

NESTORIAN MERCHANT MISSIONARIES AND  
TODAY'S UNREACHED PEOPLE GROUPS

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Travel well girt like merchants,  
That we may gain the world.  
Convert men to me,  
Fill creation with teaching.

A Syriac hymn quoted by Richard C. Foltz,  
*Religions of the Silk Road*, 62.

## Introduction

I was a missionary in France. “Why,” you may ask, “do I bother with a study of Nestorian merchant missionaries?” The answer is simple. While the history of the eastward expansion of Christianity from Jerusalem is overshadowed by what students of missions know about the westward spread, the size of the church in Europe paled in comparison to the breadth of the church in Asia.

If the church in Asia reached such a scale, many Asians must have become Christians. Andrew F. Walls asserted that “the eastward spread of the Christian faith across Asia is still more remarkable than the westward spread across Europe.”<sup>1</sup> John Foster made a similar point when he wrote, “Those who serve the Church in the East ought to have in the foreground of their thoughts a Church which was always universal, and which from the days of the Apostles onwards was always advancing eastwards. Western Church history will then take up its rightful place as a useful, indeed an indispensable, background.”<sup>2</sup> I wonder, therefore, if Christendom is in the process of becoming deChristianized, was not Asia first deChristianized?

An appropriate objection to such pronouncements would be to ask, “Where is this church today?” One must readily concede that the regions east of Jerusalem are inhabited by some of the

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<sup>1</sup>Andrew F. Walls, “Eusebius Tries Again: Recovering the Study of Christian History,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 24,3 (July 2001) : 110.

<sup>2</sup>John Foster, *The Church in the T'ang Dynasty* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1939), vii.

most unreached peoples of the present world. If, however, the spread of Christianity eastward was as extensive as some writers assert, who carried the gospel to Asia and were not some of the ancestors of these peoples “reached” at some point? How one responds to these questions has implications on contemporary missiology.

### **The Nestorian Church in Asia**

In search of an answer to these questions, I will examine the missionary efforts of Nestorian missionaries. Their church has been variously known as the Syrian Church, the Nestorian Church, or the Church of the East. The latter will be avoided to preclude confusion with the Eastern Orthodox Church. These missionaries were largely from Syria, Persia, and Sogdiana.

As I progress through this inquiry, you will discover that, first, the primary actors in the spread of the gospel were merchant missionaries. These missionaries, who combined their business with their Christian mission, hardly resembled a contemporary missionary. They lacked ties to mission sending structures and to their sending churches that today’s missionaries enjoy. These merchant missionaries must have appeared more as lay Christians who had a zeal for sharing their faith along the trade routes of Asia. Second, you will consider the impact these missionaries, along with their clerical and monastic colleagues, had on some of the people groups which are unreached today.

### **Nestorian Christology**

When students of church history read of the Nestorian church, they probably think immediately of Christological controversies. A theologian named Nestorius, from whom the Nestorian church got its name, has been suspected of diminishing Christ’s deity. Due to the limitations of

this present study, the author will be unable to explore this debate. He, nonetheless, feels justified in proceeding with the development of his thesis. Today, it does not appear that Nestorius was as heterodox as was once thought. Paul E. Pierson, in his article in the *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, “Nestorian Mission,” stated that Nestorius’ “Christology was probably orthodox, although perhaps not stated adequately.”<sup>3</sup> Maintaining an unorthodox faith is far worse than being able to express accurately orthodox faith.<sup>4</sup> Due to the limitations of this paper, I will proceed by accepting that the Nestorians, as merchant missionaries, preached an unadulterated gospel.

In the Russian province of Semiryechensk, located in southern Siberia, were discovered Nestorian gravestones. In this cemetery, interred side by side, were the earthly bodies of individuals who had come from China, India, East and West Turkestan, Mongolia and Manchuria, Siberia, and Persia. The ethnic variety of these Nestorians allows one to suspect, as Alphonse Mingana suggested, that peoples across Asia were in constant dialogue.<sup>5</sup> They lived in an age when the church was planted in Asia. They lived in the age of the Nestorian merchant missionary.

