Apostasy or 'a House Built on Sand'. Jews, Muslims and Christians in East-Syriac texts (1500-1850)

Murre-van den Berg, H.L.; Adang C., Schmidtke S.

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Heleen Murre-van den Berg

Introduction

The Church of the East belongs to the more isolated minorities of the Ottoman Empire and Iran. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century its adherents were usually known as "Nestorians", at least to those outside the church. When the Abbasids ruled in Baghdad the religious and secular leader of this church, the Patriarch (*kaṯolīkos paṯrīarkā*), was for a long time the most influential non-Muslim at court. Then again, in the early decades of Mongol reign over Persia, the Church of the East enjoyed privileges far above those of other religious groups in the region. However, in the fourteenth and early fifteenth century the church lost much of its former prominence. Most of its dioceses in China, Central Asia and Persia disappeared as a result of war losses, plagues and conversions to Islam.[1]

When in the early sixteenth century the Ottomans expanded their empire to the provinces of Baghdad, Mosul, Van and Diyarbakir, the former multi-national Church of the East had become a small, ethnic church in the periphery of the empires of the time. Even Baghdad had lost most of its Christians, the cities of Mosul and Diyarbakir being the only cultural centers of some importance that boasted sizable communities of the Church of the East. The majority of East-Syriac Christians, however, were found in the villages on the plains northwest and north of Mosul, in the mountainous region of Hakkari, and on the plains east of Hakkari in northwestern Iranian Azerbaijan. They lived among Kurdish, Azeri and Arab (mainly Sunni) Muslims, alongside other religious minorities such as Jews and Yezidis. When discussing the position of religious minorities in the two Middle Eastern empires of the time this group is worth a closer look, not least because their modern history is still largely unwritten. In this contribution I will address the question that arises directly from the theme of the present volume: how did the Church of the East position itself within the multi-religious context of its time?

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[1] On the history of the Church of the East, see Wilhelm Baum, Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History*, London/New York 2003, and Christoph Baumer, *The Church of the East: An Illustrated History of Assyrian Christianity*, London/New York 2006.

The Church of the East between 1500 and 1850

As stated above, around 1500 the Christians of the Church of the East had largely become a mono-ethnic, mono-lingual group; a group that spoke a modern dialect of Aramaic called *Sureth* and used Classical Syriac (also a form of Aramaic) in the church and for any formal writing. Additionally, some Arabic, Kurdish, (Azeri) Turkish and Persian was spoken by many members of this group, whereas a small minority of the Christians spoke Arabic as their first language. Even fewer were able to write in Persian or Arabic. The East Syriac community functioned as an independent *ṭāʾifa*, defined by religion, officially perhaps under the Greek patriarch, but in practice largely independent.[2] A considerable part of this community lived in the Hakkari mountains, where Kurdish tribes were semi-autonomous. The Christian tribes (*āshīrāṯē*) were part of the tribal federations, and the day-to-day political dealings of the patriarch, their clerical and worldly leader, were with the Kurdish beys of the region rather than with the governors in the Ottoman cities.[3] Most of the Christians, in the mountains as well on the Mosul plain, were small farmers in a rural economy. Landlords who resided in Mosul, most of them from influential Muslim families, held large tracts of lands, making most of their income by means of a variety of taxes on produce and land tenure.[4] A small minority of the Christians of this region were relatively rich. In the city of Mosul there were important Christian merchant families, one of whose members became famous because of his travels to southern Europe, Mexico and Peru in the late seventeenth century.[5]

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[2] Surprisingly little is known about how this group functioned within the *millet* system before the 19th century; the sources suggest that the patriarch often had direct relations with the offices of the governors of Van or Diyarbakir, or even with the Sultan in Istanbul. The Greek patriarch appears to have played a minimal role. Two major incidents described in the literature are the conversion of Yohannan Sulaqa to Catholicism in the 1550s, and that of Yosep of Diyarbakir in the 1680s. In both cases, the traditional party strongly opposed this move with the help of the Ottoman authorities, who on request put Sulaqa in prison (which probably led to his death), whereas they delayed issuing the necessary berats to Yosep of Diyarbakir. Cf. Joseph Habbi, "Signification de l'union chaldéenne de Mar Sulaqa avec Rome en 1553," *L'Orient Syrien* 11 (1966), pp. 99-132, 199-230, and Albert Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer der Union mit Rom: Joseph I., 1681-1696, Patriarch der Chaldäer*, Einsiedeln 1966.

[3] This, of course, depended on where the patriarch was located; this varied considerably during the period; see my "The Patriarchs of the Church of the East from the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," *Hugoye* 2 ii (1999) [http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/index.html].

[4] On the social-economic situation, see Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540-1834*, Cambridge 1997. See in particular Ch. 7, "The Practice of Politics," for examples involving the Christians of Alqosh, Telkepe and Qaraqosh.

[5] For an English translation of the travelogue of Khoury Ilyas Hanna al-Mawsuli (1668-1683), see Nabil Matar (ed. and transl.), *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century*, New York/London 2003; for further references see also Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur, vol. 3 and 4: Die Schriftsteller von der Mitte des 15.*

This priest (*ḫurī*), Ilyās Ḥannā al-Mawṣulī, was a Chaldean, that is, like most of these merchant families he belonged to the Catholic part of the Church of the East. In the last decades of the seventeenth century, Capuchin missionaries had become active in Diyarbakir and Mosul, and had succeeded in converting part of the Church of the East to their creed. The patriarchate that arose due to their labors in Diyarbakir was more successful than the early union of the mid-sixteenth century, which had quickly fallen apart.[6] Protestant missionaries arrived in the region in the 1830s, but their activities, which introduced the printing press and general education, belong to another chapter of the history of this church.[7]

The most important achievement of the Church of the East was the enormous amount of manuscripts produced in this period. The vast majority of East Syriac manuscripts that have survived until today, both in western and eastern collections, were written during this time. The majority of these are older texts, often of a liturgical nature, which were in active use in the period. New texts, however, were added to the earlier ones and testify to ongoing literary and theological developments. Most of the new texts have not been published or studied, but those that are available provide interesting insights into the theology and worldview of the times. For this contribution, two sources in the vernacular language are important. The first is a translation of the Gospel lectionary with interesting exegetical excursions, produced by deacon Israel of Alqosh in the late 60s of the eighteenth century.[8] The second source consists of a number of popular hymns in Sureth, the *durikyāṯā*, composed by a priest from the early seventeenth century, also called Israel of Alqosh, and another seventeenth-century priest, Yosep of Telkepe. These hymns have been studied and edited by Alessandro Mengozzi and show some of the riches of the, largely unedited, popular Christian poetry of the time in Sureth and Classical Syriac.[9] The creative use of traditional themes in commentary and poetry will be important for understanding the position of the

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bis zum Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts, Vatican 1951, vol. 4, pp. 97-9. On the Christian merchant families, see Khoury, *State and Provincial Society*, pp. 143, 147-48.

