

**A Re-orientation of Perspective for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: Was the Church of the East Involved in Mission Activities among Muslims in Ninth Century Asia?**

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Using the title of Nestorians' for the Church of the East, Western scholarship has at times ignored or dismissed their history in Asia as the story of a heretical Church even though that history predated the Christological struggles of the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> In the beginning of the twentieth century there began to be a reassessment in Western circles as to whether Nestorius was indeed a heretic, driven by the discovery in Persia of a Syriac manuscript of one of his writings in 1897, the *Bazaar of Heracleides*.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the theological roots of the Church of the East extend before Nestorius to Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) considered one of their most important Church Fathers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed the Church could easily be called 'Theodoran' rather than 'Nestorian'. The Church of the East grew from Edessa with its Christological position consistent with the stance of Antioch believing in both the divinity and humanity of Christ but attempting to articulate that mystery in their own linguistic and theological terms.

As well as theological, another reason for the Church of the East being relatively unknown is that they spread to the East from their initial centre of Edessa in the second century and were outside borders of the Roman Empire. Deep animosity and occasional wars between the Romans and Persians helped create a cultural and relational distance within the Churches of West and East with the Church of the East growing primarily within the Persian sphere.<sup>4</sup>

In this engaging in mission, the Church of the East's story has continued relevance to areas where Christians live as minorities seeking to survive in hostile contexts yet desiring to be effective witnesses to their faith in Christ. This spread to the East in many ways is an "alternative story", as so much of Church history describes the expansion to the West as the predominant one. Yet this growth in Asia is vitally important because it tells of a period when the Church lived in a context of restrictions on their practice of faith, similar to other Christian-Muslim contexts today. Contrary to accepted opinion of historians of the period, however, these restrictions did not mean that there were no activities in mission happening both to other regions of Asia as well

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<sup>1</sup> For a perspective on why that has occurred starting with Church historian Eusebius in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, see Walls, Andrew, *Eusebius Tries Again: Re-conceiving the Study of Christianity* International Missionary Bulletin 24, 105-111 New Haven: OMSC (2000)

<sup>2</sup> The scholarly re-appraisal was led by Bethune-Baker, J.F., *Nestorius and His Teaching: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence* Eugene: Wipf and Stock (1998 reprint from 1907).

<sup>3</sup> See Becker, Adam, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and Christian Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press (2006)

<sup>4</sup> For the context of Roman-Persian wars with Edessa on the frontier, and a fascinating view of the present day city, see Dalrymple, William, *From the Holy Mountain* London: Flamingo (1998). For the Church of the East in Persia, see Moffett, Samuel Hugh, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500, Vol. 1* New York: Orbis (1998)

as in the context of Mesopotamia.

The Church of the East continued to exist in this period in the context of a *dhimmi* [protected ones] relationship to the Muslim Abbasids.<sup>5</sup> That relationship and how the Patriarchs of the Church managed it, particularly related to the role of the monastery, figures prominently in this story in Asia. The late eighth and early ninth century provide a primary context due in part to Church of the East leader, Patriarch Timothy I, who embodied monastic concern for witness and learning.<sup>6</sup> The following important questions can be asked: what mission and learning activities may have meant to the Church of the East, how the monasteries were viewed from Muslim sources, and how that related to Christian witness and Muslim perception of that presence and encounter. While more comprehensive answers to these questions would take us beyond the scope of this article, some insight can be gained by looking at texts of both faiths alongside each other. Examining the texts of both faiths places them in a 'contact zone', with the Christian monastery as the element of common attention and common space.<sup>7</sup>

Another part of a 'contact zone' was in the function of training and scholarship. Church of the East sources show how this training was related to the outward witness of these monasteries. These monastic activities had a continuity with previous centuries as well as how they contributed to involvement in scholarship in the Abbasid realms. Training of the monks was part of a role of presence leading to encounters with Muslims visiting the monasteries, as well as involvement in translation activities.

