

The Voice of the Syriacs

IMPRINT

Information bulletin about the social position of the Syriacs in and outside the Middle East. It appears periodically, published by the European Syriac Union (ESU) in Brussels-Belgium.

Contact:

Phone: 0032 2 523 4181
 Fax: 0032 2 523 6201
 Internet: www.esu.cc
 e-mail: contact@esu.cc

Address:

European Syriac Union
 Rue Bara 152
 1070 Brussels
 Belgium

Chairman: Mr. Iskender Alptekin

e-mail: iskender.alptekin@esu.cc

Deputy Chair: Mr. Fikri Aygur

e-mail: fikri.aygur@esu.cc

Secretary: Mrs. Rima Tüzün

e-mail: rima.tuezuen@esu.cc

Treasurer: Mr. Tuma Çelik

e-mail: tuma.celik@esu.cc

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First Syriac Orthodox bishop for Belgium and France

In the second week of February 2006, His Holiness Moran Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, Patriarch of Antioch for the Syriac Orthodox Church in the world, was in Brussels-Belgium for the consecration of the first Syriac bishop for Belgium and France.

Indeed on Sunday morning, February 12th 2006, His Holiness has ordained the monk Hazail Soumi as bishop - Mor Severius - for the Syriac community of Belgium and France. The ceremony occurred in the big and famous Basilique of Koekelberg in Brussels. Many representatives were presents. The embassy of Syria in Belgium, the representative of the Catholic Church in Belgium and the representative of the Greek Orthodox Church in Belgium, among others were attending the consecration. The Basilique was full of Syriac Orthodox Church members from Belgium and France of course but also from other European countries.

His Holiness the bishop Mor Severius has studied in Syria before coming in Belgium in the 80ies in Belgium where he obtained many diplomas. Finally he did also study at the Sorbonne in France.

The Syriac community count about 15000 members in Belgium and France altogether. In Belgium the first Syriacs came in the end of the 70ies. Now they are about 12000 Syriacs. Almost all of them have the Belgian nationality and have very well integrated the Belgian society. The same is applicable for the Syriacs in France where they are fewer in number. About 10000 Syriacs are living in Brussels; the rest is living mainly in Liège.



In France, the Syriacs are about 3000 people. Half of them are living in the suburb of Paris and the rest are spread all over the country.

In August 26th 2005, the Syriacs have introduced a request under the name of the Aramean community to the formal Minister of Justice, which is also the Minister for the Cult (religion), for the official recognition of Syriac Church of Antioch.

In February 2006, following a plenary meeting in the Belgian Senate, another Minister confirmed that the request is being examined by the cabinet of Minister of the Justice.

It is most probable that the consecration of the monk Hazail Soumi as bishop Mor Severius will help the recognition of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Belgium.

We wish a lot of success to the bishop Mor Severius Hazail Soumi and we are convinced he will contribute to the promotion and the recognition of the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Syriac community in Belgium and France.

Thus step by step the Syriac community is organising itself to get closer to the European structures and to work closely with the European Member States institutions as well as the European Institutions.

This is also one of the main goals of the European Syriac Union (ESU).



European Syriac Union



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Newsletter

The Voice of the Syriacs

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Chairman`s Message

The cartoon drawings of the Prophet Mohammed that were published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten have stirred the Western world and the Muslim countries and caused some brutal incidents. The publication of the drawings is perceived by the Western countries as freedom of expression and democracy. However, among the Muslims the publication of the drawings of the Prophet Mohammed is perceived as a major insult and an offence to the Islamic faith. As a result, Muslims from various countries around the world have reacted, in order to express their anger, by attacking the European Embassies. Also, some organizations, circles and countries seized the opportunity to manipulate the feelings of their people in order to promote the hatred and abhorrence against the West and feed the anti-western organizations.



As a result of such incidents, the Syriacs and the other Christian people who live in the Middle East have always been subjected to severe aggressions.

As a reaction to the drawings of the Prophet Mohammed the first attacks of bombings were committed on 29.01.2006 Sunday around 16.30 pm, against the Catholic Church of Virgin Mary and the Syriac Orthodox Church in Kerkuk, the Septi Church in Nidhal quarter, Syriac Orthodox St. Paul and St. Peter Church in Sinaa quarter, the Assyrian St. Shmuni Church in Dora quarter and the Syriac Catholic St. Joseph Church in Bunuk quarter in Baghdad. Consequently, 3 people died and 9 others were severely injured, and as a result of these attacks the church buildings were seriously damaged.