[6] Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer*, pp. 216-19. Note that Ilyās' journey is contemporaneous with the beginnings of the Capuchin mission in Mosul in the early 1660s, cf. Ignazio da Seggiano, *L'opera dei Cappuccini per l'unione dei cristiani nel Vicino Oriente durante il secolo XVII*, Rome 1962, p. 118.

[7] H.L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language: The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century*, Leiden 1999.

[8] The text has so far not been published; for a description see my "A Neo-Aramaic Gospel Lectionary Translation by Israel of Alqosh (Ms. Syr 147, Houghton Library, Harvard University, 1769/70)," in *Loquentes Linguis: Studi linguistici e orientali in onore di Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti*, eds. Pier Giorgio Borbone, Alessandro Mengozzi, Mauro Tosco, Wiesbaden 2006, pp. 523-33. A short description of the manuscript was published by Moshe H. Goshen-Gottstein, *Syriac Manuscripts in the Harvard College Library: A Catalogue*, Missoula, Montana 1979, p. 98.

[9] Alessandro Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh and Joseph of Telkepe: A Story in a Truthful Language, Religious Poems in Vernacular Syriac (North Iraq, 17th century)* 1-2, Leuven 2002.

Church of the East among the other religious communities. In addition to these theological texts, the colophons of the manuscripts of the period provide information essential for the understanding of the themes of the times. Many of these have been published in the manuscript catalogues, albeit partially.[10] One of the most insightful early western texts on the Church of the East is the travelogue of the American missionary explorers Eli Smith and Harrison Dwight, who visited the Urmia region in the early spring of 1831. Their explicit aim was to gather as much information on the life and ritual of this community and their report provides important additions to the contemporary Syriac texts.[11]

Jews

The Jews are prominently represented in the two vernacular genres mentioned above. Both in Israel of Alqosh's commentary and in Yosep of Telkepe's long didactic hymn on the Parables of the Gospel, there are frequent references to the Jews (*yudāyē* or *ᶜammā yudāyā*). These references are stereotyped and belong to the traditional theological polemics between Jews and Christians, which are also found in the theology of the Church of the East. They all circle round one basic issue: the fact that the Jews did not accept the teachings of Christ, the Messiah, and that in their place others, the Syrians, were accepted as God's people. Israel summarizes it as follows, commenting on Lk 13,22-35:

> That is, the Jews were first, they were God's people (*ᶜammā d-alāhā*), they became last. And we, Syrians, who were from among the gentiles (*ᶜammē*), became God's people (*ᶜammā d-alāhā*); on that day of the Resurrection we will be first.[12]

According to the Syriac texts, the Jews assumed they needed no repentance; they were proud and hypocritical, and in addition became angry with those sinners who, like the Prodigal Son, repented and found God's favor – themes that are all part of the traditional exegesis of many of the parables.[13] The parable of the fig tree whose owner went to great lengths to stimulate it to bear fruit is applied by both Yosep of Telkepe and deacon Israel of Alqosh to God's attempt to convert the Jews, up to the destruction of the Temple by the later Roman Emperor Titus –

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[10] See my "'I the weak scribe': Scribes in the Church of the East in the Ottoman Period," *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58 i/ii (2006), pp. 9-26.

[11] Eli Smith and H.G.O. Dwight, *Missionary Researches in Armenia: Including a Journey Through Asia Minor, and into Georgia and Persia with a Visit to the Nestorian and Chaldean Christians of Oormiah and Salmas*, London 1834.

[12] Commentary by Deacon Israel of Alqosh (Seventh Sunday of the Apostles), Houghton Ms. Syr. 147, 154.

[13] See, e.g., the Gospel commentaries by Ishoᶜdad of Merv (9th c.) that remained influential until well into the Ottoman period; Margaret Dunlop Gibson (edition and translation), James Rendel Harris (introduction), *The Commentaries of Isho'dad of Merv, Bishop of Ḥadatha (c.850 A.D.): in Syriac and English* 1-3, Cambridge 1911.

all efforts being in vain, however.[14] In the epilogue of another poem, Yosep of Telkepe suggests that at the end of times the Twelve Apostles will judge the Jews because they crucified "Christ their Lord."[15] More than proud and hypocritical, the Jews are considered foolish, because they did not understand what was so easy to see: that Jesus perfected the Jewish law, that prophecy ended with the Jews in Yuhannan, the son of Zkharya, that is, John the Baptist, the seal (*ḥātem*) of the prophets.[16]

Of course, not much is new here; the gist of these comments can easily be traced to exegetical traditions that go back to the earliest phases of Christian history and in some cases have an unambiguous basis in the text of the New Testament. What struck me, however, is that despite the relative prominence of these anti-Jewish themes, I have not so far encountered a single reference to the Jewish population of the time in the texts of this period. Neither in the poetry, nor in the colophons or other historical texts do the Jews of northern Mesopotamia play any role. We know from other sources that sizable Jewish communities existed side by side with the Christian communities, in towns and villages such as Nerwa, Urmia, Amadiyah, Alqosh, Dehok, Zakho, Cizre and Mosul.[17] More than that, in these regions the Jews spoke a dialect of Aramaic closely related to that of the Christians, so much so that these dialects were often mutually intelligible.[18]

So far the only place where I have come across references to the relationships between the two groups is the texts written by the early Protestant missionaries. The most important ones are the notes of an early missionary physician, the American Asahel Grant, who traveled in the Hakkari Mountains in the early 1840s. He published a volume in which he argued that the "Nestorians" were no other than the ten lost tribes.[19] Although most of his argument is based on millennialist interpretations of the Bible and on the many cultural connections between the Jews and Christians of the region (apart from language correspon-

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[14] Compare Yosep of Telkepe, "On Parables", 108-116 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh* vol. 1, pp. 150-52, and vol. 2, pp. 231-32), and the rather similar exegetical comments on Lk 12,57-13, 17 (Sixth Sunday of the Apostles) in Houghton Ms. Syr. 147 (Gospel Lectionary of Deacon Israel of Alqosh), ff. 151-152.

[15] "On Revealed Truth", pp. 95-96 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 83; vol. 2, p. 186).

[16] "On Parables", pp. 155-166 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, pp. 162-64; vol. 2, pp. 239-40).

[17] Ora Shwartz-Be'eri, *The Jews of Kurdistan: Daily Life, Customs, Arts and Crafts*, Jerusalem 2000, Simon Hopkins, "Yhudē Kurdīstān b-Ereṣ Yisrāēl" [The Kurdistani Jews in Israel], *Peʿamīm, Studies in Oriental Jewry* 56 (1993), pp. 50-74.