The Christian monastery was a place where desires for learning and spiritual experience could be fulfilled. At times that would also involve Muslims visiting for celebrations and prayer.<sup>8</sup> The monastery as a place of prayer was part of a shared world, a 'contact zone', with shared practices in the ninth century of both Christians and Muslims. The context also included a 'conflict zone' of a polemical nature in disputations between Christians and Muslims in the period. The two kinds of discourse occurred between two faiths that have of course many areas of common understanding as well as differences lasting to the present period.

#### **Four new pieces added to the 'puzzle'**

Other sources that recognize a Church of the East mission spread in Asia suggest that there was no mission happening to Muslims within Mesopotamia and even that they were being

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<sup>5</sup> See Ye'or, Bat, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* London: Associated University Press (1985) and Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* Lancaster: Gazelle Book Services (1996)

<sup>6</sup> See Norris, Frederick, *Timothy I of Baghdad, Catholicus of the East Syrian Church 780-823: Still a Valuable Model* International Bulletin of Missionary Research 30:3, 133-136 New Haven: OMSC (2006)

<sup>7</sup> A sampling of these texts of both faiths will be mentioned in this article. For more detail and further sources see my forthcoming (March 2017) book based on my PhD thesis of 2014 from Regnum Press.

<sup>8</sup> Writing about Christian monasteries is an actual genre in Islamic literature, called the 'al-diyarat' books (for the word monastery in Arabic.) The most commonly known book within the Muslim world is by al-Shabushti from the 9th-10th century period. There is no full English translation of al-Shabushti's *Kitab al-Diyarat* (The Book of Monasteries). For the Arabic version see Awaad, Gurgis Baghdad: Al-Maarif (1951)

ignored. One of these writers, William G. Young,<sup>9</sup> called the lack of witness to Muslims in Mesopotamia a 'puzzle' that awaits further answers. But monastic mission activities were actually happening among Muslims in this period. There are four pieces to the 'puzzle' that help to form a more coherent picture of the Church's overall spread.

The first piece added is in seeing the importance of a continuity of monastic mission activities *dating* back to earlier generations, including before Islam began in Arabia. The Church of the East, spreading from Edessa in the second century, had been consistent in their commitment to mission from their beginning. Both their theology and liturgy gave a framework for a mission-saturated identity.

Activities in witness to Muslims in the early Abbasid period continued a tradition of missionary monasticism back to the fourth century with the *Bnay* and *Bnat qyama* [Syriac for Sons and Daughters of the Covenant], a development emerging in a similar time period as St. Antony in Egypt and the beginnings of monasticism there.<sup>10</sup> Monasticism in the Church of the East was similar but also different in nature from the form in Egypt, resulting in monastic centers that were outward looking as well as inward, fostering the desires of learning and spirituality with a commitment to mission encounter. Encounters happening in the monasteries included with Muslims visiting these Christian centers. These activities were not new for the Church but a continuation of what had gone before in their history. Though facing restrictions as a *dhimmi* community they did not stop their monastic mission activities but maintained them.

A second piece that helps answer the question of what mission involvement among Muslims was happening in the period is looking at Christian sources for clues of these activities. An important extant primary source is a history of Beit Abhe monastery by Thomas of Marga, the *Historia Monastica*, and the letters of Timothy for how they may provide answers.<sup>11</sup> There are several references in Thomas' work that mentions mission activities to Muslims in the early Abbasid period.<sup>12</sup> The *Historia Monastica* in its depiction of Muslims is also valuable in being able to understand not only the unpredictability in these stories of encounters with monks and monasteries but also the ambiguity of these meetings in terms of meaning and results.

Timothy's letters also provide evidence of a concern for strengthening the Church in face of Muslim objections to their faith. He has specific content in his letters that provide resources for engaging Muslims in religious discussion.<sup>13</sup> The Patriarch did not ignore the Muslims around him,

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<sup>9</sup> Young's book, *Patriarch, Shah and Caliph: A Study of the Relationships of the Church of the East with the Sassanid Empire and the early Caliphates up to 820 A.D.* Murree: Christian Study Centre (1974) is an important contribution to studies about the relationship between the Church of the East in Asia and its Muslim rulers.

