. Church architecture in Seleucia-Ctesiphon shows the influence of Byzantine, Persian, and Jewish synagogue models. In the following century, the influx of thousands of monophysite captives from Antioch to Seleucia greatly increased the Christian population there, and the role of the patriarch becomes more important through Mar Awa (540-552) who was respected by fellow bishops as well as the Shah, as a teacher, diplomat, and church statesman. It is interesting to note that in the year 2008 the contemporary bishop Mar Bawai caused a schism in the ACOE, and was eventually ex-communicated and replaced by the contemporary Mar Awa in 2009.

In the following century, Christian persecution caused the death of thousands of "Nestorians" and the patriarchal see remained vacant from 605 until the death of Khusro II in 628 C.E. In 637 C.E. the city passed to Arab control but the patriarchate continued in Seleucia-Ctesiphon until it was moved to Baghdad, where it remained for nearly a thousand years, according to England. That Timothy I (780-823) who was consecrated at both Seleucia and Baghdad exercised jurisdiction over twenty metropolitan provinces, amongst which were Herat (Afghanistan), Kashgar (Turkey), Tibet, India, and China. The last two included bishoprics in southeast and northeast Asia. He further claims that Seleucia itself declined further in cultural activity and trade under Arab rule, and was later renamed Al Madain.

The Peshitta, (pronounced p'shitta, or "simple" in Assyrian) is the Syriac(Assyrian) version of the Old as well as the New Testament, which England claims to have been fully established in COE by the fourth century. But he suggests that before then, we have numerous Assyrian Christian

gospels dating from 100 C.E. and well into the fourth century, when a blossoming of Assyrian literature started to appear and survived well into the eighth century.

Women seem to have played an important role in early COE, as prophets, martyrs, abbesses, spiritual leaders and ministers to the poor and ascetics. England cites that Bardaisan details the way in which Parthian and Bactrian Christian women had radically different life-styles and morality than they do today. Mosaics, reliefs, and tombs discovered in Edessa depict a liberal attitude toward women in general and the ministering women in particular. The COE had ordained nuns and deacons and some women even assumed teaching and priestly ministries. For example, the 4th century "Testament of Our Lord" charges widows with ministries of catechizing and pastoral care, and allows them to share in priestly functions. Women stood at altars to be ordained just as their male-counterparts did, in contrast to the contemporary ACOE, which does not allow women to become nuns, deacons, or priests, much less stand at altars.

England points out that the official role for women in the life of the church is increasingly confined beginning in the fourth century, although female members of noble or royal families continued to be the exception. A number of highly-ranked women related to the Khans, (Gengis, Kublai, and Hulagu) have been identified as being Christian of the COE. For example, Olagai Beki, the daughter of Gengis Khan, was head of the Nestorian Ongust Dynasty, after her husband, Po-Yao-ho died. One of the most prominent of Mongol women was Sorghaqtani Beki, the Christian mother of the Khans Mangu, Kublai, and Hulagu, and was praised by Plano Capri, Rashid-Al-Din, and Barhebraeus for her intelligence, integrity and administrative skills. Apparently many wives, daughters, and grandchildren as well as some in-laws of the Khan Dynasty were prominent and even baptized COE Christians.

By 410 C.E., the Church of the East was the strongest in the hill-side throughout the Persian Empire, and that it included bishops from as far as Herat, Merv, and Samarqand, (the Mongolian capital). Moreover, the church was organized in six provinces, under metropolitan bishops, which united eighty bishoprics. The Creed of Nicea was accepted in its original form, and clergy functions and authority were established, along with regulations for the life of the church. The Synod of 410 C.E. also negotiated with Yazdegerd I for the protection of the Christians from persecution, because the Catholicos Patriarch, Mar shimmoun had been arrested and executed, along with five bishops and one hundred clergy, just eleven years earlier, in 339 C.E., for refusing to collect tax imposed by Sapor II, from already poor Christians.

