

**‘From Beit Abhe to Angamali:
Connections, Functions and Roles of the Church of the East’s
Monasteries in Ninth Century Christian-Muslim Relations’**

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ABSTRACT

An important yet often neglected and largely unknown story in Christian-Muslim relations is the connections, functions and roles of Church of the East monasteries in the early Abbasid period of the ninth century. These monasteries had already existed in pre-Islam Arabia and were written about by Muslims in the following centuries. The thesis argues that monastic mission activities took place in the early and middle ninth century under Muslim rule with a similarity to prior centuries. It also argues that these activities focused on the Muslim context around them in Mesopotamia, differing from other scholarly work on the subject. One of these works is by William G Young, who describes his perception of the lack of witness to Muslims as a ‘puzzle’ that still needs more evidence. Contributing four more pieces to the ‘puzzle’ in this thesis, a more nuanced and comprehensive picture emerges.

An original contribution of the thesis is in its investigation from primary sources of both faith perspectives whether mission activities were able to be sustained both in Mesopotamia and to the east in the early Abbasid context. What this mission may have meant and involved for both the Church of the East and Muslims will also be explored from these sources. Occurring both in Christian and Muslim imaginations as well as in reality, these encounters centred in the monasteries were written about in both Christian and Muslim sources providing resources for sustenance of Church activities in the early Abbasid period.

The thesis also investigates the importance of monasteries like Beit Abhe and the leadership of Patriarch Timothy for those activities, including the nature of an expansion east to places like Angamali in Malabar as well as China. The interaction between the involvement in Mesopotamia and to the east will be examined more closely than in other studies. Involvement to the east will be reflected on in how that affected the ‘image’ of the Church in its homeland and relationship with the Abbasids as well.

Whether these monastic activities were sustained in the early ninth century is important because it offers the story of a period when the Church in Asia lived without political power yet had a history of previous involvement in witness. A similar context is still relevant in several ‘contact zones’ of the world today, where Christians struggle to understand what mission means in their context of living as minorities under Muslim rule and at times are

facing existential issues of survival. Through this examination of the sources a further way of engagement is reflected on based in the nature of mission while living in difficult environments. The role of a Church subject to Muslim rule yet engaged in mission and learning activities within and beyond the regions of that rule provides a different historical paradigm than usually envisioned.

The Church of the East monastery in its presence and encounter is analyzed in this thesis as a blend of a 'contact zone' and 'conflict zone' in Christian-Muslim relations of the early ninth century. Mission in this thesis is defined in these two dimensions of presence and encounter for a purpose of witness to the Christian faith, particularly from a monastic framework. Training for mission of the monks will be explored as part of the dimension of presence, focused in the monastic context.