<sup>10</sup> See Murray, Robert, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in early Syriac Tradition* Piscataway: Gorgias Press (2004)

<sup>11</sup> The *Historia Monastica* by Thomas of Marga has been translated from Syriac to English by Budge, as *The Book of Governors: Accounts of the lives and the holy men and monks of the Monastery of Beit Abhe* Piscataway: Gorgias Press (2003 reprint from 1899). Timothy's letters are at present in Syriac, French, and Arabic, and portions in English. A full translation of his letters into English would be a valuable addition to the field.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Book 5 especially for several stories involving Muslims in the context of Beit Abhe monastery.

<sup>13</sup> See especially Timothy's letters 34-36 and 39. For letters 34-36 see the PhD dissertation of Hurst, Thomas,

but rather met with Caliphs, at times was involved with them in religious discussion, and encouraged as well translation activities in his Church.

A third piece comes out of exploring from Muslim literature itself the place of monastic mission activities in the monasteries. Muslims were attentive to the monasteries around them and also visited them for a variety of reasons. A practice that went back to the beginnings of Islam in the seventh century, it had indeed happened even before in places like al-Hira for the pre-Islamic Arabs (now part of modern day Iraq). As described in the surviving *diyarat* [monastery] material of al-Shabushti in the tenth century, as well as in the twelfth century geographical dictionaries of Yaqut and the fourteenth century work of al-Umari, these works represented Christian institutions as realms of neutral space but also as places of spiritual longings and desires common to both faiths.<sup>14</sup> Discourse of this nature continued to extend from the ninth century into the tenth and eleventh centuries in the emergence of the influence of Sufism in Mesopotamia and Persia as well as across Asia to the Indian subcontinent.

Monasteries were places that Muslims visited, wrote about, and made the place of the forbidden 'other' where their imagined (and perhaps at times real) desires for wine and illicit sex could be fulfilled. Muslim literature by al-Shabushti as well as the ninth century poet Abu Nawas<sup>15</sup> also described activities in the monasteries that Muslims at times participated in, including Christian festivals and prayer. These sources provide from Muslim perspectives evidence that these monasteries were places of encounter with the surrounding non-Christian communities.

Along with this piece of the puzzle coming from Muslim literature of the early Abbasid period, there is another influential source from the period, al-Jahiz.<sup>16</sup> He wrote in the mid-ninth century period about Christians, complaining of the social influence they had in some settings and even that they were trying to make converts of Muslims. His writing suggests that contrary to the Church ignoring or not engaging in monastic mission activities to Muslims, there were actual efforts going on in a climate of restrictions sporadically enforced.

A fourth piece of the puzzle on mission involvement among Muslims actually comes from the Church's extension to the East in the same period. Authors like Young have surmised that the Church went East in mission in part because of restrictions on mission to Muslims they faced as a *dhimmi* community.<sup>17</sup> Yet the early Abbasid period was not the beginning of the Church's mission to other regions of Asia. These connections between Mesopotamia and India had been

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*The Syriac Letters of Timothy 1: A Study in Christian-Muslim Controversy* Ann Arbor: UMI (1986), and for letter 39 see Mingana, Alphonse, *Sources Syriaques* Leipzig: Se Vend (1928)

<sup>14</sup> For the geographical dictionaries of Yaqut and al-Umari see the PhD dissertation of Campbell, Elizabeth, *A Heaven of Wine: Muslim-Christian Encounters at Monasteries in the early Islamic Middle East* Ann Arbor: UMI (2009)

<sup>15</sup> For English translation of a selection of Abu Nawas' poems, including dealing with Christian monasteries, see Colville, Jim, *Poems of Wine and Revelry: the Khamriyyat of Abu Nawas* London: Keegan Paul (2005)

<sup>16</sup> For al-Jahiz, see Pellat, Charles, *The Life and Works of Jahiz* Berkeley: University of California Press (1969)

<sup>17</sup> See Young (1974)

going on since at least the sixth century.<sup>18</sup>

A spread to the East was not purely because of frustrated efforts in the Abbasid context but rather also a continued move in a direction as a 'refugee' church that had been going on for centuries. Patriarch Timothy not only knew of this mission to the East but used it in his portrayal of the Church.<sup>19</sup> The image of the church he conveyed was not only as a *dhimmi* community but also one that was spread across Asia, larger than the bounds of its homeland.

