TANG CHRISTIANITY
Its Syriac Origins and Character[1]

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Introduction

This essay provides a brief discussion on the origins and character of Chinese Tang Christianity（景教 Jingjiao）in light of the Christian Monument discovered in 1623 in Chang-an (present day 西安 Xian) and the Christian Hymn found among the Chinese texts of Dunhuang（敦煌）in 1908, viz. the *Hymn to the Trinity*（景教三威蒙度讚 Jing jiao san wei meng du zan）. In particular, the essay explores the connections between these two Tang Christian texts and Syriac Christianity. Many students of Christian history are unaware that Christianity had a significant presence in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Church Histories, written mostly by Western European scholars, have shown little knowledge of the significant influence

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[1] The research presented in this essay is part of a larger project investigating the Tang Christian texts, conducted at the Centre for Early Christian Studies at the Australian Catholic University, Brisbane.

Christianity has had in the East starting from the very beginnings of the Christian movement. This gap in Western Church Histories is inexcusable in view of the vast amount of historical data available evidencing the impact of Christianity in the East. On the rare occasion when the history of the church in the East has been considered it has been fraught with prejudices and misunderstanding.

Several works have appeared in recent years trying to correct some of these imbalances and misconceptions.[2] In general these works have correctly emphasised the pervasive presence and history of Eastern Christianity. Yet, hardly any of these works deal with Tang Christianity and most still depend on old assessments and stereotypes. The work of the Japanese scholar Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, first published in 1937, is the only monograph that covers all the Tang Christian documents and provides the basis for current historical assessments of Tang Christianity.[3] However, Saeki's monograph, although it makes an important contribution to scholarship, contains several weaknesses. For example, the translations of the texts are often unclear and, at times, incorrect, the Syriac Christian background of the texts is by and large overlooked, and there is very little discussion of the transformation of Christianity within the context of Chinese religion and culture. Similarly, most articles on the subject are very old and provide little discussion of the texts. Therefore, the origins and character of Tang Christianity remain by and large an under-explored area in scholarship today. This is surprising in view of the importance of these texts for understanding the spread of Christianity to the East, for assessing the earliest form of Chinese Christianity for which we have evidence, and for reconstructing a cultural history of Tang China. The Tang Christian texts provide some of the earliest direct evidence for the interaction between the cultures of Western and Eastern Asia. The discussion

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[2] See Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, volume I: Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992); John C. England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia: The Churches of the East before the Year 1500* (Delhi and Hong Kong: ISPCK, 1998); and Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999).

[3] Saeki published an expanded edition in 1951 (Tokyo: Maruzen). The monographs of John Foster, *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), and Arthur Christopher Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550* (London: Macmillan, 1930), only deal with selected portions of the Tang Christian collection. Also see Hsiang-lin Lo, *Nestorianism in the T'ang and Yuan Dynasties* (Hong Kong: Institute of Chinese Culture, 1966 [in Chinese]). Two works that recently appeared in Chinese are Zhu Qianzhi, *Zhongguo jingjiao* (Beijing: Dongfang Chubanshe, 1993); and Weng Shaojun, *Hanyu jingjiao wenxian dian quanyi* (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 1996).

presented here seeks to emphasise the Syriac origin and character of Tang Christianity. The failure to understand the Syriac context of Tang Christianity has led to the misleading but entrenched identification of Tang Christianity as Nestorian Christianity.

History of Research

Research into Tang Christianity began with the discovery of the Tang Christian Monument, better known as the "Nestorian Monument," around 1623 in Chang-an and the arrival of this news to the Jesuit missionaries in China.[4] The Jesuits showed an immediate interest in the Monument and its inscription. They undertook several fact-finding missions and made rubbings of the inscription which were sent to Europe. There was great excitement in China among the Jesuits and in Europe about this amazing discovery. Although some doubted the authenticity of the Monument, it was accepted as a genuine Tang relic by serious investigators. However, since the discovery of the Tang Christian Monument, investigation into Tang Christianity has been hampered by designating it as Nestorian Christianity. In itself the term could be a neutral appellation for a branch of Christianity in the East; however, the term has been used in a derogatory sense in the West describing the christology that was anathematised by the church councils of the fifth century. Therefore, by describing the Tang Christian Monument as a Nestorian Monument, an immediate prejudice was established against Tang Christianity in the West as it was perceived to be a corrupted form of the orthodox faith. Some writers have even attributed the demise of Christianity in China at the end of the Tang era to the degraded nature of Tang Christianity. This stigma remains until today.

In order to understand the label "Nestorian" one has to go back to the complex christological controversies and powerplays that plagued the church in the fourth and fifth centuries. Under the influence of Greek philosophical traditions Christianity gradually moved away from its Jewish apocalyptic orientation to become absorbed in philosophical discussions concerning the nature of the divine. With the acceptance of Christianity as the state religion under Constantine, the church became an integral part of the political, philosophical, and cultural life of the

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[4] The circumstances of its discovery and the sequence of events that followed are now lost in history; see Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 26-33.

Roman Empire. In other words, the Jesus movement, which saw its ideal in Jesus who lived simply and proclaimed the kingdom, became not only an institutionalised church but also a philosophical and political movement.[5] It was in this context, or trajectory, that the Nestorian controversy occurred.

Nestorianism was formally condemned at the church councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). It was said that Nestorianism so emphasised the humanity of Christ's nature that it divided him into two persons, one human and the other divine. Nestorius was unwilling to refer to Mary as the "Mother of God" (Θεοτόκος), suggesting that he separated Christ's divinity from his humanity and thus dividing Christ into two persons. Orthodox christology, on the other hand, stated that Christ is only one person (πρόσωπον; Syriac, ܩܢܘܡܐ) but has two natures (φύσις; Syriac, ܟܝܢܐ), divine and human. It is questionable, however, whether Nestorius himself ever taught the heresy ascribed to him.[6] Indeed, it would appear that he repudiated the views his opponents, such as Cyril, attributed to him. Therefore, it is better to regard the rejection of Nestorius as the result of the political rivalry between the episcopal sees and personalities of Antioch and Alexandria.

After Nestorius was condenmed by the formal church councils his views found a refuge within the Eastern churches of Persia. The Eastern churches not only had a great sympathy for Nestorius and his views but also felt aggrieved at the increasing influence of the church in the West. In addition, the political tension between the Sassanian empire (224-651) and Rome made it expedient for the Eastern churches to distance themselves from their Western cousins. The result of these alleged

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[5] Note the little-known study of Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages upon the Christian Church* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1914). In this fascinating study Hatch discussed how the Church passed from the Sermon on the Mount to the Nicene Creed.

[6] There is a considerable amount of literature dealing with this subject. Readers may refer to James Franklin Betune-Baker, *Nestorius and His Teaching* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1969 [1908]); Friedrich Loofs, *Nestorius and His Place in the History of Christian Church Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914); Godfrey Rolles Driver and Leonard Hodgson, *Nestorius: The Bazaar of Heracleides*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925); Aubrey Russell Vine, *An Approach to Christology*, London 1948; R. Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, 2 vols., Grand Rapids: 1954 [1895]; Robert Victor Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies: The Schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the Early History of Christian Doctrine* (London: SPCK, 1954); Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon* (New York: Mowbray, 1965).

theological differences, and the more real cultural and polical disparity, was that the Eastern church separated from its Western counterpart. The two churches not only separated, but also regarded each other with suspicion and distrust. The West branded the Eastern church with the label "Nestorian", and interpreted it, by definition, as a heretical church. With the rise of Islam, the distance between the two churches became even greater; in the West knowledge of the Church of the East virtually disappeared.

