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THE CENTURIES-OLD DIALOGUE BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND CHRISTIANITY

ABSTRACT

This article examines the pre-history of today's dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. Contrary to what one might think, pre-modern Europeans did have some understanding of Buddhism, however limited and distorted it might have been. Asians during the same period had a far better chance of understanding Christianity, because of the widespread presence of the Nestorian Church from Arabia to China. We do have evidence that interaction between Buddhists and Christians lead to some creative synthesis between the two.

1. INTRODUCTION

Early in January 2000, Peter Steinfels, a staff reporter at the *New York Times*, wrote that all too often, the only news about religion is that there is no news. Religious development, he says, occurs at a glacial pace, even when we look at things over the course of an entire millennium. Today's list of the most important religions looks much the same as that of a thousand years ago. True, some of the contenders have faded from the scene: Odin and Thor have few devotees today. Also, there have been plenty of internal struggles. But no new religions have arisen (Steinfels 2000).

One could argue that he is wrong. There is currently a revival of interest in the old Norse gods in the west, under the name Asatru. The Baha'i faith is clearly an interesting and important new candidate in the list of religions. One could also ask whether or not the Mormons, to name just one example, have not moved so far from normative Christianity as to constitute a new religion (not, of course that the Mormons would agree with such an evaluation). The list of religions has not been quite as static as Steinfels makes it out to be.

Still, there is something to his claim. Sooner or later, every scholar of religion tends to discover that the contemporary phenomenon he or she is studying has far more of a historic, or even a prehistoric, background than was thought at first. Is it still possible to make a truly original contribution to scientific knowledge about religion in the strongest sense of the term? Is there anything left

to say about religion that has not been said by the philosophers of Greece, the prophets of Israel and the seers of India? Or are we merely writing footnotes to the glorious time when the main streams of religion were laid down? If so, let us attempt to write the best footnotes we can. And this particular footnote deals with just such a long prehistory to a contemporary phenomenon.

At first glance, it appears as if dialogue between Buddhists and Christians is a purely twentieth century development, with excellent prospects for the twenty-first. The Dalai Lama and the Pope walk together in Assisi; scholars meet and produce the excellent journal *Buddhist-Christian Studies*; Buddhist and Christian monks gather to compare their experiences of the monastic life. Catholic priests practise Zen meditation and Buddhist monks discover a dimension of social and environmental consciousness of which they had never been fully aware before. In a possibly apocryphal remark by the historian Arnold Toynbee, it is predicted that when historians of the far future look back at the twentieth century, they will see it not as the century of two world wars or of technological progress, but as the century when Buddhism and Christianity finally made contact. And all this happened within a single century, in fact mostly within the last fifty years or so!

It seems so obvious: before the beginning of the twentieth century — or at a stretch the middle of the nineteenth — these two civilisations and their dominant religions were separated by half a continent and an almost impenetrable Islamic barrier. How could they have known about each other, how could any communication or influence have seeped through from one to the other? Nevertheless, it is starting to become clear that there was a certain level of awareness of one another on both sides. Slowly, a picture emerges of a pre-modern Europe that did have a certain level of awareness, however distorted it might have been, of the existence of Buddhism; and of an Asia in which a form of Christianity directly competed for Asian adherents.

2. PRE-MODERN WESTERN KNOWLEDGE OF BUDDHISM

How much did our Late-Antiquity and Medieval ancestors know about Buddhism? More than one might think. Most of the evidence for this comes from texts, of course, but before we consider those, our attention is drawn to a more physical witness.

It is a small bronze Buddha statuette, made in a typical North Indian style that dates back to the fifth or sixth century CE. Where was it found? Around Constantinople? Could it have travelled as far as Rome? Further?

In fact, it was excavated in the mid-fifties in a dig on Helgö Island, an island in the Mälaren lake near Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. From the Scandinavian Iron Age (fifth to eighth centuries CE) to the Early Viking era, Helgö was an important trading post — just how important, we can see when we consider that this Indian artefact was found there (Holmqvist 1961; Magnusson 1979). Today it is housed in the Swedish National History Museum in Stockholm. Since then, a second statuette has been found elsewhere in Sweden, but unfortunately only the head has survived.

We would be going far beyond the evidence to think that there were Buddhists among the Vikings! It is possible, of course, that some aspect of the statuette's numinous quality was recognised by the Scandinavian owners, but we will probably never know. Still, the mere fact that Indian artefacts could travel this far does tell us something about the Europe of Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It was by no means the closed-off society we often think it was. And if artefacts could go on long journeys, so could ideas. Our ancestors knew more about the Buddhists than we used to think they did, a situation only recently uncovered by Buddhologists like Almond (1986, 1987) and Scott (1985a, 1985b).

