

CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN ASIA BEFORE 1500 A. D.

(A brief Survey of Church and Mission Activities)

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Introductory:

The area covered in this chapter would extend Iran: Syria in the west up to Japan in the far-east, excluding India. Although several studies have been made by western as well as Asian scholars during the past two centuries a connected and comprehensive account of the Christian presence in Asia was not quite available till recently. The appearance of the Hidden History of Christianity in Asia written by John C England in 1996 is a significant event since it serves as an eye-opener for understanding the Asian Christian realities pertaining to the early and middle age. It is pointer as well for further research and documentation.

Now it is fairly established that the Asianness of Christianity is not confined to the country of its origin but is comprehensive as to make its influence felt in almost all the countries of the continent.

It is a pity that church historians have overemphasized the advent of the Catholic and Protestant mission in the 16th and 19th centuries respectively, to the exclusion of the mission enterprises that have taken place within Asia prior to the arrival of the western missionaries. But now remarkable amount of source material is available in Syriac, Persian, Tamil, and Malayalam for confirming commercial contacts and religious establishments of traders and missionaries. Church buildings and the stone crosses together with chalices etc., have been discovered in many places in the past century. The finding includes extracts if gospel portions in Syriac as well as in Chinese. All these go to prove that many facts remained 'hidden' for a proper understanding of the spread of Christianity in "at least twelve countries east of Persia by the eighth century."

Early Christianity in India:

Many scholars involved in writing the histories of the Asian countries are chiefly interested in studying the process of contextualization and the attempts at indigenization subsequent to the mission from the west. It is equally important to undertake such studies for earlier centuries with a view to discovering the various attempts at assimilation made by the Christian communities who had to encounter and combat Asian religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and heretical sects like Manichaeism.

The purpose in this paper is to present briefly the origin and course of the Christian mission from the second to the fifteenth century A.D> and to highlight a few events, achievements and encouraging challenges that are to be noted in the western, central and eastern regions of the continent.

The Significance of the Silk Road Traffic:

It was a super high way that ran 7000 miles from Syria to China in the early century. Merchants and Bishops, scholars, missionaries and musicians passed by the road. They carried with them not merely material goods but also ideas, messages and songs with musical instruments. The long eastward journey meant halts at many places and temporary or longtime stay for many travelers. Countless centers for worship and learning, healing and preaching were established. Such a movement of

Christianity is said to have reached China by the sixth century followed by Manichaeism in the seventh century and Islam in the eighth century. These religions are supposed to have made their impact on Chinese Shamanism. Syriac writings provide authentic evidences for studying the early trade route that connected west Asia with East Asia.

Movement of Christianity from Syria:

The Church of the East is believed to have originated in the first century among the Aramaic-Syriac speaking communities in Syria and Mesopotamia. Syriac is a dialect of eastern Aramaic. The church grew stronger owing to the immigration of Jewish Christians after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Tradition has it that Thaddaeus, one of the seventy disciples of Jesus had his mission in Edessa, an important center of the church in Syria. He is referred to as Mar Addai in Syriac. From such places there has been a steady movement of missionaries towards the east commencing from Mesopotamia, Parthia through Media and Persia. Authentic information for this enterprise is to be found in the writings of Bardaisan who lived in the second century and a fifth century document that goes by the name Doctrine Addai. By the beginning of the 5th century, twenty bishoprics were established in Seleucia and farther east including the area adjoining the Persian Gulf. Christian population increased in Armenia which was proclaimed as a Christian state. Christian settlements were increasing till the 8 centuries in the countries between Kurdistan and Persian Gulf. The Christian Community was of composite kind consisting of Syrians, Iranians and Greeks who arrived from Roman provinces. Christianity became a significant and powerful minority in the Persian empire and it had to face the oppositions and even persecution that arose from the followers of Zoroastrianism. The opposition became all the stronger because of the Persian enmity towards the Christian Roman empire.

However, during the period between 410-780, Seleucia on the river Tigris close to; the highland of Bactria had become a Church centre where the Catholicos lived. The Patriarchs of the Church continued to have their office there with supervising responsibilities of the sees which were in large numbers extending in the east up to Sumatra and Japan.

