

*The Church of the East in central Asia and China.* Edited by Samuel N. C. Lieu and Glen L. Thompson. (International Union of Academies. China and the Mediterranean World Project, 67.) Pp. xiii + 245 incl. 33 colour and black-and-white ills. Turnhout: Brepols, 2020. €75. 978 2 503 58664 9

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This volume brings together many authoritative voices and testifies to the vibrancy and dynamism of study of the Church of the East in Central Asia and China, a field of study that has grown considerably in recent decades thanks to the contribution of scholars from all over the world. This book is based on an international conference held in Hong Kong in 2015 and it is arranged in three sections followed by a very useful index.

In the first section, Erica C. D. Hunter revisits and reinforces the idea of the connection between the Syriac service book found in the Turfan oasis in the early 1900s and the city of Marv, a thesis she expressed together with James F. Coakley in an earlier 2017 publication in the *Berliner Turfantexte* series published by Brepols, where the authors also made use of the paper analysis of the manuscript carried out by Anna-Grethe Rischel. Reinforcing linguistic, philological, literary and material aspects, Hunter notes that this text and manuscript are much more oriented towards Marv, ‘the gateway for Christian outreach in Central Asia and China’, than towards Turfan.

Nicholas Sims-Williams provides an overview of the Christian biblical Sogdian texts from the Turfan oasis with interesting terminological analyses. Carried out with his usual linguistic-philological acumen, they shed light on the process of elaboration and reassessment of its religious heritage by a religious community in a context that does not exactly match that of the mother Church. The author has not included bibliographic references to a number of earlier studies. His discussion of the Sogdian rendering of ‘immortal life’ reiterates findings published by this reviewer in 2014 and in 2016 (this term also aroused the interest of Haiyu Chen in his contribution to this volume). When he indicates the necessity for ‘a full and systematic study of the Peshitta readings of the lectionary E5’ and refers to his own article published in 2017, he neglects to mention that such a study was presented by this reviewer in 2016 (C. Barbati, *The Christian Sogdian Gospel lectionary E5 in context*, Vienna 2016, esp. pp. 41–53).

Hidemi Takahashi’s rich contribution is a brilliant examination of the role of the Syriac language and writing in Tang China and in the Mongol period, distinguishing the symbolic level (see the Xi’an stele) from that of reception and use in a context in which Iranian and Turkic elements are significantly involved. The long and very accurate footnotes (rather than short endnotes) are of great value.

In the second section, the contributions of Haiyu Chen and Max Deeg focus on the Chinese context of the Christian materials. Chen’s article aims to show that the terminological framework common to Buddhist, Christian and Daoist communities with regard to the concepts of the protection of the state, holy beings as light, teaching as a medicine for healing, and teaching without written (or spoken) words, can be ascribed to the common Chinese medieval background of these communities. Therefore the Christian Chinese materials found in Dunhuang, Xi’an and Luoyang ‘should be regarded as products of medieval Chinese society. They were written at specific times in specific places and are

rooted in Chinese society. They were produced under a certain set of political, literary and religious conventions’.

Likewise, Max Deeg recontextualises the so-called ‘Jesus of Messiah Sutra’ by placing it where it belongs, namely in the political and cultural history of the mid-Tang empire. He applies a philological, linguistic and terminological approach, without neglecting the fundamental knowledge of Christian theology required to fully understand the Chinese text under investigation.,

The multicultural and multiconfessional scenario of pre-modern China is brought to the fore in Samuel N. C. Lieu’s contribution, aptly defining the famous Xi’an stele in the title as a ‘transcultural document’. Glen L. Thompson goes further and reminds us that the followers of the Church of the East in China were in any case ‘strangers in a strange land’, whatever the angle one adopts in the study of their history. The author also offers a strong reminder of how ideological approaches have affected the practice of research in an overview of the history of the study of the communities of the Church of the East in China from the Xi’an stele to the present day. The qualification of ‘foreigner’ as applied to Christians in fourteenth-century China is the subject of David Wilmshurst’s study. Indeed, some local Chinese chronicles report tensions between ‘local’ Buddhist and Taoist communities and ‘foreign’ Christian communities, offering interesting notes for any discourse that embraces the concepts of inculturation, acculturation and assimilation.

The third and final section of the book contains three contributions that give a diachronic account of the art and iconography of the Church of the East in Central Asia and China. They highlight the many difficulties that can be encountered when defining crosses or other objects of material culture as Christian ‘products’ of the Church of the East. This emerges clearly in Ken Parry’s rich contribution, which focuses mainly on the long-standing and well-known question of the role of the image within the Church of the East.

Both the article by Niu Ruji and that of Patrick M. W. Taveirn underline the multicultural environment that involves Turkic, Mongolian and Iranian populations and, therefore, Shamanism, Buddhism, Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism. And perhaps more emphasis should also be placed on the fact that in the case of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism, their roots are much further away from China because they refer directly to the lands of the mother Church. Also worth noting are the insights of Patrick M. W. Taveirne who refers to Jungian psychoanalysis and to the ‘kollektives Unbewusstes’ in an attempt to explain the bronze crosses found on the Mongolian-Chinese border within the Eurasian religious iconography.

In short, *The Church of the East in central Asia and China* is highly recommended. It confirms how much the plurality of voices and approaches benefits scientific research.

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*The rise and fall of Christian Ireland.* By Crawford Gribben. Pp. xxiv + 318 incl. 15 ill and 4 maps. Oxford–New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. £25. 978 0 19 886818 7

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‘Perhaps it is only now, after the collapse of Christian Ireland, that we can begin to recover its history’ (p. vii). Thus does Crawford Gribben open his book in which he