

# Critique on Nestorianism from the Perspective of Contextualization

## I. Introduction

The most reliable resource in regards to the spread of Christianity in China can trace back to its findings in Tang Dynasty(618-907). Its representative data would be in particular Nestorianism.<sup>1</sup> It indicates that there was no credible data with regard to the spread of Christianity prior to Nestorianism in China. In other words, other remaining resources from the previous period are not demonstrating the reliability. Therefore, documents on Nestorianism have proved that Western churches attempted its missions in Asia in the process of spreading Christianity.

The documents are resources to many following generations demonstrating that Western church missions was at work in China and that there are lessons to be learned from the problems concerning the spread of the Gospel and contextualization. There is a value in the study of contextualization concerning the missions in China in that the “Western” Christianity was spread to the great Asian continent China. Missionaries at the time tried to fit into the different culture and to make a connecting point which was “contextualization” in modern term.

Nestorianism is a form of Christianity that extended to China and reached its peak during Tang Dynasty. In today’s perspective, it was a form of “contextualization” since the Gospel and culture were connected despite the prevalence of Buddhism in China. By looking into the application of Nestorianism and to analyze why it ultimately failed will provide useful assets in considering contextualization. There are several questions to be considered. Why has Nestorianism as a form of Christianity during Tang Dynasty now disappeared? Was there a form of syncretism in the process of adjustment? Was there a possibility of theoretical problem during the formation of contextualization? These questions will eventually be beneficial for providing directions in the process of contextualization while maintaining the identity of Christianity.

## II. Nestorius and Theological Arguments

As the name indicates, Nestorianism derived its name from Nestorius (a bishop in Constantinople during 5th Century A.D.). In short, his theological views were in question. Although his interpretation of Christology was on debate, there were followers of Nestorian Christology. People called them “Nestorian church”. The name Nestorianism reflects the nature of region it originated and is referred to as “Church of the East”.

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1 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China* (N.Y.: The MacMillan Company, 1932), 51.

Nevertheless, Nestorianism attained its name to emphasize on its theological attributes.<sup>2</sup> There are several questions that follow. Why was Nestorianism a heresy to Orthodox churches of the Roman Empire? How did Nestorianism unite with the churches in Persia? And how did it separate from the rest of Christian powers?

Nicene Council in the year 325 declared the divinity of Christ as Orthodox doctrine. In 381, Constantinople Council reconfirmed Nicene Creed while Roman Empire embraced it as the Orthodox doctrine.<sup>3</sup> However, problems still resided. If the full deity of Christ is emphasized, what happens to the humanity of Christ and to what extent is His personality acknowledged? In fact, the ideas were instilled by the second century Gnostics and the third century Origen school that eventually grew into a chiasm between the Alexandria school and Antioch school.<sup>4</sup>

Cyril(376-444) was a representative of Alexandria school and was a bishop from 412 A.D.. He had influence over all Western region unto Egypt. His teachings were accepted to represent Orthodox doctrine; Christ was one person who possessed absolute divinity and humanity where the two was not intermixed or intertwined. In other words, Christ experienced completely two natures to be united. Alexandria school, strongly but purely without a doubt, advocated the divine nature of Christ because they believed that only divine Christ can give salvation to sinners. Consequently, Alexandria school ventured to lose historical substantiality of Jesus' humanity.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, Antioch school to play a leading role in Syria and Asia Minor region attempted a different approach. Two virtual founding fathers of this school who supported Antiochene Christology were Diodorus of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Documents from Diodorus are rarely left while teachings from Theodore remain. Surely, Nestorius accepted the tutelages of Theodore.

Theodore taught definitely that Christ is a perfect human being. He understood the union, as a progressive, of the humanity(Logos) and the Holy Spirit that they were not accomplished fully until the Ascension. In other words, this is not the union of substance but rather "a perfect Complacency" between the divinity and humanity. Thus, Theodore was not satisfied with the fact that the divinity and the humanity coexisted within Christ; and so focused on the perfect humanity of Christ.<sup>6</sup>

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2 Aubrey R. Vine. *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians* (London: Independent Press, 1937), 20.

3 Ibid. Nicene Council was a first associative ecumenical council. There were eight main ecumenical religious council at the time. First, 325 Nicene Council. Second, 381 Constantinople Council. Third, 431 Ephesus Council. Fourth, 451 Chalcedon Council. Fifth, 557 Constantinople Council. Sixth, 581 Constantinople Council. Seventh, 787 Nicene Council. Eighth, 869 Constantinople Council.