Among the outstanding Christian institutions of the church of the East of that age, the Clergy school at Seleucia, the Training Center for missionary monks are noteworthy. The theological school established at Edessa in the third century is claimed to be the first one of its kind in Christian history. During the following centuries theological and devotional writings were brought out by eminent scholars like Bardaisan to whom Attributed Odes of Solomon is, the earliest Christian Hymn Book and also the Acts of St. Thomas. From the American came out the teachings of the Apostles in the fourth century. The Peshita (The Syriac version of the Old Testament) was used in the churches. The literary contributions of the Syrian theologians in the following centuries include the writings of Ephrem Syrus and Aphrahat who have excelled in the area of theology, exposition and poetry. Ephrem has to his credit more than 5000 hymns, some of which are still used in the church worship of the Orthodox Church.

The theological standing of the church of the East was established by the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) based on the teachings of Nestorius. His works, including those in which he has stressed historical interpretation and the Nestorian theology were taught widely in the Persian church as well as in its eastern provinces that extended up to the Indian region.

A similar theologian and church leader of high reputation for the Arabs was Bishop Jacob Baradaeus (500-578) who was responsible for the renewal of the monophysite communities which came to be known as the Syrian Orthodox. Thousands of priests were ordained in course of time and under the able leadership of Metropolitans, Jacobite communities spread in Central Asia and in South India.

One of the patriarchs was a convert from Zoroastrianism who after a long time of exile and imprisonment was restored and honored by the ruler Khusro II. He is said to have employed many Christians in government service. In the seventh century A.D. Ishoyab VI seem to have been instrumental in strengthening the churches, giving due recognition to them.

Even after the Arab conquest in 637, the Nestorian church extended from Syria as far as Japan in the north east and Sumatra in the South east with nine Metropolitans and ninety-six Bishops. According to Lotouratte, the total number of Christians in the late seventh century was well over a million. The majority of them were Syriac speaking and the remaining were of Iranian stock. A peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims has prevailed during the 7th and 8th centuries and the expansion of the church in the eastern region including Armenia, Damascus, Turkistan and Tibet was remarkable.

The church of the East developed its independence from Antioch already in 424 and developed independently of the Roman or Constantine Church. Under Persian rule there were persecutions in the previous century. Mar Shimoun was executed along with five Bishops and one hundred clergy for refusing to collect enhanced tax from poor Christians. In the centuries that followed Christian communities were able to preserve their Semitic and Asian traditions with strong Christian commitment.

Due to importance was given to women in the church and the role they played in ecclesiastical affairs is remarkable compared to later times. Many of them occupied important positions as Abbesses and spiritual leaders and prophetesses. Apart from being the wives of the priests, they seem to have been deaconess and priests as well with special training centers and monasteries meant for them.

The church of the East in the earlier centuries of the Christian era has been in many respects a forerunner for the pattern of life set in medieval as well as modern times.

Arabian Christianity:

It is interesting to note the origin of the Arabian Christian communities chiefly owing to contacts with Christian ascetics who lived in the deserts. The impact made by Hilarian in the 4th century on the Arabs produced a number of Christian monks among them. The missionary endeavors of Theophilus the Indian during this period is praiseworthy. He was the founder of the church in Yemen and was responsible for the establishment of a monastery near Bahrein in 390. The Arab church was missionary in character as to make converts from royal and influential families of Yemen. The Arab Kingdom of Hirah that was under the rule of Persia had become a Christian state by the end of the fourth century. The Nestorian and Monophysite church activities during the following three centuries were no free from conflicts and clashed with the Jewish community. This resulted in a massacre in which many belonging to both communities lost their lives.

It may be noted that similar to the Syrian women Arab women have also played prominent role in the church. Mawiyya who ruled from Hirah became the first Arab Christian queen in 373. The wife of king Mundar III is said to have been the founder of a convent in the 6th century. The names of several women are found in the list of martyrs preserved by the church. Their final confessions of faith are also available.

