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Texts, Language, and Religion in the Making of Syriac Orthodox Communities in Europe

Heleen Murre-van den Berg

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Oriental Orthodox Christians from the Middle East and Africa have settled in Europe, fleeing societal pressures and war-related violence. These include the Armenian, Coptic, Syriac/Aramean, Assyrian, Ethiopian, and Eritrean churches. One of the prominent aspects of contemporary religious practice of these transnational Oriental communities is their strong emphasis on the writing and publishing of texts. These include traditional religious texts (from liturgy to history), retranslated and recontextualized texts, and completely new texts. As part of a larger project on the transformation of Orthodox Christianity in Europe, the current chapter zooms in on the Syriac Orthodox Church. It will discuss its successful online and offline bookshop and publishing house located in the Mor Ephrem Monastery, in the eastern part of the Netherlands. To bring into focus what exactly this bookshop does in relation to earlier practices among these churches, this contribution discusses the contents of this particular collection against the background of similar collections from other churches, two from the past, and one from the present.

Unlike *Oriental* Christians, *Eastern* Orthodox Christians (such as Russian, Serbian, Rumanian, and Greek Orthodox) have long been part of the European imagination, even if they have often been excluded from Europe's self-image as modern and secularized, as in the two rather different discussions initiated by Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007). If Eastern Orthodoxy's ideological inclusion in Europe is considered contentious by many, this is even more the case for the so-called "Oriental" Orthodox Christians. Originally a term devised by church historians

in order to distinguish this group as *non-* or *pre-*Chalcedonian from those who accepted the imperially backed decisions of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 on the two natures of Christ, the term has increasingly been used in scholarship (Hämmerli and Mayer 2014; Ross et al. 2018; Teule and Brüning 2018) as well as by the churches themselves. In recent ecumenical encounters such as the Roman Catholic-sponsored *Pro Oriente Consultations* in Vienna (Kirchschläger and Stirnemann 1991–9), the term “Oriental” became a proudly worn badge of distinction, indexing not only their origins in separate institutional, ritual, and theological traditions but also their origins outside Europe, in the Middle East, and in Africa. Conversely, the Syriac, Coptic, and Ethiopian churches have emphasized the epithet “Orthodox” in their official names, aligning themselves with the Eastern Orthodox from the Byzantine traditions rather than with Catholics or Protestants.

The first group of migrants from the Oriental churches arrived in Europe in the 1920s, after the genocide on Armenian, Syriac/Aramean, and Assyrian/Chaldean Churches in Anatolia in 1915. Survivors found new homes in the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon), Russia, and the United States, whereas others established new homes in France. Syriac Orthodox Christians arrived in Europe from the 1960s onward, fleeing Turkey during the Turkish-Kurdish conflict in Eastern Anatolia (1978–1990s) when they were mistrusted and subject to anti-Christian violence from both sides. Smaller groups of Syriac Christians left the region for Europe in relation to the Lebanese Civil War (1975–90), opposition crackdowns in Syria in the 1980s, and the violence in Syria and Iraq from 2005 onward.

Almost all European countries have taken in Syriac Orthodox Christians, with highest numbers in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands (Atto 2011; Birol 2016). The Dutch community is thought to have originated from a few men who came as labor migrants in the early 1970s. When the violence in Eastern Turkey was also directed against the Christians, larger numbers came as refugees and settled, before and after being granted refugee status, mostly in Twente, in and around the city of Enschede. Although it took some time before asylum was granted, in general the Syriac Christians were welcomed and were supported especially by Protestant and Roman Catholic churches and organizations that recognized them as fellow Christians. In the village of Glane, close to Enschede, a diocese was established in 1977. In 1981, the Syriac Orthodox Church acquired a former Catholic monastery which became the center of the “Central European” diocese, led by Archbishop Julius Cicek. With the growth of the European community, the diocese was split up, and by the time the current Archbishop

Mor Polycarpus Augin Aydin was consecrated in 2005, the archdiocese was responsible for the Netherlands only. Over the past forty years, the European dioceses acquired church buildings and monasteries and have set up a European hierarchy that owes allegiance to the head of the church, Patriarch Mor Ignatius Aphrem (in office since 2014), officially located in Damascus (though spending much time abroad), seeing themselves mostly as diasporas relating to the center in the homelands (Romeny et al. 2009; Atto 2011; Knott and McLoughlin 2010). Most European countries do not keep track of the precise numbers of Oriental Christians in general or of any of the churches in particular; a rough guess on the basis of self-reporting brings the total number of Oriental Christians in Europe to around two million people (cf. Pew Report 2017; Hämmerli and Mayer 2014; Leustean 2014; Schmoller 2018), with the Syriac Orthodox numbering around 200,000 people, of which about 25,000 are in the Netherlands. The population of Oriental Christians is dwarfed by an estimated eighty-two million Eastern Orthodox in Europe (excluding Russia, another ca. 100 million), the vast majority of which lives in countries with Orthodox majorities in Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe.