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<sup>3</sup>Paul E. Pierson, “Nestorian Mission,” *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Scott A. Moreau, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 675. C. Gordon Olson considered the Nestorian view to be “weaker than the ‘orthodox’ view.” C. Gordon Olson, *What in the World is God Doing? The Essentials of Global Missions: An Introductory Guide* (Cedar Knolls: Global Gospel Publishers, 2003), 102.

<sup>4</sup>Paula Harris recalled that these theological debates were taking place “in multiple communities and in translation to multiple languages.” Paula Harris, “Nestorian Community, Spirituality, and Mission” in *Global Missiology for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. William D. Taylor (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 496.

<sup>5</sup>Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East: A New Document* (Manchester: University Press, 1925), 41.

## Merchant Missionaries

Richard C. Foltz, in his *Religions of the Silk Roads*, told “the story of how religions accompanied merchants and their goods along the overland Asian trade routes of pre-modern times.”<sup>6</sup> His thesis included three elements. First, he argued that ideas and trade were in continuous motion along the trade routes of Asia. He suggested that just as merchants managed a mixed inventory of imported or exported merchandise, so the people of Asia adhered to a melange of local and foreign religious beliefs. He allowed that other factors attributed to the spread of religious faiths in Asia. He insisted, however, that trade was the main facilitator.<sup>7</sup> How were the merchants of these days able to wed business and missions?

Business and missions is the theme of the present meeting of the Evangelical Missiological Society. The theme may cover tentmaking as the means by which cross-cultural workers support themselves. This tentmaker would be akin to a bi-vocational worker. The theme may also cover the scenario of missionaries who use their business activities to justify their presence in countries which restrict the legal entry of traditional missionaries. In the case of Nestorian merchant missionaries, they appeared less like traditional missionaries. They were Christians who supported themselves by their business and who had a zeal for sharing their faith.

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<sup>6</sup>Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 7.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. Foltz considered the context of Central Asia to be pluralistic, precluding the possibility of finding monolithic religious traditions across the continent. He nonetheless described the conversion of “hundreds of thousands among the Eurasian steppe peoples . . . [to Nestorianism, which] appears centuries later like a bad dream to the first Catholic missionaries in China, who found it comfortably entrenched there as the recognized resident Christianity of the East.” Foltz, 8. While Christianity may adopt local forms which may lessen a sense of homogeneity on first view, the pluralism of these cultures did not exclude the possibility of attaching oneself to a particular faith over and against another.

### **Merchant Missionaries and the Day of Pentecost**

The Parthian converts of Pentecost were the first of these Asian merchant missionaries. Christianity began to spread among the Jewish diaspora in Asia. Luke recorded in Acts that the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, who were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, were among the first converts to Christianity.<sup>8</sup> John Stewart believed that these men and women were either Jews or Jewish proselytes. These Asian converts were most likely merchants.<sup>9</sup>

Foltz argued that the Jews of the Persian diaspora turned to commerce for their livelihoods. He wrote, “[They] set up networks with relatives or other Judeans in other parts of the Persian Empire or elsewhere. . . . By the Parthian period, both Palestinian and Babylonian Jews were involved in the silk trade of China . . . . Because Jews were spread across a wide geographic area spanning both the Parthian and the Roman lands, they were ideally situated to participate in trade between the two empires.”<sup>10</sup> Given that the Christian faith was spread among Jews first, and given that the contacts that the Jews had with other peoples were essentially mercantile, Foltz later reasoned, “it can safely be said that Christianity’s first link with the Silk Road was via the Babylonian Jews.”<sup>11</sup> As with the Nestorian merchant missionary, the Jewish convert to

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<sup>8</sup>Acts 2:9.

<sup>9</sup>John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1928), xxv-xxvii. Foltz, 1.

<sup>10</sup>Foltz, 31-32.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 64-65.

Christianity did not conceive of his business as a facade for his missionary activity. His livelihood depended upon his business and not upon his evangelistic ministry.<sup>12</sup>

### **Merchant Missionaries and the Early Church**

Per Beskow, writing in *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok*, argued that Christian merchants continued to be the primary reason for the expansion of the Church in the second century. He explained that the spread of the Christian gospel was facilitated by a generally westward movement of merchandise and the westward emigration of Eastern populations, the Jewish diaspora, and the exchange of Christian slaves. “In both of these contexts,” he concluded, “Asia Minor and Syria are of primary importance during the second century. . . . Asia Minor and Syria were immensely rich and sent their merchants and ships around the Mediterranean with Oriental products.”