Also, the reactions in Turabdin were expressed with a two-day long event of marching demonstration. A crowd of more than 2000 people marched from Estel in the direction of Midyat. Due to the necessary security measures being taken, the Syriacs were not attacked. However, the Syriac people were deeply worried, because the Syriacs and the other Christian people of the Middle East have always been defenseless and subject to acts of aggression.

The publication of the cartoon drawings of Mohammed, the prophet of the Muslim world, has angered and hurt the Muslim masses. This anger is released with violent attacks that are carried out against our innocent people. We, therefore, profoundly condemn these attacks. I would like to inform you that the Syriacs and the other people who belong to the Christian faith in the Middle East, where the tension is continually raising, are living in a great danger and anxiety. Accordingly, the attention and the concern of the Western world in dealing with these threats is of vital importance.

Sincerely yours,

Iskender Alptekin

The effect of the cartoon drawings reached Midyat

More than two thousand fanatic Muslims marched towards Midyat, which is the central town of the Syriacs living in the South East of Turkey, on 10-11 February 2006, in a demonstration against the cartoon drawings of Mohammed that were published in Denmark. The demonstration was organized by the Selahaddin Eyyubi Association and started after the Friday prayers. The demonstrators shouted slogans against the USA and Israel and they burned the Danish Flag.

against the Christian Syriacs in Midyat who were extraneous and unconnected to the conflict. The Muslims who came from the surrounding villages were led by the



The security forces did not prevent this unlawful demonstration; however, they provided protection for the Syriac Churches. The direction of the parade was from Estel, the Muslim area of Midyat towards Midyat, where the Syriacs live. A group of the followers of Selahaddin Eyyubi, who defeated and expelled the Western Christians from the Middle East during the Crusades era, were leading the marchers whilst riding horses and carrying green flags representing the Islam.

state officials and they attacked the Syriacs.

40 years on, today, we witness the same situation again, the problems faced in this area and their governing mentality is still unchanged. The spread of the fanaticism that is flourishing in the Middle East to Turkey is the main indication of an eminent danger. Thus, the lives of the Christians who live in Turkey is in danger. An illustrative example of this situation is the murder of the Catholic Priest Andrea Sentore. As a result of these developments of aggression the Syriacs living in the South East of Turkey are very anxious.

As it has been in the history, whenever there is a problem between the East and the West the Christian groups who live in Turkey are being attacked by the Muslims. In 1964, during the Turkey-Cyprus War, a wide scaled aggression had started

The Syrian Orthodox are integrating exemplary

Why is the Syrian Orthodox community in Sweden more successful than the Syrian Orthodox community in Germany? Theologian Bas ter Haar was awarded a prestigious prize in addition to a scholarship for his extensive research into the worldwide integration of Christian migrants from the Middle East.

Orthodox community prides themselves with the football club Assyriska which is based in the Swedish city of Södertälje. The football club is the pride of the entire Syrian Orthodox community in Sweden which also prides itself with the fact that the Swedish Minister of Education is of Syrian Orthodox origin.

When a community of migrants manages to set up a premiership football club, it can be suggested that this community has been successful. The Swedish Syrian

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The Syriacs within the Arabian Civilisation

There are historical relations between the Arabs and the Syriacs within the Arabian Civilisation, which is the largest civilisation of the Middle East. The Syriac and the Arab folks belong to the Semitic group of languages.

Prior to the dawn of Islam the Arab tribes generally had a nomadic lifestyle and the geographical characteristics of the Arabian Peninsula were not tolerable for the advancement of the Arab tribes. Meanwhile, the ancestors of the Syriacs who lived in Mesopotamia were advancing and leading with their thousands-years old civilisation.

After their conversion into Christianity the Syriacs continued to lead the civilisation within the Christianity. All of the schools and academies of Mesopotamia and Syria were founded and run by the Syriacs. In the famous academies such as Edessa, Harran, Antioch, Qenneshrin, Nsibin, Gundishapur, where the great scientists-philosophers of the Middle East were educated, the language used for education was Syriac. The Syriac scholars bequeathed the ancient Greek philosophy to the service of the Middle Eastern enlightenment. However, when the Roman Empire accepted the Christianity as their official religion, around 380 AD, the socio-

political situation of the Syriacs went through some significant changes.

The Byzantines continually oppressed the Christians who did not accept to obey the authority of the Church of Constantinople and the theological doctrines it had. As a result of these oppressions, from the 5th century onwards the Syriac people were divided into various Christian congregations. Especially, the Nestorian and the Jacobite Syriacs did not conform to Byzantium. Consequently, the continuous pressure on these two groups led to their dispersion. A group of the dispersed Syriacs immigrated to the Arabian Peninsula, where they converted many Arab tribes into Christianity. Until the emergence of Mohammed, Mecca was an important Syriac centre, where the majority of the population were Nestorians. Even Hatijah, the first wife of Mohammed, was the niece of the Governor of Mecca who was a Nestorian Bishop.