The fragmentation and fragility of the transnational Oriental churches have motivated them to put great efforts in transmitting their literary heritage to the new generations born in the diaspora, further developing time-worn practices that connect the past to the present. In the Netherlands, Archbishop Julius Cicek set up a publishing house, under the name of Bar Hebraeus Verlag (now also: Bar Ebroyo Press) after one of their great medieval authors. The corpus of this publishing house, accessible via the electronic bookshop Mor Ephrem (named after their most famous fourth-century poet and exegete), shows how the total corpus encompasses a wide range of genres, including liturgy, theology, saints' lives, history, and grammar. All of these genres come in different forms, some serving the clergy and the learned lay, others to bringing to children and laypeople the liturgy, history, and language of the church. Notably, the Mor Ephrem Bookshop (MEB) is part of a wider literary movement that can be traced among Copts, Armenians, Ethiopians, and Armenians in Europe. To study this wider movement among the European Oriental churches, I took the MEB as a pilot study. Over twenty years, many of its publications made their way into my personal library and have been used for various aspects of my research. While the "bookshop" as such is decidedly modest—in fact, it is little more than a side room in the Mor Ephrem Monastery with lots of books stacked along the walls—the accompanying website enables those who come to browse it to easily order the books. In a few clicks, one can expand one's Syriac library with

publications that vary from photographic reprints of handwritten manuscripts to recent publications by Syriac Orthodox and Western authors.

The current chapter explores the further “literarization” of religious practice in Orthodox Christian communities, understanding these textual practices as indicators of how the religious leadership (which is the major driving force behind these publications in their roles of authors and publishers and which includes both clergy and lay) sees the future of their community in the European context. Over the last century, both Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Christians went through enormous changes, going from mostly locally organized ecclesial structures to global and transnational communities. As such, they are part not only of what increasingly is recognized as a distinct “global Orthodoxy” (Roudometof 2014; Leustean 2014) but also of global Christian dynamics more generally.

The Name Debate

One of the ongoing debates in the global Syriac Orthodox community is that over the names that they would like to go by, especially in the languages of the diaspora and especially in contexts where a focus on religion and religious denomination do not seem appropriate (Atto 2011). In the Aramaic language of the liturgy (usually referred to as “Classical Syriac”) and the spoken modern Aramaic vernacular of the majority of the Syriac Orthodox from Turkey (referred to as *Turoyo* or *Surayt*), the regular term is *Suryoye*, or, in Arabic *Suryani*, the equivalent of “Syriacs/ns,” or *Syrisch(e)*, in English, Dutch, and German. From the late nineteenth century onward, local nationalists felt the need for additional terms which allowed them to separate ethnic from religious identities. The oldest of these is “Assyrian,” which was introduced by nationalists of the Church of the East (Becker 2015). This church, usually called “East Syriac” by scholars after “Nestorian” fell out of use, shares the Syriac (Aramean) literary tradition with the Syriac Orthodox Church and uses the same ancient Bible translation (Peshitta) and the same Classical Syriac language in its liturgy. Many of its adherents speak a modern Aramaic language (*Sureth*), closely related to the *Surayt* of the Syriac Orthodox. However, dogmatic, political, and geographical boundaries dating back to the third to sixth centuries have made for two separate churches with distinct histories, the first dominant in Western Mesopotamia (Turkey, Syria); the other in Eastern Mesopotamia (Iraq, Iran) (Murre-van den Berg 2007).

Early nationalists in Urmia wanted to get away from the term “Nestorian,” which at that point was used mostly with pejorative connotations, as well as from “Syriac,” which was felt not to be specific enough. With the remains of the Assyrian empires being excavated in Northern Mesopotamia, it made sense to take this name as the label for a new type of ethnic and national identification. The term, which was in use to indicate Christians of the Mosul region (*Athur*, in Aramaic), slowly became the overarching term to bring together Aramaic-speaking Christians from both the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. This type of “Assyrian nationalism,” however, found supporters mostly in the Church of the East which in the twentieth century made “Assyrian” (*Athuraya*) part of its official name. Among the Syriac Orthodox, the ethnic epithet “Assyrian” always remained contested—with some using it alongside “Syriac,” others being strong advocates of it, and yet others actively fighting it.

