

## Summary

This doctoral thesis, entitled *The Assyrian Church between the VIIth – IXth centuries*, sets out to depict a clearer and more pregnant image of the Assyrian Church in the Romanian space. Nowadays, the Assyrian Church has long lost its proeminence interms of the number of followers, but in its heydays it spanned from the Near East and all the way to India. However, in spite of its geographical distribution, it had remained largely unknown and unexplored. And it is precisely for this reason that this paper seeks to portray the religious life of Assyrian Christians from the VIIth till the IXth centuries, with all its elements, concerning statal, social and religious issues. The present thesis is divided into eight chapters and one hundred sixty-three subchapters, presenting the historical, dogmatic, liturgical and ecclesiological situations of Assyrian Christians under Islamic domination.

Any analysis of a subject, any effort to shed light on a certain topic, also casts shadows and challenges for future research papers dealing with matters still unknown. This presentation of the different aspects of Assyrian society is by no means exhaustive, as each chapter can serve as a work in itself and a much more in-depth topic of academic research. Regarding the examination of the Assyrian Church, it is confined to the indicated period, as further works shall dwell on previous or subsequent aspects. Moreover, even for the analized period, the limitations of space and time of such a thesis have made it impossible to cite all the documents and scientific papers covering the matter.

The introduction itself comprises three parts: the first sets the background and the position of the Assyrian Church among the other Churches – Oriental, Eastern and Western; the second part deals with the Christological conception of the Assyrian Church within the Persian Empire, while the last part describes the hitory and legends of the Assyrian Church.

The first part of the introduction (marked as A) establishes that fact that the Eastern Apostolic Church, together with the *Oriental-Orthodox Churches*, are known as *Old-Oriental Churches*. These explanations are supported by three tables: the first one, according with the theologian J. Oeldemann, distinguishes clearly between Orthodox Oriental Churches and Catholic Oriental Churches. The second table, belonging to Dietmar Winkler, contains a more in-depth presentation of the traditions and development of Old-Oriental Churches, namely the Assyrian one, among the other Churches. The third table, authored by Juergen Feulner, dwells on

liturgical rites. Herein become apparent both the Antiochian legacy and the differences between the Eastern Syriac rite and the Western Syriac rite within the Assyrian Church.

The second part of the introduction, marked as B, covers the Christological difference between the Assyrian Church and the other Oriental Orthodox Churches, as well as between the Bisantine Church. In this regard, the Eastern Church has been described as "strictly diplophysite". Nestorian Christology of the VIIth century proclaims the dual natura and the dual hypostasis of the Christ, while the Miaphysite Churches claim that our Saviour Jesus Christ has had a single nature and only one hypostasis. At the same time, the followers of Chalcedon honor the double nature of the Saviour, but only one hypostasis.

The third part of the introduction (marked as C) is divided into two parts: the former covers Assyran and Syriac traditions and describes the establishment of Syrian Christianity at the beginning of the apostolic era. The Nestorians had promoted three legends in support of this claim, connected to Assyrian origins: *the episode with the Three Wise Men and their worship of the Holy Child*, *the history of King Agbar of Edessa* and *the Epistles of Apostle Thomas*. The latter part describes both the historical origins of the Assyrian Church and its most important personalities of the first six centuries, such as Bardaisan, Tatian, Rabbula of Edessa, St. Ephrem, Bar Saum, and Babai II or the Great.

**The first chapter** of the thesis depicts, in parallel, the Assyrian Church in two distinct periods of time: that of the *caliphate of patriarchs (632-661)* and the *umayyada period (661-749)*. Both periods reveal systematically the situation of Assyrian Christians during Islamic domination. Characteristic for the period of the caliphate of patriarchs had been the tolerance towards Christians – more precisely, the relationship between Muslims and Assyrian Christians had fluctuated depending on the general political situation. Where the first caliph made no distinction between the three major branches of the Oriental Church – Nestorians in Mesopotamia and Persia, Monophysite Jacobites in most of present-day Syria and Chalcedonian Orthodox in the Bisantine provinces –, his successors had favored the Nestorian Christians, who had maintained their patriarchal seat in the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon.

