Tradition and the Formation of the ‘Nestorian’ Identity in Sixth- to Seventh-Century Iraq

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Abstract

Religious identities in ancient Near Eastern Christianity were mainly and primarily defined along the lines of Christological positions held by the different Christian communities. This article discusses the origin, development, and propagation of the East Syrian ‘Nestorian’ Christology of the two natures and two hypostases in Christ. It is argued that the process of the formation of the East Syrian Christological identity took a relative long time due to the complex and pluriform cultural tradition in East Syrian Christianity by the end of the sixth century and the radically changing historical, political, and social conditions in late sixth- and early seventh-century Iraq.

Keywords
Church of the East; identity; Christology; School of Nisibis; Henana of Adiabene; Theodore of Mopsuestia.

According to the East Syrian monk John bar Penkaye, Christianity was divided in three parts by the time of the Arab conquests. The ‘Easterns’ confessed the true and Orthodox doctrine of Christ being God and man, one Son of God, man who became God and God who became man, two natures and two hypostases in union, one prosopon of sonship. The ‘Westerns’, on the contrary, confessed the dogma of the possibility and mortality of the Divine Being on the one hand and the dogma of the two natures and one hypostasis on the other hand. In so defining the internal divisions of Christendom, John testifies that

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1) This article is an adapted and revised form of my (unpublished) paper presented to the Fourth Workshop on Late Antiquity and Early Islam: Patterns of Communal Identity in the Late Antique and Early Islamic Near East, London, 5–7 May, 1994.

2) John bar Penkaye, Ḧtābā d-rēš mellē, ed. Alphonse Mingana, Sources syriques 1 (Mosul, 1908), pp. 139*,18–140*,12. For this for the most part still unedited work, see T. Jansma, ‘Projet d’édition du Ḧtābā d-rēš mellē de Jean bar Penkaye’, L’Orient Syrien 8 (1963), pp. 87–
by the end of the seventh century it had become perfectly clear that the religious identity of his own ‘Church of the East’ over against both Miaphysitism and Chalcedonian Dyophysitism should be formulated on the lines of the profession of faith that the East Syrian bishops had offered to the Persian Shah Khusrav II in 612. 2 Or, to put it in the words of a modern definition of social identity, the ‘mode de discrimination à la fois cognitive et pragmatique’ of the East Syrian community was at that time basically defined by the Christology of the two qnōmē (the Syriac translation of the Greek hypostaseis) 3 in Christ, by which all those who were attached to the doctrine of one nature and one qnōmē on the one hand, or to the doctrine of the two natures and one qnōmē in Christ on the other, were declared ‘éléments étrangers’ to the community. The ‘unicité’ postulated by that ‘pratique discriminatoire’ consisted in the claim