These four pieces contribute to a clearer conception of what monastic mission activities were going on among Muslims in the early Abbasid period. The continuity of monastic mission activities in the past adds context to the Church in the early Abbasid period. Following clues from both Christian and Muslim sources to these continued monastic mission activities provides further strengthening to the argument. By adding an extension to the East as evidence of a continued vitality and stronger image of the Church in the period, a more comprehensive picture of monastic activities emerged.

### **Monasteries as a 'Zone of Contact' in Christian-Muslim relations**

Monasteries of the Church of the East like Beit Abhe provided a visible and strong Christian institution to the Muslims that had pre-dated Islam including in Arabia itself. A theory of a 'zone of contact' can be expanded to include within it elements of both 'presence' as well as 'encounter'. Terminology of a 'zone of contact' comes from the writings of Mary Louise Pratt<sup>20</sup> who focused on nineteenth century travel writing as seen from the eyes of 'empire'. She described contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths.' Though Pratt wrote from a post-colonial framework her definition has application into early Abbasid period Muslim/Christian relations where often 'highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' existed between the two.<sup>21</sup>

The East Syrian monastery was a social institution that overlapped in the contact zone providing points of presence as well as encounter with the Muslims around them in the Abbasid Empire of Mesopotamia. Evidence is available, as noted in the last section, that Muslims were not only aware of this presence but had written about these monasteries and even included them as a genre in their literature.

A 'zone of contact' in both presence and encounter can be explored through an interpretative reading of literature of both faiths from the ninth and tenth century. Genres of literature include both Christian sources like the monastic history of Thomas of Marga, books of instruction on religious discussion or Patriarchal letters such as Timothy's, as well as Muslim sources like al-Shabushti and Abu Nuwas who wrote stories set in monasteries. When these sources are read

<sup>18</sup> For the connections across the Indian Ocean in the sixth century, see Winstedt, E.O., *The Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1909)

<sup>19</sup> See for example Timothy's Letter 13 translated into English by Young (1974:130-131)

<sup>20</sup> See Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* London: Routledge (2008).

<sup>21</sup> Pratt (2008:7)

together, with a similar time context of the early Abbasid period, an important role emerges more clearly for the monastery and its activities.

One of these important East Syrian monasteries in the early Abbasid period that was a 'zone of contact' in Christian-Muslim relations was Beit Abhe.<sup>22</sup> Though only one of many monasteries in Northern Mesopotamia, its relationship to Patriarchs Isho-yahbh III and Timothy I and involvement in mission activities in both the Abbasid realms and other regions of Asia makes it an important example of the maintenance of mission and learning of the Church of the East in this period and centuries after as well. Involvement in these activities by the Church was part of a portrayal by Patriarch Timothy that made the image of the Church, indeed based in reality,<sup>23</sup> more expansive. The Church's involvement in monastic mission to the East provided strength to its ranks and indeed was a strategy for its ongoing sustenance.

The image of the Church being broader than its homelands in Mesopotamia found resonance to two different audiences. First was the Christians themselves, providing assurance that though it was an increasingly difficult time being a *dhimmi* community, they would survive due to their continued geographic reach.<sup>24</sup> In that way the monastic mission activities and how they were portrayed become a strategy of encouragement by Timothy for that very survival. Secondly was the Muslim audience, which Timothy needed to persuade that his church was not decreasing in influence but rather still strong and vibrant for the purpose of gaining concessions and privileges.<sup>25</sup> Even in periods in the future when unfriendly Caliphs or weak Patriarchs ruled as would happen just two decades after Timothy's death, the monastery still represented a powerful symbol that helped the Church maintain for centuries its spread to the East and even many of its monasteries in the Abbasid heartlands.

The role of Patriarch Timothy in this period of the Church of the East was extremely important. He brought together in his own person East Syrian elements of scholarship, heart for mission, breadth of learning and understanding of the mission of his Church across Asia, while recognizing and living within the Islamic context he found himself in. He valued deeply the monastic framework he was educated and nurtured in, especially the monastery of Beit Abhe. Timothy's death at the age of 95 in 823 represented the end of an era for the Church of the East, where concern for monastic mission to Muslims in Mesopotamia and to the East combined with a commitment to scholarship would not find such a champion again. In these ways Timothy represents to some degree a unique figure; able to take what already existed in monasteries like Beit Abhe and channel its resources in learning and activities in translation as well as encouraging and choosing monks for mission encounter.

