

The Forgotten Christians

SOMETIMES CHRISTIANS FORGET JUST HOW WIDESPREAD THE PRINCE OF PEACE'S FOLLOWING WAS BEFORE ISLAM

Most people—in fact, most Christians—tend to think of Europe and the regions the nations of that continent conquered, when they think of the history of Christianity. Many may even be aware of “Eastern Christianity” but typically associate it with either Greece or Russia. There is, however, an entire non-European Christian world, which once extended across most of Asia and now survives—perhaps not much longer—as tiny remnants here and there, where once, before Islam, there were millions of faithful adherents. This is a brief overview of those “forgotten Christians” and what happened to them.

By Ronald L. Ray

O beying the command of Jesus Christ, his apostles and earliest followers sought from the beginning and with great zeal to “make disciples of all nations.” Far from being a merely Semitic phenomenon or some more peculiar offshoot of Judaism, the religion founded by Jesus was something completely new and different, even when compared to the religion of the Hebrews, which had prepared its way.

Already in the first decades after the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, the “sect of the Nazarenes” first became known at Antioch in Asia Minor (now known as Turkey) as “Christians”—the name that remains to this day. Those early Christians sought by every means to carry the Gospel message to the ends of the Earth. Part of that history is very familiar to us.

We know from the apostles themselves and from



An astounding early Ethiopian church building is the Church of Bet Giorgis, shown here, almost unique in the world for being carved out of the bedrock. Thus the building is set in a deep pit with perpendicular walls. It can only be entered via a hidden tunnel. The doors and lower nine windows are faux; the upper 12 windows are functional. It is dedicated to Saint George, patron saint of Ethiopia. Legend has it that the king had constructed a number of churches at God's instructions, when St. George appeared before him in armor on a white steed and rebuked him for not building a church dedicated to him. The king swore he would build George a church more beautiful than any other. The result is what we see today.

the earliest fathers of the church (the most important of the post-apostolic leaders and teachers) that the *evangelion*—the “good news”—was brought by the apostles and evangelists to all of Asia Minor. St. Paul traveled as far as Spain; St. Peter to Antioch and then Rome, from whence he sent the evangelist, St. Mark, to Alexandria in Egypt. By the 2nd or 3rd century of the Christian era, the new religion had been preached in the furthest reaches of the Roman Empire, where, amid frequent persecutions, Christianity grew to what it is today.

But what of the rest of the world? Surely it was not ignored?

Indeed, one of the oldest Christian communities can be found in Ethiopia, founded after Phillip, one of the first seven deacons, baptized a eunuch from the household of the Ethiopian queen. Tradition tells us

that St. Jude Thaddeus, known afterwards by the Aramaic name Addai, went to the city of Edessa, which became with Antioch the heart of Eastern Christianity. St. Thomas penetrated as far as the southwest coast of India, and possibly to China. There are, in fact, legends that either one of the apostles or some early Christians even reached what is now Mexico. First or second century A.D. Christian symbols and ancient graffiti can be seen to this day, it is said, in catacombs below Mexico City.

What concerns us here, however, is the today nearly forgotten spread of Christianity to the east of Jerusalem—a story as fascinating as it is full of surprises. If you thought you knew the history of Christianity in its entirety, think again. And when you are done reading, realize what has been lost of a vast culture, for almost none of it has survived.

CATHOLIC-ORTHODOX-NESTORIAN-JACOBITE

About the year 107, St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote an epistle to the Christians at Smyrna, in which he was the first to employ the word “catholic,” meaning “universal,” to describe the church—that is, both the Christian Church as a whole and its universal extent. The term “orthodox,” meaning “true-” or “right-worshipping,” arose during the Christological disputes of the first centuries, particularly at the universal councils of Ephesus (A.D. 431) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451). Prior to the first major East-West schism in the early Middle Ages, the two terms were used somewhat interchangeably and only later came to denominate two distinct communions of Christian churches.

The Council of Ephesus declared against the heresiarch bishop, Nestorius, and taught that Jesus Christ has two natures, human and divine, united in one Divine Person, and that the Blessed Virgin Mary is therefore truly the Mother of God—the *Theotokos*, “God bearer.”