[18] D.T. Stoddard, *A Grammar of the Modern Syriac Language as Spoken in Oroomiah, Persia, and in Koordistan*, New Haven 1855 [also in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 5 (1855), pp. 1-180], p. 8, writes about the Jewish dialect of the Urmia region: "It is nearly allied to the Modern Syriac, and Jews and Nestorians can understand each other without great difficulty."

[19] Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians or the Lost Tribes*, London 1841 [reprint Piscataway. NJ 2002]. Grant (p. 126) also noted the close similarity and mutual intelligibility of the Aramaic language as spoken by Christians and Jews respectively.

dences, he notes many similarities in 'customs'), Grant also states that most of the Christians and Jews themselves firmly believed in that relationship. There are not many independent sources which confirm that such thoughts were present in the early nineteenth century,[20] but I am inclined to accept that Grant based himself on what might have been a minority tradition regarding historical origins and ethnic relationships of the early nineteenth century.[21]

However, as far as I am aware, nothing of this has seeped through to the Syriac and Sureth texts of the time, and we are left with the fact that the Jews take their traditional position as the counterpoint to the sincere Christian, who is exhorted to repent and believe in Christ as the Son of God, rather than being haughty, angry or foolish.

Christians

Before looking into the references to Muslims, I would like to dwell for a moment on the Christian self-image sketched in the same texts.

The first aspect that strikes the reader is the very confident tone in which the texts speak of the Christians of Mesopotamia, denoted variously as *kresṭyānē*,[22] *mšīḥāyē*[23] or *ʿammā mšīḥāyā*.[24] "We, Christians" or "we the Christian people" are part of the worldwide Christian Church and represent the eastern clime of the Church that the Apostles planted in all corners of the world. According to Yosep of Telkepe, we as Christians all profess the same faith, are baptized in the same

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[20] Grant, *The Nestorians*, pp. 118-128; an earlier indication (mentioned by Grant), is found in Smith, *Missionary Researches*, p. 393; bishop Mar Yosep of Ada (near Urumieh in Iran) is noted to have said that "his nation derive their name *Nusrány*, from Nazareth, where Christ was brought up; but added the singular assertion, *that they are descended from the ten tribes of Israel.*" The emphasis is by Smith, who does not, however, elaborate on the issue. That the whereabouts of the ten tribes were on the mind of early missionary explorers in the region is clear from Smith's earlier remark (p. 358), when describing the Jews of Iran: "We naturally look among them for the remains of the ten tribes; but if such were their origin, all traces of it have been effaced. They now resemble their brethren elsewhere [..]"; it remains unclear whether Smith expected a different physiognomy or different beliefs in the descendents of the ten tribes.

[21] One of the likely reasons for the disappearance and actual denial of such constructions today is the fact that another historical construction became much more popular: that of the ethnic connection with the ancient Assyrians of the region. Much has been written on this subject; for an overview see my *From a Spoken to a Written Language*, pp. 35-8.

[22] Israel of Alqosh, "On Perfection," p. 54 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 19; vol. 2, p. 148), Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," p. 2 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 52; vol. 2, p. 168), "On Revealed Truth," p. 78 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 78; vol. 2, p. 183).

[23] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," p. 83 (ibid. vol. I, p. 80; vol. 2, p. 184), Yosep of Telkepe, "On the Life-giving Words," p. 5 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 92; vol. 2, p. 192).

[24] Israel of Alqosh, "On the Sin of Man," p. 101 (ibid. vol. 2, p. 41; vol. 2, p. 162), Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," p. 12 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 54; vol. 2, p. 170),"On Revealed Truth," p. 26 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 58; vol. 2, p. 172).

names, and obey the same God, creator of the worlds.[25] As Christians, we are kneaded together in one dough, whether from Jewish, Samaritan or gentile backgrounds.[26] In the colophons, the patriarch, regularly styled "of the East", is sometimes referred to as the universal father (*āḇā gāwānāyā*),[27] or even the "second Shimᶜun,"[28] referring to a position equal to or even higher than the "patriarch of the Westerners," the Pope.[29] The global outlook of the Church of the East in this period is underlined by the often confident tone of the letters written by the prelates of the Church of the East to the Roman Catholic Church, accepting the Pope as the head of the global church, but also stressing that in the Church in the East, boasting its own apostolic origins, local ritual and custom should be preserved.[30]

[25] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Parables," pp. 4-8 (ibid. vol. 1, pp. 124-25; vol. 2, pp. 214-15). In the late 1820s, Mar Yoosuf, the bishop of Ada in Iran, expounded views similar to Smith's (*Researches*, p. 391); he believed that the twelve apostles evangelized the different parts of the earth, resulting in twelve sects, upon which "each apostle gave to his own sect particular institutions, which are binding upon it, and not upon the others." Smith added that according to Mar Yoosuf, "All the twelve are orthodox, but any new thirteenth or fourteenth sect he would immediately pronounce to be heretical."

[26] "On Parables," pp. 24-27 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 129; vol. 2, p. 218).

[27] Compare Joseph-Marie Sauget, *Un gazzā chaldéen disparu et retrouvé: le MS.* Borgia syriaque 60, Vatican 1987, pp. 51-3: "it was completed […] in the days of the universal father [*āḇā gāwānāyā*] Mar Eliya Catholicos Patriarch of the East". Elsewhere, the jurisdiction of the patriarchs of the Eliya-line is described as covering the "whole orthodox East;" cf. William Wright, *A Catalogue of the Syriac Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge 1901, vol. 1: Camb. Add 1975 (Wasta 1586): "It was written in the days of the father and lord of the fathers and the head of the bishops of the pastors [..] Mar Eliya Catholicos Patriarch of the most important of the Eastern corners and of all the ends of the earth of the glorious orthodox faith [*rēshāt penyātā madnḥāyā w-kul sāwpē tēḇēylāyē da-trīṣay shuḇḥā*]," and Camb. Add. 1981 (Monastery of Mar Awdisho Nuhraya, Dere, 1607): "It was written in the days of the watcher and shepherd and the head of the shepherds [etc.], Mar Eliya Catholicos Patriarch of the East, mother of the lights, and of the whole glorious orthodox earth [*wa-d-tēḇēyl kullāh da-triṣay shuḇḥā*]."

[28] For the Syriac text of the "Indian Letters" from the early sixteenth century, see J.S. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino –Vaticana. De scriptoribus Syris Nestorianus*, Rome 1725-28, vol. 3, p. 593. For more on this text, see my "The Church of the East in the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century: World Church or Ethnic Community?" in *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, eds. J.J. van Ginkel, H.L. Murre-van den Berg, T.M. van Lint, Leuven 2005, pp. 301-320.

