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**Evaluation**  
of the Doctoral Thesis of Bishop Mar Aprem  

The History of the Assyrian Church of the East in the Twentieth Century with special Reference to the Syriac Literature in Kerala

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Mar Aprem presents in this doctoral dissertation the history of the Assyrian Church of the East in the 20th century. The Church of the East was one of the largest Churches in Christendom. It spread up to China and Indonesia. But the two World Wars reduced this church to a small marginal existence; it became incapable of contributing anything substantially to humanity as it did in the early period of Christianity. Now the new leadership with open mind and heart desires it to have an honorable existence in the Christian world and to contribute its share to world peace and prosperity. The present eminent leaders of this church have now realized that this objective cannot be achieved by the isolated marginal existence. So it entered
into relationship and contact with world Christianity and world religions. Special mention must be made of its recent relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. This new dimension in the life of the Assyrian Church has given it an honorable existence in the world. The nickname *Nestorian* stigmatized on them is partly removed. Their way of expressing the Christian mysteries is accepted by the Roman Catholic Church. Today there is a very close collaboration and cooperation between these two churches.

Eminent specialists in Eastern Church matters like Sebastian Brock (Oxford University) and J.F. Coakley (Harvard University) and Dietmar Winkler (University of Graz) have regretted that no authentic and exhaustive history of the Assyrian Church of the East during the 20th century is being written. Although J.F. Coakley (together with K. Parry) published *The Church of the East: Life and Thought* (in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* (vol.78/3) 1996), and Winkler (together with Wilhelm Baum) published *Die Apostolischen Kirche des Ostens, Geschichte der sogenannten Nestorianer*, (Klagenfurt, 2000), they are not exhaustive. The first one deals with a few aspects while the second one tries to present the entire history of the Church of the East from the beginning till the end of the 20th century. Hence both have their limitations. All these and other eminent orientalists both in the West and in India were encouraging Mar Aprem to present an authentic and objective history of the Assyrian Church of the East during the 20th century.

Mar Aprem is the rightful man to write this history of this section of Christianity, as he knows personally its history for the last 40 years. He is very closely associated with its life and history than many others, both inside and outside the Church of the East. In addition to his personal experience, he undertook several journeys to the various European and American university libraries for collecting materials and consulting eminent scholars in this field. He had
opportunity to meet such eminent men during the regular Symposium Syriacum meetings, the Pro Oriente Syriac Commissions and Syriac Dialogues, and the World Syriac Conferences. The recognition of his authority in this field by the learned world is clear from the invitations he receives for giving lectures on this topic in the European and American universities.

Mar Aprem presents the 20th century history of the Assyrian Church in a chronological order. He is very clear in his presentation. He had at his disposal several manuscripts in Syriac language which others in this field were unable to consult. His ability in the Syriac language enabled him to make use of the first hand sources. So he could fill up the gaps in the history. He explains clearly the causes of the recent division of his church during the second half of the 20th century. He knows its background thoroughly. The one partly responsible for the split, Mar Thoma Dharmo, was first the bishop here in India. In the same way, the way to unity of the two factions in this church was started and crowned with success in India. Mar Aprem with his generous heart succeeded in putting an end to the factionalism in the Church of the East in India. This process of reunion of the two groups is spreading to the other parts of the world also. He is also objective and fair in narrating the history of Christianity in India and the separation of the Church of the East from the main body of Christianity in India.

Today there is also a very strong move to end the division in the 16th century in the ancient Assyrian Church, and the rift between the present day Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church. And also there is an earnest attempt among the various Christian Churches to understand one another the formulations of theology, especially of the Assyrian Church of the East. In all the various ecumenical activities, Mar Aprem is actively involved. As he knows much better, he presents his views objectively and clearly. As he gives leadership, so he gives right orientation in Christian love and Christian commitment to the world, to the various isolated Christian groups.
who knew for centuries only factionalism and strife. So he is the rightful man to write the history of the ecumenical activities of this Church, especially during the last 20 years.