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<sup>22</sup> The previously cited *Historia Monastica* by E.A.W. Budge (1899) is a translation into English of Thomas of Marga's history of the monastery of Beit Abhe, originally written in 845 A.D. He was a monk there himself.

<sup>23</sup> According to the authors (Barrett and Johnson) of the *World Christian Encyclopedia* Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), the Church of the East in Asia by the year 1000 A.D. may have had over 12 million followers.

<sup>24</sup> As noted in this article, the Church of the East by Timothy's period had spread across Asia to India and China with millions of followers.

<sup>25</sup> During Timothy's almost fifty years of being Patriarch, he faced five different Caliphs (rulers) of the Abbasid Empire. In Letter 5 he describes how he had to go six times into the presence of one Caliph to get a concession for his people granted.

Activities to regions of the East attest to a Church with vibrancy even in this period of being a *dhimmi* community. Timothy was aware of at least some of these activities as seen in his own letters. In the same year of 781 C.E. that Timothy engaged in a dialogue with Abbasid Caliph Mahdi, the Church had erected the *Stele* (a ten foot high stone monument similar to many used by the T'ang dynasty to communicate important information) in China, listing some of the history of the mission there up to that point as well as mentioning four monasteries existing in China under the T'ang dynasty.<sup>26</sup> A contribution to a fuller picture of monastic activities in the time of Timothy can be seen by examining extant epigraphic materials like copper plate charters and crosses in Southern India as well as this monument in China. These sources can be examined for clues to monastic mission activities in places like Kollam and Angamali in Malabar and China in the East and links to sending monasteries of Mesopotamia like Beit Abhe.

An analysis of the copper charters also yields the interesting possibility that Christians participated in this trade as part of merchant societies known as the *Anchuvannam* and *Manikkiramam*, which operated from places like Kollam and the *Serra* centre of Angamali to areas across the Indian Ocean.<sup>27</sup> Abbasid merchants had begun to sail to China in this period, including via the Malabar Coast. Muslim settlements were only in a very nascent phase in Malabar at this point and the importance of Muslim trade in the Indian Ocean and on to T'ang ruled China was growing by the middle of the ninth century.

### Training for Monastic Mission Activities

A key function of the East Syrian monasteries across Asia was in the area of training. It had various purposes for the Church and continuity over their history going back to Nisibis in the fifth century. A larger question on how the monks involved in mission activities were nurtured is beyond the scope of this article. Clues can be obtained by examining several of the monastic rules of the period and earlier bringing out implications for understanding how the monks were trained. From these rules as well as examining the letters of Timothy and work of Thomas of Marga, a tentative conclusion can be offered that nurturing for mission involvement was built on a foundation of monastic training. Training had a primary emphasis on Biblical exegesis, continuing a tradition in East Syrian schools since Edessa and Nisibis that had learning the works of Ephrem, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Narsai prominent.<sup>28</sup> There is no specific evidence available in the primary sources of a curriculum for mission training separate from a more general one, but there is however evidence for the choosing of monks from monasteries such as Beit Abhe for specific mission assignments. It is possible that these monks were trained for mission in more of an 'informal' curriculum, based in relationship with other monks and studying texts together like Timothy's letters.

The ninth and tenth centuries were very active in intellectual exchanges between Christians and Muslims.<sup>29</sup> These exchanges at times involved the communication of Christian faith not only for

<sup>26</sup> For a translation of the *Stele* into English as well as other commentary see Legge, James, *The Nestorian Monument of His-an fu: relating to the Diffusion of Christianity in China* London: Trubner and Co. (1888)

<sup>27</sup> See Narayanan, M.G.S., *Perumals of Kerela 800 A.D.-1124 A.D.* Calicut: Printex India (1996)

<sup>28</sup> Becker (2006)

