Asia's Forgotten Christian Story by Steve Cochrane is a book dedicated to Christian-Muslim relations by studying Christian and Muslim sources on monastic activity in Mesopotamia and other regions in ninth-century Asia, at the time of the first 100 years of the Abbasid Caliphate rule when new restrictions were imposed on the practice of Christian faith. The exploration is done solely through the lenses of the Church of the East, a Church related to the Nestorian controversy over the unity of the divine and the human in Christ, also known as *Nestorian heresy* in the Christian theological doctrine. If the reader has no background on this theological landmark in the history of Christian doctrine, the book's subtitle *Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth century Asia* might be of limited help to clarify its non-orthodox perspective. Nonetheless, the book's thematic dedication to the monastic mission of the Assyrian Church of the East (i.e. Nestorian or East Syrian Church) is more specifically situated in the Introduction, relative both to its opposition to the *Miaphysite* or West Syrian Church, and to its new relations with the Catholic Church due to the common Christological document agreed upon by the Church of the East and the representatives of the Catholic Church during the Pontificate of John Paul II in 1994. The positioning relative to the Eastern Orthodox Christianity is not given. It is stated that *western scholarship* at times ignored or dismissed the Church's history in Asia as the story of a heretical church. It is then claimed without much elaboration, that the Church of the East Christological position is "consistent with the stance of Antioch" (p.2) but is an attempt, in author's terms, to articulate the mystery of the divinity and humanity of Christ in different "linguistic and theological terms" (ibid).

One could argue that this initial scarcity of detailed, accurate and in-depth historical and theological notation is irrelevant as the book concerns a particular period of Christian-Muslim relations and aims to contribute to the "larger history and future of these relations" (p.6). We will come to this seeming irrelevance later.

Pointing correctly that monastic activity in mission was taking place not only before and after Islam in Arabia and West Asia but also further east as well, the monastic mission is presented through various sources (letters, witnessing, poetry and reflections by Muslim authors, Islamic writings about Christian monasteries, *d'rasa*/debate, including a collection of graffiti verses, ascetic cannons), yet scantily and superficially: from a purely reader's perspective it offers bits and pieces of information which present the various aspects of monastic mission in a somewhat *bricolage* form, as each short chapter can be approached in

no necessary (reading) order.

On one hand, the impression of a bricolage compilation of sources might be simply due to the fact that *Asia's Forgotten Christian Story* is abridged version of *Many Monks across the Sea: Church of the East Monastic Mission in Ninth century Asia*, by the same author. On another hand, this might be 'welcome' by some as it exhorts no exigent commitment on reader's side, conveying nevertheless the message that these sources indicate a certain level of readership, interest and importance of the monasteries for the Arabs both before and after Islam made its appearance. The book argues for the commitment of the Church of the East to scholarship in monastic collections and teaching or translating activity. Hence, it emphasizes the strategic importance of the Beit Abhe Monastery located on a mountainside about 80 km north-east of the modern Iraqi city of Mosul, and the various historical figures that extend up to and after the ninth century, including patriarchs, rabbanim, caliphs and monks, such as Thomas of Marga, a former member of Beit Abhe himself. Muslims are presented through these sources sometimes as commending Christian faith (and even conferring benefits on churches and monasteries), sometimes more ambiguously which only reflects the otherwise known unpredictable relation between different faiths. Attention is given to monastic settlements from the sixth, seventh and eighth century, unearthed in the last sixty years at places like the island of Kharg and other locations in the Persian Gulf on the *sea* route to India and China, all of which are taken to indicate another level of the witnessing of faith.

It might be easy to agree with the author's claim that in inter-faith relations today, it is imperative to find new/old paradigms for strengthening dialogue and relationship, and that perhaps through a re-birth and renewal of Christian monasticism in Islamic countries, new bridges could be built. But it is hard to understand how the hospitality, humility, obedience, daily liturgy and monastics' non-intrusive witnessing of faith goes along with the claim that "[m]onasteries were places that Muslims visited, wrote about, and made the place of the forbidden 'other' where their imagined (and perhaps at times real) desires for wine and illicit sex could be fulfilled" (p.68)? The reader is given a displaced and everything but syllogistic conclusion, not only in terms of the presented material but in terms of the Christian ascetic anthropology. One is therefore left wondering whether this was the "Asia's forgotten story" we should have been told, and if so, why and in what sense is it called Christian? Earlier, the author presents a Muslim literature source that the he himself

classifies as "quaint and strange" (p.50), attributing it to a "young tenth-century man from Bagdad" (ibid), a source that evidently speaks more about its writer's longings than about monasteries or the foundations, practice and aim of a monastic life. The reader might be bewildered as elsewhere the author emphasizes the life of sacrifice which involved "virginity and holiness, two qualities important to East Syrian monastic identity […], affirmed in the daily practice of the liturgy" (p.9), but does not openly bring side-by-side the contradiction of this argument when monastic life is presented in Muslim literature. Instead, we are given an elaboration on how these sources could have been read by Muslims, when we read again "[w]hether viewing the beautiful gardens, sampling the home-grown vineyard wine, or indulging in erotic adventures in imagination or reality, the monastery and monastic activities in Muslim literature became an example of Christian 'otherness'" (p.53).