[29] The phrase "Mar Papa, Catholicus Patriarch of the Romans and all the westerners" occurs in a famous 14th-century text, cf. Paul Bedjan (ed.), *Tashᶜītā d-Māry Yahbalāhā pāṭrīyārkā wa-d-Rabban Ṣaumā – Histoire de Mar-Jabalaha, de trois autres patriarches, d'un prêtre et de deux laïques, nestoriens*, Paris/Leipzig ²1895, p. 84. See also my "The Church of the East in Mesopotamia in the Early Fourteenth Century," in *Jingjiao. The Church of the East in China and Central Asia*, ed. R. Malek in connection with P. Hofrichter, Sankt Augustin 2006, pp. 377-94.

[30] For an overview of these contacts, see David Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation of the Church of the East, 1318-1913*, Leuven 2000, pp. 21-32, and for some of the letters, Samuel Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes inter Sedem Apostolicam et Assyriorum Orientalium seu Chaldaeorum Ecclesiam*, Rome 1902; cf., e.g., the letter of Mar Shimun (Shimun XIII Denkha, d.d. 20 April 1670), pp. 197-201. (For an Italian summary of Shimun's correspondence with Rome,

Such global Christian identities did not exclude the continued importance of local and regional identities. The most general term that in some contexts has ethnic or linguistic connotations is that of *Surāyē*, "Syrians," a term used by Israel of Alqosh to address his hearers.[31] However, he never uses it to distinguish Syrians from other Christians. The term is also used by the eighteen-century deacon Israel, and in his work seems to have even less ethnic connotations, being practically synonymous with "Christians", as in the sentence: "And those who believed in him, were baptized and became Syrians".[32]

Below the level of the "Christian" or "Syriac" people, the most important part of somebody's identity was his or her family village, town and region. In the colophons, references to the regional origins of the scribes and the donors are given as a rule. Some scribes mention both their region of origin and their present location, as for instance priest Isa, son of priest Awraham son of priest Hormizd, who wrote in 1550: "their family (*gens-hon*) and their origin (*tohem-hon*) are from the village of the honeybees, Oz, which is near the strong citadel of Burdqeyl. And now the humble writer dwells in the village of Basuri". Another example comes from a manuscript written in Alqosh in 1759 and commissioned by the learned priest Giwargis, "son of priest Hormiz, of the blessed village of Aradan, in the country (*atrā*) of Sapna."[33] Most of the manuscripts come from the regions in which tribal connections were less important but the clan (*ᶜāshīrat*) continued to be an important focus, as indicated by a prayer by Yosep of Telkepe, in the epilogue of his poem "On Revealed Truth":[34]

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see Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer,* pp. 244-49.) This patriarch, in favor of establishing a union with Rome, paid the Pope all due respect ("Father of fathers" etc.), and acknowledged him as the rightful successor of Peter, with jurisdiction "over all four corners of the earth." He also wrote a profession of faith that acknowledged Mary as the "mother of God" and Christ as endowed with "two natures, one person" ("person" as a rather inaccurate translation of *qnumā*). However, Mar Shimun also made clear that he did not want to change the ritual (*taksa*), because he did not want to introduce "confusion" in the "body of Christ". This all the more so because "we are bound in the hands of the heathen and the Muslims, and it is difficult therefore to change the ecclesiastical rituals that are observed in our countries."

[31] Israel of Alqosh, "On Perfection," p. 63 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 22; vol. 2, p. 150), Israel of Alqosh, "On the Sin of Man," p. 23 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 27; vol. , p. 153), Israel of Alqosh, "On Shmuni," p. 3 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 3; vol. 2, p. 164). Note that in all three cases the context is practically identical: "(Listen), come, Syrians!"

[32] Houghton Ms. Syr. 147, 177-8. Cf. also the introduction to the creed, at the end of the text: "All of us Syrians who are baptized, we believe in one God …" (p. 199). It is rather unlikely that Israel should have believed there were no other Christians than the Syrians.

[33] Camb. Add 1983 and 1986 (Wright, *A Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 281-82 and vol. 1, pp. 308-9). On the formal aspects of the colophons of this period, see also my "'I the weak scribe'".

[34] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," p. 125 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 90; vol. 1, p. 125I). Note that he adds "strangers" (*nuḥrāyē*), but it is unclear which kind of 'strange' readers or listeners he envisaged. "Stranger" is also used to denote monks, especially solitary hermits.

Pray and beg for me, oh my people (*nashwātī*) / and all you people of my village (*bnay māṯī*) / and also strangers and people of my clan (*ᶜasheryāṯī*) / that the Lord may forgive my sins.

Despite the use of the term *Surāyē* that is also used by the Syrian Orthodox to denote themselves (pronounced as *Suroyē*), and the shared language between the two communities (Classical Syriac and various dialects of Neo-Aramaic), the confessional differences between these two communities are not forgotten. This is indicated in a passage by Israel of Alqosh, who contrasts the faithful adherence to the traditional faith by the "Easterners" (*maddenḥāyē*) with that of the "Jacobites" (*yaᶜqubāyē*, i.e., Syrian Orthodox) who changed it.[35] However, no re-baptism would be needed when they wanted to become part of the Church of the East, as would be the case when Muslims or other "unbelievers" wanted to become Christians.[36]

Polemics with the Roman Catholic missionaries and those "Easterners" that were attracted to uniatism is one of the most important characteristics of this period. The struggle between these two parties was fierce at times, and often fought with political means. However important the dogmatic, spiritual and liturgical issues, power struggles between various parties within the Church of the East contributed just as much to the growing divide between the Catholics and the tradionalist party.[37] Dogmatically, discussions over the position of the Pope as the head of the worldwide church, the status of Nestorius and the veneration of Mary in its Latin manifestations formed bones of contention, but all these points also had consequences for the liturgy, which in the Catholic view needed numerous adaptations.[38] The colophons of the manuscripts also reflect the significance of the new ecclesiastical structures. Whenever a scribe indicated his allegiance to a patriarch and bishop, he would explicitly also acknowledge either the traditional-

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[35] "On Perfection," pp. 51-2 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 18; vol. 2, p. 147 and vol. 2, pp. 60-1).

[36] According to Scher, a manuscript written in Gazarta in 1613 (Seert 40) includes rites, "to confer baptism to the heathens", to "the sick" and "prayers to recite over Jacobites and Melkites who want to become Nestorian", see Addai Scher, *Catalogue des manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés dans la bibliothèque épiscopale de Séert (Kurdistan)*, Mosul 1905, pp. 27-8.

[37] For further references, see Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation*, Habbi, "Signification de l'union chaldéenn" Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer*. For the larger context of the Catholic missions in the Middle East, see Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la réforme catholique (Syrie, Liban, Palestine XIIᵉ-XIVᵉ siècles)*, Rome 1994; Robert Haddad, "Conversion of Eastern Orthodox Christians to the Unia in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," in *Conversion and Continuity. Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands: Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, eds. M. Gervers, J. Bikhazi, Toronto 1990, pp. 449-59, and Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World. The Roots of Sectarianism*, Cambridge 2001.

