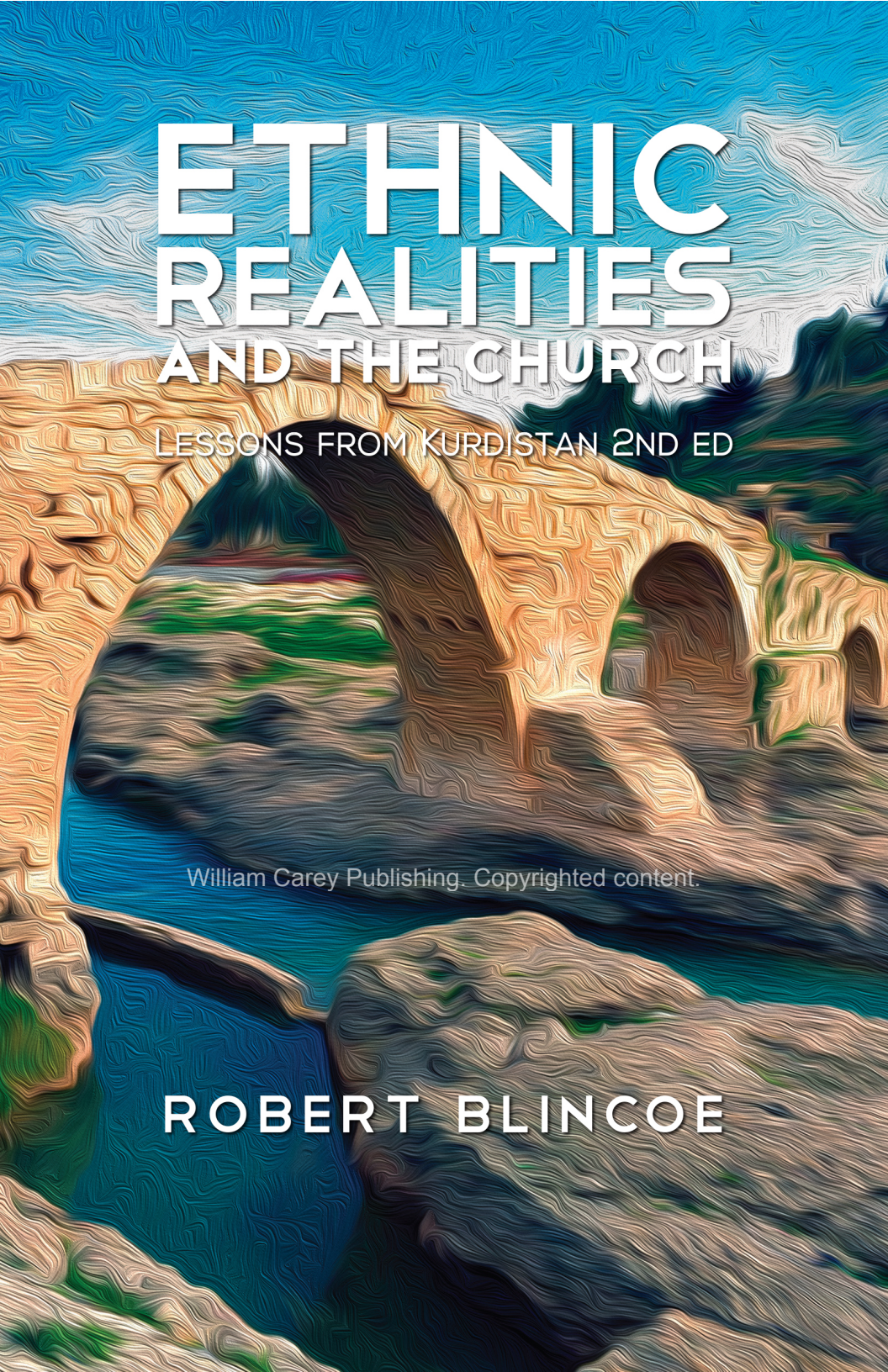

ETHNIC
REALITIES
AND THE CHURCH
LESSONS FROM KURDISTAN 2ND ED
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ROBERT BLINCOE

Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from Kurdistan

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Chapter 1

17th Century Mission in Kurdistan

Missionaries in 17th century Kurdistan needed two months to walk from Mosul to Aleppo. The land is unforgiving; watering stations are still scarce and the weather harsh. Winter winds bite to the bone, and summer heat melts away the senses. For a thousand years caravans moved their goods from west to east and back again along the Silk Road. However, when Vasco da Gama sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, he proved that Portuguese merchants could bypass the petty kingdoms and customs bandits. From that time, the entire profit loaded in Oriental harbors arrived directly in European ports. The middleman lost out; caravans along the Silk Road vanished. Traders no longer passed through the Kurdish region. Commerce stagnated for 450 years; that is, until Western oil interests laid pipelines in the mid-20th century. Caravans again carry commerce through Kurdistan on its way to western consumers.

A Catholic Mission Arrives in Kurdistan

Father Jean-Baptiste of Saint-Aignan walked along this road. Jean-Baptiste was a Capuchin missionary who came to evangelize the Nestorian Christians of western Kurdistan. His experience is

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a distant mirror for those who followed him in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Catholic Mission to the Nestorian Church of the East

What were Jean-Baptiste and other French Catholics doing along this road? In the 17th century, French Catholics built mission stations in Aleppo and Mosul and at points between. They were evangelizing the "heretical Christians." Pope Origen IV had issued a decree in 1437, announcing that Nestorians should be encouraged to become Catholics.[1] Accordingly, papal emissaries began a mission to the Church of the East (Nestorians). Its success was so great that more than half the Nestorian population eventually moved into the Catholic Church.

Catholic Mission to the Armenian Church

The Sultan in Constantinople also granted permission for Catholics to work among Armenians. When Armenians converted to Roman Catholicism, they gained an ally in Europe. According to Martin van Bruinessen, Catholics "succeeded in making converts because the French king had acquired from the Ottoman court the right to protect all the Sultan's Catholic subjects" (1992:24). As we will see, the Armenians and Nestorians hoped more than once for a strong Christian partner to free them from Muslim domination and return to them their independent kingdom. Desire for a strong ally has caused the ethnic Christians in the Near East to convert to the religion of the missionary, whether French (17th century) American (19th century) or Russian (20th century). One must understand the vulnerable position of the ethnic Christians; their land was criss-crossed by invading Byzantines, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, Kurds, and Russians. Accordingly, the number one foreign policy goal of Christian tribes has been to seek a strong ally.

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1 The rift traces to the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431.

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Medical Work Opens a Door

The Catholics built stations in Aleppo and Mosul to serve their growing mission to these historical churches. One day Jean-Baptiste walked on this road; he was stopped by Kurds from Diyarbakir. Their pasha and his brother were both ill, and would the foreigner please come to examine him. Jean-Baptiste turned north to Diyarbakir and visited the sick men. For several weeks, Jean-Baptiste attended to their needs. The pasha and his brother revived. As a reward, the pasha granted permission for Catholics to open a mission station to the Nestorians in Diyarbakir. As we will see, the healing art often opened the door to Christian mission in Kurdistan.

Father Jean-Baptiste came to Kurdistan from Tours, France (Guest 1993:53). He was a monk of unusual determination. As we will see, only missionaries of indissuadable resolve stayed in Kurdistan.

In 1668 the Pope appointed Jean-Baptiste as custodian of all the Capuchin missionaries in the Near East. In that same year, Jean-Baptiste received news that Yezidi Kurds near Aleppo had contacted his mission, and were inquiring into the Christian faith. He went to look for himself.

Catholic Mission to Yezidi Kurds

Armenians initially supported a Catholic outreach to Yezidi Kurds[2] near Aleppo. The Armenians introduced one Father Justinien to the Yezidi chiefs. Justinien "was fluent in Arabic and knew some Kurdish" (Guest 1993:53). He and Jean-Baptiste spent several days with the Yezidis. The missionaries decided "that the Yezidis were sincere, and persuaded them that the Pope was the true father of all Christians" (1993:53). The Yezidis invited Justinien to visit their community the following week.