Beskow believed that, as incredibly as the thought may seem to the reader, merchant missionaries from Asia may have founded and provided the majority membership of the church in Gaul.<sup>13</sup>

Eckhard Schnabel, in *History of Early Christian Mission*, demurred on Beskow’s insistence that Christian traders and the commerce of Christian slaves were the only explanations for the growth of the church in this period. Schnabel countered that Beskow based his reasoning uniquely on the absence of historical testimony supporting other explanations, such as “the sending of

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<sup>12</sup>Foltz argued that their evangelism naturally followed their business. Their clients became familiar with both their Christianity and their commodities. Foltz, 35. While Foltz’s comments are beneficial for the present writer, he does take exception with other theses proposed by Foltz. For example, Foltz proposed that Persian influences were present in Jewish postexilic scripture. He argued that Ezekiel and Daniel borrowed their eschatologies from Persian beliefs. Foltz, 32.

<sup>13</sup>Per Beskow, “Mission, Trade and Emigration in the Second Century,” *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 35 (1970) : 108.

missionaries to foreign regions.”<sup>14</sup> If the merchant missionaries were not the only traveling Christian evangelists publishing the gospel of Jesus Christ in other lands, they certainly played a significant role as the church spread to the west and to the east.

### Nestorian Merchant Missionaries

Like the Jews before them, Persians who had placed their faith in Christ, were merchants. The close relationship between the business of Nestorian Christians and their missionary activity is confirmed by the metaphorical meaning of “merchants.” Foltz noted that in Syriac, the language of the Persians, the word for merchant, tgr’, was often used as a synonym for a Persian missionary. A fourth century Syriac hymn included the following stanza:

Travel well girt like merchants,  
That we may gain the world.  
Convert men to me,  
Fill creation with teaching.<sup>15</sup>

The clergy of the Nestorian church also could be found among traders of their day. Paula Harris, who presented a thoroughly researched paper on the missionary heritage of the Nestorian church at the 1999 World Evangelical Fellowship’s missiological meetings in Brazil, explained that the Nestorian missionary model included both the professional missionary and the lay missionary.<sup>16</sup> One may conclude that the professional missionaries were fully supported by their ministry activities. Stewart would not agree. He explained that the Nestorian church lacked the

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<sup>14</sup>Eckhard Schnabel, *Paul and the Early Church*, vol. 2, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 1555.

<sup>15</sup>Foltz, 62.

<sup>16</sup>Harris, 497.

structure to provide for the material needs of its clergy. The Nestorian bishops supported themselves as Paul did through his tentmaking activities. They were merchants, carpenters, blacksmiths, and weavers. With humor, Stewart recalled how “sacerdotalists” objected that “the merchant could with ease lay aside his calling and become a monk or presbyter, and vice versa.”<sup>17</sup> According to Mingana, some of the original priests in Persia were ordained by one “Aggai, a maker of silks, the disciple of Addai.”<sup>18</sup> They were merchants from the start.<sup>19</sup>

Paul E. Pierson believed that these merchant missionaries, teamed with their monastic and cleric counterparts, formed “one of the most passionately missionary branches of the church.”<sup>20</sup> Mingana considered the Persians to be the most “virile element” of the Nestorian missionary movement.<sup>21</sup> These Christians had the character to persevere through difficulty, the training to transmit the gospel message, and the social networks to encounter the men and women who had not yet heard of the Savior from Nazareth. These missionaries took the gospel to the extremities of Asia.

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<sup>17</sup>Stewart, 5.

<sup>18</sup>Mingana believed that Addai was Thaddaeus, one of Christ’s twelve disciples. Mingana, 8. Moffett believed Addai was one of the Seventy in Lk 10:1-24. Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 33.

<sup>19</sup>Bosch did not include in his “Missionary Paradigm of the Eastern Church” the role played by the merchant missionary. He accredited the spread of Christianity in Asia via Nestorian missions to Nestorian “monasticism, theology, and mission.” David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books: 1991), 204.

<sup>20</sup>Pierson, 675.