We can now look at how Tang Christianity has been assessed in the history of scholarship. In order to understand this history it is important to start with a reference to the thirteenth century Venetian traveler, Marco Polo (1254-1324), the first to inform the West about China.[7] Marco Polo consistently used the term "Nestorian" to describe the Christian communities he found in Asia, including China. For example, Polo pointed out that among the inhabitants of Mosul were Nestorian and Jacobite (Monophysite) Christians. Polo did not make a distinction between the two groups, but said that they function in much the same way as the Church in the West. However, according to Polo, they came short at several points:

> For you must know that though there is a very great number of Christians in those countries, they are all Jacobites and Nestorians; Christians indeed, but not in the fashion enjoined by the Pope of Rome, for they come short in several points of their Faith.[8] (Marco Polo I.5)

Polo did not elaborate further; but, whenever he came across Christians in Central Asia, and in the provinces of China, he generally referred to them as Nestorians.[9] Marco Polo's description of Christians in the East as being Nestorian (*Nestorin*) has influenced the portrayal of Eastern Christians ever since. His *Travels* was the West's major source of knowledge of the East when the Jesuits entered China in the seventeenth century. His work indelibly reinforced the perception in the Western mind that Eastern Christianity was Nestorian and as such falls short of orthodox Christianity at a number of points.

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[7] Cosmas Indicopleustes, the sixth century geographer from Alexandria, does not talk about China in any great detail.

[8] In Henry Yule, ed., *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* (London: Murray, 1929), 60.

[9] Marco Polo I.5, 33, 42, 43, 44, 49; II.48, 70, 73.

The most important work that appeared in the 17th century on China was that of Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit, *China Illustrata*, published in Latin in 1667. It is clear that Kircher was influenced by Marco Polo's negative evaluation of Christianity in the East as being Nestorian. Therefore, taking his lead from Polo, Kircher discussed the heresies of Nestorius, and others, in the context of the early christological controversies. According to Kircher, after the first 400 years of Christianity, Satan used the Nestorian heresy (*Nestoriana Hæresis*) to ruin the orthodox faith in the East. Relying on the evidence of Marco Polo, he asserted that there was no town in the East which had not been contaminated by it (92).[10] In other words, Kircher provided a very negative assessment of Tang Christianity, seeing it as a perversion of orthodoxy by the Nestorian heresy.

The next major writer in Europe to discuss early Chinese Christianity was the eminent Vatican librarian, Assemani (1687-1768). In his work *De Syris Nestorianis* (Rome, 1725-28) he discussed Christianity in China at length. He referred to the existence of the Thomas tradition in India and its supposed links with China, citing several Syriac texts from the Malabar Church. However, according to Assemani, we can only be certain that Christianity entered China by the year 636 with the mission of Alopen (1725-28, DVI). Then, following Kircher, Assemani sanguinely declared that Chinese Christianity stems from Nestorianism (1725-28, DVII, DXIX). So too, the teaching of the Tang Christian Monument (which he called the *Monimento Syro-Sinico*) derived from the heretic Nestorius (*haereticis Nestorianis*) and not from the orthodox faith of Christ (1725-28, DXXI). The negative description of Tang Christianity in the major works of Kircher and Assemani has influenced the West's understanding and assessment of Tang Christianity ever since. These works of the 17th century formed the basis of the descriptions of Tang Christianity found in separate studies and in the more general Church Histories of the 19th century.[11] With a few exceptions, most subsequent writers and historians have come to apply the term Nestorian to Tang Christianity.

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[10] Athanasius Kircher, *China Illustrata* (Amsterdam: apud jacobum à Meurs, 1667), 92. Kircher never actually left Europe. All his information about China was second-hand.

[11] The work on Asian Christianity published in 1818 by Thomas Yeates, *Indian Church History* (London: A. Ural-Altaische Jarbücher), referred to Tang Christianity but did not provide in depth discussion.

Research in the nineteenth century ended with James Legge's short monograph *The Nestorian Moment of Xsi-an Fu*, published in 1888.[12] Legge is important as he was not only one of the most eminent sinologists in the nineteenth century, but also a protestant missionary in China. As the title of the work indicates the designation of the Tang Christian Monument as the *Nestorian Monument*, had now become entrenched in the discussion. Legge surmised that, "Beyond a doubt, the Christians of whom the Inscription speaks belonged to the Nestorian Church."[13] Legge did express some sympathy for Nestorius, yet he had a fairly low estimation of the character of Tang Christianity. He went on to refer to Tang Christianity as "an emasculated Christianity, deprived of the leading features of the Gospel," and as being "swamped by Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist ideas, a certain degenerate nominal Christianity."[14] Unfortunately, Legge's negative assessment has been uncritically adopted by many historians in the twentieth century.

Therefore, it appears that due to the earlier works of Kircher and Assemani, the term "Nestorian" had become firmly associated with Tang Christianity in the nineteenth century. Most writers in the twentieth century, up to the present day, reflect this misguided understanding of Tang Christianity. Although a new impetus to the study of Tang Christianity occurred with the discovery of the Tang Christian texts in the caves of Dunhuang in 1908 by Aurel Stein and Paul Pelliot, the Nestorian understanding and hence disaparaging estimation of Tang Christianity has become fixed in the minds of most Christian historians.

The three most important works that dealt with the discoveries of the Dunhuang texts, particularly in the English speaking world, were those of Moule, Saeki, and Foster. Moule published and discussed all the evidence at hand regarding Christianity in China in his book *Christians in China before the Year 1550*, which was published in 1930. Moule was the first scholar to attempt a meticulous assessment of the material. His book is well referenced and is still a valuable resource for the study of Tang Christianity. He first dealt with the evidence for a Christian presence in China before the Tang dynasty, then discussed the Tang Christian Monument and the discoveries from Dunhuang, and

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[12] James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu* (London: Trübner and Co., 1888).

[13] Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu*, 41.

[14] Foster, *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty*, 112.

finally he listed references in Chinese sources to Tang Christianity. Moule provided an overview of the identification of the Monument as a Christian witness. He also presented a translation of the Monument and of the Christian Hymn found at Dunhuang. His study is important as it was the first attempt to present a comprehensive overview of the materials. However, weaknesses remain. Moule only dealt with two documents at any length and did not deal with the question concerning the origins and character of Tang Christianity. In a short monograph published in 1940, *Nestorians in China*,[15] he still applied the Nestorian label to Tang Christianity without critical reflection.

The most complete and extensive study of Tang Christianity is provided by Saeki's *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*. Saeki provided the texts and translations of all the Tang Christian materials, including references to Chinese materials and other relics up to the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368). Saeki made available much valuable information, but, like most other historians, talked about Nestorian documents and relics without ever pausing to define what is meant by "Nestorian." Neither did Saeki offer a detailed analysis or overall assessment of the texts.

The third, and final, major consideration of Tang Christianity to appear at the time was the work of John Foster, *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty*, published in 1939. This work did not contain detailed comment on the texts as in Moule and Saeki. However, its importance lies in providing a more careful investigation of the nature of Tang Christianity. Foster emphasised that Tang Christianity should not be seen as Nestorianism, but as genuine Christianity, albeit in a different form from that of the West. He also discussed some of the content of the Dunhuang texts and presented a much more positive assessment, although he still used the adjective "Nestorian" throughout. Foster's caution, however, was heeded by few.