Over the last few decades, opponents to the usage of “Assyrian” as an ethnic indicator in the Syriac Orthodox Church have successfully introduced the term “Aramean” as an ethnic term. The proponents of the term “Aramean” often were critical of the more secularist and leftist leanings of many of those using the term “Assyrian.” More importantly, the term “Aramean” was added to “Syrian” or “Syriac Orthodox” in order to respond to the European context that seemed to demand ethnic rather than religious markers. The initial European term “Turkish Christians” (i.e., Christians from Turkey) was strongly rejected by the community itself because of the implication that they were of Turkish descent. Within the community, mostly the emic Aramaic term *Suryoye* is used, which therefore has also gained some currency in academic and governmental publications in the Netherlands. However, because *Suryoye* in most European languages translates to “Syrians,” which implies a unique relationship with the Arab Syrian state, most did not find this a satisfying term. On the other hand, using “Syriac Orthodox” to refer to this group, as I do in this chapter, prioritizes ecclesial over ethnic identity and preemptively closes the shared Aramean/Syriac/Assyrian heritage to the variety of groups that may identify with it. The epithet Aramean opens this up, by separating religious from ethnic identity, allowing those who are not members of the Syriac Orthodox Church to identify with it—even if the vast majority of Aramean activists keep emphasizing their unique links to the Syriac Orthodox Church. Over the past decades, the term “Aramean” has gained considerable weight, not only over “Assyrian” (which never held a majority position within the Syriac Orthodox Church) but also over the term “Syriac,” which until today, however, is the term used by most clergy and laity and which reflects all the ambiguities of an “ethnic-like” ecclesial

Figure 10.1 Interplay and overlap of ethnic and ecclesial identifications; created by Heleen Murre-van den Berg.

community (Bakker Kellogg 2019; Brubaker 2015; Murre-van den Berg 2013b) (see Figure 10.1).

Texts, Collections, and Textual Practices

When I started to study the setup and contents of the MEB, the collection reminded me of collections that I had come across in my earlier research, even if most of these are from East Syriac (i.e., Assyrian Church of the East) rather than West Syriac (i.e., Syriac Orthodox) circles. While most of the actual texts are different, the genres are very similar and can easily be compared, thus helping to delineate the developments of the last fifty years against the background of migration and new forms of self-understanding in a European context. Unfortunately, so far no studies are available that discuss similar pre-1900 Syriac Orthodox collections. However, considering the close and long-term connections between both major church traditions, I take the collections from within the Church of the East as a valid starting point to contrastively analyze the contemporary collection of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the Netherlands and beyond.¹

The oldest is the collection of the monastery of the Church of the East in Jerusalem. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Church of the East maintained an active presence in the Holy City, with a small monastic community in the monastery and church of Mart Maryam in what today is the Muslim quarter of the Old City (Brock 2006–7). Sometime between October 1717 and September 1718, Priest Kanun—the monk in charge—made a list of the holdings of the monastic library. This inventory has been preserved (the oldest such inventory in Church of the East circles; see Rücker 1931), and about half of the manuscripts are still to be found in Jerusalem. The inventory lists 100 items, and includes the essential items of a monastic East Syriac library of the time—

serving the church in its ritual functions first and foremost, and, second, the monks in their spiritual and scholarly needs (Murre-van den Berg 2015a).

The second East Syriac collection is the manuscript collection of the American Protestant mission in Urmia, on the basis of the catalogue that was made by William Shedd, an American missionary, and Oshana Sarau, an archdeacon who worked for the East Syriac Patriarch Mar Shimon Ruwil XVIII, in 1898 (Sarau 1898; Murre-van den Berg 1999). Going by its contents as well as by the preface of the catalogue, the primary function of this collection was educational and scholarly. It intended to provide study materials for the Assyrians in the missionary schools as well as to collect manuscripts for the wider American and European scholarly community. Its collectors—both American missionaries and local Assyrians—focused on the Classical Syriac heritage, mostly from the Church of the East, but including items from Catholic or Syriac Orthodox origins.