The first encounter between Buddhism and the west occurred during the reign of Ashoka (272-236 BCE), the first emperor of almost all of India. Ashoka's grandfather Chandragupta, founder of the Mauryan dynasty, already had contacts with the Greeks when, in the year 204 BCE, he concluded a peace treaty with Seleucus I, one of Alexander the Great's self-appointed successors. By Ashoka's time, the Greeks were well known in India — they were called the *yona* in the Pali language (Sanskrit: *yavana*), that is, the Ionians. Greek-dominated areas surrounded India's north-western borders. They were not the first Greeks in the area — textual references indicate that there were Greek cities in or near the area even in the Buddha's time. In one *sutta* the Buddha refers to the fact that among the Greeks, a free man might be a slave the next day, and uses this fact to show the artificiality of caste differences. But it was only later, in the Ashokan era, that Greeks and Buddhists entered into dialogue.

Ashoka is famous for having had his laws and pronouncements inscribed on rocks and pillars. This has led to many of them being preserved. In these inscriptions he informs the world that he sent out Buddhist "missionaries" to the surrounding countries, including the Hellenistic areas in the Levant. But no Greek acknowledgement of these "missionary" efforts has ever been found. In fact, not a single Greek text from the Mediterranean area even mentions Buddhism or the Buddha by name.

Ashoka was more successful closer to home. In the city of Kandahar, in Afghanistan, two short versions of Ashoka's edicts have been found: a bilingual one in Greek and Aramaic, and another only in Greek. This area, then known as Bactria, actually became a country that was Greek in culture and Buddhist

in religion, and this combination was to play a key role in the expansion of Buddhism to central Asia and from there to China. But before long the Bactrians had lost contact with the Greeks in the west. First, there was a political schism in which the Bactrians declared themselves independent from the other Greeks, and shortly afterwards, the Parthians established a new Persian empire that created an unbridgeable gap between the two groups. Greek political power inside and north-west of India disappeared completely between 120 and 80 BCE. Buddhism would not be able to enter into discussion with the west from here. Bactria itself remained Buddhist for a long time afterwards, but the Greek cultural influence gradually faded away.

Only in the early Christian era do we see textual references to Buddhism. Around the year 202 CE, Clemens of Alexandria wrote in his *Stromata* ([s.a.]:1. XV) that among the Indians there were followers of “Boutta”, who, he maintained, they had raised to the level of divinity because of his extraordinary level of holiness. Did Clement ever meet Buddhists himself? There is no direct evidence for this, but a hundred years earlier, Dio Christosom had mentioned that there were Indian and Bactrian communities in Alexandria (Scott 1985b:89). So it is possible.

The next reference to Buddhism only comes at the end of the Hellenistic era, around the beginning of the fifth century. St. Jerome wrote in his work *Contra Jovianus* ([s.a.]:1.42) that Indians believed in the virgin birth of the Buddha. And that really was all that the western world knew about Buddhism by the year 400. But, as the Buddha statuettes in Sweden show, there always were ways and means for goods and ideas to travel between one culture and another. But with the movement came new interpretations, resetting the exotic in terms of the familiar, and this set the scene for one of the strangest episodes in the entire history of religions: the enshrinement of the Buddha as a saint in the Christian church.

27 November is not an unusual day in the Catholic church's traditional calendar. About ten or twelve saints are associated with this day, from St. John Intercisus (circa 421 CE) to the Blessed Humilis of Bisignano (1600-1637 CE). But there are two saints honoured on this day that look very interesting to us: Saints Barlaam and Josaphat (The Orthodox churches associate these two with different days on the calendar).

Josaphat's story can be put briefly as follows: There was once an Indian king named Abenner who persecuted Christians. When a soothsayer predicted that the king's son would become a Christian himself, Abenner took steps to ensure that his son would grow up in the palace, secluded from the world. Despite this, the ascetic Barlaam entered the palace and converted Josaphat. The king continued to resist for a while, then accepted the inevitability of the situation and himself became, first a Christian and later on a hermit. Josaphat

finally renounced his throne and went off into the desert in search of his old teacher Barlaam. He spent the rest of his life as a desert hermit (Thurston & Attwater 1956:432-433).¹

This legend was quite popular in medieval Europe. We see the first signs of it in the tenth century, and by the thirteenth century Josaphat and Barlaam could be found on the official list of saints. It is not clear which pope placed them there, nor even whether it ever happened officially — sanctification was a far less structured process in the Middle Ages than it is today. More than sixty texts bearing different versions of the legend have come down to us, not only in Latin, but in a variety of medieval European languages, in Christian Arabic, and even in Amharic (Ethiopian).

