

The Assyrian Church of the East and the Russian Orthodox Church: inter-religious relations

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Since January 2013 I've had the pleasure of being based in Ankara as the Institute's Research Scholar. While the majority of my time has been devoted to creating an online archive of the research projects carried out under the auspices of the BIAA between 1947 and 2013 (check it out at <http://www.biaa.ac.uk/research/papers/type/previous>; QR code below), I've also had the chance to prepare for my PhD research in a variety of ways. Beyond linguistic preparation and attending a six-week academic seminar on 19th century American religion, where I presented on charismata among early Mormon missionaries, I've also been researching my PhD topic directly. I hope to investigate late 19th century religious relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Assyrian Church of the East in the Ottoman and Persian empires.

In the 19th century, the Church of the East (also called the 'Nestorian' or, modernly, Assyrian Church) was centred primarily in what is now eastern Turkey and northwestern Iran, in relative isolation. The story of its sensational 'discovery' by the West is broadly known. It was around 1820 that the British and Americans first became aware of eastern Christians who spoke 'the language of Jesus', and in the decades that followed they initiated missionary efforts among them (Baum, Winkler 2003: 124). German Protestants became interested in the Church from 1825 and the French began missionary work in 1838 (Baum, Winkler 2003: 124–26).

Some aspects of the inter-Christian relations that ensued have been extensively dealt with – such as the involvement of the Anglican Mission (see Coakley 1992) – and much of interest has been learnt from the study of the eastern Church's interactions with its European counterparts. For instance, we see that the selection of the Church's current eponym ('Assyrian') and modern nationalist claims were influenced by the British missionaries. Additionally, primary literature from the period illuminates interesting features of the western religious mindsets: the strong millenarian expectations and eastern Christianity's role within the millennial lead-up, the Presbyterians' eagerness to see the eastern Church's members as 'proto-Protestants' and the Anglican mission's aim of rejuvenating the ancient church with its former proselytising power all provide interesting material for studies focusing on missiology and eastern-western inter-Christian relations.

The Russian angle, however, has been largely neglected. It is known that the Russian empire had significant interaction with the Church of the East and its people on both military and missionary fronts, and, indeed, has often been accused of liberally peppering their proselytisation with politics. At the moment, only Russian sources attempt to

describe the history of interaction in any systematic way, and these are often published out of theological centres. Beyond a need to confirm the historical facts and make them more accessible to English-speaking scholars, a proper examination of primary literature would surely lend fascinating insight into both the Church of the East and the Russian Orthodox Church, and their perceptions of each other.

Eastern Christians had long looked to Russia as a source of protection from and support against their Muslim neighbours; one of the early alliances was in the 1770s, when the Nestorian Catholicos united with Russia and Georgia against Turkey (Sado 1996). In the late 1820s some Nestorians resettled in Russian territory and became Russian Orthodox (Sado 1996); this, however, was largely in the expectation of support from the Tsar, and when that failed to materialise many returned to their original faith (Baum, Winkler 2003: 124–26). Between the 1830s and 1850s, Nestorian leaders made multiple attempts to enter into political or religious alliances with Russia, applying to the embassies or consulates in Tehran, Tabriz and Tbilisi, and sending messages to the Holy Synod or Russian Emperor; the Russians, however, remained largely unresponsive (Sado 1996). Some minimal efforts were made, such as appointing a 'sarparast' in Persia to ensure the protection of the Christians in 1845 and creating an organisation for the support of the Nestorians in Yerevan who had converted to Orthodoxy (Sado 1996; Baum, Winkler 2003). The 1860s saw the Russians exert a greater interest, as evidenced by two journeys made to the eastern Christians in 1861–1862 and 1864–1865 by Sofonia Sokolskii (a Russian Orthodox leader) in response to a request from Michael of Urmia (Baum, Winkler 2003; Konstantin 2012: 22). Russia still took no steps to facilitate their accession to the Orthodox Church, however, though requests for this continued all the way through the 1890s (Baum, Winkler 2003: 133). In 1892 the Russians finally began to show serious interest in the prospect, though there was resistance (clearly) from the Anglican side (Baum, Winkler 2003). Two Orthodox priests visited Nestorian villages to gather information in 1897, which they subsequently presented to the Holy Synod. Between 17–21 March 1898 the Synod decided to accept Mar Ionan of the Church of the East and his fold into union with the Orthodox Church; he and a delegation travelled to St Petersburg, and on 25 March were accepted into the Church at Alexander Nevsky Lavra (Sado 1996; Baum, Winkler 2003). At this point, 20,000 were officially united to the Russian Orthodox Church (Baum, Winkler 2003). The social interest aroused by this event is attested by the translation and publication in 1898 of Maclean's *The Catholicos of the East and his People*; the foreword cites the Nestorians' 'sincere desire ... to again unite with the mother-church from which it had fallen due to the folly and pride of its leaders' (Lopukhin 1898). Shortly after the accession, the Synod organised a mission to the Church of the East in Urmia (modern-day Iran) and sent four people to head it that autumn.



Cover page of a 1906 edition of *Orthodox Urmia*, the mission journal published bilingually in Syriac and Russian (photo courtesy of S. Sado, with permission)

The first group led mission activities until 1901, though they were replaced with new missionaries in 1902 due to conflicts and incompetence (Sado 1996). The new group was successful in forming a translation committee that translated and printed Orthodox literature in Syriac, as well as in registering the ‘Cyrillo-Sergian Urmian Brotherhood’ in 1904. This group, too, however, faced internal troubles and external ones; one of their main complaints was the Anglican mission and its efforts to hinder their work (Zhuravskii 2003: 64). Sergii (Lavrov) became the new mission leader in 1904, and would remain in that capacity until the summer of 1916. Though the Russian revolution, Russo-Japanese War and other events combined to make the period 1904–1908 quite difficult for the mission, they did manage to publish a journal entitled *Orthodox Urmia* during 1905–1906 (it would run again between 1911–1914) (Sado 1996). Beginning around 1909 the anti-Russian stance of the Nestorians changed, and Nestorian Patriarch Mar Shimun Benjamin initiated correspondence with the mission head at Urmia, even directly discussing union in 1911. In September of that year some 100 households joined Orthodoxy, and in December the Bishop of Mosul, Mar Ilii, was received into Orthodoxy as well (Sado 1996). The Nestorian Patriarch remained interested in union

between 1913 and 1914, but Sergii never found a sanctioned opportunity to meet with him before 1914, and thereafter it was put off entirely with the onset of war. Though Russia was militarily very successful on the Caucasian front, occupying Trabzon, Van, Erzerum, western Armenia and Kurdistan, the Synod had no funds for foreign missions, and the mission head was left vacant in September 1917 (Sado 1996).

I expect that a close study of the primary Russian literature will yield much of interest, elucidating the political and social context but also lending insight into the attitudes of the Russian Church towards the eastern – but Christian and proximate – other. Since many western accounts are disparaging of the Russian mission and its motives, allowing the Russian voice to surface should create a more holistic perspective. In a world increasingly sensitive to the concept of a global Christianity that spills over traditional borders and regional assignments (a Pew Research Center study – <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/> – shows that over 66% of the world’s Christians resided in Europe in 1910, whereas a century later the figure was 25%), this seems an opportune time to uncover narratives of little-known missions and to explore new possibilities for inter-Church influences.

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