<sup>21</sup>Mingana, 39.

### **Sogdian Nestorian Merchant Missionaries**

The Sogdians were the primary actors in this merchant missionary paradigm of the church in Asia. Foltz considered them to be the middle-men of trade and ideas.<sup>22</sup> “Sogdian merchants were the real masters of the Silk Road, whoever the ephemeral powers of the time might be. Under the rule of their fellow Iranian peoples, the Parthian and the Sasanians, Sogdian merchants moved easily in the Iranian lands to the west, where some of them were won over to the Christian message, just as other Sogdians, active in the former Kushan lands, had embraced Buddhism.”<sup>23</sup>

Admittedly the Sogdians did not persist in their Christian faith. They were attracted to Manichaeism at the same time as Nestorian Christianity. Earlier they had been converts to Buddhism. As Foltz related their shifting faith, he insinuated a naive attitude in the Sogdians towards different faiths. Foltz allowed that the Sogdians never embraced Buddhism as a people, while he insisted that they were the primary Buddhist messengers east of their land.<sup>24</sup> If the Sogdians adopted Christianity in the late second century, the time during which an ancient Syriac document was written attesting to the presence of Christians among the Bactarians,<sup>25</sup> their Nestorian baptism came at least four hundred years after their encounter with Buddhism. They remained a Christian people until the eighth century, when they turned to Islam.<sup>26</sup> The Sogdians could have been a Christian people for between five and six hundred years. While their later

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<sup>22</sup>Foltz, 12-13.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 68.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>25</sup>Mingana, 7.

<sup>26</sup>Foltz, 15.

abandonment of Christianity was complete, they were hardly flippant believers. Before their conversion to Islam, the Sogdians, because of their trade relations, were well situated to carry the Christian gospel along the trade routes of Asia.

The commerce of the Sogdians benefitted from a system of trails and roads which crisscrossed Asia. This system of overland trade routes was later called the Silk Roads. These itineraries were so denominated because of the predominance of the silk trade on these roads which connected Rome and China. The Nestorians established their churches in towns that lined these roads.

While there is much to contrast between Western and Eastern missions, they shared one common element: Antioch. Antioch was connected to the Roman Roads and the Silk Roads. From Antioch, Paul traveled into Asia Minor or Europe by traveling on Roman Roads, or by boarding a Roman ship. Nestorian missionaries, from Antioch, took the Silk Roads into Asia.

Foltz considered the Sogdians to be the most successful merchants of Asian trade and as such, “the major link connecting East and West.”<sup>27</sup> Their ability to transmit the story of Christ, while they caravanned across Asia, was enhanced by their language, Sogdian. Sogdian was the Greek language of Asia. As the lingua franca for trade relations, Sogdian was the language of choice for the merchant missionaries as they traded their wares and communicated the gospel with their clients and associates.<sup>28</sup> The Sogdians also learned the languages of other Asian peoples as they had opportunity to trade with them. Their language abilities enabled them to serve as interpreters and translators. Sogdians were the primary translators of Buddhist, Christian, and Manichaeistic

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 68. Syriac is often considered the language of the Nestorian church. Foltz explained the difference between Syriac and Sogdian. Syriac served as the language of the priest and Sogdian served as the language of the missionary.

texts. Foltz asserted that Sogdian translators were behind the translations of religious texts “from Indian Prakrits (vernacular dialects), Aramaic, or Parthian into Bactrian, Tokharian, Khotanese, Turkish, or Chinese, either via Sogdian or directly.”<sup>29</sup> These merchant missionaries were ideally suited for cross-cultural ministry because of their language skills.

### **Training Nestorian Merchant Missionaries**

Nestorian merchant missionaries benefitted equally from the training they received in Nestorian monasteries. The Nestorians had two primary schools, one at Edessa and the other at Arbel. Edessa’s importance to Nestorian missions is unquestionable. Adolf Harnack, in *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, described it as the headquarters of Nestorian missions and the nucleus of Syrian Christianity in the third century. From Edessa, Syrian Christian literature was disseminated. The Christian population even exceeded every other city of its day prior to Constantine. But it was no more than “an oasis.” Harnack believed that “round it swarmed the heathen.”<sup>30</sup>

East of the Tigris, Arbel was the second missionary center. It was the capital of the province of Adiabene. Mingana located the origin of the church’s spread deeper into Asia at Arbel. He proposed that the missionary significance of neither city paled in light of the other city.<sup>31</sup> Nestorians were trained for three years in one of these schools, after which they departed to carry

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<sup>29</sup>Foltz, 13. Foltz related how Nestorian missionaries of Persia taught the Turks the art of writing. Foltz, 69.