<sup>29</sup> See Thomas, David, *Regard and Disregard in Early Relations between Muslims and Christians* Chronos 14

defense but also for mission purpose. The letters of Timothy, as well as works by Church of the East writers Theodore bar Koni and Ammar al-Basri, were often in a question and answer format with specific issues highlighted that provided points of contention between the two faiths, as well as resources leading to answers used in real encounters of witness.<sup>30</sup>

Training for witness happened in an environment in the early ninth century filled with theological disputation among the three faiths of Christianity, Islam and Judaism in Mesopotamia. The translation movement in Mesopotamia was growing in the early ninth century with East Syrians having an important role in it. This translation movement was in a broader context of the ongoing mission of the Church across Asia. Some of the translations may even have been done in the monasteries contrasted with the usual emphasis that the primary location was a *Bayt al-Hikma* [House of Wisdom], a form of library sanctioned by the Muslim rulers in Baghdad. Not all these activities were mission, but they did fit within a context that included monastic activities in mission. Involvement in mission activities and translation should be considered in a closer relationship than they have been in other scholarly literature on the subject.

### **Effectiveness of Monastic Mission Activities in the Early Abbasid Period**

Reflecting on this alternative story of Church of the East monastic activities in Asia, Sebastian Brock<sup>31</sup> at the Oriental Institute in Oxford in May, 2006 asked me this question: 'What did I think was the secret of the Church of the East's mission effectiveness?' A complex question to answer, it needed to include the difficult measuring of spiritual factors in that effectiveness as well as the specific region or time period. A different question, yet related, can also be asked: what activities in monastic mission were able to continue and be sustained in the early Abbasid period in a context of being a *dhimmi* people? If the answer to the latter question was that these activities in mission were able to be maintained in this period, it would indicate that continuance over several centuries had happened. These activities did indeed continue and were part of strengthening the Church by the Patriarch.

If Brock's question was applied to the Church's mission in Mesopotamia among the Muslims in the early Abbasid period, the answer would be minimal effectiveness if numbers of converts is the measure. A more complete picture of what was happening in the Church's homeland among Muslims is presented in this article, with involvement in mission occurring in various ways. It has also answered the question of effectiveness from arguing that the sustaining of mission to the east during this same period suggests a strength and vitality going on in the Church. If effectiveness is seen in this way, the continuance and expansion of mission and learning activities of the East Syrians in this period can be seen as centrally tied to the institution of the monastery.

The very 'secret' of this effectiveness was embodied in the monastery in the way it provided 'glue'

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New York: Yeshiva University Press (2006:17)

<sup>30</sup> For Theodore bar Koni see Griffith, Sidney, *Chapter 10 of the Scholion: Theodore bar Koni's Apology for Christianity* *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 47, 157-158 Roma: OCP (1981). For Ammar al-Basri, see Beaumont, Mark, *Christianity in Dialogue with Muslims* Carlisle: Regnum Press (2005)

<sup>31</sup> Brock is one of the most prolific writers and authorities on the history of the Church of the East, as well as a foremost Syriac scholar.



to the spread of the Church across Asia as well as being an important symbol to the Abbasids in imagination and reality.<sup>32</sup> In coming at Brock's question of a 'secret' for effectiveness from another direction, monastic mission activities were actually an important part of that 'secret'. It was not a story of triumphalism but rather continued endurance over many centuries. Looking for a 'secret' of effectiveness must be in the context of this endurance during very difficult periods of the Church of the East's history.

In researching what these monastic mission activities meant to the Church of the East as well as to Muslims in the early Abbasid period, several models from the work of Martha Frederiks<sup>33</sup> on Gambia should be considered. They are listed below,<sup>34</sup> with an additional one I would add included after. The first is the more traditional model of mission, *expansion*, where emphasis is on numbers of converts and church growth. In the Church of the East, there was growth through monastic mission activities based in a network of monasteries.

A more useful description than 'expansion' comes from the *Historia Monastica* itself. It is that monks were 'dispersed' to other regions of Asia.<sup>35</sup> This happened at times according to Thomas of Marga because of human pressure and sin. The 'dispersal' of the Church of the East monks was a form of expansion that involved activities that stretched across Asia. Within Mesopotamia due to the restrictions involved the mission of the Church was centered in the monasteries. Expansion and growth, as well as effectiveness in results looked very different in that context. Timothy's unique role in choosing monks from the monasteries and his own passion for mission should also be considered.