In the first umayyadan period, the Christians had been considered by the first caliphs a tollerated religion. Mu'āwiya (661-680), the Muslim leader, realizing that in Syria the Assyrian Christians represented the majority, had considered that an edict of tolerance would benefit the entire empire. Additionally, seeing that the relationships between Christians and the Bisantine

Empire were lucrative, he had decided to marry an influential Christian woman, which significantly eased commerce in the northern part of the empire. In Damascus, the capital of the Muslim Empire, the highest offices of the state had been entrusted to Christians. One such example is that of the finances of the empire, which were entrusted to the Banū Sargūn family or Manšur.

Christians have not only been favored, but they had been imposed some restrictions as well the first and most important had been financial – non-Muslims paid taxes which, as time went by, became higher and higher. Another restriction was social: non-Muslims were excluded from military service on grounds of national safety and were therefore obliged to pay an additional tax. Christians were also forced to wear a belt around their waist in order not to be confused with the Arabic population. Later, they were also made to wear a large, yellow patch and have their hair cut in a specific fashion, short on the forehead. They were not allowed to ride horses, nor were they permitted to travel in the center of the road, which they had to yield to the first Muslim they would encounter. Additionally, they were not allowed to occupy central positions in gatherings.

The end of the umayyad period, during the reign of the sixth caliph, Umar II (717-720), can be described as the first period of general persecution.

Referring to the period of Orthodox caliphs, Christians believed, at first, that Muslims were a new Christian sect. However, during the umayyad period, Saint John Damascene, son of Banū Sargūn, having a rich Oriental culture and living among learned Muslims, had devised a fierce dispute in chapter 101 of the second part (Heresies) of the book *Source of Knowledge*, where he debated the issue of Islam in the context of an Abrahamic religion, showing Christians just how dangerous belief in the Koran can be.

Catholicos Īšōjahab III of Adiabene (650-658) had distinguished himself in the period of Orthodox caliphs both in a spiritual plane and in the political arena. In 650, Īšōjahab III had served as the diplomatic representative of the Persian Borān in his relationships with the Roman Empire and, subsequent to bilateral discussions covering military, political and religious matters, a truce between the two empires had been agreed.

The umayyad period had been represented religiously at the highest level by the Catholicos Gīwrgīs. He supports the Christology of Babai the Great, where he consolidates the belief that *The Christ has the same human nature as us and, at the same time, the same Godly nature as the Father. In Jesus Christ, the Son of God, coexist two hypostasis of His nature.*

**The second chapter** discusses the main Christian literary sources specific to the early Islamic period of the Persian area. While this chapter does not fully cover the whole Nestorian literature of the time, it nevertheless paints a vivid image of East-Syrian and West-Syrian Christianity. Thus, East- and West-Syrian writers are presented in a chronological manner and they had a tremendous influence on the literature and religious services of the Assyrian Church.

In the pre-Islamic period, theological Assyrian literature had been able to develop publicly and freely, without constraints, but later on, during the Islamic period, theological literature had only evolved in monasteries and theological centers. It is worth pointing out that literature had seen a great revival at the time, many clerics and laics bringing considerable contributions to the development of Nestorian literature. East- and West-Syriac theological literature in the monachal space of the VIIIth century did not bring about many differences, but were focused first and foremost on upholding the Christian faith before the influence of Arabic literature.