Kenneth Cragg, an eminent Christian theologian and Islamic scholar has pointed out that early Christian missionaries in Arabia have first invented the Arabic script that was used for priming the Quran. The contributions of Christian Arabic poets who were patronized by Muslim rulers were written on Christian themes. The apologetic works of Abd al Masih written in the 9th century is said to be an attempt at presenting the Christian faith in purely Asiatic dress and language. Polemical writings were produced by Yahya ibn Adi, a Jacobite theologian in answer to attacks upon the doctrine of Trinity.

The Christian communities in some Persian Arab provinces flourished in the 9th century with full recognition for their academic contributions and administrative skills still the break out of the crusades.

It is refreshing to know that many scholars are now involved in concentrated studies on the early history of the church in Persia, Arabia and Armenia particularly during the first ten centuries when the Eastern churches have made phenomenal growth amidst opposition and devoid of any contact with the Graeco-Latin church.

Christianity in Turkestan:

Moving eastwards we find several places which speaks in clear terms about the church enterprise in Transoxiana and west Turkestan. As early as the fourth century, refugees and merchants from Syria and Persia were instrumental in spreading Christianity among the inhabitants, especially the Mans (Turks).

Mero became an important missionary centre. Both the Nestorian and Armenian missionaries have worked hand in hand in evangelizing the Huns. That is Armenian church was also active in this area is evident from an Armenian gospel parchment of the 10th century. A palace called Samarguad which lies on the side of the silk road which passes through west Turkestan became famous as a meeting place for travelers and settlers because of an emporium which was an operation for their benefit. The place became a Christian centre in due course with Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) Melitites (Syrian of the Greco Rite) and Armenian (Apostolic Church) settlements. In the centuries that followed it became a strong Nestorian centre. Marco Polo who visited the place reports that there were about 11,000 Christians. A Latin Missionary Bishopric was established there in the fourteenth century.

The missionary enterprise of the early Nestorians at Samargaud according to Pothen and Mundadan extended up to Ladakh as the visit of a Christian ambassador from Samarguad to Tibet in the 9th century is confirmed.

A number of artefacts from East Turkestan belonging to a period of nine centuries since the fifth have been discovered. Of these the manuscripts, paintings and relics are helpful in ending out glimpses of church life during the Chinese, Turk and Mongol rule. Hsuan Tsang is believed to have visited the region and reported about the activities of Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Manichaeans.

One important place which needs mention is Dandung, a famous centre for Buddhist worship. Christian missionaries who traveled on the Silk Road have visited the place frequently and established churches. Both Turkish and Tibetan Christians have lived together under the see of a Nestorian bishop. This place is important also for the reputed library in which many important commentaries, treatise and Christian apocrypha most of which written in Syriac are still preserved. A significant document found in Chein – fo- tung temple was the 'Chinese Gloria' or 'Hymn to Trinity'. In a list of names of 25 saints are found six names to be Chinese, A painting on silk named ie., Bob Pasteur"

depicts a Crist-like figure in the pattern of Bodhiasthva attributed to a period earlier to the 11th century.

The Tibalean Experience:

As for Tibet, the commercial and trade contacts with Persia loom large. Foreign dignitaries including religious luminaries such as the Christian missionaries were accorded cordial reception by the monarch who adopted a policy of toleration. The Syrian Church got established in Tibet by the 8th century as many Christians filled the country. Among the relics discovered crosses, inscriptions and manuscripts are valuable. A manuscript discovered at a Tibetean. So also, Christian themes such as salvation by grace is said to be noticed in some other manuscripts. Abbe Hue who visited Tibet in the 19th century was surprised to find Christian rituals, symbols and practices getting assimilated into Lamaism.