When Justinien arrived, large crowds of very excited Yezidis greeted them:

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2 Yezidi Kurds are not Muslims. Their religion existed in pre-Islamic Kurdistan. The subject of Yezidi religion is outside the scope of this book. Refer to Guest, Izady, or Kreyenbroek for more information on this colorful people.

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> They brought sheep to be slaughtered before him to the music of flutes, tambourines, kettledrums and lutes. The women, dressed in their finest clothes, emerged from black tents with shrill cries of joy. The celebration lasted several days, with ceremonial dances in honour of the Pope, the king of France, the French consul and the Capuchin mission (Guest 1993:54).

Justinien reported that everyone—sheikhs, the black-robed priests and the tribesmen—wanted to learn about Christianity. John Guest writes,

> Plans were made to hold a mass with kettledrums and tambourines in the ruined basilica of St. Simeon Stylites. . . . The Yezidis satisfied Pére Justinien that they did not worship the devil and that their refusal to curse him was part of a general rule that none of God's creatures should be cursed (1993:54).

"I Thought I Was Seeing a Dream"

Justinien himself was overcome with joy: "When I saw their eagerness to draw to the bosom of the church, their tears and their affection, I thought I was seeing a dream rather than reality" (Guest 1993:54). He celebrated Latin Mass for the Yezidis, evidently translated by three Armenian lay brothers. At the conclusion of worship the missionaries baptized two Yezidi sheikhs and gave them new names, Peter and Paul. One Yezidi tribesman recalled a tradition that his people descended from some old crusaders who fled to the mountains after the fall of Antioch (1993:54). "The only jarring note came from the Armenians, who persisted in fishing despite the Yezidis' plea to spare the hallowed animal lives" (1993:54). Catholic missionaries baptized thirteen Yezidis in the coming months. But serious opposition to the Yezidi mission was about to begin.

Armenian Church Turns against the Mission to the Kurds

More Yezidi chiefs sent invitations to meet the Capuchins; hopes ran high that a movement to Christian faith was imminent. However, at this point disgruntled Armenians put a stop to the movement. Guest explains,

> the Armenians who had originally introduced Father Justinien to the Yezidis now turned against him. They prevailed upon his

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> prospective guide to complain that the missionary had usurped the functions of their chief and that the tribesmen would prefer to deal with one of the other orders. The Carmelites rejected the proposal but the Jesuits, who had targeted the Yezidis as prospects eighteen years before, offered to help. . . . The Armenians hinted that a subsidy to their Yezidi friends would be very acceptable [if the Jesuits wanted to win Yezidi loyalty?] (1987:52).

Failure of the Yezidi Mission

The Yezidi mission failed because of jealousy from the Armenians. Having taken cover in the palace of King Louis, the newly Catholic Armenians closed the door behind them; no Kurds would be allowed the same protection. As we will see, the Armenian church often opposed a mission to the Kurds.

Secondly, the mission failed because the Catholic orders competed with one another:

> The ensuing dispute was finally resolved by the French consul, who ruled that any missionary endeavor involving actual or potential money payments should be approved by all three missions [Carmelite, Jesuit, Capuchin]—thereby *suspending all further work among the local Yezidis* (Guest 1993:55, italics mine).

As we will see, competition among missions has greatly injured the mission work in Kurdistan.

"The Hour Has Not Yet Come"

In 1679 a Parisian named M. Pierre Dupont established a fund for further mission work among the Yezidis. However, the missionaries sent out met with no success; the French Catholics decided "that the hour for the conversion of this unhappy people was not yet come. . . . They returned, shaking the dust off their shoes" (Guest 1993:58). As we will see, the missionaries have felt more than once the need to wait for the timing of God to begin a mission to the Kurds.

Catholics Continue Their Mission to the Christians

Meanwhile, the Catholic mission to the Church of the East continued with results. Dominicans actively proselytized Nestorians in Amadia, northern Iraq, from 1759 to 1779. As we will see,

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