[38] Of the clergy, one of the most active in liturgical renewal was patriarch Yosep II, see Herman Teule, "Joseph II, Patriarch of the Chaldeans (1696-1713/4), and the Book of the Magnet. First Soundings," in *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage* V, eds. Rifaat Ebied, Herman Teule, Leuven 2004, pp. 221-41.

ist or the Catholic party.[39] Only few copyists wrote colophons without indicating such allegiances, and it remains to be seen whether that was the result of a conscious neutrality, or has to be attributed to reasons unknown to us.

Whether this means that references to inner-Christian polemics in the vernacular poetry of Yosep of Telkepe should be interpreted as referring to the discussions with Catholicism is difficult to prove. No explicit polemics with Catholicism occur in the early Sureth texts. Interestingly, the heretics of early Syriac Christianity, Simon, Marcion and Mani, are mentioned a few times. Yosep introduces them in "On the Life-giving Words", to warn the people of false prophets who by their learning and asceticism deceive their hearers.[40] The text suggests that these "learned nazirites" and "nominal Christians" (*b-šemmā mšīḥāyē*) should be sought within the Christian community rather than outside it, but Yosep does not identify them, at least not for modern-day readers. The same deliberate vagueness is found in prayers for "peace among each other" or "peace in monasteries and churches" to be found in the poems and the colophons, which might refer to a variety of inner-Christian struggles.[41]

Muslims

The most important issue in the context of this volume is the way in which the Christians speak about Islam. How do they perceive the majority religion of their time and region? First of all we should be reminded of the fact that the texts contain precious little on Islam – at least not explicitly. No contemporary polemic or dialogical texts devoted to Islam have been found so far. In many ways, however, the texts reflect the fact that these Christians are part of the Islamic world of their time.

The most important sign of this is that though Arabic was certainly not the first language of the majority of these Christians, the language and its cultural connota-

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[39] The combination of the place names and the ecclesiastical allegiance indicated in the manuscript colophons is generally used to track the relative importance of the Chaldean and various traditional hierarchies, see my "Patriarchs of the Church of the East" and Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation*, for many examples.

[40] "On the Live-giving Words," pp. 101-3 (Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, pp. 114-15; vol. 2, p. 208). See also Yosep of Telkepe, "On Parables," p. 20 (ibid. vol. 1, p. 128; vol. 2, p. 217), where the same trio is mentioned as an example of "later scholars" who "abandoned the teaching of our Lord".

[41] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Parables," pp. 184-85 (ibid. vol. 1, p, 169; vol. 2, p. 244): "Give us peace among each other, the sons of the Christian people / and grant victory to their king and sovereign // May you grant victory and sow mercy in their hearts / and may peace be in their churches and their monasteries." An example from a colophon from a manuscript written in Telkepe in 1706: "may blessing be upon them and may the Lord give them joyful times [*zabnā pṣīḥā*] and a peaceful church [*ʿumra nīḥā*] to read in it." (Camb. Add 2017, Wright, *A Catalogue*, vol. 2, pp. 557-8).

tions influenced the Syriac tradition at many levels. The most obvious is that of names: Arabic names such as ᶜAbd Allah, ᶜAbd al-Masīḥ and ᶜAbd al-Aḥad are relatively numerous, also among those writing or sponsoring Syriac manuscripts.[42] The incidental use of Arabic *hijra* dating, usually alongside the "Christian" Seleucid and (in later times) Western AD dating, show that at least some knowledge of this chronological system existed among Syriac scribes.[43] Most importantly, the languages of the region, mostly Arabic but also including Kurdish, Turkish and Persian, were a source of many loanwords for modern Sureth. Most of these loanwords are culturally neutral, often referring to food, clothing, utensils and common daily activities.[44] However, terms from the religious, Islamic context also occur in the Christian texts, and a few examples of these will be discussed later.

Arabic was also considered the language of culture and education and in this period began to be used again as a literary language alongside Classical Syriac. New genres such as that of autobiography were written in it, as also testified by the second Chaldean patriarch Yosep (1696-1713/4). In his short autobiography he notes that, protected by the help of Christ, he went to study in a Muslim school, because in his opinion nothing of the kind existed among the Eastern Christians.[45] However, Mar Yosep did not in the first place need such knowledge of Arabic in order to ameliorate Christian-Muslim relations, but to become part of the Catholic community of the Middle East. The Catholics, including the Western missionaries, used Arabic as a *lingua franca* that unified the Christians of the Arabic speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In my opinion, the use of

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[42] Most of these Arabic names are connected with manuscripts from the western and southern regions, whereas combinations of Arabic and Syriac names also occur often. Kurdish names are less prominent, at least among the men. Many of these men were priests, deacons or monks, confirming that Arabic was acceptable also in clerical circles. For references in the manuscripts (Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation*, pp. 382-501), see: ᶜAbd Allāh in Gazarta 1540, Diyarbakir 1546, Hesna d-Kipa 1547, Mar Pethion 1560, Gazarta 1681, Mosul 1683 and Alqosh 1727, ᶜAbd al-Masīḥ in Rabban Hormizd/Mar Augin 1558, Alqosh 1727, and ᶜAbd al-Aḥad in Gazarta 1561, Gazarta 1569, Mar Pethion 1686, Mosul 1696, Sharukhiya 1696, Kirkuk 1727 and Qodshanis 1731.

[43] Cf. Sebastian Brock, "The Use of *Hijra* Dating in Syriac Manuscripts: A Preliminary Investigation," in *Redefining Christian Identity. Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam*, eds. J.J. van Ginkel, H.L. Murre-van den Berg, T.M. van Lint, Leuven 2005, pp. 275-90; Brock lists 25 examples from East Syriac manuscripts between 1500 and 1850. On a total of about 1500 dated manuscripts from that period this is not particularly high (1,6%), but significantly higher than for manuscripts of the West-Syriac tradition.

[44] Cf. Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, pp. 100-2, where he discusses pairs of synonyms, one of which is often a loanword from one of the neighboring languages. See further Arthur J. Maclean, *A Dictionary of the Dialects of Vernacular Syriac as Spoken by the Eastern Syrians of Kurdistan, North-West Persia, and the plain of Mosul*, Oxford 1901, who meticulously indicates the provenance of each word.

[45] For the Syriac text see Giamil, *Genuinae Relationes*, p. 209, for more references, also to the Arabic version, see Teule, "Joseph II," pp. 222-34.