China Receives Christ:

The Silk Road will lead the traveler to step into China which in fact was the terminal. The Chinese Kings in the 6th and 7th centuries have maintained cordial relations with the Turks when China's borders extended into east Turkestan and Persia. As was in the case with other counties of Asia we have surveyed earlier, the traders from Persia were the first ones to arrive with their commodities and create a religious ethos of their own in China. Between 7th and 9th centuries, a number of Nestorian congregations have sprung up with a few monasteries that 'received the favor of the ruling monarch. A Nestorian monument of 8th century measuring 9ft high was discovered in 1625 by the side of a church and monastery. The inscription purported to have been written by a native Chinese priest of the monastery speaks of the 'way' in China under the caption "The Ministers of the Cross". Underneath the text of the inscription a reference it made to the erection of the monument with the names of 70 saints, monks and presbyters of the church of the east. The text, apart from 70 Syriac words is written in Chinese with imagery drawn freely from traditional Chinese and Buddhist sources. The authorship of the inscription is attributed to Ching Ching (Adam). He was a reputed scholar in Christian and Buddhist theology and translated among other texts, the six Paramitassutra of Buddhism in collaboration with a monk I'rajna by name. From the four series of documents Alopen, Ching, Cyriacus, Cyriacus and Turfan collections belonging to periods between the 7th and 9th centuries, it is evidently clear that the teachings and worship patters of Christianity was indigenized with critical evaluation of the elements assimilated from Buddhist, Muslim and Manichar sources. So also, Confucian and Taoist terminology were not completely rejected by the Chinese Christians. In turn Buddhism is said to have adapted the concept of the communion of saints and the practice of observing lent. An important Christian centre since the 7th century was Chan-the capital city of the Tang dynasty. It was the terminus of the Silk road. The Al-o-pen writings were compiled in the city library where many Christian writings were translated into Chinese.

During the period that followed Christianity received patronization form the ruling King who honored a Christian Bishop and organized an annual retreat for the monks of the four monasteries that were situated in the area. He is said to have resided over preparatory as well as inaugural meetings of the 9th century. The heretical books of Manicheism were confiscated, and the monasteries were closed. Pro-Taoist emperor persecuted the Christians, and many were evacuated from their monasteries. Books and artefacts were destroyed. However, the mission from Persia and Bactria continued till the end of the century. The Christian witness continued in North China with a much-reduced number of Christians chiefly through the monasteries in the 11th century. There is an important evidence for the surviving Christian presence in the 12th century. This is found in the

report of John f Piano Carpturi who visited Mongolia in 1245-47. He speaks of the Chinese version of the scriptures and Christian literature. He records that Christians were monotheists who honored Jesus Christ and believed in eternal life.

The southern part of the country was connected with west Asian countries by sea routes. Maritime trade existed between them ever since the 8th century. As early as the 7th century, the sea port Can-fu or Canton has become one of the important Christian centres. The Nestorian Bishop had relations with the officers in the royal courts. The siege of Canton during 877-878 resulted in the massacre of six score thousand Muslims Jews, Christians and Parses who were teachers in the city. The Christian activities, however, continued in Canton and in a few other places in the 10th and 11th centuries. Marco Polo who visited Fugee in the thirteenth century found a Christian community which possessed in Psalter and paintings of apostles in their worshipping places. Although this sectarian group is not easily identifiable Marco Polo estimates their number to be not less than 7,00,000. When asked about their church identification they declared themselves "to be Christians as their predecessors had been".

According to the Buddhist historian Tsan ning who lived in the 10th century the Nestorians, Manichaeans and Zorostrians were pseudo vegetarians and teetotalers who were 'perverse' and 'disorderly' under cover. They were also implicated for communal disturbances.

When the Mongols established their supremacy in China the Nestorian Christians were granted freedom of worship. Interestingly a colony of Armenians was established in Chan Chou by the fourteenth century. The Franciscan missionaries had arrived in China by that time.

Subsequent to the rule of Jenghis Khan in the 13th century, the rule of Mongolia extended from the Volga to the mouth of the Yangtse. The rulers were tolerant and were eager to learn from all religious quarters. Many members of the Khan family and several others from the major tribal groups have already become Christians. From the 12th century till the 15th century there was enormous growth of the Christian church in China owing to the untiring endeavors of both the eastern and other Roman church.