<sup>30</sup>Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. James Moffatt (New York: Williams and Norgate, 1905), 294.

<sup>31</sup>Mingana, 5-6.

the message of Christ to the ends of the earth. Some established new monasteries in the lands of their sojourn.<sup>32</sup> The new monasteries became new Nestorian training centers.

These monasteries were the educational institutions for Nestorian children and youths. The primary subject of these schools was the Scriptures. While these schools were tuition free, per se, the parents were expected to provide a portion of the Nestorian monks' compensation. The students sought employment during their summer vacations to provide for themselves.<sup>33</sup> Future merchant missionaries were among the students in such schools. Aspiring merchants "were expected to study the Psalms, the New Testament, and to attend courses of lectures before entering on a business career."<sup>34</sup>

### **Ascetic Nestorian Merchant Missionaries**

As merchants, the Nestorian Christians sought to maintain lucrative businesses. The future of their work and their own livelihoods depended upon profitable trades. Their desire for material gain must have been counterbalanced by the ascetism of their school masters, the Nestorian monks. Alphonse Mingana related the tale of the Bishop of Arran who was accompanied by four presbyters and two laymen to the country of the Turks. They began their journey after the bishop had received a commission in a vision to evangelize Byzantine prisoners. Their daily rations

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<sup>32</sup>Stewart attested to the presence of "hundreds of monasteries in the land of Persia." Stewart, 46.

<sup>33</sup>Stewart, 37.

<sup>34</sup>Assemmani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 3, pt 2 : 941, quoted in Stewart, 39.

consisted of a loaf of bread and a jar of water for each.<sup>35</sup> The merchants and missionaries who traveled the roads of Asia had to be accustomed to surviving on such meager sustenance.

The merchants would join a caravan for the trip to distant markets. Caravan members enjoyed a degree of safety due to the size of the traveling entourage and due to an eventual military escort. The caravan's professional guides knew the optimum routes for each journey.<sup>36</sup> Caravans still did not provide a trip of leisure. Merchant missionaries who were acquainted with the asceticism of a Nestorian monk possessed the stamina to survive the journey.

Often one may associate isolation from the activities and cares of the world with the life of the ascetic. If Samuel Hugh Moffett is correct, this impression originated from the reputation of the Egyptian ascetic, not the Nestorian ascetic missionary. In contrast to the ascetic tradition of Egypt, Moffett explained, "Syria . . . , with its travel and trading traditions, stressed mobility and outreach. Its ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor, and preaching the gospel as they moved from place to place."<sup>37</sup> Such missionaries brought the gospel to the Asian peoples of their age.

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<sup>35</sup>Mingana, "Early Spread of Christianity," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 : 303, quoted in Stewart, 81-82.

<sup>36</sup>Foltz, 9.

<sup>37</sup>Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1992), 77-78. Bosch also contrasted Nestorian missionary asceticism with Egyptian isolated asceticism. Bosch, 204.

## Nestorian Merchant Missionaries and Today's Unreached People Groups of Asia

Mingana argued that the Persian missionaries, many of whom were merchants, worked to thoroughly convert the peoples they encountered. He wrote, "From the third century down to the time of Chingis [*sic*] Khan, the activity of the East-Syrian and Persian converts to Christianity slowly but surely worked to diminish the immense influence of the priests of the hundred and one cults of Central Asia, the most important of whom were the mobeds of Zoroastrianism and the wizards of Shamanism."<sup>38</sup> Foltz concurred that Christianity in Central Asia was "on the verge of displacing Zoroastrianism, on the popular level."<sup>39</sup> A Muslim scholar of the eleventh century, Abu Rayhan Biruni, wrote that "the majority of the inhabitants of Syria, Iraz, and Khurasan [were] Nestorians."<sup>40</sup> The Nestorians, at least before their decline, would not blend elements of their Christianity with those of another faith. When the Nestorians met these peoples, they sought to win them to Christianity.