At the Synod of 424 C.E., the Church of the East declared its independence from Antioch, and therefore the Roman Empire, and defined the independence of its catholicos/patriarch from Rome. This enabled the Church of the East to grow independently of the Roman Empire and Constantinian Christianity. England writes, "The church's emphasis on such doctrines as the humanity of Jesus, strengthened this independent development throughout the Persian Empire." (23) According to England, it also contributed to the creation of a Christo-Persian literature, through translations from Assyrian. This is how, according to England, the Christian community in Persia formed a "millat" (a "nation" in Assyrian), a legally recognized religious minority, confined to their own quarters in whichever city they dwelt.

Under Islam, the Arab conquest, reaching Ctesiphon in 637, was followed by civil dissension

for another one hundred years. At this time, the Church of the East extended from Syria in the west to Japan in the northeast and Sumatra in the southeast, and their hierarchy included nine metropolitans and ninety-six bishops. The Ummayyad Arabs established supremacy until 750 to be followed by the Abbasid Caliphs ruling from Baghdad. East and West Assyrian Christians continued to live under Muslim rule, as a permitted minority with civil status, which was at times given assistance to repair its churches. The services of educated Christians were widely used in administration, and a majority of physicians, artisans and merchants were Christians. Timothy I, patriarch under five Caliphs (780-823) established six new provinces for Armenia, Damascus, Rai, Dailam, Turkey, and Tibet. Hilarion (291-371) was one among the many who fostered Arab-speaking monks in Negev and Aqabah regions. Some of the others were Theophilus “the Indian” who founded churches in Yemen, and Abdisho who built a monastery in Bahrain. Many prominent Arabs became Christian, and the Gulf coast of eastern Arabia was saturated with Church of the East settlements.

In central, southeast, and northeast Asia, the Church of the East reigned supreme over most other religions, including Buddhism and Taoism, and the provincial population remained mostly “Nestorian” until the Ming dynasty. The “Nestorian Monument” in China, (of which the CSU Stanislaus has a rubbing now) is an example of how prominent the COE was through many dynastic rules in China. We find the same type of missionary activity and “Nestorian” settlements throughout India, particularly the Kerala region, beginning with the first century C.E. and still going strong even today, under the Indian Metropolitan, Mar Aprim, who presides over an enormous ACOE diocese which supports a very large church with a monastery, a printing press, and a university.

Throughout the book, England provides names, dates, and places for Christian activity and mission in Asia, with many interesting and detailed events, and referenced footnotes. From his narrative, we come to understand that the COE was prominent during the Persian rule, the Roman rule, and even the Ottoman rule, yet begins to decline after seven centuries, and after Christianizing nearly half of the world. England outlines three main factors for the decline of the ACOE in Asia: 1) The natural social, political, and geographical changes taking place in Asia, 2) The numerous sectarian schisms from within, and 3) The inability of COE to utilize local languages of the communities it served. This is in contrast to the way in which Catholicism has maintained its numbers and influence throughout the world, by utilizing other languages such as Arabic, Spanish, French, German, and English.

One of the main differences highlighted in this book between the Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church is that the foundational roots of the COE, unlike the imperial-colonial roots of the Roman Catholic church, were established by disciples, not emperors, hence it was a liberating movement, one that was built on the humanity, charity, and healing of Jesus, and that the success of the church was achieved without imperial subjugation and colonization.

England admits there are enormous amounts of manuscripts still not studied or translated, which could in the future give us more information on early Christianity in general, and the Church of the East in particular. Additionally, he concedes that a methodology based on interdisciplinary studies should be employed in order for scholars to be able to project a true history of Christianity. Consequently, this book does not attempt to discuss the entire history

of Christianity in Asia, from its inception in Syria-Palestine to its primacy and influence on the Asian Empires and subjects, as the title of the book suggests, instead, England focuses on the life of the Church of the East, its movement, mission, development, and expansion. Unless of course, the story of the Church of the East is the story of Christianity in Asia, in which case, the book is titled appropriately.