The third collection is that of *Atour Publications* (AP). Like that of the MEB collection, it is online and ongoing but has its basis in East Syriac “Assyrian” literature in its widest sense. AP is the work of an American-Assyrian scholar, David G. Malick, who is committed to collecting and printing old (copyright-free) and new books relevant to the Assyrian Church of the East in the widest sense, “specializing in reprinting valuable books and periodicals concerning Assyrian language, literature, history and culture.” Different from the three other collections, this is a private enterprise which is not connected to one of the churches and their hierarchies, or to an educational-missionary enterprise like the Urmia collection. Like the MEB, it features about 150 items. Like AP, the MEB commits itself to providing cheap copies of old and new texts. Where AP for the older Syriac texts employs older, out-of-copyright editions and translations alongside privately produced contemporary writings, MEB offers a mixture of similar cheap reprints of earlier publications and contemporary productions with publications based on photocopied handwritten materials—thus combining the tradition of manuscript writing with the technical possibilities of mass production and distribution. Whereas at first sight it seems a long shot to compare two contemporary collections with the older ones, similarities in types of actors and aims (ecclesial and scholarly), and the overlap of genres and the common basis in the Classical Syriac heritage allow us to identify a number of new developments in the contemporary Syriac Orthodox Church. These developments are closely related to concepts of learning and textual transmission and can be related to the new transnational European context of a vulnerable migrant community.

Tradition and Continuity

In many ways, the Syriac Orthodox MEB collection is characterized by continuity with the past. Like in Orthodox churches everywhere, the historically tested formulations of faith in the language of the church constitute the solid base of the heritage that is being transmitted. The Syriac Orthodox, therefore, like other Orthodox churches, put much effort in upholding their ancient liturgical, linguistic, and literary traditions as the primary means to establish and reestablish themselves in a new context. In the MEB collection, like in the three other collections introduced earlier, the liturgical texts in the Classical Syriac language, the texts that one needs to execute the daily and weekly liturgies, form the core of the collection. The full gamut of liturgical texts is available, often in large-volume and beautifully executed editions, ranging from the Gospel lectionaries and Anaphora's for the weekly Eucharistic service, the liturgies for Baptism and Weddings, to the important hymnal collections, subsumed in the *Beth Gazzo*, of which also an audio edition is on offer.² In comparison, the contemporary liturgical collection of Atour Press is less wide ranging. This is understandable because it is not a church press as such, but nevertheless it sells the three basic liturgical texts of the Assyrian Church of the East, the Eucharistic and Baptismal liturgies, and the daily prayers, complemented by a hymnal in the modern language which includes translations of older hymns as well as contemporary compositions.³ In all four collections, the Bible is present in a variety of formats, testifying to its importance in past and present iterations of the faith.

In the MEB collection, the subcategory of "Religious Books" takes up an important traditional genre. The term refers to monasticism, monastic life, and mysticism more generally, in line with older definitions of the term "religious life" in both East and West. Indeed, a selection of highlights from the traditional monastic literature dominates this category. These include Gregory bar Ebroyo's thirteenth-century *Book of the Dove*, treatises by Isaac of Nineveh, a well-known East Syriac mystic author from the seventh century, and a selection of the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a traditional early Eastern Christian text available in many ancient and modern languages.

Finally, in continuance of its strong presence in the older collections, the genre of hagiography is well represented in the contemporary collections. In MEB, a separate category entitled "Biographies of the Saints" includes thirteen items, all on individual saints, some of which are well known also in other denominations, such as St. Mary and St. George. Others are specifically West Syriac, like St. Jacob of Nisibis, Queen Theodora, and Mor Gabriel. These traditional texts are

Figure 10.2 *The Life of St. Jacob of Nisibis*—book cover; photo by Heleen Murre-van den Berg.

published in attractively formatted single-story booklets, with Classical Syriac, a modern translation, and an audio CD (see Figure 10.2). In line with its general policies, the AP collection restricts itself to reprints regarding this genre, most importantly that of Paul Bedjan's seven-volume edition of the Classical Syriac versions of the Saints' Lives (Bedjan 1890–7).

New Genres, New Readerships, New Languages

However, there is one major difference when comparing these traditional texts in the modern collections against the background of earlier practices of producing

and collecting texts. According to a broad survey of manuscript collections of the Church of the East, liturgical texts usually made up more than half of the average monastic or parish collection (Murre-van den Berg 2015a). The East Syriac Jerusalem collection, with about 60 percent of liturgical manuscripts, conforms neatly to this model. This has completely changed in the modern collections, which show much lower percentages of liturgical texts: in the Urmia collection of the late nineteenth century it is no more than 13 percent, in AP it is around 2 percent, and in MEB, the focus of this investigation, it is 7 percent of the total collection.⁴ As argued in the previous section, there is no reason to believe that the interest in liturgy and religious literature more generally has declined. Indeed, a quick survey of the collections makes clear that the main reason for the lower percentages of liturgical books is the fact that other genres have become more numerous, thereby diminishing the relative rather than absolute importance of liturgical manuscripts.⁵ So what are the major innovations that we see in the modern collections, especially in that of the Syriac Orthodox?