The Nestorians, by contrast, believed that the two natures were so distinct that the Messiah was in fact two persons, one human and one divine, and claimed Mary gave birth only to the human, Jesus. This teaching found deep roots in Mesopotamia, where most of the churches broke communion with the orthodox Christian churches, which were represented particularly by Rome and also Constantinople. The Assyrian Church of the East continues to embrace Nestorian teachings to this day.

The Council of Chalcedon declared that the two natures of Jesus Christ are distinct and uncommingled, although existing in a “hypostatic union” in one Divine Person. It condemned what this author views as the heresy of Monophysitism, which said that Jesus Christ had only a single divine nature, which somehow overwhelmed or subsumed His humanity.

The Monophysites were widespread across north and east Africa and the Middle East. They, too, broke communion with the orthodox Churches and continue to the present. After the 6th century, the Monophysites were often known as “Jacobites,” named for one of their leaders, Jacob Baradaeus.

It is primarily these two break-off forms of Christianity—the Assyrian/Nestorian and Monophysite/Jacobite—whose history concerns us in our present essay. To be fair, these two ancient churches would view the Roman and Constantinopolitan Church as heretical. But, for familiarity’s sake, we will retain the traditional designations.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF EMPIRE

The busy trade routes and military roads of the Roman Empire, along with the sea lanes of the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean, enabled the message of Christianity to be carried quickly from Palestine to the furthest reaches of the empire by new converts from all classes of men, thousands of whom were in movement at any given time. Christians could be found in every part of the world under Roman rule by the early second century.

The spread of Christianity eastward followed similarly the highways of the kingdoms there, even to the furthest reaches of the Great Silk Road. According to Philip Jenkins in *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died*, “The world’s first Christian kingdom was Osrhoene, beyond the eastern borders of the Roman empire, with its capital at Edessa: its king accepted Christianity around 200.”¹ Edessa for many centuries boasted a “true image” of Jesus Christ, which was said to have

been brought there by Mar [i.e., Lord] Addai (the apostle, St. Jude Thaddeus). A number of scholars believe, based on scientific and historical studies, that this image was actually the “Shroud of Turin,” which tradition says is the burial shroud of Jesus.

Armenia embraced Christianity around A.D. 300. Once Armenia was a large kingdom, which extended from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea in the southern Caucasus.

But depredations by rival political and religious powers, particularly Islam and the Turks, have reduced that nation to a tiny fraction of its former size.

In Africa, Christianity spread not only to Egypt and other north African provinces to the west, but found fertile soil further south in Ethiopia, also known formerly as Abyssinia, even in Nubia. Here, the Coptic form of Christianity prevailed, known for extreme asceticism and certain liturgical practices which are uniquely African, such as the use of drums at the holy part of the Divine Liturgy.

Interestingly, the Nubian kingdom exercised significant regional influence in its Christian days. The king even invaded Egypt in 745 to defend the patriarch of Alexandria. Jenkins quotes a passage from B.T.A. Evetts’s *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*: “And there were under the supremacy of Cyriacus, king of the Nubians, 13 kings, ruling the kingdom and the country. He was the Orthodox Ethiopian king of Al-Mukurrah; and he was entitled the “Great King,” upon whom the crown

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descended from Heaven; and he governed as far as the southern extremities of the Earth.”²

Today, such things are but a memory.

At the Nestorian church’s greatest extent, its patriarch—the church’s highest episcopal authority—governed an expanse which dwarfed the geographical extent of the Roman and Constantinopolitan patriarchates combined, from Tripoli on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean to Beijing in China, and from Turkestan in the north to Sri Lanka in the south. At the church’s zenith, its members numbered in the millions for most of the Middle Ages. The Jacobites could claim a similar range of activity, to which Africa must also be added.

Politically, this growth was made possible by the protection afforded by Persian, and later numerous Islamic, rulers. As the Roman empire had embraced the Catholic form of Christianity, so Persian rulers and Muslim Arabs found it expedient to foster the Nestorians and Jacobites, in order to counter the influence of the hated Byzantines in Constantinople. Many Eastern Christians have been high officials in Islamic governments during times of toleration since the 7th century. One was the last of the orthodox Greek fathers of the church, the Syrian St. John Damascene. [See the following article for more from and about St. John of Damascus.—Ed.]