Around 630's AD, at the beginning of the spread of Islam, the Syriacs opened the gates of the important towns of Mesopotamia and Syria to the Muslim conquerors, in order to escape from the oppression of Byzantium. Therefore, the

friendly relations between the Syriacs and the Arabs were improved. The Syriacs contributed greatly to the development of the theology and the literature of Islam, which was a new religion. Due to the fact that the Arabic language was lacking the abundance to accommodate the theology of the new religion, the Syriacs enhanced it in their academies, with the insertion of the Syriac vocabulary. Also, with the translation of the Greek philosophy (especially the works of Aristotle) the Syriacs enhanced the Arabic language further.



Accordingly, the Syriacs changed the ancient Arabic into a modern and powerful language. Until the 13th century the Syriacs flourished under the Arab rule. After the 11th century a significant part of the Syriacs started to use the Arabic language in their church's liturgy and as their daily language.

When the Ottoman Empire entered its descending era the Melkite and the Maronite Syriacs who lived in Lebanon helped the improvement of the Arab nationalism in order to gain their independence from the Ottoman rule. The Christian Syriacs who founded many movements such as "Nahda", in order to strengthen the Arab nationalism, they used their publishing houses, schools and all other means they had. Also, the founders of some important Middle Eastern formations such as the Baath Party and the PLO (the Palestinian Liberation Organisation) were Christians.

In conclusion, the contributions of the Syriacs

in the foundation of the Arab Nationalism, the spread of Islam, the enhancement of the Arabic language and generally the founding of the Arab civilisation have been significant and they have historical importance. Therefore, it is not wrong to refer to the Syriacs as one of the native groups that founded the Arab Civilisation. Today, the majority of the Syriacs (the Maronites, the Melkites, all the Syriac Catholics, a significant part of the Syriac Orthodox and the Chaldeans) use the Arabic language as their mother tongue.

Although, in and around Qamishli the Syriac language is still used, in the daily life and in the school the Arabic is the dominating language. Even in Turabdin, the Syriacs of Mardin and Hazach speak Arabic. The Syriac language is used in the few remaining villages of Turabdin, in Northern Iraq and in the Diaspora. Accordingly, the Arabic language is spoken by almost ninety per cent of the Syriac people. Therefore, the Arabic language belongs to the Syriacs as well as the Arabs.

It is a scientific fact to refer to the Syriacs and the Arabs, who are so closely related, as the joint owners of the Arab Civilisation. This fact does no harm to the Syriac ethnic identity. Being an owner of the Arab civilisation is not becoming Arab. As the owners of the European Civilisation are all of the nations who live in Europe, in the same way, all of the nations who live between Iran and North Africa are the owners of the Arab Civilisation. Thus, so are the Syriacs.



Mor Philexinos Yuhanon Dolabani (1885-1969)

Metropolitan of the diocese of Mardin, Turkey (1947-'69)

Mor Philexinos Yuhanon Dolabani, the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan of Mardin and its Environs, Turkey, is one of the outstanding scholars that the Church has seen in the near past. He was born in the year 1885 and was ordained Metropolitan in 1947. It was in 1908 he became a monk in Deyrulzafaran. He was a great scholar and poet and had written more than 70 books. He made a number of translations from Syriac to Arabic and Turkish. Bishop Dolabani was the first to translate the Syrian Orthodox liturgy into Turkish for the people who moved to Istanbul, because they know longer understood Syriac. His extensive writings in Syriac include histories of the Patriarchs, and of the monasteries of Deyrulzafaran and Mor Gabriel. He printed the books and many others in the monastery, as well as periodical called al-Hikmat (Sophia). His editions cover many more important texts, several of which are of hitherto unpublished authors. Of his translations into Syriac, those of Patriarch Afrem Barsoum History of Syriac Literature, and of the play 'Theodora' (by Paulose Behnam, 1916-1969), deserve particular

unpublished. His scholarly work was recognized and respected by all, as well as his good deeds. He used to ask the people: "What good things have you done? Don't tell lies, try to say only good things, think of God". He loved and helped poor people.

He is buried in Deyrulzafaran. The week before he died, when he saw his last article in the Patriarchal Magazine, he said: "I don't like death to break my pen, because the Church and our youth still needs my pen, but may God's will be done".

