
Chorbishop Seely Joseph Beggiani gives an overview of the theology and practices of the Syriac tradition of Christianity in his book Early Syriac Theology. In recent years, the history and practices of Christians from the Near East have come into the public sphere. Beggiani provides a useful primer to serve as an introduction to the Syriac tradition for academics and non-academics to learn more about the tradition. Beggiani attempts to demonstrate two things within his book. First, he attempts to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Christian theology, liturgy, and figures that emerged in Syria and the Levant from the second to seventh century, particularly as the Syriac tradition relates to the Greek or Latin traditions (xv). Second, he attempts to demonstrate the diversity within the Syriac tradition itself by highlighting the distinctiveness of the east-Syrian tradition of eastern Syria, northern Iraq, and Persia that would become the Church of the East, the west-Syrian tradition of western Syria that would become the Syriac Orthodox Church, and the Maronite tradition of Lebanon (xviii-xx). Beggiani is successful in his attempts to explain the distinctiveness and diversity both without and within the Syriac tradition, and presents that distinctiveness and diversity in a manner that is accessible to readers, and therefore serves as a helpful introduction to people just entering this field of study.

Beggiani organizes his book into different chapters according to different themes around theology and liturgy. The first few chapters of the book cover a theology on the nature of God and works through soteriology, incarnational theology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, and Mariology. From there, the next few chapters cover liturgical practice and sacramental theology. It ends with chapters on eschatology and faith. Though the themes are still related, the different themes that compose the chapters of the book help us understand where Syriac Christianity is located in the various traditions and spheres of Christianity, and the internal diversity of the tradition itself.

Within his book, Beggiani focuses on the time period of the second century CE to the seventh century CE, which allows him to explore the formation and thought of this distinct tradition before the emergence of Islam in the Near East. This period serves as the foundation and genesis of a tradition that uses Semitic languages like Aramaic and Syriac for its writing and worship rather than Greek or Latin, and a tradition that would grow to have one of the largest missionary fields in antiquity, reaching from Iraq to China. Within that field, there would also be a great deal of diversity as different communities formed in different regions.

In explaining the nature of the Syriac tradition, Beggiani often uses the Greek-speaking Christian communities of the Roman Empire as an interlocutor to show the particularities of the Syriac tradition. He focuses primarily on three areas of dissonance: language, imagery, and discourse. The Christian scriptures that would eventually come to compose the New Testament were written in Greek, and though the Syriac tradition uses the same New Testament canon as the rest of the Christian world, the Syriac tradition locates itself in the Semitic world rather than the Hellenistic world. It is a tradition that connects itself to Jesus and his followers culturally and linguistically by using and speaking the same language of Jesus, Aramaic (xvi, xviii, 53). Specifically, Christians of the Syriac tradition came to use Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic originating from the city of Edessa. The language and culture are significant
because language shapes ideas and concepts that would eventually mark how those ideas are conveyed. Beggiani demonstrates throughout his book how Syriac Christians use Old Testament typology and revelation from nature in their writings to explain their theology, showing how something or someone in the Old Testament served as a precursor to something in the New Testament (33, 37, 96-99). Beggiani contrasts this with how Greek-speaking Christians engaged with Greco-Roman philosophy, and Beggiani further shows the difference between Syriac and Greek Christians by explaining the distrust Syriac Christians at the time had towards Greco-Roman philosophy, which they saw as paganism and the work of the Devil (ix, xvi, 53). Finally, Beggiani makes reference to the tradition of poetry and hymnody that came to dominate the Syriac tradition, which is unique because of its centrality to the catechesis of its members.

Beggiani also tries to explain the distinctiveness of the different branches of the Syriac tradition. Early in his work, Beggiani shows how the effects of the early Christian councils created divisions within the Syriac tradition. Though they were functionally independent by 426, the Council of Ephesus in 431 saw the division of east-Syrian Church of the East from the rest of the Christian movement as it became to be identified with Nestorianism. After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the west-Syrian Syrian Orthodox Church along with a number of other churches divided from the rest of the Christian movement and became what we now know as the Oriental Orthodox Church, which became identified with Miaphysitism. Finally, the Maronite Church is a small body within the Levant that came to accept the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon, and is an Eastern Catholic Church in communion with the Pope of Rome. Where Beggiani spends most of his analysis is on the liturgical distinctions of the different churches. As Beggiani is a Chrobishop within the Maronite Church, he pays particular attention to Maronite liturgical practice, but also includes the practices of the churches of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church. However, his analysis is limited in part because of the limited historical analysis that is done within his work, and it would be helpful to understand these rites and practices if he provided some of the history of these rites and how they may have changed as time went on.

Beggiani is successful in providing an introduction for those seeking to study the Syriac tradition by explaining its distinctiveness and internal diversity to the reader. In a positive way he provides not just the basic information, but also a desire to learn and study more, as the book leaves the reader with questions for which they will hopefully track down answers. Though his work could be strengthened by briefly talking about the contact between Zoroastrians and Christians in the Near-East, this is a relatively minor fault in what is otherwise a very significant book in the field of Syriac studies.

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