**Chapter three** tells the story of the fate of Assyrian Christians during the Abaside Dynasty. The Muslims of that era, compare to the umayyads, were more aggressive in their attitude towards minorities. A major change in the development of the empire did not come from a geographical direction, but, rather, an ethnic one, namely the ethnical composition of the Arabian government. The Abasides, who came to power on top of the wave of Islamic orthodoxy, gave religion precedence over race. True religion, not through Arabian birth, had set the rule for Islam at that time. This emphasis on one true religion did not, at first, worsen the treatment of Christians within the empire, nor did it exacerbate the frictions between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. The third Abaside caliph, Al-Mahdi, began his reign with an effort to quench the thirst for orthodoxy of Irani Shiites of Bagdad and, in an uncommonly peaceful gesture towards Christians, he organized a debate where he also invited the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (779-832).

Caliph Mutawakkil, due to his persecutions against Christians, had been nick-named *the Christian hater* by the Jacobite historian Bar Hebraeus, in the XIII-th century. Mutawakkil's religious policy, increasingly reactionary, had been harsher towards Christians. It is true to say that at no time during the Abaside reign had Christians been totally free or not subjected to pressures and discrimination. Violent persecutions were local, brief and far apart. Even during the reign of the generous caliph Al-Mahdi, the empire was not always tolerant with Christians. At

one point in time, after losing a battle on the border to his enemies – Bisantine Christians –, Al-Mahdi had ordered the destruction of some churches and forbade Christians to have slaves.

Arabic education is greatly indebted to Christian dhimmis scholars, who activated throughout the 500 years of Abaside dynasty. One of the reasons why caliph Mahdi invited Timothy I to the debate had been, without a doubt, the fact that he was a zealous patron of education, familiar with Aristotle and Greek and Syrian texts. Because of the pioneering activities of Christian translators, Arabians, who up to that point had had little education, but who had open and curious minds, had been propelled to a fully-fledged intellectual revolution. Thus, in a mere few decades, Arabians had assimilated all the knowledge that had taken the old Greeks centuries to develop.

Together with the emergence of Nestorian doctrine and the firm establishment of a hierarchy in Persia, the Nestorian Church had began to seek opportunities for expansion. This has been made possible by both external and internal circumstances and conditions, which had favored the development of the Nestorian Church. The unexpected success of their missions was largely due to a series of internal factors, which mixed their enthusiasm for faith with a monachic system and a hierarchy always ready for action and sacrifice. Furthermore, they were extremely modern in planning their missionary actions. Wherever an episcopate was established, the project also included a school with a library and a hospital with medical services. Nestorians were famous for their technical abilities and for their scholar and medical knowledge. Just like modern missionaries, they combined educational services with medical and religious activities and thus enjoyed a great popularity among nations of the Eastern hemisphere.

**Chapter four** is wholly dedicated to the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and to his theological letters, in the context of Islam. The Catholicos – Patriarch Timothy I has been one of the most interesting personalities of the Nestorian Church. His mandate had been one of the longest and successful, but eventful as well, since at that time the Church had had to adjust to the new realities that came after the early Abaside dynasty. The leadership of Timothy I (780-823) came in a crucial time for the development of Islamic erudition. Theological development occurred in parallel to the edification of a new political system in the Muslim Arabic world. The movement of the Islamic capital to Bagdad had been especially important for the Nestorian Church. The Umayyads, with Damascus as their capital, were exclusively interested in the Mediterranean, while the Abbasides looked towards the East.

The literary activity of the Patriarch had been very varied. The diversity of his theological thinking becomes apparent especially in his letters. 'Abdišū' mentions a collection of approximately 200 letters, organized in two volumes. Of these, only a small part survives and, in turn, that part has been only partially edited. His 59 surviving letters are transmitted, just like his codex, through a collection of synods which, according to the title, are called *Collected Synods* of Patriarch Elias I.

In his letters, Timothy defends traditional Nestorian Christology in conversations with other Christian confessions. Also in these letters, Timothy develops certain aspects of his Christology in the context of Islam, which teaches its own teachings about Christ and which differ greatly from the Christian perspective, especially in terms of Christ's divine nature. Islam strictly rejects any divine aspect of The Christ.

**Chapter five** presents the administrative and legislative organization of the Nestorian Church. This organization follows two parts: before the Arabian conquest, when the Nestorian Church had been established and the second, covering the umayyad and abaside period, when the Church had developed and consolidated its administrative and legislative organization.