Even the Mongols were long amenable to Christianity, and some converted. The great Kublai Khan in the 14th century possessed a Christian wife. There was, in fact, a serious effort by the Mongols to form an alliance with the West at that time to annihilate Islam, which, however, came to naught.

EARLIEST TRADITIONS

These Eastern churches, being Aramaic or Syriac in origin, preserved the earliest Christian traditions the longest, whether in the liturgy or pious practices or music. Jenkins tells us:

Eastern churches . . . produced the musical traditions that are such a glory of Catholic culture. Syria, after all, has a strong claim to be the source of Christian music. No later than the second century, Syria (Edessa?) produced the *Odes of Solomon*—what has been termed “the earliest Christian hymnbook.” The earliest known pioneer of Christian [*sic*] music and chant was the Gnostic Bardaisan of Edessa, who around 200 composed hymns and songs that won a wide audience. Seeking to counter his heretical influence, Syrian church leaders like Ephrem of Edessa kept the older melodies and rhythms but added their own orthodox lyrics. Syrian music profoundly influenced later composers both East and West . . . and the Ambrosian chant of Milan was ordered “to be sung in the Syrian manner.”³



Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Christians

Bashar al-Assad protects Christians in his nation of Syria, as did Saddam in Iraq and Mubarak in Egypt—all targeted for “regime change” by the Zionists, leading one to believe the so-called radical Islamists are merely acting on Israel’s behalf. Religious minorities such as Christians are safe under Assad’s umbrella to freely attend church services each week and to celebrate non-Muslim holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Assad is an Alawite, a moderate sect of Islam, and no other non-Christian sect would stand up for Christian rights, as even critics of Assad will admit. The World War I Sykes-Picot Agreement carved up the Middle East according to British and French interests, ignoring the interests of Middle Easterners and making the newly formed nation of Syria a very diverse society ethnically and religiously with Sunni Muslims, Christians, Alawites, Druzes, Ismaelites and others. This diversity led to decades of civil strife and *coups d’état* until the Assad government came to power. Alawites, numbering about 2.4 million, are Syria’s largest religious minority. The secular socialism of the ruling Ba’ath Party de-emphasizes Islam as a component of Syrian nationalism but prescribes that non-Muslims respect Islam as their “national culture.” Although Alawite beliefs are secret, it is known they believe they can be reincarnated as Christians or even as animals and must undergo repeated reincarnation before they can return to heaven. Alawite doctrine includes Christian and other belief elements. They honor many Christian saints and celebrate some Christian holidays.

In the East, Christians also retained far longer an active knowledge of and reference to Jewish, Gnostic and Christian pseudepigrapha—"gospels," psalms and other extra-canonical spiritual writings attributed to canonical authors and biblical personages. Nevertheless, Syriac and Coptic Christians were extremely conservative regarding Holy Scripture, accepting even fewer New Testament works than the West. Already in the 2nd century, they acknowledged as approved only the four traditional Gospels.

According to Jenkins, Nestorians also seemed, in the 8th to 9th century at least, to harbor some openness, or at least curiosity, about other religions like Buddhism, Taoism and Islam, with which they coexisted. They actually helped translate Buddhist teachings into Chinese, giving some of them a certain Christian ring. These texts then became the basis for all Japanese forms of Buddhism.

It was likewise the Eastern Christians who helped preserve the writings of Aristotle and other ancient philosophers. Through them, these works found their way to the Islamic world, which carried them back to a Western Europe that had almost forgotten them by the end of the first millennium A.D.

In Ethiopia, where Christianization took place before Emperor Constantine's conversion, the great depth of faith and practice continues to this day. Jenkins quotes a Portuguese priest who, during the Catholic Counter-Reformation, encountered Ethiopian Christianity.

No country in the world is so full of churches, monasteries and ecclesiastics as Abyssinia; it is not possible to sing in one church without being heard by another, and perhaps by several. . . . [T]his people has a natural disposition to goodness; they are very liberal of their alms, they much frequent their churches, and are very studious to adorn them; they practice fasting and other mortifications . . . [and they] retain in a great measure the devout fervor of the primitive Christians.⁴

To glorious, elaborate liturgies full of singing, incense and bells, Christians in the East added (or really, continued) "intense moral seriousness . . . [and] spiritual athleticism, that spoke to a community marked by the eternal conflict of the principles of Light and Darkness and by the realities of death and judgment."⁵

For Eastern Christians, the highest earthly expression of the Christian religion was, and is, the monastic life.