Readers expecting a work that articulates a vision through operating on the broad, macro-level of theological context and principles of praxis will be frustrated. The author makes an effort to present eleven canonical monastic rules which centered on the disciplines of prayer, fasting, silence, laid down by "Abraham who founded the monastery of Mount Izla in the sixth century" (p.36), but even though they are recognized as "[…]the foundations for spiritual strength needed for mission assignments […]" (p.38), they are only briefly enumerated. Hence, in its focus (both legitimate and important focus) on showing that mission and monasticism are not mutually exclusive, what the book does not vividly convey is the *core* of the ascetic life for a Christian monk and nun: his and her prayer. This is where we come full circle to the initial point on the relevance of nuances and accurate in-depth theological information, even more so when discussing Christian-Muslim relations.

If we want to promote greater Christian-Muslim understanding, we need to acknowledge the very real, *fundamental* differences in Christian and Islamic theologies and *accept* these differences, not eradicate them, for they *cannot* be expunged (not even those *within* Christianity), unless one promotes the supposedly 'peaceful', yet eroding solvent of ecumenism, instead of a dialogue truly respectful of differences. It is therefore imperative not to downplay first of all the broad, but distinctive theological teachings of Christianity, and what follows are only few reflections in light of the author's claim for the need to strengthen 'dialogue' between faiths. The incarnation of God, the concrete existence of Christ, of the (fully) divine and (fully) human nature in one person, is absolutely central to Christianity. Christians believe that Jesus *is* God, God made flesh (i.e. in time). Christians

also believe that Jesus is God's Son (consubstantial with God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, and thus eternal, i.e. the doctrine of the Trinity). God's Son incarnated (as Ἰησοῦς Χριστός) and moreover *resurrected* after being crucified, is not only the core of Christians' faith and hope of salvation, but evidently a complex theological creed, for it took the early Christians several centuries (through the seven ecumenical councils) to explicate and protect the very concept of *orthodoxy* (specific only to the Eastern Orthodox Church) on several important and well-known issues. When Islam came along, it explicitly dismissed this witnessing of faith as blasphemy and in this sense, metaphorically speaking, Christians and Muslims are not even 'playing the same game', as what is central creed in one theology is blasphemous in the other. It is another matter that precisely these differences are either incorrectly dismissed and stricken out, or misused for *political* or other purposes to attain everything but an engaged dialogue affirming of *differences* that exist and *cannot* be neglected or disregarded not even *within* Christianity, for orthodoxy is not called orthodoxy by chance.

As for the Nestorian Christology, about one hundred new fragments found in the Syrian-monophysitic literature collected in Friedrich Loof's edition of the *Nestoriana* in 1905, or the discovery in 1889 of the Syriac translation of Nestorius' *Bazaar of Heracleides*, edited by a Syrian Catholic scholar Paul Bedjan in 1910, show that the meaning that one gives to terms such as *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *physis*, *prosopon*, was a major point of contention. In fact, Nestorius rejected the term *Theotokos* (i.e. Birth-giver of God) used for the Holy Mother. This 'simple' fact is not however a matter of meaning and discourse, or a 'controversy', but a dogmatic heresy and *on its own* – with no additional syllogistic rigmarole – makes questionable and incoherent any claim (as one can hear in some modern theological interpretations) that Nestorius never denied the divinity and humanity of Christ. One either believes that *God* was born in human flesh (i.e. in time) of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, or one does not; there are no fifty dogmatic shades of grammatical coextensive grey in between. You therefore either call a Birth-giver of God for what She is, a *Theotokos*, or you don't, as rejecting the only rightful term does not 'protect' presumably naïve people from 'heretically' worshiping *Her*, but dishonours Truth (in the face of Χριστός) and Her *core* identity. A (Nestorian or other) heresy is unbefitting not only dogmatically, but also eschatologically: the both divine and human nature of Christ would not have been so opaque should faith had its *aim* in logic.

What makes the birth of Исус Христос (gr. Ἰησοῦς Χριστός) as God's Son born in actual

time and not only before time so thick for contemplation, is less obsolete for a heartful theanthropic gaze (gr. ἐν Θεώ), by *living* the beauty of human life as a renewed possibility to participate fully in God's life. The monastics of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, *take this possibility seriously*, by living through and with the Holy Apostolic Church the *fullness* of Christian life in each and every of the Christian virtues, incessantly, as if, *resting* prayerfully in Христос (in His very concrete name) and also being united with Him Eucharistically. The coenobitic 'desert' or the monastery is therefore a place of *nepsis* and hesychastic life, just as of 'mission', even if the neptic work is *presupposed* in any contribution to the world. The impetus of asceticism may appear to be world denying, but its essence, on the contrary, is *restorative*, therapeutic. Thus, they turn *ever again* by Grace and toil towards a Holy communion, a theanthropic community with, through and in the *Resurrected* Χριστός, which is impossible (and meaningless) without the pure and purified repentant 'water' of the monastics' transformative change of heart (gr. μετάνοια) in the personal here-and-now. The discourse on mission from this *lived*, alive position or lived theanthropic *vision* grows naturally and does not preclude a straightforward conversation about *indispensable* differences relative to other faiths or other 'choices' (gr. αἵρεσῐς, *hairesis* as one's take), which cannot be 'brushed away' even while leaving the fine line between orthodoxy and heresy to the Holy Church Fathers (rather than to 'cathedra' theologians). For today, not compromising it in our practice, on political or other grounds, is a rarity.