The city of Palermo in Sicily had a church dedicated to Divo Josaphat. In 1571, the Doge of Venice made a gift of relics (a bone and some vertebrae) of St. Josaphat to the king of Portugal. These were taken to Antwerp by the Spaniards in 1672 and installed in the monastery of St. Salvator. We even find traces of the legend in literature: a sub-story from the legend was used by Shakespeare and incorporated in the *Merchant of Venice* (Almond 1987:391 ff). The story of this Indian saint would later return to the east when it was translated into a Filipino language in the eighteenth century.

The veracity of the legend was being questioned as early as 1577, but only in the middle of the nineteenth century did the truth come out. Not only did the legend describe two saints who never existed, but the basis on which it rested was the biography of the Buddha. Today, neither church historians nor buddhologists seriously doubt this. It is not certain on which version of the Buddha's biography was used to construct the legend of Josaphat: it shows signs of being composed from several versions and may even have been based on a version no longer extant. But broadly speaking, the story is instantly recognisable. Even the name *Josaphat* is derived from the Indian word *bodhisattva*, a Buddha-in-training.² Other elements were added from a variety of sources, some Christian in origin, others not. The "desert" element, for example, strikes one as quite un-Buddhist, since ancient India was covered in jungle and that is where Indian hermits withdrew to. Various sub-divisions of the text can be traced to tales from Indian literature, such as the *Ramayana*

- 1 A more complete version appears in Almond (1987:392-393). Various versions and translations of the legend of Josaphat are known. We name but two: The complete text in Middle English, in Hirsch (1986), and a modern English translation of the Ethiopian version, in Budge (1976). No Afrikaans translation of the legend is known to exist.
- 2 The sequence of names as experts currently see it is Sanskrit *bodhisattva*, followed by Arabic *Budhasaf*, Georgian *Iodasaph*, Greek *Ioasaph*, and finally, medieval Latin *Josaphat*.

and *Mahabharata*, to stories from the Jain traditions, and possibly even from China. Only one of the sixteen sub-stories, the “Parable of the Sower” can be shown to have been taken from the New Testament.

What we have then, is a situation in which medieval Christians were influenced, perhaps deeply influenced, by the life of the Buddha, no matter how much this story was viewed through a Christian lens. This indicates that we need to be careful when we draw our tidy lines of division between the religions. Religious influences may arrive from the strangest points of origin: once present, they will be adapted to fit in with the dominant paradigm. The legend of Barlaam and Josaphat is the textual equivalent of the Helgö-statuette — taken by itself, it is a context-less piece of information, but taken in a wider sense it indicates that the Eurasian continent was not quite divided into a number of mutually exclusive camps. Perhaps the most elegant commentary on the entire matter was by Max Müller:

Whatever we may think of the sanctity of saints, let those who doubt the right of Buddha to a place among them read the story of his life as it is told in the Buddhist canon. If he lived the life which is there described, few saints have a better claim to the title than Buddha; and no-one in either the Greek or the Roman church need be ashamed of having paid to Buddha's memory the honour that was intended for St Josaphat ... (Almond 1987:406).

In the later Middle Ages, more accurate information about Buddhism started to reach the West. Marco Polo's story is well known, but he was not the first medieval European to reach the Far East. The Franciscan missionaries John of Plano Carpini and Benedict the Pole arrived at the Mongol court at Karakorum in 1246, nearly 30 years before Polo. In 1253, another Franciscan, John Rubruck also visited the court. All three wrote about their travels and so gave the West its first glimpse of Buddhism as it was in fact practised. Here we find the first descriptions of core Buddhist doctrines such as rebirth and karma. The next report comes from Hethum I, king of Lesser Armenia, who undertook a state visit to his liege lord, Mangu Khan. He too briefly mentions a “god” worshipped by the Mongols, called *Chakemonia*, i.e. *Shakyamuni* (Almond 1986).