Arabic by the Chaldeans was more a part of Catholicism than of Muslim-Christian relationships.[46]

Whereas the use of Arabic indicates that the Christians were not isolated from their Muslim context and were part of the same cultural milieu, the texts in Syriac, and especially in Sureth, include unambiguous polemic references to this same Muslim context. Of these allusions, the most explicit refer to the political oppression the Christians felt themselves suffering under. A typical example is the prayers in the colophons asking for protection for a certain village. In 1735, in the difficult period following the first campaign of the Persian Nadir Shah in Northern Mesopotamia, the scribe Simeon of Alqosh prays for his village and the nearby monastery:[47]

> This book was written in the blessed and blissful village, prosperous in the orthodox faith and strong in the Pauline Gospel, Alqosh, the village of Nahum the prophet, which was set and laid out by the Lord, the Spirit, near the most holy monastery of Mar Rabban Hormizd the Persian – may our Lord protect it with his mighty right hand, and may he silence and bring to an end the oppression of the oppressors (*ṭlumyā d-ṭlumē*) and the taxes of the sultans [*sheqlā d-shulṭānē*], through the prayers of Rabban Hormizd, Amen.

A year later, in 1736, his uncle, the scribe and priest Yosep of Alqosh, used even stronger words when begging for the protection of his village Alqosh:[48]

> May the Lord Christ build it, enlarge it with his strong right hand, and quiet and withdraw from it the oppression of the oppressors, and the injustice of the wicked, and turn away from it the rage and anger of evil and barbarous men; a strong foot, I say, and a destroying hand – through the prayers of the ark of light, Mary and of the prophets of the Old and the saints of the New, Amen.

Earlier attestations of similar prayers, in connection with other villages, suggest that the phrases themselves were formulaic and part of the art of writing of the

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[46] See Hilary Kilpatrick, "From *Literatur* to *Adab*: The Literary Renaissance in Aleppo around 1700," *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58 (2006), pp. 195-220, and my "Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church between 1500 and 1800", *Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting*, eds. H. Gzella, M.L. Folmer, Wiesbaden 2008, pp. 335-52.

[47] Camb. Add 1996, see Wright, *A Catalogue*, vol. 1, p. 424. For the economic effects of the wars with Persia in this region, see Khoury, *State and Provincial Society*, pp. 64-8; a lengthy Syrian Orthodox colophon written in Qaraqosh (near Mosul) in 1746 provides an eyewitness account of the second invasion of Nadir Shah in 1743, which included the pillaging of Rabban Hormizd and Alqosh. See M.H. Pognon, "Chronique Syriaque relative au siège de Mossoul par les Persans en 1743," in *Florilegium ou recueil des travaux d'érudition dédiés à monsieur le marquis Melchior de Vogüé*, ed. G. Maspero, Paris 1909.

[48] Cambridge Or. 1294 (1736), in A.E. Goodman, "The Jenks Collection of Syriac Manuscripts in the University Library, Cambridge," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1939), pp. 595-96; text in Classical Syriac (personal notes): *maᶜmar-lāh māran mšīḥā. māwreb-lāh b-yammīnēh ḥayltanāytā. w-nšallē w-nbaṭṭel mennāh ṭlumyā d-ṭlomē w-ᶜāwlā d-ᶜawwālē. w-mahpek mennāh ḥemtā w-rugzā d-(')nāshē bīšē barbarāyē. reglā ᶜašinya, āmarnā. w-īdā bazzuztā. b-ṣlut qbut nuhrā maryam. w-da-nbīyē da-b-ᶜattīqā wa-d-qaddīšā da-b-ḥadta, amēyn.*

time. However, both their more frequent occurrence in certain difficult periods and their relatively concrete description of the hardships of the time indicate that they have to be taken seriously as a description of the types of hardship endured by the Christian community.[49] Usually, those who caused this adversity are not mentioned by name. Yosep of Telkepe, however, explicitly links such troubles to the Muslim rulers. The epilogue of the poem "On Revealed Truth" opens with the following exhortation to prayer:[50]

> Come, let us glorify, Christians/ and let us keep on beseeching Him / that he make peaceful times for us / and save us from the Muslims;
>
> That he save us from the Ishmaelites[51] / from the nations[51] and the barbarians / this life has been made bitter to us / May our Lord re-establish the Greeks;
>
> That he establish the Greeks in our days / so that we might rebuild all our churches / that he bring peace to our countries / and protect our priests and pastors.

The combination of the prayers in the colophons with these lines in Yosep's poetry leads to the conclusion that in the eyes of the Christians of Mesopotamia, Muslim rule was seen as an obstacle to peace and prosperity for their community. It is Muslim landlords that oppress the Christians by taxing them highly, by not securing peace, and by prohibiting the rebuilding of churches. The colophons of this period, which in general do not include historical comments, refer in a number of cases to concrete occasions when the patriarch or the scribe was personally affected by political upheavals, usually when Kurds in Northern Iraq caused unrest in the Alqosh region, notably in 1701-2, 1717, 1751, 1823 and 1844.[52] One excep-

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[49] Two manuscripts from the late 16th century use the same expressions in different combinations, cf. Camb. Add 1975 (Wasta 1586), in Wright, *A Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 79-80, and Ms Sachau 31(Abnaya 1591), in Eduard Sachau, *Verzeichniss der Syrischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, Berlin 1899, vol. 1, pp. 129-30. In this early period such notes might refer to the Celali rebellions, see Suraiya Faroqhi, Bruce McGowan, Donald Quataert, and Şevket Pamuk, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Volume Two: 1600-1914*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 433-39.

[50] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," pp. 85-7, in Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, pp. 80-1; vol. 2, pp. 184-85.

[51] Note that one of the variants has "oppressors" (*ṭlomē*) rather than "nations" (*tohmē*).

[52] On the Kurdish raids in 1701/2 that caused a copyist to leave his village, see the notes in Seert 34 (Monastery of Jacob the Recluse, 1611) and Seert 47 (Seert 1702), in Scher, *Catalogue*, pp. 24, 31-2; on the patriarch who left Alqosh for Telkepe for fear of the Kurds in 1717, see Mosul 31 (Telkepe 1717) in A. Scher, "Notice sur les manuscrits syriaques conservés dans la bibliothèque du patriarcat chaldéen de Mossoul" *Revue des Bibliothèques* 17 (1907), p. 236, and Ming. 595 (Telkepe 1717) in A. Mingana, *Catalogue of the Mingana Collection of Manuscripts now in the Possession of the Trustees of the Woodbrooke Settlement, Selly Oak, Birmingham*, Cambridge 1933, vol. 1, p. 1134; on the flight of Mar Isho‘yaw to Seert due to raids by Oz Bek in 1751, see Seert 54 (Sduh 1610) Scher, *Catalogue*, p. 37; on the occupation of Semel by the Kurds in 1823, see Mosul 6/Bidawid 116 (Alqosh 1823) in Scher, "Notice", p. 230; on the attacks by the Kurdish emir of Rawanduz on Mosul, Amadiya and Alqosh in 1832, see Dawra Syr 525 (Rabban Hormizd 1832), note in Arabic in Petrus Haddad and Jacques Isaac, *Al-Makhṭūṭāt al-Suryāniyya wa-l-ʿArabiyya fī khizānat al-*

tionally long and detailed note describes a conflict between Kurdish tribes near Amadiya in 1706, in which the Mezarnaye led by "someone called Mahdi" clashed with the Yezidi Daznaye, again leading to the patriarch's flight from Alqosh.[53]