Very little has been added after Moule, Saeki, and Foster in terms of the scholarly investigation of Tang Christianity. Most, if not all, subsequent authors have referred to Tang Christianity as a branch of Nestorianism, overlooking or being unaware of the cautions raised by

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[15] See Arthur Christopher Moule, *Nestorian in China: Some Corrections and Additions* (London: China Society, 1940).

Foster.[16] Even recent scholarly works appearing in the past ten years have not moved beyond general descriptions and stereotyped caricatures. Thus, almost without exception, scholars continue to refer to the Tang Christian Monument as the Nestorian Monument.[17] Tang Christianity has come to be synonymous with Nestorian Christianity. So too, with the discovery of several Tang Christian texts at the beginning of the twentieth century in China, the Nestorian label was immediately used to describe the texts without critical evaluation. This is reflected in the titles of many monographs, articles, and chapter headings on books dealing with Tang Christianity.

Syriac Christianity

Before we can proceed with a more detailed discussion of the content of the Tang Christian Monument and Hymn, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the contours of Syriac Christianity to sketch the background. It is evident that Syrian missionaries brought Christianity to China from the West. According to the Tang Monument, a certain Alopen (ܐܠܘܦܢ : Abraham), a monk bearing a Syriac name, of the kingdom of Daqin（大秦）, brought the Christian sutras to the Tang capital, Chang-an, in 635. Then, in 744, according to the Monument, another priest from the kingdom of Daqin arrived in China to strengthen

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[16] For example, Arnold Rowbotham, *Missionary and Mandarin: The Jesuits at the Court of China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of Califormia Press, 1942); Leonard M. Outerbridge, *The Lost Churches of China* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952); Aubrey Russell Vine, *The Nestorian Churches* (New York: AMS Press, 1953); Columba Cary-Elwes, *China and the Cross: Studies in Missionary History* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957); Kenneth Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967 [1929]); Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen and Co., 1968); D. Hickley, *The First Christians in China: An Outline History and Some Considerations Concerning the Nestorians in China during the Tang Dynasty* (London: China Study Project, 1980); Ralph R. Covell, *Confucius, the Buddha, and Christ: A History of the Gospel in Chinese* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986); Bob Whyte, *Unfinished Encounter: China and Christianity* (London: Collins, 1988); Karen Louise Jolly, *Tradition and Diversity: Christianity in a World Context to 1500* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1997). Also the works cited before, Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*; England, *The Hidden History of Christianity in Asia*; and Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christian in Asia before 1500*.

[17] A recent doctoral thesis from the University of Tübingen, however, has shown more potential for understanding Tang Christianity. Li Tang, *A Study of the History of Nestorian Christianity in China and Its Literature in Chinese* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2002), has set his translations of the Tang Christian documents within the context of Syriac Christianity. Li correctly questions whether or not the designation "Nestorian" is an adequate appellation for Tang Christianity. However, the thesis still refers to Tang Christianity as Nestorian Christianity and the Syrian connections are only stated, not demonstrated.

the Christian church. The term Daqin is commonly understood to refer to the region of Mesopotamia or Syria.[18] The inscription concludes in Syriac writing with a chronological statement, the names of several cities in Central Asia, and a long list of the names of 128 Syrian priests. The Syriac text also states that the Priest Adam (אדם, another common Syriac name) prepared the inscription. Apart from these direct indications of the Syriac origin of Tang Christianity, there are also numerous theological and cultural allusions in the inscription and the Tang Christian texts to Syriac Christianity. This essay will highlight some of these references. It is clear that the origin of Tang Christianity must be situated somewhere within the provenance of Syriac Christianity.[19] It follows, then, that an understanding of Syriac Christianity is indispensable for an accurate evaluation of the origin and character of Tang Christianity.

Therefore, we must include in our discussion some reflection on the distinctive theological characteristics of Syriac Christianity. Syriac Christianity covers a range of ecclesiastical traditions stretching over a vast area and period of time, much of which we are unable to reconstruct accurately. In other words, one should be very careful with generalised statements concerning the beliefs and practices of Syriac Christianity. Nonetheless, there are some characteristics or tendencies within the development of Syriac Christianity that allow us to make some general observations. But first of all we need to state the obvious: the church in the East shared the basic tennts of Christianity with the church in the West. The emphasis on the mercy of God, centered in the story of Jesus Christ, has historically defined the contours of the Christian faith. The Eastern church, like its Western counterpart, emphasised the metaphors of sin, salvation, and everlasting life, based on the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Both churches stressed the evangelical call to repentance, faith, and moral conduct according to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Furthermore, like Western Christianity, the Eastern Church developed a highly organised structure of church government and liturgy anchored in the bishop. In other words, a traveler to the East would readily have recognised Syriac Christianity as belonging to the same religious tradition as the church in the West.

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[18] See Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 79.

[19] It has been suggested that Tang Christianity originated from India. However, there is no evidence within the Tang Christian documents to support such a connection. Although Christians could easily have travelled from India to China, it is clear that the Tang texts reflect Syrian traditions.

Nevertheless, Syriac Christianity had its unique characteristics, identifying it with a different cultural milieu.[20] There are the obvious linguistic differences. The theological language of the West was Greek, later Latin became dominant; in the East, Syriac was the language of theological expression. In the West, Greek philosophical categories and concerns heavily influenced the church's theological thinking. Western theologians developed a theological genre for doctrinal formation based on Greek philosophy. In the East, the influence of Greek philosophy was much less prominent.[21] Instead, in the extant Syriac sources hymns and metrical homilies employing a rich range of metaphors, images, and various literary devices are dominant. Syriac writers used symbols, images, metaphors, and paradox to express their theological thought. These characteristics reflect Jewish connections, rather than the philosophical speculation or systematization of Greek philosophy. Not only does the form of Syriac theological writing differ from the West; there is also a different emphasis in subject matter. Syriac writers are more concerned with Christian life than with Christian doctrine. The main subjects of Syriac writing relate to the grandeur of the Christian faith (devotion) and to the conduct of the believer (ethics). Perhaps the main theological motif of Syriac Christianity is the metaphor of the journey, understood in terms of a spiritual battle with the world. The believer's life is seen as a passage from this life to the next, the world must be left behind and paradise must be re-gained. Jesus saves and guides the believer to his or her ultimate destination. The world, however, is always near to attack and to obstruct the believer's journey to paradise. Therefore, the doctrine of the "two ways" (dualism), stemming from Judaism, plays an important role. The believer must reject the passions of flesh and escape the world of evil; thus *enkrateia* was an important characteristic of early Syriac Christianity.[22] Syriac Christianity had an ascetic or an austere quality, much more so than in the West. The single state was preferred over marriage. Concern for the poor and almsgiving was also emphasised.

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[20] In light of the previous observations, it is better to talk about "unique characteristics" than "differences."

[21] The interaction between the East and the West or Greek and Syriac cultures has been avidly discussed in recent research. Many scholars are now recognising that there was frequent interaction between the two traditions; Syriac Christianity did not develop in isolation from the rest of the Christian world.

[22] Greek philosophical traditions certainly had an influence here.