In 1275, Polo was therefore not the first westerner in East Asia, but he was the first to penetrate all the way into China — something even his father and uncle had not succeeded in during their previous journey. In his travelogue he does mention Buddhism as he encountered it in various provinces of the Mongol Empire. *Il Milione* did not seem to have much patience with doctrinal hair-splitting; like a good phenomenologist he describes the rituals he ob-

served in temples dedicated to *Chagamoni Burkhan*³, and there is no evidence of him enquiring into the philosophical background to these rituals. However, during his travels homewards he did encounter and write down the Buddha's biography. Once his travelogue was published, therefore, after two thousand years of rumours, distorted legends and half-understood teachings, the West finally had a reasonably accurate version of the life of the Buddha. It had some impact: in 1446, 150 years after the book's publication, an unknown editor of a Venetian reprint inserted a comment remarking on the parallels between the stories of the Buddha and St Josaphat (Almond 1987:396).⁴

After Marco Polo there would be a variety of travellers and missionaries from Europe who would write home about Buddhist monks and temples (mostly of the Tibetan/Mongol Vajrayana tradition) But this is where we end this part of the story. In 1498 Vasco Da Gama discovered a sea route to India. From that moment onward, information about the Asia and its religions began to flow westwards on a regular basis, and by the middle of the nineteenth century, Europeans would have a reasonably clear image of Buddhism.

3. CHRISTIANITY IN ASIA

European Christians of late antiquity and the middle ages, as we have seen, did have access to information about Buddhism, but it was limited and distorted. It was much easier for Asian Buddhists to get to know a little about Christianity: one could simply ask the neighbours. There have been Christians in Asia since the beginning, and indeed, we know of more than twenty bishops active between Kurdistan and the Caspian see by the year 225 CE (Moffett 1998:79).

Sadly, this has become a forgotten chapter in Christian history. Today, Christians, whether Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant, might at best be aware that there once was a community of "Nestorians" in Asia. But even that is not quite correct. The Persian church was already four centuries old when the Nestorian controversy erupted, and had long regarded itself as independent from either Rome or Constantinople. Even when the established church in the Persian capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon strongly endorsed Nestorius' position and made his view of the Trinity its doctrine, there always remained sizeable minorities that stayed true either to the Monophysite view or to Chalcedonian

3 The term *Burkhan* is a Mongol word with a Siberian shamanistic heritage. It denotes not only a god, but also any depiction of a god, in that case of Shakyamuni Buddha (Almond 1986:95).

4 Marco Polo's book has remained in print, in one language or another, ever since its first appearance. It is currently freely downloadable in two parts at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/10636> and <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/12410>.

orthodoxy. Despite this, we will use the established term “Nestorian” to indicate the Persian church as a whole, especially in its later phases. Until recently the existence and history of this Persian branch of Christianity was known mainly to specialists, and it has only become available to the general reader with the appearance of works by Moffett (1998) and England (1996), from which most of the information in this section has been taken.

Most of this tale takes place in Persia. Christians were always a minority here, first under the Zoroastrian yoke of the Parthian and Sassanid Empires, and later under Islamic domination. But they were a sizeable minority: It has been estimated that by the end of the eighth century there were a million Christians in Persia alone. England (1996:2) estimates that for the first few centuries of Christianity’s existence, there were more Christians in Persia than in the West. Moffett’s (1998) estimates are more conservative, but still leave no doubt that the Persian Church was an organisation to be reckoned with. Life under the Zoroastrians was hard: There were periods of persecution in Persia that, according to some authors, exceeded those in the Roman Empire. During a period of forty years in the reign of Shah Shapur II (r 309-379) as many as 190 000 Christians were killed. Later persecutions would be shorter in duration, but just as cruel: in the year 448 CE, ten bishops and an unbelievable 153 000 lay Christians were executed in the city of Kirkuk (Moffett 1998:136-145, 161). Despite such persecutions, Christianity persisted in Persia. It was only under Islamic rule, and more particularly under Mongol conquerors who had accepted Islam, that the Persian church finally disappeared from the scene, leaving only a few small remnants.

Despite its minority status, the Persian Church had a strong missionary outreach. The various indigenous churches in India have at least some historical influence from Persia, and there were Nestorian communities as far south as Yemen in the Arabian Peninsula. But we are more interested in the Nestorians’ movement into the Asian interior.

This movement mainly followed the old Asian trade routes — the same routes taken by Buddhism in its movement from Central Asia to China. Persian missionaries crossed the steppes to do mission work among the Turkish and Mongol tribes living there. They reached Samarkand by the fifth century and the oases of Turfan and Dun-Huang shortly afterwards. From there, it was not far to China, and tradition has it that it was two Persian monks who smuggled silkworms out of China to the West in the year 551 CE (Moffett 1998:242).