One of these expansive genres is that of the Bible. The first shift is that to the continuous Bible text in one or two volumes, first noted in the nineteenth-century Urmia collection. This is closely connected to the rise of printed rather than (the bulkier) handwritten volumes, which always came either as lectionaries or as the five-part Peshitta. In the two contemporary collections, AP offers a reprint of the Urmia Bible in Classical Syriac and Literary Urmia Aramaic (Murre-van den Berg 1999), whereas MEB sells a 1979 reprint by the United Bible Societies of the Classical Syriac-printed Bible edition by Samuel Lee (London 1823). More importantly, the MEB has on offer various editions of the Gospel lectionary, in Classical Syriac, Arabic, and Turkish. These combine traditional liturgical ecclesiastical usage and context with the sensibilities of the contemporary multilingual context and the increasing weight that is put to “understanding what you read.”

This focus on “understanding what you read” is further underlined by a Turkish translation of the continuous New Testament available in the MEB, but even more so by a completely new genre in comparison to the three other collections, namely editions that are geared specifically toward children, such as the Classical Syriac translation of a graphic novel about the life of Jesus that has been widely used in mostly Evangelical circles and is available in many languages.⁶ Also primarily focused at children and young people are the catechisms, in Syriac as well as in Dutch, under the title *Yulfono Mshihoyo* (“Christian Teaching”). The most important one was written by a patriarch from the early twentieth century, Mor Aphrem Barsoum (in office 1933–57).

Catechisms in Syriac are first attested in the seventeenth century, when under influence of Roman Catholic missionaries also Orthodox churches embraced this way of teaching the fundamentals of the faith to the lay.⁷ The fact that these texts are increasingly also translated into Dutch underlines the fact that these catechisms are meant to help children and young people to learn from texts, rather than orally from the priests. Vice versa, these editions confirm that many of these young people, who grew up in the Netherlands, prefer to read Dutch rather than the vernacular Aramaic, Classical Syriac, or Arabic.

The linguistic issue comes to the fore even more prominently in another genre that has seen many changes and expansion in the modern period. Those not at home in the literature of Orthodox churches might be surprised to learn that in an ecclesial bookshop like the MEB, grammars and dictionaries are well represented. In this, the MEB collection follows traditional patterns in which grammatical scholarship played an important role. This is to be explained from the fact that in the Orthodox churches the usage of specific traditional languages for church ritual tended to go hand in hand with sustained forms of multilingualism and literary exchange, both within each church and between various Orthodox churches. This made translations from one language to another an ongoing concern, from the earliest period in which Greek was the major language in Christian circles with Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopian, Georgian, and Arabic to be added to it—up to contemporary transnational and multilingual times. Over the centuries, therefore, monastic libraries tended to include dictionaries and grammars, some of which date back to the Abbasid period in which linguistic scholarship flourished (Murre-van den Berg 2015a).

At first sight, the MEB library focuses on the classical liturgical language rather than the vernacular, though mostly by way of modern grammatical and lexical works. This corresponds to the fact that the modern Aramaic vernacular language that is spoken in many of the Syriac Orthodox communities, called *Turoyo* or *Surayt*, does not have a stable status as a standardized language.⁸ All dictionaries in the MEB collection, therefore, concern themselves with Classical Syriac: the learned all-Classical Syriac dictionary produced by Thomas Audo in Urmia in 1896 in the East Syriac script,⁹ a simple Classical Syriac lexicon explaining basic words with pictures produced in the Netherlands, and two versions of the Classical Syriac dictionary produced by Aziz Bulut, Sabo Hanna, and Bishop Julius Cicek, in its Dutch-Syriac/Syriac-Dutch version, and in its German/Syriac version. The MEB collection also features a range of Classical Syriac grammar books for children that are used in Sunday and summer schools to teach the children the language of the liturgy. All of this underlines

the importance, in the eyes of the church leadership, of Classical Syriac as the language of the church.