The Chinese Texts

We may now turn to the Tang Christian Monument and the *Hymn to the Trinity*. The text of the Tang Monument can be found in Saeki; several translations are available. The Monument consists of 28 vertical columns of Chinese text containing around 1756 characters. There are also a few Syriac notes at the beginning and end of the inscription, containing about 70 words. The Syriac notes mostly contain the names of the representatives of the Tang church. The content of the Tang Christian Monument can be divided into three segments: doctrinal, historical, and eulogistic.[23] The doctrinal segment provides a brief outline of the teachings of the faith and the customs of the church. The historical section deals with the spread and progress of the mission in Tang China, describing a period of around 150 years. The eulogy at the end provides a shorter summary in verse of the first two sections.

Clear facsimiles of the *Hymn to the Trinity* can be found in Saeki and Moule.[24] Mingana identified the Hymn with the East Syrian form of the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.[25] Moule thought that the Hymn was composed around 800. There cannot be any doubt regarding the authenticity of the *Hymn to the Trinity*. The Hymn is clearly based on the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* and betrays numerous parallels with Syriac Christian literature. It consists of 44 lines of seven characters each, with the exception of line three in stanza six, which contains eight characters. Together with the title at the beginning and conclusion of the Hymn, it contains 327 characters. The Hymn conforms to the seven-syllable metre of Tang poetry. The form and the translation of the Hymn reflect an early attempt to contextualize Christianity within a Chinese milieu. The *Hymn to the Trinity* is an important primary source for the study of Tang Christianity. The Hymn is much more than a mere translation; it contains a great deal of elaboration on the *Gloria*. There is a real attempt in the Hymn to

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[23] See Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu*, 39.

[24] The text was first printed in Lo Chen-yu in *Tun huang shih shi I shu*, 1909, vol. 3, folios 45-47, and in *Taisho Tripitaka*, vol. 54, 1288b, c.

[25] This observation depends on Moule, *Christian in China before the Year 1550*, 52. The *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* is an early hymn of praise to the Trinity based on Luke 2:14, where the angels announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds in song. The song of the angels was expanded over a period of time until it was standardised in the fifth century. This form can be found at the end of the Psalms in Codex Alexandrinus in the British Museum. Another version of it also appears in the *Apostolic Constitutions*, vii, 47.

provide something new for the Tang church. The anonymous author was producing a liturgy, or prayer, for use in the Chinese church. The Tang Christian Monument and the *Hymn to the Trinity* are the most important documents representing Tang Christianity and are the only texts readily available today for investigation. These texts allow us to examine first hand the beliefs and aspirations of Tang Christianity.

Comparison of the Chinese Texts with Syriac Christianity

We are now in a position to make a comparison between the theological thought of the Tang Christian texts and Syriac Christianity. We will analyse the thought of the Tang texts under certain themes to reveal the strong connections with Syriac Christianity. It will be noted that an understanding of Syriac Christianity is essential for a sound assessment of Tang Christianity. Western church historians have too often regarded Tang Christianity as a weakened form of Christianity, not even worthy of the name Christian, due to supposed Nestorian or Buddhist influences. However, an examination of the Tang texts will show that there is nothing Nestorian or Buddhist in the texts *per se*. Instead, the theology and devotion of the texts correspond almost totally to the Syriac Christianity of the fifth and sixth centuries. Of course, the authors of the texts borrowed from the surrounding Chinese religious vocabulary, a vocabulary used in connection with Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. However, by and large, the terminology of the texts under discussion were filled with Christian meaning.

We will analyse the thought of the two Tang Christian texts under several categories in light of the writings of Syriac Christianity, especially those of Ephraim and Narsai. The most important point that we will make is that the theology and expression of the texts demonstrate strong connections with Syriac Christianity. The suggested Buddhist influences on Tang Christianity are tenuous and do not belong to the core of the faith expressed in the texts under discussion. Also, we will note that there is nothing particularly "Nestorian" about these texts. Rather, it expresses the beliefs and sentiments of Syriac Christianity, albeit in a Chinese religious garb.

The Incomprehensibility and Majesty of the Trinity

The Tang Christian Monument expresses faith in the One true and eternal God, incomprehensible and invisible, who is the source of all

created things. The focus of the text is on celebrating the incommunicable attributes of the Trinity. Several themes come to the fore that reflect close proximity with Syriac Christianity. God is the Incomprehensible One, the One dwelling in glorious Light, and the One unsurpassed in majesty and mercy. These themes are characteristic of the way in which God (ܐܠܗܐ) is portrayed in Syriac theological and liturgical writings. Thus the opening passage of the Tang Monument begins with a lofty description of the Exalted One, the only true God.

> As is well known,[26] there is One who is eternal, just, true, and tranquil. He is the Origin of origins, and without beginning. There is One who is incomprehensible and invisible. He is the End of ends, and yet existing inexplicably. He is the fundamental mystery, and the creator of all things. He is more wonderful than all the holy ones because He is the Ancient of Days. This is our only wonderful, the three-in-one （我三一妙身）, without beginning, the true Master, Aloha（阿羅訶）![27]

The first lines of the Eulogy in the Tang Monument describes the exalted One in a comparable way:

> The True Lord is without beginning.
> Possessing deep tranquility, He is eternal and just.
> Possessing all power, He skilfully fashioned the world.
> He created the earth and established the heavens.

This celebration of the grandeur of the Trinity is often found in the Syriac writers. The eternity and immutability of God is particularly emphasised in Narsai. Although God brings about change in the world, God's nature remain unchanged forever (ܟܝܢܗ ܕܠܐ ܫܘܚܠܦܐ, Narsai, *Nativity* I.6,10). Like the statements in the Tang Monument Narsai says that God's being is without beginning or end (ܕܠܐ ܫܘܪܝ ..., ܕܠܐ ܫܘܠܡ ܐܝܬܘܗܝ, Narsai, *Nativity* II. 24, 25).

Since God is eternal and above the human being, he always remains incomprehensible. Consequently, in the Syriac writers God is commonly described as the "Hidden One," and as One who is inscrutable in his essence and ways.[28] God is fundamentally "the wholly other." As such,

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[26] The first three books of the Book of Documents (*Shujing*) begins in the same way, "Now verily, it is acknowledged;" see Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu*, 3. The characters are used to introduce a quotation or a saying about what is supposed to be well known.

[27] The translations of the Chinese texts are my own.

[28] One of the titles used for God in the Syriac authors is the "Hidden One" (ܟܣܝܐ).

the human can approach God only with great humility and awe.[29]
Ephraim's hymns are saturated with lofty descriptions of the divine,
celebrating the incomprehensibility of the Godhead. It is not only
impossible for humans to scrutinise the divine persons of the Trinity,
but also quite improper to pry into the divine nature. Ephraim asks, "Who
would linger and be searching on into the depths of the Godhead?"
(*Hymns on the Pearl* 1.3). In another place, Ephraim makes this point
more forcefully:

> The Son, who is too subtle for the mind, did they seek to feel: and the Holy
> Ghost who cannot be explored, they thought to explore with their
> questioning. The Father, who never at any time was searched out, have they
> explained and disputed of. (*Hymns on the Pearl* 7.1)

In the same way, Ephraim reflects on the mystery of the Godhead
which is beyond human discernment, "His aspect cannot be
discerned, that it should be portrayed by our understanding"
(ܐܠ ܡܬܕܪܟ ܚܙܘܗ ܕܢܬܨܝܪ ܒܣܘܟܠܢ) (*HNis* 3.2), and "The
Trinity that is unsearchable - has laid up treasures in baptism"
(ܬܠܝܬܝܘܬܐ ܕܠܐ ܡܬܒܨܝܐ) (*HEpiph*, 12.7). The *Hymn to the
Trinity* reflects the same themes. In the third stanza the Trinity is described
as being "inaccessible and unreachable"(離尋無及 li xun wu ji).[30] The
fourth stanza is much more explicit. No person has ever observed or
scrutinised the divine being; instead the divine majesty scrutinises the
world.