The second model Frederiks used had an emphasis on reconciliation, service and peacemaking, called *diakonia*, which has not been developed or applied in this article related to the Church of the East. Third was a model of *presence*, emphasized by the lives and witness of Francis of Assisi and Charles de Foucauld in North Africa. In this article on the early Abbasid period, it was argued that monasteries of the Church provided a presence that Muslims were aware of and wrote about as well. Presence had at times within it the element of encounter as Muslims visited the monastery for various reasons.

The fourth model that Frederiks highlighted was *dialogue*, more popularly discussed and implemented in recent years in Christian-Muslim relations. It had an emphasis on the ongoing need for relationships between the two faiths at several levels. In the early Abbasid period, intellectual exchanges of various kinds occurred between the two faiths that perhaps could be included under this model.

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<sup>32</sup> Cochrane, Steve, unpublished paper on the Decline of the Church of the East after 1400, given at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies seminar March 2012.

<sup>33</sup> See Martha T. Frederiks, *We have toiled all night: Christianity in the Gambia 1456-2000* Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boeken Centrum (2003).

<sup>34</sup> For these models see Frederiks (2003:90-91)

<sup>35</sup> For example, a whole chapter of the *Historia Monastica* is entitled 'Of the Dispersion of the Holy Fathers into all Countries' (Book 1, Chapter 14)

The final one is *kenosis*, or self-emptying which Frederiks argued has seldom been followed in Christian-Muslim history but involved the Church living among Muslims with humility and love. Monks of the Church of the East in their mission involvement lived out a self-*kenosis* that was evidenced by living as a *dhimmi* community yet continuing to engage in mission encounter with the Muslims around them.

A similar but additional model to self-emptying that I would add is suggested by the story of the monastic activities in mission in the early Abbasid period. It is the Church of the East as a *martyr* Church. Involvement of the Church in these activities was strengthened by their conscious foundation of liturgy that gave them regular disciplines of memory. It was a memory that included martyrs who had gone before and were remembered in the daily prayers in the monasteries. Being a *martyr* Church did not only mean the sacrifice of physical life but an ongoing tradition of sacrificial living that went back to their early history in the writings of Aphrahat and Narsai. A lifestyle of mission involvement over centuries centered in the monasteries experienced periods of ebb and flow in the relationship with the Muslims around them. Mission involvement at this particular period in the Church's history had within it the continued understanding of a *martyr* identity. It continues to be true today.

### **Monasteries as Signposts in Future of Christian-Muslim relations**

The role of the monastery and its activities in present and future relations between Christianity and Islam continues to be a very important but neglected resource of understanding. While this article has focused on an alternative story of monastic mission activities in the early Abbasid period, there is relevance to the present and future as well. The particular period of the ninth century in Christian-Muslim relations featured in this article also contributes to a larger history and future of these relations.

In various contexts throughout history, including the ninth century, Muslims have visited monasteries for diverse reasons, whether aesthetic, religious, or for pleasure. Even today, as detailed by one Western Benedictine monk<sup>36</sup> who spent time in the Coptic monasteries of Egypt, 'many Muslims come to the monasteries' and some of those came 'in the evening' to receive exorcism from demonic possession. He explains these Muslims' rationale as they explained it to him:

They say that their own sheikhs do not deal with this kind of power, but only with the One God, so they appeal to the Christian monks instead. By this kind of explanation, they get the help they need, yet preserve a sense of their own religious integrity.<sup>37</sup>

Monasteries throughout history have been places where there has been a 'zone of contact', though for many different activities and reasons. Relations between the world's two largest faiths continue to face the question of what social constructions exist that can influence this future direction, and the monastery provides one of those continued constructs. The monastery provides a social space that opens up opportunities for encounters for co-presence and

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<sup>36</sup> See Mark Gruber, *Journey back to Eden: My Life and Times among the Desert Fathers* Maryknoll: Orbis (2002).

<sup>37</sup> Gruber (2002:86)

interlocking experiences that can reduce the 'zone of conflict' between the faiths.