In 796 CE, Patriarch Timothy I appointed bishops for Tibet. No known Tibetan texts confirm their presence there, but this was the period when Vajrayana Buddhism was first established in that country, so we can imagine that the theological struggle for the conversion of Tibetans must have been considerable. Artefacts, mostly crucifixes, have been found that indicate a Christian presence

in Tibet by the tenth century. More speculatively speaking, perhaps the strict hierarchical composition of Tibetan Buddhism may have found some inspiration in the Nestorians' system of bishops and metropolitans.

In the year 635 a Persian missionary known to us only by his Chinese name Alopen (possibly a Chinese pronunciation of Abraham) arrived in the capital of China, the city of Chang'an. He proceeded to found a church in the city (we know of eleven Nestorian churches in China by the end of the seventh century), and to translate the New Testament into Chinese. The next great figure in the history of the Chinese church is Ching-Ching (Chinese for Adam). In 782 a Buddhist monk named Prajna reached Chang'an and was appointed as scripture translator. Unfortunately his knowledge of the Chinese language was insufficient to the task and it was only with the help of bishop Ching-Ching, Chinese-born but of Afghan ancestry, that Prajna managed to translate seven volumes of Buddhist sutras.

What makes this incident even more interesting is that while they were working on this task, by 804 there were two other great names in Buddhist history resident in the same monastery. Both were Japanese. The first was Kobo Daishi (Kukai), founder of the Shingon (Tantric) school of Japanese Buddhism. On his return to Japan he brought with him a number of Buddhist texts, quite possibly including those on which Ching-Ching and Prajna worked together. The other Japanese monk resident in the Ta-ts'in monastery at the time was Dengyo Daishi (Saicho), later to found the Japanese Tendai school of Buddhism. Such a concentration of religious founders can rarely have been together in all of religious history and as Moffett (1998:302) remarks, who can resist the temptation of speculating about the mutual influences between the Nestorian and the three Buddhists?

Was there ever a Nestorian church in Japan? Opinions differ. England accepts that certain Japanese place names and archaeological findings indicate a Christian presence in Kyoto, then the Japanese capital city. Moffett is more sceptical. In Korea excavations have shown a possible Nestorian presence, but it is unclear if the area in question was under Korean or Chinese domination at the time.

By the end of the eighth century, Nestorian Christianity disappeared from China. One reason for this was the persecution of all religions of non-Chinese origin under the T'ang dynasty (it hit Buddhism just as hard, in fact only the Ch'an and Pure Land schools managed to go underground and survive). It would return only with the creation of a new dynasty (the Yuan) by the successors of Genghis Khan.

There were many Nestorian Christians among the Turkic and Mongol tribes of Northern Central Asia. Some tribes, such as the Uighurs and Keraits, were even predominantly Christian. Genghis Khan's brother Tolui, to name just one

example, was married to the Kerait princess Sorkaktani, a known Christian. But she was not to be the Empress Helena of Asia, for of her three sons, Mongke the chief of the Mongols, Hulegu the conqueror of the Persians and Kubilai the emperor of China, none converted to Christianity (Moffett (1998:400 ff, 505).⁵ Thus, there never was an Asian Constantine to establish Christianity firmly in the region.

The founding of the Yuan dynasty by the Mongol conquerors saw a second blossoming of Chinese Nestorian Christianity. Once again, Christian churches and Buddhist temples were in close proximity, although we do not again hear of co-operation between individuals from these two religions. But this time around the Nestorians were too closely allied to the Mongol overlords. Now the Chinese saw them, not as a religion of Persian origin as before, but as the religion (or one of them, at least) of the hated Mongol barbarians. This was also the period when Franciscans started their own missionary expansion into China, and they regarded the Nestorians as the worst kind of heretics. The disagreements between these two groups of Christians could not have done much for the public image of Christianity in China. The fall of the Yuan dynasty in 1368 saw the final disappearance of Nestorian Christianity from China. The Catholic missionary attempts of the thirteenth century were also unsuccessful. When new missionaries arrived by sea two centuries later, they were met with a singular lack of recognition. On the steppes, Nestorianism would largely succumb to the Golden Horde of Tamburlaine, although small, isolated communities persisted into the start of the twentieth century (England 1996:87).