> Eternally living in glorious light (妙明 miao ming),[31] world without end.
> Your Light and majesty fully scrutinise, the boundaries of the world.
> From the beginning no person, observed or beheld You.
> Restoring righteousness, no one has been able to see your countenance.

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[29] According to Beggiani, this is a recurrent theme in early Syriac theology, "The Syriac
Fathers have no doubt of the possession of the life of God in faith and grace. Yet they are also aware,
at the same time, of the abiding mysteriousness and inaccessibility of God. Such is the real paradox
at the heart of Syriac belief." J. Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology* (London: University Press of
America, 1983), 1.

[30] Literally the characters mean, "far from searching out and unreachable." Again here many
equivalent Buddhist expressions could have been used if there was an attempt at syncretism (e.g. 不
思議 bu si yi, beyond thought and words, etc.).

[31] The expression 妙明 in Buddhism refers to the enlightened heart or mind (William Edward
Soothill, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms* [London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co.,
1934], 235), however here it is used to describe the inscrutability of the Trinity, the one who is beyond
thought or discussion.

The language used in the Chinese texts corresponds to what we find in numerous Syriac writers. One does not need to refer to Buddhism or Daoism in order to understand the meaning of the descriptions. We also note that the Chinese texts do not dwell on ontological aspects within the being of the Godhead and far less on the composition of the person of Christ.

The Symbolism of Light

Another prominent theme in Syriac literature that is reflected in the Chinese texts is the usage of the symbolism of light.[32] In many Syriac hymns God is pictured as the one who dwells in glorious light. Light functions as a symbol of divine goodness, purity, and inscrutability. For example, we find the following expressions in Ephraim's *Hymns on the Pearl*:

> I found out that the Son was incomprehensible, since He is wholly Light. (*HPearl* 1.1)

> He cast out abundantly all His gleams upon them that looked upon Him. (*HPearl* 2.1)

> In the covenant of Moses is Thy brightness shadowed forth: in the new covenant Thou dartest it forth: from those first Thy light shineth even unto those last. Blessed be He that gave us Thy gleam as well as Thy bright rays. (*HPearl* 6.7)

Jesus is frequently referred to as the Lord of Light, the Creator of Light, or as the Lightgiver (cf. *Sermon on our Lord*, 37; *HEccl.* 36; *HEpiph.* 1. 11,12). The theme of light is also prominent in the Syriac liturgies. We note the following words addressed to Jesus in the *Anaphora of Addai and Mari*:

> You, the effulgence of your Father's glory and the image of your Begetter's substance, you who were revealed and shone forth in the body of our humanity and enlightened rational beings with the knowledge of your greatness, enlighten our souls, O my Lord, with the light of your Gospel, and grant us to meditate upon your Scriptures.

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[32] The symbol of light should be understood in the context of the light versus darkness dualism that we find in some circles of early Judaism and Judeo-Christianity. This dualism is clearly expressed in Narsai: "But you as the light will banish the darkness of error; and by your flames, I will enlighten the blind world" (Narsai, *Nativity* V.45-46).

In addition, coupled with the symbol of light is the idea of enlightenment.[33] The divine being is not only described in terms of light, but also as the creator and the bestower of light. The idea of God as light and God as enlightening humanity through his light are often found in close proximity in the Syriac tradition. The salvific effect of the revelation of God's light is enlightenment. Therefore, light is not only a symbol for the divine presence, but it also serves as a salvific metaphor relating to enlightenment. The revelation of the divine light results in the enlightenment of all those exposed to the light of the gospel. Thus, the preaching of the gospel enlightens the world. We may list the following examples:

> The Holy One was baptized and straightway went up, and His Light shone forth on the world. (*HEpiph.* 14.48)

> Praise to Thy Epiphany that gladdens all, Thou in whose revelation the worlds are lightened! (*HEpiph.* 14.50)

> In the Birth of the Son light dawned, and darkness fled from the world, and the earth was enlightened; then let it give glory to the brightness of the Father who has enlightened it! (*HEpiph.* 15.1-5)

The symbolism of light is used with the same frequency and in the same manner in the Chinese texts. In the Tang Monument enlightenment is an important motif. The first section of the Tang inscription concludes:

> When the Way and the Saints united,
> The world became cultured and enlightened（天下文明 Tianxia Wenming）.

The Eulogy contains the following lines:

> The Luminous religion is the brightest and most brilliant（明明景教 ming ming Jingjiao）.

> The True Way was proclaimed and enlightened the world（真道宣明 Zhendao xuan ming）.

In the *Hymn to the Trinity* the concepts of light and enlightenment feature prominently and in close proximity. God is the one "Eternally living in glorious light" (stanza 4). In the last line of the second stanza receiving the gracious light saves the righteous. In stanza six the community prays for the enlightenment of the whole realm:

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[33] One may also understand enlightenment here as gaining knowledge of the truth. See Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 65-66.

Today we all recount your mercy and grace,
Sighing for your wondrous joy to enlighten this country.

The usage of light as a symbol for the divine transcendence and of divine illumination demonstrates the close connection between the Tang Christian texts and Syriac Christianity. Although the character 明 (ming) occurs frequently in Buddhist texts of the period, denoting Buddha-wisdom or enlightenment, the character in the Christian texts recalls the motif of illumination through the gospel that we find in the Syriac Christian writers.

The Description of Salvation

Syriac Christianity had a distinctive emphasis in its portrayal of salvation in comparison with the church in the West. Its understanding of soteriology is seen in terms of a return to paradise after the Fall and expulsion of humanity from the Garden of Eden.[34] In this connection, the journey, sometimes a voyage, which describes the return, has always been a central motif in Syriac theological writing. The journey requires guidance and effort as dangers have to be avoided and as obstacles have to be overcome. Ethical requirements that accompany this journey include almsgiving, simplicity, and participation in the sacraments or mysteries of the church (i.e. baptism, the Eucharist, anointing, etc.). Ephraim's hymns are replete with the journey motif describing the return of the exiles.

> Man fell in the midst of Paradise, and in baptism compassion restored him: he lost his comeliness through Satan's envy, and found it again by God's grace. (*HEpiph.* 12.2)

> The sinner returns home like the Old Testament leper. He returns to his former abode and enters into his inheritance
> (ܩܢܝܬܘܗܝ ܠܐܪܥܐ ܗܦܟ ܕܣ ܐܦ ܩܒܐ). (*HParad.* 4.3)

> He cleansed him with hyssop,
> and led him back to Paradise
> (ܠܦܪܕܝܣܐ ܐܗܦܟܗ ܙܘܦܐ ܒܗ ܕܟܝܗ). (*HParad.* 4.4)

In Narsai we find the following passages referring to this theological motif:

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[34] Also note Murray's discussion on the portrayal of God's plan for salvation in Syriac Christianity, in *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study of Early Syriac Tradition* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 44-49.