There will continue to be 'zones of contact' as well as 'zones of conflict' between the two faiths. In the presence of these monasteries, whether ancient ones still in existence or newly developing ones, there can also be continued opportunities for encounter. Christian-Muslim relations will continue to experience the ambiguity and unpredictably they have always encountered but these monasteries can provide a 'zone of contact' needed in a common future. In the almost thirteen centuries since Patriarch Timothy died in 823, with the Church of the East at its largest geographic spread with perhaps its greatest number of monasteries in existence; to the present day where the Church has only a handful of monasteries left, it has been an extremely long decline and twilight. The reality of being a *martyr* Church continues to be a very real description today. Yet there are stirrings of renewal in East Syrian monasticism, recognizing its history and honoring the same longings that once in existence.

Could it be possible that through a re-birth and renewal of Christian monasticism, even in Islamic countries, new bridges could be built? What is seen in this article through this often neglected part of inter-faith history in earlier centuries is an alternative story that provides a signpost to a needed alternative future, one that emphasizes 'zones of contact and exchange' rather than mutual exclusion and conflict. It certainly also carries many possibilities of ambiguity and unpredictability even as it did in the ninth century. The relating and learning from an alternative story in Christian-Muslim relations from the past may however lead in new directions to an alternative story in the future.

### **Implications for the Future**

The alternative story described in this article has focused on the growth of the Church across Asia in the period before Western mission involvement. It also presents a Church that lived without political power within empires ruled by the Persian Zoroastrians up to the seventh century and the Abbasid Muslims to the thirteenth, as well as various empires in China and India. As noted in the article, most Christians today in Asia continue to live as minorities to other faiths including Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Yet also growing mission movements in countries like China and India present whole new dynamics for the Church in Asia, including a commitment to see all areas of society reflect the realities of the Kingdom of God.

There are many implications from this article and the alternative story it presents for mission strategy today. Exploring even a handful of them would require another article, but I will briefly focus on two related to the challenge of reaching the Muslim world. First of all is the importance of Christian communities that function as places of devotion yet also places of outward witness. In the article, I describe how the Church of the East in Asia, very much like the Celts in Scotland/Ireland at a similar period in history, had an 'outward monasticism' different than the normal stereotype of only withdrawal from the world. The Celtic monastic communities like Iona and Lindisfarne, among many others, were sending out many monk-missionaries that helped to evangelize the continent of Europe particularly up to the tenth century. Similarly, the Church of the East monasteries also sent out monk-missionaries across Asia up to the fourteenth century. What does this mean for groups like YWAM today, that have teams and University of the Nations training bases all over the world? These bases in many ways resemble monastic centers, with intentional commitments both to deepening devotion as well as outward mission. Should there be a greater commitment to strategic location of these bases in Muslim nations as signposts?

These signpost communities as described in the article could be ways to change present zones of conflict into zones of contact and exchange.

Secondly, this article lists with brief comments the five ways of engagement with Muslims in mission history that Martha Frederiks describes. I give a further one, a church that lives in the faithfulness of the *martyr*. The history of the Church of the East in Asia as briefly written about in this article reveals a martyr church, and it continues to be in places like Iraq and Syria today. Yet much of the mission involvement and even mobilisation for mission happening particularly in the West today (and even in groups like YWAM) continues to focus on other parts of the world. The message of possibly becoming a martyr for our faith and witness is not always the easiest one to mobilize new missionaries. Yet it must always be part of that challenge, because it is not going to become less of a reality but even more.

At first glance it may seem that these two points, creating more communities of witness and influence in Muslim nations, and seeing more people aware and committed to the possibilities of martyrdom in those very nations, are contradictory. Yet they do go together. There will continue to be zones of conflict in Christian-Muslim relations all over the world. But we must intentionally work to see those areas of conflict lessened, through both our loving witness to Christ in sharing the Gospel as well as touching every area of Muslim society with that love. At times that life of obedience will lead us to the cross, but even then the cross of sacrificial love will be the very signpost for Muslims we pray for. After all, the greatest zone of contact and exchange in history has been the cross of Jesus Christ, and His resurrection to new life. We must walk in that same spirit today.

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