However, this exclusive focus on the liturgical language—which is spoken and understood easily only by a few of the learned clergy—appears to be shifting. Recently, a Dutch-Syriac version of the Sunday liturgy was published in a beautiful small churchgoing edition, suggesting that “understanding what you read” is at least as important as cherishing the liturgical language of the church community (see Figure 10.3 a and b). Increasingly, also, the modern vernacular language is being embraced as a potential communal and religious language. The MEB collection includes a children’s book (in both Latin and Syriac script, and accompanied by a German translation; see Figure 10.4 a and b), a popular grammar book by Murat Can to learn the modern language: *Toxu yelfina Surayt / Laten we Surayt leren*, and a learned grammar of the modern language. Some of these books use the Syriac script, while others use transcription in the Latin alphabet, indicating the desire of those in charge to propagate the knowledge of the modern vernacular to young and older readers with all possible means and methods.

While one is inclined to interpret this as a modern vernacular turn, moving away from the exclusive attention to the classical language, a comparative look at the four collections makes clear that Classical Syriac, despite being the dominant language of the liturgy, always had to share pride of place with other languages, such as Arabic, Turkish, and the modern vernacular (Murre-van den Berg 2015a; Mengozzi 2011). The MEB list, in line with its emphasis on grammar, dictionaries, and teaching materials of Classical Syriac, tends to

Figure 10.3a and b Bilingual prayer book, Dutch-Syriac; photo by Heleen Murre-van den Berg.

Figure 10.4a and b Eliyo and Maria Aydin, *Die Grossmutter und der Fuchs* / *I-Qashtowu-Ta'lo* (Bar Hebraeus Verlag, 2012); photo by Heleen Murre-van den Berg.

prioritize Classical Syriac, with a few German or Dutch items, alongside the already-mentioned Bible translations into Turkish and Arabic. As important, however, is the fact that despite the efforts to promote both Classical Syriac and the vernacular languages in the modern collections, the mere fact that the websites of both MEB and AP are in English indicates that the publishers assume that ultimately the Syriac/Aramaic languages are not understood well enough to function as a common language. It is English rather than Syriac that is the language that allows as wide a public as possible regarding what the online bookshops have on offer; it is children and their lay parents as much as priests and monks who are supposed to read, learn, and teach.

Thus, there are important differences between the older and contemporary collections. The most fundamental change concerns the fact that nonclergy, men, women, and children are seen not only as listeners but as readers and participants in the religious-literary enterprise. While this (re)inclusion of the lay into the orbit of the literary public started in the nineteenth century (as reflected in the Urmia collection), it considerably broadened in the twentieth century, first in the Middle East and later, more profoundly, in the diaspora communities. Both the children's books and catechisms in the MEB and the range of languages that are used to print and publish testify to the desire to include nonclergy

and nonscholars into transnational debates that are seen as essential by the clerical and sociopolitical elites. While further study of print runs and reading practices is needed to assess to what extent and how these publications are being appropriated by the lay, the publications as such testify to the commitment to these themes by the mostly clerical actors. Their main focus indeed remains the transmission of tradition, but judging from their publications, the actors believe that transmission can succeed only when the community as a whole is involved, not only in living the tradition in pious imitation but in appropriating it via reading, understanding, and reformulating this tradition for themselves.

Iconography

Another major difference with earlier textual practices concerns the increasing importance of images. Compared to the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Oriental churches give icons a less theologically central and less visually prominent role. While in the past this led to a near-aniconic religious practice, today the absence of a theology of icons allows for a rather free and eclectic use of religious imagery, in church buildings and in manuscripts, books, and digital publications. This is the case, for example, in an English-language children's Bible which was translated into Classical Syriac and which includes the drawings of the English original. Different from the translation of the graphic novel discussed earlier, in this case the cover has been Syriacized, using a well-known Syriac icon of Christ's Entrance into Jerusalem rather than one of the images that are used in the running text (Figure 10.5 a and b). This iconographic hybridization not only visualizes the wide-ranging borrowings that go on but also underlines the shift discussed earlier, expanding the traditional readership of the Bible from monks to laypeople especially children, mixing global aesthetics as to what is fitting for children with traditional Syriac biblical imagery. Another type of hybridization and global aesthetics concerns the increasing use of photographs, of monasteries and churches, of Syriac monks in traditional monastic attire adorning spiritual literature (in which the monks feature as examples for laypeople), and finally that of a Jesus look-alike that reminds one of similar images used in Evangelical circles that is found on several editions of the most popular catechism.