> Through his ascent, he opened a way for us to travel on high
> (ܟܒ ܣܘܠܩܗ ܒܪ̣ ܠ ܐܘܪܚܐ ܕܪܝܫ ܠܥܘܡܪܐ). (V. *Ascension*,
> 271).

> Behold! The King has set out on the new road to the Kingdom on high.
> Let us travel with him so that we may not be despoiled by robbers!
> (ܗܐ ܡܠܟ ܪܠܟܐ ܒܐܘܪܚܐ ܚܕܬܐ ܕܠܡܠܟܘܬ ܪܘܡܐ).
> (V. *Ascension*, 387-88)

Likewise, the idea of restoration of the image of God, which has been marred by the Fall, is prominent.[35] The Evil One has infected human nature with poison and inflicts bitterness on humanity. There is a constant struggle against the Evil One and his demons that try to keep the world in bondage. However, renewal is possible through the cross, by which the Saviour plundered the kingdom of the Evil One. The cross purifies from sins and delivers humanity from sorrows to a new way of life, bringing about the restoration of peace and tranquility. The teaching of the two ways also features prominently in this scheme of salvation, again revealing the Jewish origins of Syriac Christianity. The believer must constantly choose to walk in the way of righteousness by denying sinful passions and rejecting the way of unrighteousness. The following examples from Ephraim and Narsai illustrate these ideas:

> Adam sinned and earned all sorrows; likewise the world after His example, all guilt. And instead of considering how it should be restored, considered how its fall should be pleasant for it. Glory to Him who came and restored it! (*HEpiph.* 10.1)

> By the two roads (ܐܘܪ̈ܚܬܐ ܬܪ̈ܬܝܢ), he showed the direction for the two classes (of good and evil),
> So that everyone might journey in his freedom on whichever one he wants.
> The road of life (ܐܘܪܚܐ ܕܚܝ̈ܐ) he called narrow because of its toils;
> And that of perdition he called broad because of sinful desires.
> (Narsai, V. *Ascension*, 381-84)

> He proclaimed on earth a message of renewal for mortality. (Narsai, II. *Epiphany*, 44)

> He is the renewer of humanity,
> He taught them ways to struggle spiritually. (Narsai, V. *Ascension*, 93)

This plan of salvation featured in Syriac Christianity forms the basic subject matter of the Tang Monument's message. The framework of the

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[35] "For Ephrem, the original image of Adam, disfigured and lost in the Fall, is found and restored by Christ as the 'image of God.'" See Beggiani, *Early Syriac Theology*, 43.

Tang inscription reflects clear theological intent. The inscription begins with a statement on the eternity and incomparability of God. The inscription then moves on to a description of creation, including the creation of man with excellent and unstained disposition. However, the inscription continues to describe the Fall of the original man when Satan deceived him. The description of the Fall is very similar to what we find in Narsai (*Nativity* I.25-35). Blame for the Fall is placed on the deceit of Satan; Adam is almost completely exonerated. Since the Fall humanity has fallen into hopeless confusion and darkness, humanity went astray and became unable to return home.

The Monument then recounts the incarnation of the Messiah. One true person of the Trinity, the Luminous Lord of the Universe, concealed his true majesty and appeared as a human being. Following the traditional pattern of the New Testament *kerygma*, the inscription relates that the Messiah fulfilled the old law, taught about the kingdom, and he purged away the stains of human nature, abolished death, and ascended into heaven.[36] Thus the Messiah obtained salvation for the entire world. The inscription then contains a section on the history of the proclamation of the gospel into the whole world and gives a description of the noble lives of those who proclaim the gospel. The eulogy contains similar themes. The supreme Lord of the universe took on human form and made salvation free to all.

These ideas also lie deep within the structure of the Chinese Hymn. The first stanza of the *Hymn to the Trinity* refers to the tranquillity of the Garden of Eden that was lost:

> The whole world recounts, all-embracing peace and harmony,
> Man in original upright nature, received nourishment and tranquility,
> The Triune Power and gracious Father, Aloha!

In the second stanza of the Hymn, the idea of return and rescue from evil and suffering are expressed:

> All the righteous, fully return to venerate,
> Receiving holy and gracious light, they are saved from the evil ones!

In stanza six we read: "From this vast suffering world, You are saving the masses." In stanza ten the ideas of salvation from suffering and restoration occur:

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[36] It appears that the translator either had difficulty in translating the ideas of the cross and resurrection or tried to veil these teachings for some reason.

> Restore the withered and scorched, send down the sweet dew.
> So that all may be watered, and the good roots flourish.

In other words, the same plan of salvation is presented in Tang Christianity and in Syriac Christianity. The motif of Fall from paradise and return to God, through the cross of the Saviour, stands at the center of both Tang Christianity and Syriac Christianity. This observation demonstrates that the authors of the Tang texts wrote within the theological framework of a Syriac milieu.

We need to digress here for a moment and discuss the meaning of the statements relating to the incarnation of the Messiah in the Tang Monument. We note the following passage:

> Then, our Trinity divided his Godhead（我三一分身），
> and the Illustrious and Honourable Messiah,
> concealing his true divinity (majesty)（戢隱真威），
> appeared as a human being（同人出代）.

The statement in the first line has sometimes been used to argue that the Tang Monument espouses a Nestorian Christology.[37] The discussion revolves around the translation of the two characters 分身(fen shen), i.e. whether or not we see the so-called Nestorian heresy reflected here. However, it is clear from the Chinese text that the statement does not refer to the person of the Messiah but to the Triune Godhead. It is not viable to understand the Chinese text in any other way. The expression 我三一 (wo san yi), "our Three-in-One," is the subject of the sentence. A separation, or division, occurred within the Trinity not within the Messiah. This is the only possible meaning within the context. The Messiah then concealed his divinity and appeared as a complete human person for the sake of humanity.[38] The expression in the eulogy 分身出代 (fen shen chu dai) is shorthand for the more extended statement above. We may translate it as, "Dividing the Godhead, He appeared for the sake of humanity." Here we must recall the words of Narsai, "At the fullness of the ages, He opened the treasury of His Divinity, and enriched the universe from the treasures that [contain] the manifestation of [the

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[37] See Weng, *Hanyu Jingjiao wendian quanshi*, 49 and Zhu, *Zhongguo Jingjiao*, 132.

[38] Legge is confusing. At this point he has a note that reads, "Literally, 'our Three-in-One divided His body (person)'. I must take 分身 actively as expressing the act of the Tri-une. The peculiar dogma of Nestorius underlies the expression – the dogma of 'two persons in Christ'; one of the many vain attempts to fathom 'the great mystery of godliness.'" Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu*, 5. He translated correctly, but understood the Messiah as the subject of the sentence.