4 Ibid., 24.

5 Samuel H. Moffet, 『A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. I』, Trans. by Kim Insoo (Seoul: jangrohoi sinhakdaehak choolpanboo, 1996), 283.

6 Ibid., 26-27.

It was Nestorius who was taught under the influence of Theodore's teachings. On the basis of such a kind of theology, Nestorius used the term *Christokos* (the bearer of Christ) to refer to Virgin Mary instead of the term *Theotokos* (the bearer of the Godhead). Cyril, on the other hand, raised a question about not using the terminology of *Theotokos* and attacked him because he undermined the divinity of Christ as well as the Nicene Creed.

According to Samuel Moffet, Antioch school had exactly opposite emphasis to Cyril. Nestorian theology was derived from Antioch school. The strongest point of the Antioch was that Christ existed historically in a complete human nature. Antioch school had equal interest in redemptive works as much as Alexandria school did, but they connected their interest to Christian ethics. What is important to remember in the midst of the contrast between the two schools is that both the Alexandria and the Antioch did not deny that Christ is God and human at the same time. Both schools were proud of their authenticity. The difference, however, laid at their emphasis.<sup>7</sup>

Looking back at the time, Cyril was theologically overwhelmingly more persuasive than Nestorius. Cyril attempted to boldly mention the fundamentals of Christology and to build a solid theology. On the contrary, interest of Nestorius was focused in barricading the misuse of the term *Theotokos*. This, however, eventually led for fatal fall of the position Nestorius held. Consequently, Rome stood by Cyril and he convinced Pope to deport Nestorius. In the year 435, Nestorius was sent to Petra of Arabia, from which he was sent to Egypt, and then to Oasis. Nevertheless, all did not end with Nestorius being expatriated. It seemed that he was not influential in Antioch school any more, but there were remaining followers left.

In regards to this, there are some questions on the extent of remaining theological problems and disputes on the aspect of political matters involved. As a result, they led to the separation between Western churches and non-Roman Asian churches.

### III. Nestorianism in China Missions

In the year 431, deported Nestorian followers due to heresy settled in Persia via Syria. They were persecuted from Zoroasters, but as they were protected from the national king, they spread their religious powers.<sup>8</sup> Even during the 7th century when Persia was ruled by the Islams, they resided in the region spreading their mission works in Northern Arabia, India, Mongol, and China.

Nestorians were fast in missions and thus expanded their congregation in a great speed. They were upright and honest in their work in the region of Asia. They were devoted to the works of mission and were able to spread the missions in great speed. Although they didn't particularly have a specific financial support nor a personally stabilized status, they all had volunteering mission mind.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Samuel H. Moffet, 『A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. I』, 458.

<sup>8</sup> <http://100.naver.com> (2003. 3. 18.)

With such a mission heart, they went forth throughout all Asian region reaching to China. It was during Tang dynasty when Nestorianism entered to China and it is known from the documents that Nestorianism very much flourished during the time. However, Nestorianism only thrived to fade out so quickly. This fade out suggests that it is important to discuss elements in directions and models on contextualization in missiological perspective.

When Jesuit missionaries entered into China during 16th century, records show that they spotted groups of Jews but not a hint of Christian groups.<sup>10</sup> In the midst of this, there was a dramatic discovery of a record that show how Christianity was spread to China. In 1623, an epitaph recording from 大秦景教流行中國碑 was found near Hsain, the capital city during Tang dynasty. The writings seem to prove that in the year 635 (9 years into Tang dynasty), one Nestorian missionary arrived at the capital of China. There are recordings of more than 1,756 Chinese characters and around 70 Syrian words in the epitaph. The writings show that the very first Nestorian missionary, Alopen (阿羅本), entered the country in the year 636 and conducted active mission works. The epitaph was inscribed in the year 781.<sup>11</sup>

Emperor Taejong, according to the Nestorian epitaph, promulgated the edict of universal toleration that neutrally acknowledged the spread Christianity. The content declared that religion should be formed at the needs of regional differences for the salvation of mankind and that Alopen from Roman Empire brought with him a Bible and a sacred image. It also stated that the new religion is deep and intricate with the fundamental truth being perfect and succinct. It is easy to gain logic and through this all people should be recovered. It is recommended to be ramified to all the world.<sup>12</sup> This was the position that emperor Taejong of Tang dynasty paid attribute to the religion. Emperor Taejong was generous to the religion not because of his political reasons but because he himself was spiritually interested and also wanted to proliferate the message to his people. Taejong was a figure who built libraries and owned many books for his interest in the advance of academics. His ardor for studies led him to be interested in the new religion and eventually led Alopen to begin the works of Bible translation.