### **The Keraites**

The ancestors of the Uighurs were one of the peoples among whom the Nestorians worked when their church spread across Asia. They live today in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region in Northwest China. The Nestorian missionaries, while working in Central Asia, worked among the Turkic Kerait tribe, the ancestors of the Uighurs.

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<sup>38</sup>Mingana, 5.

<sup>39</sup>Foltz, 66-67.

<sup>40</sup>Abu Rayhan Biruni, *Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. E. Sachau (Lahore: Hijra International, 1983), 282; quoted in Foltz, 67.

In 1007 C.E., the ruler of the nomadic Keraites was hunting at a high altitude and was surprised by a sudden snowstorm. He lost all hope of returning to his camp. While despairing, he saw a vision of a saint, who said to him, “If you believe in Christ, I will lead you to the right direction, and you will not die here.” He gave his allegiance to Christ. After regaining his camp, he summoned the Nestorian merchants who were also in the camp, to seek their advice concerning Christianity. They emphasized his need to be baptized and they gave him one of the Gospels, which he read on a daily basis. They also taught him the Lord’s prayer. The Kerait chief requested that a priest be sent to his tribe to baptize him and the two hundred thousand souls who had followed him to faith in Christ.<sup>41</sup> Moffett asserted that “during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the whole tribe was considered Christian.”<sup>42</sup> Of the Keraites, Paul E. Pierson stated that “in the eighth century their language was reduced to writing.” He does not say it explicitly, but the scriptures may have been translated, knowing the practice of the Nestorians. Pierson goes on to say that this “was passed to the Mongols.”<sup>43</sup> He alluded certainly to the Kerait orthography, and perhaps to the scriptures as well.

### **The Taklimakan Uighur and Lop Uighur**

The Taklimakan Uighur and the Uighur Lop Nur are two other unreached people groups of East Asia. They too were in contact with the Nestorians. The latter are descendants of the “ancient Loulan people,” who lived at the Lake Lop Nur. When it dried up, they had to move to

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<sup>41</sup>This story is recorded in a 1009 C.E. letter written by a Nestorian metropolitan to the Nestorian Patriarch, John. Mingana, 14-16. See also Foltz, 70.

<sup>42</sup>Moffett, 400.

<sup>43</sup>Pierson, 675.

Miran. Their contact with the gospel was through the Nestorian missionaries who “established churches in the villages along the Silk Road” between the eighth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>44</sup> The Taklimakan Uighur live today as a remote tribe in the Taklimakan Desert. Until 1990, when they were “discovered,” they had lived in isolation for 350 years. Soon after their discovery, Nestorian manuscripts were uncovered nearby in the Dunhuang Oasis. At some point the inhabitants of this region, if not the ancestors of today’s Taklimakan Uighur, were in the proximity of Nestorian missionaries. Today though, they are “the epitome of an unevangelized people group.”<sup>45</sup>

### **Other People Groups**

Nestorian missionaries, whether lay or clergy, influenced other people groups who are considered to be unreached today. The reader has already met the missionary band of a bishop, four presbyters, and two laymen who subsisted on a loaf of bread and a jar of water each day and preached the gospel to Byzantine prisoners, who were among the Turks. Nestorian missionaries evangelized the Mongols, the You Tai, the Central Tibetans, and the Sarikoli Tajiks. The Mongols at times were on the verge of embracing Christianity as a tribe. Nestorian missionaries won many Mongol converts between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. You Tai are Chinese Jews, who migrated to China between 500 and 1000 C.E. When Marco Polo passed through China, he found them among Nestorian Christians.<sup>46</sup> Concerning another group, the Nestorian patriarch in Baghdad, Timothy (778-820), referred to the presence of Christians in Tibet and

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<sup>44</sup>Paul Hattaway, *Operation China: Introducing all the Peoples of China* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2000), 529.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 530.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 363, 564.

expressed his willingness to send a missionary to them.<sup>47</sup> And finally, today's Sarikoli Tajiks are descendants of the Persians. Before the arrival of Islam in the tenth century, most Persians were Christians.<sup>48</sup> Are Sarikoli Tajiks the sons and daughters of these missionaries who originally brought the gospel to the peoples of Asia?