DESTRUCTION & DISAPPEARANCE

It is estimated that perhaps as many as 20 million Christians could be claimed for the Eastern churches at their height in the Middle Ages—around half of local populations after the initial wave of Islamic incursions. By 1900, only about 4 million adherents total were left to the Eastern Orthodox, Nestorian, Jacobite, Coptic and autocephalous Orthodox churches from Egypt to Persia, excluding Ethiopia. Nevertheless, those Christians of a century ago still comprised 10% or more of their countries' populations. Today, that number is rapidly approaching zero. So what happened?

No doubt, continuous theological strife played a role. The frequent divisions and disagreements led to a splintering of the churches, even more than in the West, at least prior to the Protestant Reformation. But that alone could never explain the decline.

Rather, the largest factor has been the long centuries of the spread of Islam. Jenkins would have us believe that the followers of Muhammad only sporadically persecuted Christians—and then rarely for truly religious reasons.

Instead, the causes were supposedly "political" or economic, or the result of ethnic hatred or even "climate change." This is either gross ignorance or deliberate misrepresentation, motivated by a political correctness which also embraces an anti-Western worldview and is so agnostic, that it fails to comprehend the motivating power of religion.

It is true, as Jenkins points out, that there have been periods, even centuries in some places like the Holy Land, where Christians, Muslims and Jews coexisted relatively

peacefully from the 13th to the late 19th century, until the advent of Zionism. But that is more the exception. Where Muslims are the minority, they are also more peaceably disposed. But when they achieve greater numbers, they become increasingly zealous and even violent in exercising and imposing their religion.

Jenkins's own book undermines the Islamic "religion of peace" trope. Muhammad himself ordered conversion by the sword, and the accounts Jenkins provides of various persecutions, along with a timeline of the growth of Islam, demonstrate the early and regular persecution of Christians

Increasing persecution in earnest did not begin only in the 14th century, or only in response to the (temporary) Mongol threat to Islam. This, although the early Middle Ages in particular did see long periods of tolerant coexistence. No doubt, however, that the

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In A.D. 301, Armenia became the first major country to recognize Christianity as a state religion. The Tatev monastery, shown here, is one of the pearls of old Armenia. Construction of the Christian complex, on the site of an older polytheistic temple, began in the 9th century. By the 11th century, the Tatev monastery housed around 1,000 monks and a large number of artisans. In 1044, Muslims destroyed the Church of St. Gregory at the site, along with surrounding buildings. They were soon reconstructed. The monastery was significantly damaged during the Seljuk Turkish invasions of the 12th century and by an earthquake in 1136. In 1170, Seljuks plundered the monastery and burnt something like 10,000 manuscripts. The monastery was rebuilt toward the end of the 12th century. The complex houses an amazing swaying phallic tower, a relic of pagan times, which has served as a detector of earthquake tremors and invading armies.

dhimmi tax on Christians was a major motivation, and the fact that new Islamic political regimes inherited the old Persian, Syrian and Coptic Christian government bureaucracies.⁶

The truth is that the history of Islam, aided and abetted by a Jewry equally hostile to Christianity, is the history of the near extinction of Eastern Christianity. There was more than one Christian city in history that fell to the sword of the Saracen, because the gates were opened to the invader by the Jews.

The Christian histories and martyrologies—Catholic, Orthodox, Syriac—are replete with accounts of the wholesale enslavement, torture and massacre of thousands and tens of thousands of Christians by Mohammedans throughout all the centuries of the Islamic religion. The Trinitarian and Mercedarian orders in the Catholic Church were dedicated to redeeming Christian captives from Muslims, their members sometimes even exchanging themselves when no ransom could be provided.

Not all of the disappearance of Eastern Christianity was due to bloody persecution, of course. Men have the same motivations as they always had. There were large numbers of Christians who converted because they liked the new religion better, or who—by the hundreds and thousands—succumbed to “white persecu-

tion”: the constant discrimination, taxation and subtle and overt oppression, which can make life intolerable, especially if it afflicts one’s family. To call the latter conversions “voluntary,” however, would be a misrepresentation.