Divine] Persons (ܩܘܡ̈ܐ " (ܘܕܐܘܡܐܝܬ ܐܠܗܐ ܩܢܘܡܐ, *Nativity* I. 57). There is a rich theology behind the Chinese 分身 that reflects this Syriac tradition. In other words, the Tang Monument does not refer to the so-called Nestorian heresy of the two persons of Christ.[39]

Noah Typology

Another motif in the Syriac authors that is reflected in the Tang Monument and the *Hymn to the Trinity* concerns the image of the ship, which rescues a remnant from tumults and storms, i.e. Noah typology. This motif stands as a sub-theme under the theme of the journey or voyage.[40] The ark refers to the church, and sometimes to the wooden cross of the Saviour, through which believers are rescued from the storms of the world and carried to a heaven of rest.[41] The imagery receives embellishment with the addition of the picture of the helmsman and sailors.[42] Ephraim's first Nisibene hymn is filled with Noah typology.[43] The flood and escape through the ark is a metaphorical image of salvation. Note the following extract:

> Lo! all the billows trouble me; and Thou hast given more favour to the ark (ܩܒܘܬܐ): for waves alone encompassed it, mounds and weapons and waves encircle me O Helmsman of that ark, be my pilot on the dry land!
>
> The Just One has chastened me abundantly, but it He loved even among the waves. For Noah overcame the waves of lust, which had drowned in his generation the sons of Seth.
>
> An ark (ܩܒܘܬܐ) in Thy mercy Thou didst prepare, that Thou mightest preserve in it all the remnants.
>
> The ark upon the mountain brought forth; let me in my lands bring forth my imprisoned ones!

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[39] Similarly see John M.L. Young's discussion, in *By Foot to China* (Lookout Mountain, GA: Grey Pilgrim Publications, 1991), 84-89. We may quote his conclusion, "... on the basis of this whole investigation, a picture of 'Nestorian' heresy does not appear..." (89).

[40] This is also a major theme in patristic writers. "The main points of the allegory [the voyage] represent the Church as a ship on its voyage to the heavenly haven, guided by the helmsman and manned by sailors. The helmsman is primarily Christ, sometimes the bishop." Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 250.

[41] See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 240.

[42] Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 249-53. See Aphraat (*Dem* 15, 684.4-5). Also see Ephraim (*HVirg.* 31.15; *HEccl.* 51.2-3; *HFid.* 49.4-5, 66.8; *HParad.* 2, 13).

[43] In Ephram's *Sermon on the Lord*, the ship is used in an interesting way, refering to the body of the Lord (vv.50ff.).

> Thou sentest healing by means of the dove to the sick ones that were drowning in every wave; it entered in and drove out all their pains.
>
> Compare the souls which are in me, with the living things that were in the ark; and instead of Noah who mourned in it, lo! Thy altar mourning and humbled.

This image of salvation occurs in the Tang Monument on two occasions. In the first section that describes the plan of salvation it is stated that the Messiah ascended to the Palace of Light in the Ship of Mercy.

> He put out the Ship of Mercy to ascend to the Palace of Light（棹慈航以登明宮）.
> Thereby he saved (were carried across) the restrained spirits (of the masses).

In the eulogy the following expression occurs:

> The living and the dead are sailing in the ship（存殁舟航）.

It is interesting to note that different characters are used for ship（棹 zhao, and 舟 zhou）. This suggests that the author is not translating Buddhist concepts; otherwise one would have expected consistency in terminology. We also find the image of the perilous destructive water and the ship as a vessel of salvation in the *Hymn to the Trinity*, where yet again another term for boat（筏 fa）is used. In the last line of stanza eight in the *Hymn to the Trinity* we note the request: "Send down the raft to grant escape from the fire and tumultuous river"（降筏使免 jiang fa shi mian）. The "river" is used as an image of danger and destruction, the "raft" as an image of salvation. Saeki, Moule, Foster, and Weng have all interpreted the "raft" here as "decidedly Buddhist."[44] However, this conclusion must be questioned in light of the Syriac Christian background. None of these authors seem to be aware that the image of the salvation raft is also very prominent in Syriac Christianity.

Water Imagery

The symbol of water (or dew, rain, etc.) is also used as a positive metaphor in the Syriac writings; it brings nourishment to the earth. Water symbolism is found to be prominent very early in Syriac Christianity.

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[44] Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, 272; Moule, *Christians in China before the Year 1550*, 54; Foster, *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty*, 156; Weng, *Hanyu Jingjiao Wendian Quanshi*, 204.

The *Odes of Solomon* contains numerous references to water (6.8ff.). The most embellished usage of the image is found in Ode 6:

> For there went forth a stream, and it became a river great and broad;
> Indeed it carried away everything, and it shattered and brought (it) to the Temple;
> And the restraints of men were not able to restrain it,
> Nor even the arts of them who habitually restrain water.
> For it spread over the surface of all the earth,
> And it filled everything.
> Then all the thirsty upon the earth drank,
> And thirst was relieved and quenched;
> For from the Most High the drink was given.
> Blessed, therefore, are the ministers of that drink,
> Who have been entrusted with His water.
> They have refreshed the parched lips,
> And have aroused the paralysed will. (Ode 6.8-14)[45]

Later, the Syriac Fathers continued to use water symbolism. One example from Ephraim will suffice:

> How is it possible, that Thy grace can refrain the welling of its stream
> (ܡܒܘܥܝܗ),
> when it is not possible to restrain, the abundance of its flow?
> And why has Thy grace, shut up its mercies, and withheld its streams
> (ܡܒܘܥܝܗ),
> from the people that cry, for one to moisten their tongue?
> And there was a pit, between them and their brethren; like the rich man who cried,
> and there was none to answer, to moisten his tongue. (*HNis* 10.6-8)

No doubt the imagery of this prayer of Ephraim is echoed in the *Hymn to the Trinity* in the request of stanza ten:

> Restore the withered and scorched, send down the sweet dew,
> So that all may be watered, and the good roots flourish.

As water is essential for life, so the symbol underscores the universal need for salvation. Water as a symbol in its own right is less frequent in Buddhist texts. The symbol is more prominent in Daoist texts where it denotes the female principle（陰 yin）being soft and yielding. Certainly, the water symbolism of the Tang Christian texts does not accord with this Daoist notion, but reflects the usage of the Syriac writers. The symbol is used to denote enlightenment and salvation.

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[45] Also cf. Ode 11.6-7, 14, 16e; 26.13; 30.1-2; 35.1, 5.

Divine Titles

Another characteristic of Syriac Christianity is its preference for using divine titles to describe the divine nature.[46] This characteristic shows Syriac Christianity's indebtedness to early Judaism. The portrayal of God as the "Gracious One" is a central theme in Syriac Christianity and is expressed by numerous titles applied to God and Christ, such as "The Merciful Father," "God of Mercies," "The Merciful One," etc. God's coming down to save humanity is an indication of his great mercy.

> God in His mercy stooped and came down, to mingle His compassion with the water, and to blend the nature of His majesty with the wretched bodies of men. He made occasion by the water to come down and to dwell in us: like to the occasion of mercy when He came down and dwelt in the womb: O the mercies of God who seeks for Himself all occasions to dwell in us! (*HEpiph.* 8.1)

> This Jesus, though he be the Son of the Just One (ܒܪ ܟܐܢܐ), all that He preaches is grace. (*HNis* 39.16)

> Blessed be He that has mercy on all! (*HEpiph.* 12.7)

The Chinese *Hymn to the Trinity* likewise commemorates the grace of God by numerous titles and by reference to the divine plan of salvation. The first person of the Trinity is the "Gracious Father" (stanza 1 and 3), God is the root and foundation of all goodness (stanza 6). He is the Merciful One (stanza 7), and the Merciful Father (stanza 9 and 11). In other words, the description of God found in the Chinese Hymn is characteristic of that in Syriac literature.