The main source of information concerning the law of the Oriental Church, we cite the *Synodica*. As the title suggests, it is a collection of chronicles of documents and decisions issued by synods. In the sasanide period, the acts and canons of Persian synods are present, together with the "Western" synodical canons. Together, they gave rise to a *collection of Eastern and Western synods*, which had continued to spread. The existing prototype had been completed with additional material from the West at the Great Synod of the XI-th century.

The direction of development of the Persian Church is marked in the V-th century by a tendency to establish its own seat in the city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. This implied a totally new direction of development, as the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon would have been superior to all other Persian bishops from the other episcopates. Additionally, it was sought to decrease the dependency of Persian dioceses on Antioch, or even its complete dissolution.

The role given by Māruta of Maiperkat to the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon upon reorganizing Persian communities ensured his primacy over the other Persian bishops. A proof in favor of this is present in the documents of the synod of 410, where the term *catholicos* is introduced in a latter edit which sought to both attest and historically date the precedence and equality to Western patriarchs. The uncontested independence of Persian communities

established in the wake of the war between Constantinople and Persia was followed shortly (in 424) by judicial independence. The synod of Dadisō witnessed the unilateral dissolution of the dependency of Antioch as a supreme instance for Persian bishops.

The Patriarch of *Seleucia-Ctesifon*, with his later residence (from 762) in Baghdad or in Samarra, had succeeded in maintaining his position as the leader of the Nestorian Church during the Islamic period and even to consolidate it. The Patriarch had kept the traditional centralized power of all the Church. In the VII-th and VIII-th century A.D., the bishops of Elam and Persia had attempted to break away from the authority of the Patriarch. However, full submission only came at the end of the VIII-th century, under the guidance of Timothy I.

Assyrian monachism had been founded in the IV-th century by Greek hermits banished in the area of Mosul by Emperor Valens (364-378) and by seventy disciples of the Pachomian monk Eugene, who came from Egypt as an immigrant to live in the mountains of Nisibis. In the VI-th century, Abraham of Kaskar, after studying at the school of Nisibis, went to the desert to become acquainted with Anchoretism. Retreated on Mount Izla of Nisibis, he had founded the "Great Monastery" and set a rule for his countless students: this rule, which had been adopted and completed by his disciple, Dadisho, became *The Charter of Nestorian Monasteries*, which, just like Bet Abe Monastery of Aqra, was unified, by act of foundation, to the *Great Monastery*.

Lays and clerics were already clearly separated in the V-th century. Lays still held some rights in the clerical church, but these rights were gradually restricted. First and foremost, they were consulted in choosing the bishop and held seats in the ecclesiastical gathering of the diocese and of the community. Moreover, lays had equal rights at the synod of the diocese.

*Christians represented, during the Islamic period, to a certain extent, their own state within the state organized religiously and personally. Social care of the Church for its followers became all-inclusive, in case it was not already implied directly or indirectly in the duty of religious care. Of all the regulations of Christian life valid at that time, of special interest is the matrimonial law.*

**Chapter six** offers a rich image of Assyrian liturgy, described under several aspects. The aim of liturgy, just like in all the other Churches, is committing the Holy Eucharist and that is the reason why this chapter looks carefully at the meaning of the Eucharist for the Assyrian Church.

From the middle of the VII-th century, the Eastern Apostolic Church had adopted a rule which limited the number of liturgical formulations to three, which mark the ecclesiastic year in

Eastern Syria till today. These three formulations of Eucharistic prayer bear the names of three remarkable figures of the Eastern Apostolic Church: the *Liturgy of Addai and Mari*, the *Liturgy of Theodore of Mopsuesia* and the *Liturgy of Nestor*. Anaphora, which bears the name of *Addai and Mari*, is, of all three, the most venerable. It is also the most commonly used liturgy from the Assyrian liturgical year.