More than in the domain of the texts, borrowing of images seems to be guided by few explicit rules, with images originating in Catholic and Protestant sources added to those originating in Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches. This iconographic hybridization suggests that there are strong religious and

Figure 10.5a and b Children's Bible in Classical Syriac; photo by Heleen Murre-van den Berg.

aesthetic affinities (among the Christian churches and especially among the Orthodox churches) that make such borrowings popular and effective, despite the persistent dogmatic and cultural differences between them (Mengozi 2020). This, in turn, indicates that the contemporary development of these textual and iconography practices does not happen in a vacuum, but is influenced by what happens in other churches, even if these practices as such are aimed at preserving their distinct ecclesial and linguistic heritage. This case study suggests that mutual influencing takes place at a number of intertwined levels, transnationally within each of these Oriental churches, among these Oriental churches themselves, among Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, and among European and Global Christianity more broadly. This was already suggested in the works of Hämmerli and Mayer (2014) and Leustean (2014) which sketch the contours of an emerging European Orthodoxy consisting of a plurality of Eastern and Oriental churches that sees itself not only as representatives of distinct, often ethnically or nationally defined, churches but as part of a wider European or Global Orthodoxy that positions itself as different from Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and secularism.

Hagiography and History

An interesting aspect of the use of photographs or naturalistic images in these productions is that they tend to naturalize and historicize texts that earlier were

not illustrated at all. Or, if they were, these consisted of icon-type illustrations, that is, highly stylized images that conform to strict iconographic norms as to the basic elements of the image, resulting usually in images that are timeless and universal, rather than contextually and historically grounded. *The Life of the Holy Jacob of Nisibis*, for example, a church father and saint that lived in the fourth century, is illustrated by a photograph of the well-preserved ruins of the Church of St. Jacob in Nisibis, where tradition tells that he lived (Figure 10.2), whereas an introduction and a considerable number of notes further contextualize and historicize the ancient Syriac text.

This historicizing tendency comes across very clearly when comparing what is comprised in the category of “history” between the older and contemporary collections. In the older collections, the historic genre had been somewhat neglected. This trend, however, has completely been reversed in both modern collections, MEB as much as AP, with “History Books” being the largest subcategory of the MEB (thirty-four items). This category includes modern copies of the medieval Syriac Orthodox works of Mikho’il Rabo (Michael the Great) and Bar ‘Ebroyo, but most of the works are modern, including historical works written and published in the 1920s to 1950s in the Middle East, like the *History of the Syriac dioceses* and the *Berule bdhire*—“Scattered Pearls: History of Syriac scholarship and literature”—by Patriarch Aphrem Barsoum.¹⁰ It also includes works written by Western scholars and published elsewhere, such as the widely distributed three-volume work *Margonito Gnizto* (*The Hidden Pearl*).¹¹ AP features the more modest but equally impressing *Literary History of the Assyrians* by Pera Sarmas and the so far unexplored work by David Giwargis Malik, *History of Assyria*.¹²

A specific subgenre under “History” is memoirs and narratives about the genocide of 1915. It is here that the historic genre starts to overlap with the hagiographical. Historical accounts, when dealing with steadfast faith in the face of persecution, tend toward the hagiographical and the hagiographical—in the recent or the less recent past—being interpreted firmly as part of the group’s history, with the martyrs of the faith as the founding fathers and mothers of monasteries, churches, and the community itself (Murre-van den Berg 2015b). The republishing and rereading of the works of the medieval chronographers add to this pattern by underlining the *longue durée*, situating the Syriac churches in the wider Christian and general history of the times with explicit and implicit references to the special history of the Syriac Christian people that always suffered from discrimination and persecution. Against the background of new groups of Syriac Orthodox coming in from the Middle East fleeing the

advances of ISIS in their region, and of the transnational community following these events closely via social media and satellite TV, the prominence of past stories of persecution and martyrdom interacts with and models those that are newly lived and written in the contemporary world.

Global Orthodoxy and Ethical Issues

Those who are at home in discussions among Eastern Orthodox communities might be surprised that, different from what happens, for example, in Russian Orthodox or Roman Catholic circles, the publications in MEB appear to *not* include explicit debates on ethical issues, such as abortion, same-sex marriage and *lgbt* rights (Suslov 2016). This does not mean that the texts are neutral in this respect: the Saints' Lives, for example, are imbued with references to the Christian way of life, espousing the so-called traditional values even if family life is usually not the major topic of these stories. This suggests that if and when these debates over contemporary ethical issues take place within the Syriac Orthodox community, it would be in the more or less private circles of family and church rather than in publications that are advertised in MEB. It seems, therefore, that church leaders tend to be careful not to complicate the nuanced and careful debates that take place within these communities, in which constraints from the dominant liberal discourses in the host country have to be squared with the demands from Orthodox practices in the home countries. To what extent the Oriental churches, especially when compared to the fairly explicit and outspoken traditional stances of the Eastern Orthodox churches from Central and Eastern Europe, will seek to steer a middle course, or will move toward the sometimes-belligerent anti-modern perspectives of some of the Eastern Orthodox, remains to be seen.