An important interfaith dialogue or colloquium, more in the fashion of a debate was convened by the ruler Mangu in 1254. Participants from Christians, Muslim, Manichaeans, Shanrnan and Buddhist communities took part in the discussion that continued in the following years. A Nestorian theological school was established at Khannbaliq in 1230. Records reveal to us the existence of about seventy monasteries in Southern China during the 13th and 14th centuries. The earliest Christian mission from west to the west took place when Suma and Markan undertook journeys to Europe. The patronization of the Khans continued while several women folk including the wives of Khan have embraced Christianity. Unfortunately, the antagonism between the Nestorian Roman Christians weakened the recognition of the Khans. Thus, the Christian presence was weakened in the region by the 15th century.

The South Eastern region of Asia that covers countries like India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Sumatra was already connected with Persia and Syria in the early centuries both by land and sea routes. Consequently, Christian churches came into existence in these countries with episcopal standing.

Christian Mission in Sri Lanka, Myanmar and Java:

Anuradhapura, a strong Tervada Buddhist centre was also a trading centre. It gave access to Christian traders and missionaries to establish churches. According to information available from inscriptions, several foreign Christian high officials were employed in the court of the Sinhalese Kings during the 5th century. Abu Zayd Hassn of Basra who visited the place had left records in appreciation of the tolerance shown by the monarchs to the Jewish and other communities. Another Muslim, Idrisi

who visited Anuradhapura in 1154 mentions that there were ministers in the court representing the four major religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

Myanmar, formerly known as Burma welcomed trade connections with West Asia since 14th century. In places like Pegu evidences are found for the existence of communities Nestorian or Armenian.

Giovane de Marignolli who visited Java says that Christians were to be found at Majapahit and also in Sumatra. The journey of the Magi in search of the new born king of the Jews is supposed to have commenced at Java according to a tradition.

Christ in Korea and Japan:

A study of Korean Christianity would reveal the impact of Chinese culture chiefly through the spread of Buddhism from the 4th century. The Silk Road seem to have reached Korea, Japan and as far as eastern Russia. References to Nestorian presence in Korean Chronicles is called Sanguk Yusa and Samguk. During an excavation near An Shan in 927, several clay caresses from a large tomb that contained the remains of seven bodies were found. Bronze mirrors engraved with the Christian symbols of fish and the grape vine were unearthed. These are preserved in the Christian museum of Soongsil University at Seoul.

Japanese history also records through an injunction of prince Shotoku (544-622) the "full liberty and personal rights" granted to the Nestorians. Nestorian Christianity was named as "the Church of Unanimous". Both Mar Aprém and Young point out in their studies that empress Komyo was strongly influenced by Christianity and she later built a hospital, an orphanage and a leprosarium. Further churches have been in existence in Sukoshi and KadomMn central Japan. In one part of the Foundation stone of a Buddhist temple at Kyoto built in 818 and restored in 1165 are found letters used for Christianity along with Uzu Nasa (Yesu Messiah). The characters are inferred to belong to an earlier period of 603 when a Christian building stood there till the 9th century when the burning of the same could have taken place.

A ninth century manuscript entitled 'The Lord of the Universe 'on Alms giving' and preserved in Kyoto is said to have been based on the Sermon on the Mount and other Matthean passages. In fact, this is an A-o-pen document from Dunhuang.

It should be noted that the evidences available for Christian presence in South West and South East Asia are fragmentary compared to that of central and Southern Asian countries.

The emergence of Christian churches in Central and Southern Asia were possible because of the mission of the Eastern churches, namely Persian, Syrian and Armenian. In the chequered history of eastern Christianity in this part of Asia, are remarkably preserved the basic Christian beliefs and the accepted patterns of worship. Further studies are worth the while for reconstructing the church life of the Christians and their attempts at contextualization and the process of indigenization attempted by them. These will provide incentives for modern attempts at Asian expressions of Christian commitment.

End Notes:

1. Published by ISPCK, Delhi and CCA, Hong-Kong. 1996
2. Ibid, P 1

3. Ibid, P 25
4. Ibid P 46
5. Ibid P 71
6. Ibid P 106, 107

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