Mar Aprem divides the 20th century history into four periods: period of decline, 1900-1918 (ch.3); period of uncertainty, 1918-1933 (ch.4); period of suffering, 1933-1975 (ch.5); and finally ecumenical era, 1976-2000 (ch.6). This division was meant for explaining conveniently the events of the 20th century. One knows thoroughly that the whole period was a period of suffering.

In chapter 3 of the thesis, the author explains the vicissitudes, the church had gone through during this period, especially during the first World War (p.115ff.). This part also narrates the continuous attacks of the Assyrians by the Kurds in their own homeland in the Hakkari region. Mar Aprem is basing on earlier authorities such as W.A. Wigram, John Joseph and David Jenkins. During this period, the Assyrians lost their homeland and became refugees. The ill treatment they had undergone in the various camps and during their march from one place to another is well depicted. Mar Aprem quotes from the letters and narratives of the eyewitnesses of the horrors they had to undergo (123).

The second period is a period of uncertainty. Those who managed to escape the cruel massacre of the first world war tried to settle down in Iraq with a view to go back to their home country in Hakkari region. They had absolutely nothing; their Patriarchs were killed one after another. During this period the dominant figure in the church of the East was Mar Timotheos of Trichur. He was by birth an Assyrian. He traveled from India to Iraq and to England and USA to organize the scattered communities and to get the opportunity for a better education for the young Patriarch. Even during this period the Assyrians were entertaining the hope of getting a home country of their own. In 1933 there was another terrible massacre in Iraq: “Sixty
five out of Ninety five Assyrian villages and settlements were either sacked, looted or destroyed or burnt to the ground…...the British authorities afforded no relief. The only thing the Royal Air Force did was to take photographs from air of scenes of horror” (p. 199).

The third period is a period of constant exile from one place to another of the Assyrians till their final settlement in USA. The sufferings of the migrants are well depicted in this chapter. Once the people had some kind of tranquil settlement, then there occurred the split among them in 1968, owing chiefly because of tribal quarrels. The Assyrians were living for centuries on the mountains under tribal chieftains. Even today the tribal pettiness is there among many of the Assyrians. And in 1975 the Patriarch himself was killed, mainly because of tribal quarrels. The Patriarch had to flee from Iraq to Cyprus first and then to several other places and finally he settled down at Chicago. The Patriarchal line was until recently hereditary.

The fourth and final period is a period of prosperity and better understanding among the various groups within the Assyrian church and with the other churches in the world. It is a period of growing ecumenism.

This thesis is unique in its kind, as there is no other exhaustive, objective and adequate history of the Church of the East of the 20th century. The earlier histories present one or the other aspect of the life of the Church of the East during the 20th century. Two points highlighted in this thesis is worth mentioning:

1. the terrible homicide of the Assyrians during the two World Wars, which reduced their number considerably. Mar Aprem brings out the reasons for the massacre and the reduction of the church to a very marginalized existence.

2. The modern era of ecumenism in the Assyrian Church, especially its cordial relationship with the Roman Catholic Church.
This aspect is entirely new in the life of the Assyrian Church. Mar Aprem presents this aspect very extensively.

I am convinced that the present work of Mar Aprem will very well be appreciated by the learned world both in the East and in the West. **I am very happy to recommend this thesis for Ph.D.** Because of its original contribution and merit, it can be a standard textbook for the history of the Church of the East during the 20th century.

The author presents also the contribution of Mar Narsai press in Trichur to the Syriac literature. Its contribution is substantial, especially when the whole church of the East outside India was incapable of doing anything in this field. In his thesis, the author made use of the Syriac literature available here in Kerala, which nobody else was formerly able to make use of. Although the author does not quote from the books in the French and German languages, there is ample proof to show that he knew the content of many of the available German and English books.

The bibliography could be expanded, especially when it is going to be published, adding the most important and pertinent books in this field in German and French. The latest book in this field is that of Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler, *Die Apostolische Kirche des Ostens*, Klagenfurt, 2000.

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