When edict was promulgated in the year 638, the first Christian church was built in the country's largest city, the capital city of Sian, China. The emperor ordered the church to be built from his treasury. In his calculated leniency, Taejong also ordered Buddhist temples and mosques to be built as well. Taejong commanded for his portrait to be held at the wall of the church to commemorate his contribution in building the church. As from the edict, there were 21 clergies at the

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9 Mar Aprem, *Nestorian Missions* (N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1980), 119.

10 Samuel H. Moffet, 『A History of Christianity in Asia Vol. I』, 458.

11 Ibid., 463.

12 Ibid., 465.

time. Presumably, all were Persians.<sup>13</sup>

Christianity missions in China started out peacefully without much difficulty. However, it is not that there weren't any persecutions. When emperor Taejong died in 649, Gojong showed hospitality toward Nestorianism. There were temples in all nations' residing 358 states and more than 200 churches were present at Sian.<sup>14</sup> During Gojong's reign, Alopen received the title of the "great patron and spiritual lord of the empire". The Chinese imperial family extolled Alopen.

Despite the hospitality, persecution on Nestorianism began after encouragement movement on Buddhism bolstered by Wo Hou, who started out as a concubine of Gojong and who later became an empress. In 691, Wo Hou announced Buddhism as the national religion and personally expressed opposition toward Christians. In 712, Nestorianism was persecuted to the point where Daejinsa was destroyed. However, Nestorianism was recovered after Hyunjong came to the throne. Two delegations were sent from Persian churches into Sian.<sup>15</sup> The long reigning period of Hyunjong(712-756) was a recovery times for the churches but Tang dynasty was at its ebb from the rapid expansion of Arab powers.

In such times, Nestorianism was oppressed and suffered for being a foreign religion. Also, many churches were eradicated due to civil commotions. All the more, due to exiles and homicides of Christians, they gradually faded without a trace after Tang dynasty.

Year 377(987 A.D.). In the Christian residents at the rear back of the church. Seven years ago, I met a Buddhist monk from Najran who was sent to China from the Catholicos with five priest to take care of matters of Christian churches. I asked him for some tourist information in regards to the trip and he told me that Christianity has completely disappeared from China. Native Christians have vanished in one way or another and their churches have been torn down. He said that there is only one Christian left in the continent...<sup>16</sup>

Then, just how did once a successful Nestorianism cease away so quickly? Was it simply because of religious infliction? Or was it because of syncretism of Christian theology and Buddhist ideas? Or was it a matter of political negotiation? These are some of the questions we should ask for the sake of lessons we may learn to apply

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Kyungwoon, 『*dongbangei chunpaduen kidokkyo kyungkyo*』 (Seoul: donseunambuk, 1996), 2.

<sup>15</sup> Kim Kwangsoo, 『*donbangkidokkyosa*』 (Seoul: Kyomoonsa, 1971), 167.

<sup>16</sup> Moule, *Christian in China*, 75f. Recited. Samuel H. Moffet, 『History of Asian Christianity』, 481.

today. Specifically, we should look into the matters closely to find out if there were any theological compromise in the Gospel which possibly could happen during the process of contextualization.

#### IV. An Attempt of Indigenous Application

When Nestorianism entered Tang dynasty, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism already had its place settled in at the time. Nestorians attempted to use Buddhist and Taoist terminologies rather than Syrian language when they translated the message so that it could easily be understood by Chinese. Especially, many terminologies were derived from Buddhist language. Several examples are as follows.<sup>17</sup> Holy Spirit was “玄風”(hyunpoong) and prayer was “修功德”(soogongduk). Church was “寺”(sa), as that of Buddhist temple, and for monks, same “僧”(seung) was used. Bishop was “大德”(daeduk) and apostle was called “僧伽”(seoungka). Sin was “惡業”(ahkup), Trinity was “三身”(samsin), and God the Father was “天尊”(chunzon).