Discussions over these ethical issues tie in with one of the major frustrations of the members of the Oriental churches. Syriac Orthodox Christians in the Netherlands find that they are often categorized in the same group as Muslims, as part of this "other," non-Dutch, and nonwhite group that looks, talks, and moves differently from the majority white population. From the perspective of the Syriac Orthodox, however, they are fully part of Dutch majority society, because of their Christian religion, their acceptance of the secular state, and their modern (i.e., non-Islamic) gender norms. This suggests that the Syriac Orthodox accept a combination of ethicalized and racialized conceptions of Dutch citizenship (Baumann 2010). At the same time, however, this is not exactly the

case with regard to their ethical norms, which, when taken in the traditional way (which often is not stated explicitly), may be as different from majority secular Dutch society as those of the perceived Muslim other. The careful way in which the texts seem to circumvent these questions suggests that for now the Syriac Orthodox leadership intends to steer away from an antagonist position, even when in private some may espouse and perhaps even try to enforce traditional norms and values.

Concluding Remarks

It is time to return to the question which was posed by this volume, as to what extent the developments as described earlier are related to the refugee situation of the Syriac Orthodox, in past and present. On the one hand, many of these developments are part of wider changes within Orthodox Christianity, Christianity, and perhaps religions in general. Whether one labels it “modernization” or “westernization,” or perhaps even “secularization,” there can be no doubt that many religions, which for the majority of its adherents tended to emphasize participation and embodied practice over and above learning, understanding, and believing (the work of the learned elites), over the past two centuries have adopted and propagated some kind of intellectualism for the masses. Every believer today needs to be fully aware of the consequences of their religion, and needs to be able to explain to others what it entails and why things are done the way they are. The move of the Syriac Orthodox to the West (voluntary and involuntary) did not cause this development; it merely accelerated it.

However, the way this process takes form, in Europe and other places of the Syriac Orthodox diaspora, is predicated on their specific refugee situation. The most important aspect is the ongoing precariousness and fragility of these communities. Different from many other migrants, there is no state to back them up and safeguard their religious-communal heritage: it is up to those who left to safer shores to do so. Worries over continuity and preservation, which plague migrant communities everywhere, take on an existential shade if the group is that small and has so few power bases around the world. Texts (in addition to buildings and organizations) are a manageable way—fitting their particular history and fitting modern European society—to preserve their past and build their future. However, marginality and precariousness have not ended with migration, and perhaps lead the community to be more careful than others

in stating their particular position in European society, in order not to risk their hard-won safety and acceptance. At the same time, the fact that there is no state power to back the church gives the church a flexibility to deal with these European challenges in a way that other Oriental and Eastern churches—which have to reckon with strong powers back home—do not have.

Many of the explicit debates in and about the Syriac Orthodox Church are about ethnicity. The publications of the bookshop indicate that the church leadership tends to downplay the ethnic issue. While there is lot about language, there is nothing that prioritizes ethnicity. This may be interpreted as a deliberate choice to avoid clerical involvement in the political struggles between the “Aramean” and “Assyrian” parties, each of which has its power base in secular nationalist organizations. More importantly, one may conclude that from the perspective of church leaders organizing as a distinct ethnic group is not necessarily the best way forward in European society, even if it brings certain perks as to recognition in the secular Dutch context. As Sarah Bakker Kellogg (2019) has shown, for the Syriac Orthodox, the feeling of kinship, of “groupness,” is closely tied to the church as community in which “religion” is functionally equivalent to “ethnicity,” rather than an addition to it, and thus not something that in a secular context can be neatly separated from “religion.” Perhaps we can interpret the focus in the MEB collection on religious content as a way to overcome the threatening dichotomy between the religious and ethnic aspects of Syriac Orthodox communal identity. The collection prioritizes religion, in its specific Syriac Orthodox form and its ecumenical and generic “Christian” way simultaneously, just like it stimulates Syriac/Aramaic language learning and communal participation while at the same time acknowledging the usage of Turkish, Arabic, German, Dutch, and English by productions that make use of these languages. While this may strike some as inconsistent and unsatisfactory, it might in fact reflect and therefore acknowledge and own the community’s liminal and creative position at the center of a new European citizenship.