#### Nestorian Merchant Missionaries and Post-Christian Peoples

One result of recognizing the significance of the work of Nestorian missionaries in Asia, whether they were clergy or merchants, is that the church of today is returning to where it was once planted. Based on the preceding examples of peoples reached by the Nestorians, these peoples are post-Christian, even if ancient post-Christian. The criteria of apocalyptic group representation is met, as is the criteria of group accountability.

#### **The Criteria for Missions to Unreached People Groups**

Paul Hattaway used these two criteria as he presented a case for the nearly 500 unreached people groups that he catalogued in *Operation China*. He first established that when Christ commanded the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations,”<sup>49</sup> the Lord envisioned the nations to be the ethnolinguistic people groups of the world. Hattaway then considered the scene

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<sup>47</sup>Arthur Christopher Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo: The Description of the World*, 2 Vols. (London: Routledge, 1938), 143; quoted in Hattaway, *Operation China*, 511.

<sup>48</sup>Hattaway, 498.

<sup>49</sup>Mt 28:19.

in Revelation of a multitude present before the throne of Christ from “every tribe, tongue, and nation.”<sup>50</sup> He stated:

If the ultimate aim of God is to redeem individuals from among every ethnic and linguistic representation of humankind on the earth, then everything must be done to learn who those people are so that the church may do everything in their power to see them won for Christ. This appears to be of such importance in the Scriptures that the final sign of the imminent Second Coming of Christ is linked to the completion of this task: “And this gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations (*ethnae*), and then the end will come.”<sup>51</sup>

Hattaway began with the necessity that the gospel be announced, so as to insure the comprehensive representation of all peoples before the throne of Christ. He established next the accountability criteria for the preaching of the kingdom. After the gospel has been preached as a testimony to an ethnolinguistic people group, the group becomes responsible for how it responds to the gospel.<sup>52</sup> He concluded, “In places like China there are whole races of people who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel. Not only are these lost individuals, but they are lost ethnic representations of humankind.”<sup>53</sup>

Hattaway pled with Christians to recognize the value that each of these peoples has in “God’s sight.” And rightly so. However, because of what has now been demonstrated, to say that some of

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<sup>50</sup>Rev. 5:9, 7:9. While conference participants and the writer discussed the themes raised in this paper at the South Central Regional meeting of the EMS in New Orleans, March 12, 2005, Mike Pocock astutely observed that in Rev. 7:9 the apocalyptic seer referred to the redeemed representatives of the world’s people groups who came “out of the great tribulation.” The writer afterwards added the reference to Rev. 5:9, for this multitude “from every tribe and language and people and nation” is the universal collective of men and women whom the Lamb purchased with his blood.

<sup>51</sup>Hattaway, 6.

<sup>52</sup>Mt 24:14.

<sup>53</sup>Hattaway, 6.

these ethnic groups are without representation before the throne of God is difficult to defend. For one, a number of these groups were reached at some point in time. Second, the criteria of accountability also has been fulfilled as the gospel was preached “as a testimony” to some of these groups, or at least to their ancestors.

### **Ancient and Recent Post-Christian Peoples**

Having recognized the contribution made by the Nestorian merchant missionaries to insure the representation of the peoples of Asia before Christ’s throne and their accountability for the gospel, the first needed adjustment is with terminology. Some of these peoples must no longer be considered pre-Christian, at least based on how these passages in Matthew have been understood and how “nation” has been defined. According to this understanding, some of the groups must at least be seen as ancient post-Christian. The church is now going back to this continent to evangelize these groups again because of how precious they are in the “sight of God,” to borrow Hattaway’s words.

Denominating these groups as ancient post-Christian will enable a more instructive comparison to be made with the recent post-Christian people of the West. Christianity in a civilization once known as Christendom is in the process of waning, as happened to the Nestorian Church in Asia. Perhaps this deChristianization is happening for similar reasons. Future study based on a recognition of the similarities between the two situations will facilitate a better understanding of the scriptural mandate for missions on one hand, and a more realistic understanding of the history of the expansion of Christianity on the other. Post-Christian peoples must be understood in light of the scriptures. What missionary mandate remains for them?

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