Nonetheless, although the terminologies were also used in Buddhism, it is difficult to say that all its words had Buddhist connotations. Tang dynasty was influenced by Buddhist culture; and in order for the translators to make people understand, they didn't have a choice but to use the existing vocabularies. In other words, it would have been better if there was an effort to spread the message by developing new terms to differentiate themselves from existing religion, specifically, Buddhism. Alopen missionary was recalled as “阿羅本 景教僧”(narabon kyungkyoseung) and the priest that went along were referred to as monks. Christian priest and Buddhist 僧 were terminologically confusing enough and rather was considered the same. Indeed, Nestorian churches were called “大秦寺”(daejinsa). “寺” indicated Buddhist temple and thus was enough to bring forth befuddlement to lay people.

The monastery established in 638 at the I-ning Ward 義寧坊(euryungbang) was only three blocks away from the famous Kuang-ming-ssu 光明寺(kwangmyungsa) where Shan-tao often preached. It was originally known as P'o-ssu-ssu 波斯寺(pakisa) or the Persian Monastery, but this was later changed by an official decree to be called Ta-ch'in-ssu 大秦寺 in 745 when the Nestorians in China called their religion Ching-chiao 景教, the Religion of the Great Light.<sup>18</sup>

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17 Lee Kyungwoon, 『Dongyangui chunpaduin Kidokkyo: Kyungkyo』 (Seoul: Dongseonambuk, 1996), 64.

18 Ingram S. Seah, "Nestorian Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism in T'ang China", *Taiwan Journal of Theology*. No. 6 (March, 1984), 79-86. Shan-Tao(善導) belonged to the Chinese Pure Land School and was the most important Buddhist preacher. He not only was influential in China but was also influential over in Japan. Many of his teachings coincided with the teachings of Nestorianism. He stated that

In “Jesus-Messiah Sutra”, word “天尊”(chunzon) is mentioned more than 50 times. The word represents the worthiness of Lord God but it is another word that represents Buddha in Buddhism and it is a terminology that is also used in Taoism. It is similar with the term regarding Christ. Christ is referred to as “世尊”(sezon) but it is another word that indicates Buddha.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, after passing into 8th century, there seems to be an undertake in syncretically combining the idea of Buddhism and Taoism and applying it to Nestorianism. This could be found in documents such as 志玄安樂經, 大秦景教宣元至本經, 大秦景教三威蒙度讚, 大秦景教大聖通真歸法讚, and 尊經. Ideas such as “What comes around goes around” and “안락도 사상”(ahnrakdo sasang) were mentioned and was in line with Lao-tzu’s 도덕경(dodukkyung).<sup>20</sup> Serving the emperor came right after serving the eternal being. So, portrait of the emperors were held in temples. The teachings indicated that what comes first is God, second is the emperor, and third are the parents.<sup>21</sup> This provided a behind story in why the emperor was worshipped later on. Comparable to the later teachings that used Taoist ideas, the teachings here used Buddhist terminologies. Ethically, though, the teachings were Confucianistic in that it emphasized the idea of filial duty and accrediting the authority of emperor to the powers of the heavens.<sup>22</sup> Although Persian missionaries did not have plenty of knowledge in Chinese and were not able to exactly pinpoint what they wanted to say in the language, they were too susceptible to Buddhist teachings. We can find such ideas shown in some of the lines found in “Jesus-Messiah Sutra”. “[The Lord] first sent all living beings to worship all the devas and buddhas, and for Buddha to endure suffering.”<sup>23</sup> Or “Those who have received precepts must first teach other people to worship all devas. Then the Buddha will be worthy of the name to receive the suffering. . . .”<sup>24</sup>

In the practical aspect, they absolutely refused worshipping Maria as “the mother of the Father God”. Nevertheless, they did not abandon prayer meetings for the dead. Wooden percussions were at play to the East when giving worship and Christian priest had their head shaved while growing their beards. Similar to the problems shown in

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“The Buddha is the Great Merciful Father of all sentient beings. He also is the very beneficial and effective agent through whom salvation (lit., deliverance from the world) is attained.”