The situation in Persia was much the same. By 1551, a number of Nestorians reunited with Rome and have since been known as Chaldeans, while the original Nestorians were called Assyrians. The part of the Indian church most influenced by Nestorianism allied itself to Rome in 1559, and later split into an Easter Rite catholic church and another branch that allied itself to the monophysite patriarch of Antioch in 1653.

How far did Nestorian Christianity spread through Asia before it effectively disappeared? Once again, we find a difference of opinion, with England as the more liberal interpreter and Moffett the more conservative. Suffice it to say that there is contested evidence of a brief Nestorian presence in Burma, The Philippines and Indonesia.

Thus the Persian church, notwithstanding its eventual demise, was once a Pan-Asian organisation that existed side-by-side with Buddhism for centuries. We know of just a few concrete instances of interaction, but it was in Central

5 Centuries earlier, there had been a Christian empress, Sirin, in Persia, but despite his tolerance towards all religions, her husband Chosroes II never did abandon his own Zoroastrian beliefs.

Asia, right where the two religions co-existed the most and the longest, that Buddhists developed the concept of “Adhi-Buddha”, an omnipresent but personal Buddha-hood that is difficult to reconcile with the purely Indian concept of “dharmakaya”, also an omnipresent Buddhahood, but regarded as totally impersonal. The Adhi-Buddha concept is not accepted by many Buddhist schools. Yet it is the closest Buddhism has ever come to promulgating the Semitic concept of God. Can we see it as an idea borrowed from the Nestorians? We will probably never know. The only direct reference to Christianity in the vast Buddhist canon is in the *Insadi-Sutra* (c. 14th century), a late text of Turkic origin in which we find a prayer that Maitreya, the next Buddha, will appear soon and that his reign will extend over Byzantium and Baghdad, the political centres of Christianity and Islam. The text also mentions “Mother Mary” (Klimkeit 1981:47).

On the Christian side, there is more explicit evidence of a transfer of ideas between Christians and Buddhists. In Alopen’s *Jesus Messiah Sutra* we can find a number of references to the Buddha and Buddhist doctrines. Such references tend to the polemical — often, they attempt to show off the Nestorians as better Buddhists than the Buddhists themselves! Still, the appropriation of Buddhist terminology is striking. In another work by Alopen, the *Discourse on Monotheism*, the typically Mahayana Buddhist concept of Emptiness is used to show how God transcends all human categories:

The holy One of great wisdom [prajñā-pāramitā] is equal to pure emptiness [śūnyatā] itself and cannot be taken (a view thereof) (Scott 1985b:94, cf. 92-98; viz. Klimkeit 1981:47-48).

Just as Western Christians adopted Greek philosophy as their fundamental hermeneutic framework, so do we see the Nestorians, at least in China using Buddhist philosophy to pour their religious insights into a culturally acceptable mould. If Nestorianism had not died out, there could now have been a second, very different kind of Christianity — one that remained true to the basic Christian mythology (which Alopen recounts in quite conventional terms) but which saw those myths not in terms of a Greek philosophical framework, but in terms of a Buddhist philosophy of emptiness. And this is just the kind of development we can see happening today as a result of the more recent attempts at dialogue between the two. In Krüger’s *Sweeping whirlwinds* (2003), for example, “Buddhism”, not the distinct sectarian phenomenon, but the broad philosophical framework, is used as a hermeneutical key to unlock the history of Reformed Christianity in Pretoria.

There is yet another point of view that demands greater attention to be given to the old Asian church. It was never a church that could see itself as an alter ego of the state, not even during the Yuan dynasty. On the contrary, throughout Asia it was a humble institution, sometimes tolerated alongside

others, at other times persecuted with those others. Always it needed to enter into dialogue with representatives of other religions and work out a *modus vivendi* along with them. In the modern secular world, we see the church more and more in the same position. Perhaps the Nestorian church, theological differences notwithstanding, is a better role model for Christianity than the traditional exclusivism of large sections of the western church. More research into the Persian church and its far-flung developments may give us new insights into the nature of Christianity and this religion's role in Third Millennium society.

4. CONCLUSION

We may now return to Steinfels and his declaration that not much has changed in the world of religion during the last thousand years. And in broad terms, he is right. Then as now, a few Buddhists and Christians are formally in dialogue, while the masses of both religions look on. And yet, for all that their numbers are few, the dialogue, then as now, holds the promise of great religious creativity. How will Christians and Buddhists a thousand years into the future regard our attempts at dialogue? I hope they will find us worthy of our predecessors, a millennium ago in medieval Europe and Central Asia.

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