The Liturgy of Addai and Mari begins with *The Liturgy of the Word*, followed by the *offering (Qurbana, anafora, Eucharistic prayer)*. Afterwards comes the *Communion*. The East-Syrian ritual has this macrostructure in common with all neighbouring Oriental liturgies. However, its prayers, specific chanting, the emphasis on processions towards holy places, together with other details, set it apart with a style of its own.

The East-Syrian liturgy has a biblical understanding of the history of salvation. It is founded on two worlds: the here, the worldly, the visible realm of the mortals, the finite and the there, the godly world, invisible, eternal, lasting and infinite. Through His resurrection, Jesus Christ makes this world accessible to us. The Church is the image of the heavens. Thus earthly liturgy mirrors the heavenly one and by celebrating the Eucharist here, on earth, one can partake to the heavenly liturgy.

This progression mimics the history of salvation through dynamism: from the heavens onto the earth, in order to savor the eternal fruits. These are the main ideas which are developed widely in the interpretations of East-Syrian liturgy.

Joseph Baradeus, bishop of Edessa and tireless preacher of Christianity at the beginning of the VI-th century, offers four explanations for the fire that comes down from heaven as a symbol of the Holy Ghost, Whose descent is evoked by priests during epiclesis.

**Chapter VII** is dedicated to religious, social and political relationships between Nestorians and Muslims during early Islam.

The East-Syrian church and early Islam have had countless common traits. However, it is worth keeping reserved in drawing conclusions, as the sources of information of the time and the existing studies are incomplete and contradictory. Also, Nestorians ought not be imagined as a homogenous group. The East-Syrian Church – Nestorians – and the rival West-Syrian Church have played an important role in terms of culture and translations. Questions concerning divinity and the human nature of Jesus Christ had taken up most of their conversations and it is in this way that the most important school had seen important unrest, approximately in the year 600, due to

contradicting opinions with regards to Christological Orthodoxy and the use of metaphors in the exegesis. Close to the year 612, they had to take defense in their war against Miaphysite opinions and ideas, which they condemned vehemently, where they attributed to their adversaries unilateral statements about the Christ and Virgin Mary and which, by means of argumentation, they had taken to the absurd. This approach was soon used in the Islamic kalam and an inversed and condemned image of Christology seems to be present in the Koran, whose revelations had started at the time.

In the Koran, Jesus is described as God's exemplary slave and the wording is close to the old Syrian phrasing. But the Koran condemns the Trinity, as the metaphors connected to God are denied, resulting impossible for Jesus Christ to be considered the Son of God figuratively. In the East-Syrian Church, Ephraim insisted, in the IV-th century, that philosophical research into the nature of God should not be carried out. Metaphors are precisely those means which enable to common man to name the unboundless and the divine mystery. In later years, metaphors related to God had been generally rejected and they struggled to give a literary influence to Antiochan influence. Some metaphors were allowed, however, as they came from the Bible.

Aside from military and political participation, there are many other signs of the influence of Arabian Christians in the development of Islam: Arabian Christians were acquainted with the Syrian liturgical language; the Koran itself seems to be named after the popular chanting of Nestorian liturgical texts and contains many Syrian terms; local heroes are sometimes portrayed as biblical characters. But all these stories were not allowed into the Koran.

Other East-Syrian influences would be: foregoing the wine; rejecting the idea of original sin, as man needs to use his own reason regarding ethical questions; the concept of *angelic school*, where the Creator, using a nib, would teach a heavenly book.

The initiative to translate into Arabic the majority of philosophical writings had probably been determined by Nestorians and Persians. With these translations, the Nestorians had transmitted, at the same time, their theological and philosophical traditions. The Abassides had supported the translations, as they seem to have viewed them as a tool which would attest their intellectual superiority.