The preponderance of Christological titles in the Chinese Hymn is another demonstration of the strong links between early Chinese and Syriac Christianity. More than ten titles are applied to Christ in the Hymn.[47] All of these titles derive from the Syriac Christian milieu. Several of these titles have been associated with Buddhist terminology.[48] Our observations, however, show that there are other possibilities. Syriac Christianity had a great fondness for using divine titles. This does not mean that some of the divine titles were not borrowed

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[46] See Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom*, 159-71.

[47] The titles are: Illustrious Son, Master Ruler, Supreme Law Giver, Messiah, Universally Honoured One, Most Holy Son, Everlasting Life, Living King, Merciful One, Good Lamb, Holy Son, Great Master, Holy Lord, Law King, Meek One, Law Governor, Most Holy One, Majestic Glory.

[48] See Weng, *Hanyu Jingjiao Wendian Quanshi*, 204.

from Chinese Buddhism. Christianity was a new phenomenon in China; its entire religious vocabulary had to be created in this new linguistic and cultural environment. It was natural for the Tang Christians to use religious vocabulary that was in common use. However, the terms were intended to convey different concepts.

Peculiar Expressions

In light of the preceding survey it is apparent that Tang Christianity owes much of its terminology and character to Syriac Christianity. The influence of Chinese religions on Tang Christianity should be reassessed. Many expressions within the Tang Christian texts have been understood in the light of Chinese religious culture, especially Buddhism and Daoism.[49] However, the tendency to establish links between the Tang Christian texts and Chinese religions should be questioned. Similarities are mostly on a surface level as the authors of the Chinese texts struggled to find religious terminology to express the message of the Christian gospel for the first time in a totally foreign culture. Therefore, when we note peculiar expressions in the Tang Christian texts we should not at once have recourse to Chinese religious texts. Rather, we should consider the possibility of a Syriac Christian background to clarify the expression. One example will illustrate our point.

In the last stanza of the *Hymn to the Trinity* the Father is addressed as the "ocean of hidden mercy" (海藏慈 hai zang ci). This expression has been interpreted by means of the Buddhist notion, where the ocean is an important symbol indicating the vastness of the virtues of the Buddha. However, the ocean or sea is also a popular metaphor for the vastness of God's grace in Syriac writings. We note the following examples:

> At this storehouse of treasure I was amazed, for small was its treasure at first; and though no man took from it, poor was the spring of its wealth. But when multitudes have come round it, and plundered it and carried off its riches, according as it is plundered, so much the more does its wealth increase. For a pent-up spring, if one seeks it out, when deeply pierced it flows forth mightily and abounds. (Ephraim, *HNis* 42.4)

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[49] See, for example, the book by Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine, 2001). Palmer understands Tang Christianity in terms of Daoism (and sometimes Buddhism). The book is geared towards a popular readership and does not deal with critical questions.

May He who gives both in justice and in grace give to me, in His mercy,
Of the treasure store of His mercies. (Ephraim, *HParad*. VII.25)

O wise Leader, wondrous Overseer of your household and great Treasury
supplying abundantly every assistance and blessing in your mercy.
(*Anaphora of Mar Addai and Mar Mari*)

Who can measure the ocean of his grace? (*Isaac of Nineveh*, The Second
Part, chap. 19.11; Sebastian Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh* [Louvain: E. Peeters,
1995]; also cf. Ephraim's *HEccl.* 5:17)

His immense grace, like the ocean, knows no measure. (Isaac of Nineveh,
The Second Part, chap. 40.13; Sebastian Brock, *Isaac of Nineveh* [Louvain:
E. Peeters, 1995])

These references show that there is no need to have recourse to Chinese
Buddhist texts to understand the usage of the expression "ocean of hidden
mercy" (海藏慈). In light of the Syriac context of Tang Christianity it
is much more feasible to interpret the Chinese expression as a
combination of the images of the "treasure-store" and the "ocean of grace"
which we find in the Syriac writers. At least, this possibility should be
seriously considered.

Conclusion

This brief comparison of texts demonstrates that Tang Christianity
shares much of its sentiment and terminology with Syriac Christianity.
The Christian faith was appropriated, not as a system of doctrine or truth,
but rather as a *way* of salvation. Humanity lives in confusion and darkness
and is in desperate need of direction and light. The Christian message
offers this direction and light through the cross, which opened the way
of return to paradise. Everyone is invited to follow in this way. Thus, the
Christian faith is seen more as a way leading to life, rather than as a
system of correct doctrine. The Syriac writers and the Tang Christian
texts describe this way to life by means of a rich imagery and symbolism
that avoid the subtleties of philosophical speculation but that emphasise
the concrete experience and hope of the believer. Doctrinal questions or
arguments lie very much on the periphery of concern. In particular, the
Nestorian christological controversy does not feature at all. Thus, to apply
the expression Nestorian Christianity to Syriac Christianity or Tang
Christianity is certainly a gross misrepresentation. The religious
worldview expressed in the Tang Christian Monument and Hymn is
clearly recognisable as that of Syriac Christianity.

Similarly, some expressions in the Tang Christian texts have time and again been interpreted in terms of Buddhism and Chinese religious motifs. However, as we have seen, this is not necessarily correct. The contribution of Chinese religious thought to Tang Christianity has sometimes been overrated. Even though some of the Chinese terms employed in the Tang Christian texts may have been used in Buddhist or Daoist texts; they are often infused with Christian meaning when one considers the Syrian context. At the same time one should be aware that several ideas current in Syriac Christianity lend themselves naturally to Chinese culture and worldview. For example, the ideas of righteousness, benevolence, tranquility and peace are esteemed virtues in Confucian thought. So too, the notion of a perfect world, which had become lost, is deeply rooted in ancient Chinese myth. Many concepts of Syriac Christianity found a ready home in Chinese soil. But, be that as it may, the Tang Christian texts owe their theology and spirituality to Syriac Christianity.

Therefore, contrary to common opinion, Tang Christianity should not be considered as an "aberrant" form of Christianity. In terms of theology it is unmistakably Christian, even when considered from a traditional or orthodox point of view. Syncretistic tendencies are negligible. For example, the Tang Christian Hymn under discussion is quite exclusive stating that "without returning to you there is no salvation" (stanza 5). This is remarkable given the syncretistic and pluralistic character of Chinese culture. Tang Christianity had a great vision of the majesty of God, one it shared with its mother church in Syria. In addition, it also had a passion for evangelism, one that seems even more pronounced than that of its mother church. In other words, again contrary to common opinion, the Tang church was not a heterodox form of Christianity with only internal concerns, which eventually led to its demise. Rather, Tang Christianity should be studied in its own right.

ABSTRACT

The paper provides an investigation into the origins and character of Tang Christianity in light of the Tang Christian Monument and the Christian Hymn from Dunhuang. After a brief survey of the history of research and a concise description of Syriac Christianity, it offers a comparsion between the religious sentiments and language of the two mentioned Tang Christian texts and Syriac Christianity. The paper argues that Tang Christianity has been misunderstood by applying the Nestorian label to it. Instead, Tang Christianity reflects Syriac traditions and should be undertsood in its own right.

撮　　要

　　本文根據碑林〈景教碑〉和敦煌〈景教三威蒙度讚〉，研究唐朝基督教的來源和性質。在評述以往對景教的研究、介紹敘利亞基督教特點的基礎上，作者比較了上述文獻的原文與敘利亞基督教的宗教思想。作者認為，把唐朝基督教歸於涅斯多流主義是錯誤的，唐朝基督教實際上反映了敘利亞基督教的思想。