Even today, a traveler to the ancient homelands of Nestorian, Jacobite and Coptic Christianity—which are also the homelands of Catholicism and Orthodoxy—can visit millennium-old ruins of Christian cities devastated by the scimitar. Regions that once were fertile farmland became deserts more than 1,000 years ago, destroyed by the conquering Muslims.

In spite of that, Christians remained an influential and sizeable minority in the East until the closing decades of the Ottoman Empire in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries. But it fell to the Freemasonic, crypto-Jewish “Young Turks” and their modern “republic” of Turkey to purge Asia Minor of the last remaining sizeable groupings of Christians.

According to James Bryce, the 1st Viscount Bryce, “The bloodstained annals of the East contain no record of massacres more unprovoked, more widespread or more terrible than those perpetrated by the Turkish government upon the Christians of Anatolia and Armenia in 1915.”⁷

Jenkins tells us:

Before 1914, Christian pockets were numerous and widespread, while by 1930, most had vanished or were in the process of disappearing. Asia Minor now became, definitively, Turkey—a Muslim land, freed of virtually all Greeks and Armenians. . . . Along with the Christians, there also vanished what had once been their abundant heritage of buildings, of art and architecture.⁸

[Interestingly, Jenkins points out that many of the architectural wonders attributed to Muslim builders, across Christian lands in the Mideast and Europe conquered by Islamic armies, were in fact the work of Christian architects employed by Islamic rulers.—Ed.]

Sadly, we must point out that the responsibility for what may turn out to be the final annihilation of Christianity in the Middle East and north Africa likely will fall to the United States of America, acting as the proxy of Zionist forces in Israel and elsewhere. The U.S. wars fought since the 1990s in the Balkans, Iraq and Syria, and the even more widespread destruction created by America throughout that region, have had as their first—and some would say primary—casualties the few remaining Christians in lands that once flourished under the sign of the Cross.

It is a powerful testimony to the deep faith of the surviving Christians of the East that they have maintained it through all the rigors of 15 centuries and more of persecution. Let us not forget them again. ♦

SOURCES:

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ENDNOTES:

1 Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died*, p. 54.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

4 Fr. Jeronimo Lobo, “Voyage to Abyssinia,” quoted in Jenkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 55f.

5 Quoted in Jenkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 72f.

6 *Dhimmi* was the name applied by the Arab-Muslim conquerors to indigenous non-Muslim populations who surrendered by a treaty (*dhimma*) to Muslim domination.

7 Quoted in Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

8 Jenkins, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

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The Aryan Heritage of the Nestorian Christians

By Patrick Derek Fox

Throughout this issue of THE BARNES REVIEW, there has been ample discussion about the displacement and wiping out of Christian communities and belief systems by Islam during the Middle Ages. By Medieval standards, this amounted to nothing less than a classic race war that was instigated by both ethnic and religious issues. The Moorish invasion of Italy, Spain and the attempted takeover of the rest of Europe by the Islamic hordes, and the subsequent crusades, were the greatest expression of this animosity. One legend that persisted throughout the crusades was that of Prester John, the sovereign ruler of a far-off Eastern Christian kingdom, who would, similar to the United States in both world wars, enter the conflict to turn the ongoing battle into a permanent victory for Christendom.

The Nestorian, or Assyrian Church as it is called in the West, was a Christian sect that has its origins in Asia Minor and Syria. Those knowledgeable about ancient Aryan history will note that many modern theorists consider Asia Minor as the birthplace of the Aryans or Proto-Indo-Europeans, often confused as a race but more a cultural and linguistic expression linked to the Nordic racial group. This author agrees on many of their theories and theological tenets. This church grew out of the condemnation of Nestorius (c. 386-450) and his teachings at the councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon. The church faced much persecution at first by many religious forces including the Muslims. Eventually, the Muslims under the caliphate recognized the Nestorians as an independent religious community and protected them, and the Nestorians for a while gained significant influence in the Islamic world.

The Middle Ages were a time of great understanding between Christians and Muslims that was severed by the crusades. But even among the Muslims, such tolerance would not last due to the internal beliefs of the faith itself and its chief antagonism toward anything non-Muslim. Nestorianism flourished in Persia and throughout the Middle East. One must remember the northern Iranians, the people of Asia Minor, modern Afghanistan and northern India were Aryan. The Indo-European Romans had opened up the Silk Road centuries before, and generations before that, Euro-