At first, the Nestorians had built many monasteries and were allowed to conduct their missionary activities freely among non-Muslims and this fact attests their good relationships with the conquerors. Both among the ranks of Christians and Muslims there were hopes of the Rapture

and the return of Christ and it remains unknown if it had been these common expectations that led to these relationships. With time, however, the Nestorians had lost a lot of their freedom and power and had been subjugated as *dhimmis*.

The questions and reproaches leveled by Islam had led to new arguments. Interest towards law and history grew and the Nestorian intellectual elite was favored at the Abassid court and they had been part of translations and discussions. Be that as it may, they were able to do precious little for their fellow Nestorian Christians.

Although Nestorians had preferred Muslims to Bisantines or Persians from the beginning, as time went by many of them either took refuge there or converted, for pragmatic reasons, to Islam. This conversion had been supported in various ways by the Abassides, while the Nestorians had sought to prevent it.

**The last chapter** depicts the dramatic situation of the Assyrian Church in the wake of the Abasside period and until today.

In the Near East, the Eastern Apostolic Church has had its historical peak in the second half of the XIII-th century. The Abassid dynasty of Baghdad, which was ruling in name only over local warlords, had ended in 1258 when the capital had been occupied and destroyed by Mongols, who murdered the last caliph. The new masters of Asia had come as adepts of shamanism, budism and – where, in their lands, they were exposed to Christian missionaries, Christianity. But the very same Mongols who posed a mortal danger to Western Christianity turned out to be the defenders of Christianity in the Near East, because their main enemy was Islam, whose caliphate had indeed gone extinct, but who still received strong support from Egyptian Mamelukes..

After the fall of the Eastern Apotolical Church under the Islamic-Mongolian yoke, the remaining followers took refuge into the mountainous Kurdish area of Northen Irak delimited by Lakes Van and Urmia and the city of Mosul. Others went west, up the Tigrus river, reaching Diyarbakir, the old Amid. It was in this area, which nowadays comprises regions of modern Turkey, Iran and Irak did the followers of the Eastern Church stand fast from the beginning of the XVI-th century till after the First World War, continuing to lead, within the Millet system, an independent life as "Mountain Nestorians", as they were called by Western turists of the time.

Eastern Apostle Church stood, after the heavy losses of World War I, at approximately 10,000 followers; aside from those forced to seek British protection in the prisoner camp of Baquba, there was a small group which had migrated towards Hassake in north-eastern Syria, which at the time was under French occupation and additional isolated communities dwelling around lake Urmia in Iran. Others still made it as far as America, representing the spearhead of a Church that would spread – in spite of its small size – throughout the world. The spiritual leader of all these groups was Bishop Abimalek Timotheus (1908 – 1945), who, given the general confusion that plagued the entire Church at the time, came out as an energetic figure – Its true "Patriarch".

The Catholicos Patriarch Shimun XXI Eshai settled, together with his group of followers, in San Francisco in 1954 and from there they tried to keep in touch with believers from around the world. Even today, there are Assyrians living in the United States, some European countries, Irak, Syria, Iran and, in small groups, in other countries of the Near East. There was no turning back towards the leader of the church in Irak during the leadership of Shimun XXI, nor did it occur during the period of his successor.

**The Conclusions** are divided into three chapters:

The first part deals with the ecumenical situation of the Assyrian Church of the XX-th century. Through the efforts of its Patriarch, Mar Dinkha IV Knanaya (since 1976), the Assyrian Church manages to continue ecumenical dialogues with the Catholic Church, with the Catholic Caldean Church and with the Council of Churches of the Near East. Additionally, an unofficial channel connects the Assyrian Church to the Syrian Orthodox Church and that channel serves as the sole forum of ecumenical discussions.

In the second part, the Nestorian or Assyrian Church establishes the correct name of the Church. Thus, the Eastern Apostolic Church seeks to remove any accusation of "Nestorian heresy", as it has the clear conscience of an unchanged Orthodoxy, which marks the piety and veneration of the Virgin Mary, which it shares with all Oriental Christian Churches.

The third and last part summarizes briefly the eight chapters.