In the lines quoted above, Yosep further suggests that only a change of government from "Ishmaelites" to "Greeks" could guarantee better living conditions for the Christians. Although the term "Greeks" is vague and not connected to an existing country, it probably indicates a Christian rather than a Muslim administration. This is confirmed by texts of another type. The earliest example in this period is a Syriac letter written in India in the early 1500s, after the arrival of the Portuguese. These, according to the Indian bishops who wrote the letter, were sent by "the king of the Christians of the West" who "has sent powerful ships to our country of India." According to the clerical author, this Western Christian intervention led to a welcome defeat of local rulers, and "fear and dread is in the heart of all the pagans and Muslims of these countries."[54] This text makes clear that the West was greatly appreciated as a help in the defeat of the Muslims, be it in India or in the Middle East. That ideas such as this were current among the Christians of Kurdistan is also confirmed by texts from the end of this period, when the missionary explorers Smith and Dwight visited the region in 1831. To their own amazement and dismay, these two American pastors were seen as forerunners of the liberators from Muslim oppression, in phrases reminiscent of the Syriac text of the early 1500s, referring to the passing of government into the hands of Christian kings in order to liberate the Christians from the oppression by the Muslims.[55]

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rahbāniyya al Kaldāniyya fī Baghdad ['Syriac and Arabic Manuscripts the Library of the Chaldean Monastery, Baghdad'], Baghdad 1988, pp. 238-39; on the events of 1843-1844, see Camb. Add 1981 (originally from 1607, repaired in Mosul 1844) in Wright, *Manuscripts*, vol. 1, pp. 189-92: "Today we are dwelling in the city of Mosul because we fled before the Emir of the Bohtaye, Badr Khan Bey, the oppressor, who laid waste the region of Diz and the whole region of Tiari – he struck them with the sword and destroyed all the monasteries and churches."

[53] Camb. Add. 2017 (Telkepe 1706), in Wright, *Manuscripts*, vol. 2, pp. 558-60.

[54] Cf. Murre-van den Berg, "The Church of the East," p. 318, and Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, vol. 3, pp. 595-98. Another copy of this MS is found in Berlin 59 (Urmia region, 18th c.), see Sachau, *Verzeichniss*, vol. 1, pp. 201-2.

[55] Smith, *Researches*, pp. 393-94, 406. I tend to think that this longstanding expectation of foreign help was one of the reasons why in the early 1840s the Patriarch of the Church of the East was eager to be in touch with the British, French and American missionaries in the region, thereby sowing seeds of distrust among his Kurdish neighbors, which combined with larger geo-political developments unrelated to the Assyrians culminated in the massacres of Assyrian Christians by Badr Khan Bey in 1843. This factor is overlooked in the otherwise insightful overviews in Sarah D. Shields, *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells*, Albany, NY 2000, pp. 51-8, and John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Mission, Archaeologists, and Colonial Powers*, Leiden 2000, pp. 74-85. Among the Armenians, similar expectations of foreign support in shaking off Muslim rule were present, leading to a number of concrete attempts at cooperation between 1500 and 1800, see Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars*, London 2006, pp. 110-19. It is likely that the leadership in the East Syriac community was aware of these attempts among the Armenians.

Although in these references Islam as a religion is not discussed and the charges against Muslims are political rather than religious, the proposed solution (the coming of Christian kings), suggests that in the eyes of the Christians the political or economic conflict was interpreted in religious terms. The first aspect reflecting this is the fact that, in line with countless earlier Christian authors, Muslim authority over Christians was seen as punishment for their sins. Yosep of Telkepe wrote in his poem "On Divine Economy":[56]

> Since we have trodden on our Lord's commandments / we have been delivered into the hand of Muslims[57]
>
> into the hand of the Ishmaelite people[58] / an onager, a desert ass / so our Lord called Ishmael / from the time of Abraham the chosen[59]
>
> From the time of Abraham father of kings / the Lord King of kings said / that kings will rise in Ishmael[60] / The Lord causes kings to rise and fall
>
> May he make the evil kings fall / so that they remain confused in the anger of our Lord! / May he make the holy kings rise / so that they have mercy for all mankind!
>
> That they show mercy and justice / May he restore peace in the villages / so that they rebuild the churches / and raise in them praises to our Lord

Syriac literature, especially that of community-oriented poets such as Yosep, following in the footsteps of, for instance, Giwargis Warda of the 13th c., has always used the oppression and the adversaries of the people to exhort them to repentance and faith.[61] Even more, the rise of the kings from Ishmael is part of the promise made by God to Abraham. However, the same belief in God's hand in the rise of Muslim kings also encourages the belief in a final overthrow of their rule: in the end "holy" kings will rise and restore peace in the villages.

Mengozzi, who edited and studied these texts, notes the polemical use of Arabic and Muslim terminology. Words like *ḥadīth* and *sharᶜ* (<*sharᶜiyya*) are not used to show proximity to Muslim interpretations of the world, but to point to the Christian, that is, better, way of understanding them.[62] The Christian *ḥadīth* is the *ḥadīth*

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[56] Yosep of Telkepe, "On Divine Economy," see Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 2, pp. 119-21 for text and interpretation.

[57] Sureth: *msolmex b-īdā d-mushelmānē*

[58] Sureth: *b-īdā d-ᶜamma ishmaᶜlāyā*.

[59] Gen. 16:12.

[60] Gen. 17:20, "twelve kings."

[61] On Warda, see David D. Bundy, "George Warda as Historian and Theologian of the 13th Century," *Acta Orientalia Belgica* 7 (1992), pp. 191-200. For a contemporary example, see the edition and translation of the elegy by the priest Saumo on the victims of the plague that struck the plain of Mosul in 1734: Bruno Poizat, "La Peste de Pioz. Suite et fin," in *Semitica. Serta philologica Constantino Tsereteli dicata*, eds. Riccardo Contini, Fabrizio Pennacchietti, Mauro Tosco, Turin 1993, pp. 227-72.

[62] An Arabic text indicates that this interpretation of the term is already found with the early 14th Awdisho of Nisibis; cf. Herman Teule, "A Theological Treatise by Išoᶜyahb bar Mal-

b-leshshānā ṣaḥḥīḥā, the true story and the only revelation.[63] This also means that the reference to John the Baptist as the "seal of the prophets", mentioned above in connection with the polemics against the Jewish community, at the same time, and probably at a more important level, polemicizes with Muslim theology. According to the priest Yosep, it is Yohannan (John) rather than Mohammed who is the "seal of the prophets".[64] From this perspective, the many references in Yosep's poetry to the uniqueness and eternal importance of the Christian faith find their meaning not primarily in the opposition to other Christians or Jews, but in the antagonism to Islam.