Metropolitan Mor Julius Cicek (1942-2005) lived with him for three years in Mardin and he remembers: "He was such a spiritual loving man, always praying. It was enough to see him, to be with him, to live with him. We were living and praying together. He was a man of God, a living example, which is better than words and long talks. I tell people about his life and influence. Metropolitan Mor Gregorios Yohanna of Aleppo is preparing a book entitle "Dolabani, the Ascetic of Mardin". He remembers that bishop Dolabani used to sit every day with the visitors, explaining the

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Gospel, telling stories of the Church Fathers, singing Church songs, in order to avoid gossiping. Father Ibrahim of Zafaran monastery remembers that bishop Dolabani lived as a monk, with very little money. He loved the people and used to teach humility by his life. He did not care for food or clothes. When he was very sick at the time of his death, special food was cooked for him. He asked if the boys living in the monastery were eating the same food. At the negative answer, he ordered that his food should be taken to the boys and that the boys' food should be brought to him. Malfono Isa Gülden residing in the monastery of Mor Gabriel remembers what bishop Dolabani told him before going to the military service: "You should not forget to pray. God wants spiritual prayer from your heart. You can always pray in your heart. When you do or say anything good, that is prayer. Christ said to pray all the time, but you can pray all the time by doing good things in your shop, in your work, in your military service. Your life becomes prayer when you think, do and say good things".

Dolabani was a missionary-minded man. After the end of the



persecution of the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox in early 20th century, he ordained many number of priests, monks and deacons, and send them to very remote areas as far as Bitlis and Van where the faithful had lost their clergy and forgotten about Christianity. Dressed as lay people, they baptized so many Syrian Orthodox people and also Armenians who had no more clergy. Sebastian P. Brock recalls a meeting with the Metropolitan: "I met Bishop Philexinos Dolabani once, a few years before he died, and he has always greatly impressed me, both as a man of great holiness and as a tireless scholar in the service of the Syrian Orthodox Church".

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Researcher Naures Atto from the Theology Faculty at the University of Leiden, Holland, discovered the football club during a visit to Sweden. She is undertaking comparative research into the position of Syrian Orthodox migrants in Sweden and Germany.

Atto and her colleague Bas ter Haar Romeny recently received a message which is every researcher's dream. The European Science Foundation awarded Romeny's research-proposal with 1,25 million Euros. He was awarded the European Young Researcher Award, an honourable and encouraging prize amongst young European researchers. His research proposal was built upon material from Atto's promotion-research.

In the next few years Romeny and three other colleagues, including Atto, will research the situation and position of three Christian communities from the Middle East in five particular countries: The Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden and the United States. These selected countries all have an individual perception of integration. In order to obtain a complete, overall view they will also research the people who have stayed behind in their homeland.

The aim of the research is to establish the elements that influence a successful integrati-

on: the culture of their homeland, the collective culture of the immigrants in their homeland, their new homeland and the manner in which they were welcomed in these countries.

They are particularly interested in America which wants immigrants to feel like real Americans but simultaneously emphasizes the importance of their group identity. Even though this approach is currently under discussion.

Because even 1.25 million Euros has its limits, they have put South America on hold. Although whole hordes of Christians from the Middle East have settled there. Nowadays, practically entire former Christian Bethlehem lives on the coast of the Great Ocean.

With the following selected migrant communities; the Egyptian Copts, the Byzantine-Orthodox Christians and the Syrian Orthodox Christians, one lands in the historical centre of Middle Eastern Christianity, Romeny's specialism. The immigrants also take these historical backgrounds with them and they can play a significant role in their integration.

The distinction derives from a split in the church which took place centuries before the prophet Mohammed. In a time where Christianity was not just a peripheral phenomenon but a predominant religion.

The point of contention was the nature of Jesus Christ; was he God or human, or both? In addition how did his divine and human nature relate to one another?

Another story, or rather an entire book, is

required to clarify these differences. The fact is that the matter still divides Christians to this very day. The mosaic of the Oriental church becomes even more complex when one involves the liturgy and the relationship of the various groups to the Church in Rome or to Protestantism.

The common denominator is clear the influence of Christianity in the Middle East continues to fade steadily. The fading process started with Islam, from the seventh century after Christ.

The Christians, including the Jews, received dhimmi status. In exchange of a special tax they did not have to join the national army and they were free to practice their religion. They played a valued second fiddle. At least in theory but sometimes reality was more ferocious.

A height of tolerance was present during approximately the eight century. At this stage the Christians were probably still the majority. Baghdad was the capitol of the Muslim Caliphate. It had a mixed population. All groups developed a great thirst for the Greek culture.

Various groups of Syrian Christians, who still speak a dialect of Aramaic, an ancient language also spoken by Jesus Christ, played a significant role in the translation of Greek manuscripts into Arabic.

By Eildert Mulder
From the Dutch newspaper TROUW; 2nd of September 2005

Will be continued