It is in this opposition that the most important concern of the Christian writers of the time comes to light: that political and economic oppression results not only in hardships and economical setbacks, but that their situation as a sometimes vulnerable minority might also induce Christians to become Muslims. An intended marriage to a Muslim woman might have been another reason to contemplate conversion, as becomes clear from stories told to the missionary Smith.[65] We have little concrete evidence about the number of East Syriac Christians that converted in this period, but a re-reading of these texts has convinced me that it was a more important phenomenon than has been assumed, even though the texts only incidentally refer to this.[66] Notably, some notes in manuscripts of the 1570s refer to the conversion of the Syrian Orthodox (West Syriac) patriarch Naᶜama to Islam in 1572, whereas a later note also documents the conversion of two Armenian clerics.[67] The Syriac text of these colophons has not been edited, but it is likely that the verb *kaper* is used, 'to apostatize', or *makper* 'to cause to apostatize'. This word

kon preserved in the Theological Compendium *Asfār al-Asrār*," *The Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58 (2006), pp. 235-53, here p. 242.

[63] Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, pp. 116-18, reference to Yosep of Telkepe, "On Revealed Truth," p. 84.

[64] Ibid, p. 118.

[65] Cf. Smith, *Researches*, p. 383, about a man becoming Muslim in order to marry (but who died after having denied Christ, but before having become Muslim), and pp. 385 and 389 about the ecclesiastical ritual to be followed if an apostate wanted to return to the church. Court records from other parts of the Ottoman Empire suggest that intended marriage or divorce were a frequent reason for conversion to Islam, compare Masters, *Christians and Jews*, pp. 34-5.

[66] Apart from conversions to Islam, conversions to Yezidism might also have threatened some communities of the Church of the East, at least in the 1610s; compare Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq*, London/New York 1999, pp. 47-8, basing herself, among other sources, on a Syriac colophon translated by M.H. Pognon, "Sur les Yézidis du Sindjar," *Revue de l'Orient Chrétien* 2 x (1915-17), pp. 327-29.

[67] Seert 83 (Gazarta 1557/1572), Scher, *Catalogue*, p. 63; Diyarbakir 50 (Mar Augin 1553/ 1576), in Addai Scher, "Notices sur les manuscrits syriaques et arabes conservés à l'archevêché chaldéen de Diarbékir," *Journal Asiatique* 10 (1907), p. 354. For further stories about Christian martyrs who are said to have been killed because of (re)turning to Christianity from Islam, see Jean Maurice Fiey, "Martyrs sous les Ottomans," *Analecta Bollandiana* 101 i-ii (1983), pp. 387-406, who refers to forced conversions to Islam, especially during wars (e.g., in 1832, cf. pp. 401-3).

occurs a number of times in the poems of Yosep of Telkepe, exhorting his listeners not to leave the faith, but to "stand with heroism" and profess the Christian confession."[68] This is expressed most clearly in Yosep's elaboration on the parable of the fool who built his house on sand:[69]

> The foolish man built on sand and his house was ruined / the ignorant (fool) [*nazani*] who apostatizes [*kāper*] in his religion [*dīnī*] and faith [*haymānuthēh*] / all religions [*dīnē*] are considered by him the same as the religion [*dīnā*] of our Lord / he erred and was destroyed like Simon and his companions.

> He did not make his life and existence perfect with the faith / but he quickly destroyed his house / whereas the wise man endured trials with strength / he honored the religion of our Lord and died for his profession.

According to Yosep, apostasy is the result of ignorance and foolishness, which earlier have been identified as the essential mistakes of the Jews. Elsewhere Yosep makes the explicit connection: do not become as the Jews, the apostate people, the *ʿammā kāporā*[70] who did not see what the real religion was they should have followed. In the eyes of Israel of Alqosh, too, following the religion of Christ could lead to martyrdom, which in his opinion was a small price to pay in view of the eternal rewards at the Resurrection.[71] However, at the same time Yosep's and Israel's insistence on the possibility of martyrdom underlines that many members of the Church of the East were susceptible to less antagonistic views; perhaps other religions were indeed not so different from the religion of our Lord.

Conclusions

Perhaps the most surprising result of this overview of the relationship between Christians on the one hand and Jews and Muslims on the other was the fact that, more than I had realized, fear of apostasy, of conversion to Islam, colored the views of the leadership of the time. The texts do not really address this problem directly, as if the authors feared that this would attract unwanted attention to the subject. However, by stressing the fundamental and universal importance of the Christian faith, by portraying the Jews as a negative example of what happens to those who leave the fold, and by presenting the Muslims as the worldly enemies of the Christian community, the conclusion is clear: conversion to Islam is like building one's house on sand, a foolish thing to do in this world and the next. In comparison, conversion to Catholicism, another aspect hardly addressed in these texts,

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[68] Yosep of Telkepe, "On the Life-giving Words," p. 30, in Mengozzi, *Israel of Alqosh*, vol. 1, p. 98; vol. 2, pp. 195-96.

[69] "On the Life-giving Words," pp. 112-15, ibid. vol. 1, pp. 117-18; vol. 2, p. 210.

[70] "On Revealed Truth," p. 116, ibid. vol. 1, p. 88; vol. 2, p. 189.

[71] Israel of Alqosh, "On Shmuni and her Seven Sons," ibid. vol. 1, pp. 42-50; vol. 2, pp. 163-67.

seems to be a minor issue: it is a subject for debate and causes schism and rivalry within the church, but is basically seen as an inter-Christian discussion about influence, money and ritual, not about the resurrection from the dead.

The two issues, however, are closely related: the fear of Islam, that is, the fear of becoming an ever-shrinking and weak community, forces the church to look for other partners. Every outsider is a potential ally against the Islam that dominates the world of the Christians of Mesopotamia, particularly those outsiders who are also Christians. The ecumenical outlook of the Church of the East encouraged many of its clergy and faithful to look for Catholic, Protestant or Russian Orthodox support, hoping with good reason that Christian clergy of foreign lands would be able to enlist support for their temporal needs in a society that was perceived as basically hostile.

However, we need to be cautious and not overemphasize the antagonistic feelings of the Christian community vis-à-vis the Muslim majority. The texts that were used for this contribution are mainly clerical, and thus reflect one particular view of the relationships between the communities, i.e., the position of those that benefit from a clear separation between religions. As indicated above, their insistence on purity, steadfastness and faith suggests that not all members of the community agreed with them. And then, even Yosep of Telkepe was able to see things in a more positive light:[72]

> May our Lord Jesus grant peace to all believing kings / and sow peace between bishops and sultans / may he bless the winds and give us rain in the clouds / and protect the children of the church from all oppression.

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[72]   Yosep of Telkepe, "On the Life-giving Words," p. 125, ibid. vol. 1, p. 120; vol. 2, p. 212.

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