19 Kim Kyungho, “*Kyungkyoui sinsasang younku*” (Theses, Hanshin Graduate School, 1995), 23-24.

20 Kim Kiwon, “*Kyungkyo sasangei daehan younku*” (Theses, Catholic Graduate School, 1992), 52-53.

21 A. C. Moule, *Christians in China Before the Year 1550* (N.Y.: The Macmillan Co., 1930), 59.

22 Igram S. Seah, “Nestorian Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism in T’ang China,” 81.

23 Ibid., 60.

24 Chan Sik Lee, “A Study of a Chinese Nestorian Sutra, ‘Jesus Messiah’”, *The Northeast Asia Journal of Theology* (September 1974), 47.

translations, Nestorianism was assimilated into Buddhism in practical aspect as well. Shaving heads and praying by chanting with wooden percussion showed that it was difficult to differentiate Buddhism and Nestorianism. Therefore, it clearly indicated that Christian identity, while receiving and accepting other religion, was at risk in theory and in practice.

## V. Problems in the Process of Contextualization

There were at least three significant problems in the process of contextualization as Kenneth Latourette points out.<sup>25</sup>

First, Nestorianism could not overcome that it was the religion of a foreign community. Most congregation members who were important figures to the community were mostly non-Chinese merchants, soldiers, and missionaries who lived under strong powers of Tang authority. In other words, Nestorianism was not for the abased or unlearned people of the society but for the supporters of foreign powers to hold government positions as well as for the upper levels to be able to read and understand Chinese literature. According to what is written in the epitaph, there were Chinese believers but only few in number. Nestorianism mainly depended on foreigners' leadership and support.

Second, Nestorianism flowed into China when there was no need for a new kind of faith specifically. When Christianity was introduced to Roman Empire, people sought for satisfaction from various sources of philosophies and Eastern religion. It was a time of religious conflict perceived from the lethargy of the national faith.

The time of Tang dynasty, however, was the time of native religion. It was immersed within the people of China at the time. In the midst of native religion, Buddhism was propagated all throughout the region. Paradoxically speaking, because Buddhism was gaining its power in religion, it was also possible for Nestorianism to successfully surface up in the culture. That is, Nestorianism seemed to be just another denomination of a successful religion, Buddhism, to ordinary Chinese people. In reality, Nestorian translators adopted Buddhistic terms while translating the messages and the two kept in close relations. Nestorian believers wanted to spread its Gospel with familiarity by their side, but eventually the uniqueness of Christianity was forfeited and the purpose faded out.

Third, Nestorian missionaries deviated from the essential core of the church. Moreover, they were not interested in spirituality nor in the cooperation with congregations. As a result, Nestorian believers have been reduced in its numbers. All these factors combined proceeded to be serious hindering factors for Nestorian mission works in the huge land of China.

Of course, it is not easily accessible to assume how Nestorianism endured for

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<sup>25</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, 57-60.



almost 250 years despite its unstable position in religious hierarchy and from the uncertain political settings at the time. Regardless any reason, Nestorianism eventually ceased out because it remained only as a foreign religion and could not enroot its beliefs into native religious community. That presumably is why Nestorianism evaporated with the decline of Tang dynasty.

From this context, it is problematic to say that Nestorian missionaries had a deep influence over the lives and thoughts of Chinese people. It was rather perceived that the missionaries highlighted associations that may exist between Nestorianism and Buddhism. Contrarily, there is an opinion that Nestorian believers merged into Muslim communities in China while Nestorianism was at its decline in the 9th century. According to the book *The Luminous Religion* by Mrs. C. E. Couling, it is recorded that Nestorians, during the time of persecution, were absorbed into larger Muslim communities who did not treat them harshly. They both believed in one God and they were both close to Persian Saracens. In such circumstances, some declare that Nestorians considered it a better choice for them to unite with Islam community than to choose other religion.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, this is just an inference and is something to be identified with proven supplementary documents. One thing to be sure is, though, that there are remnants of churches that once used to exist at the time and which eventually ceased out in the land of China.

What exactly did Nestorians want to spread? To what extent did Nestorians want to preach about Jesus Christ? How did Nestorians depict the lives of Christians to Chinese? These are some of theological questions we have to deal with while discussing the contextualization process. Latourette mentions several of these theological contents through the analysis of the documents.<sup>27</sup>

Remaining documents show that Nestorian believers had faith in God the Lord of heavens and earth. God formed humans in His image and laws were given to people through Moses. The Spirit of God resided with the prophet and ultimately sent Christ to this land. Nestorians acclaimed the resurrection and the baptism of the dead. Furthermore, they believed in divinity and personality of Christ Jesus. Also, they refused to call Maria as “the Mother of God” and to use such image. They opposed doctrine of purgatory and yet prayed for the dead. They denied transubstantiation but declared for the real presence of Christ Jesus during the Holy Communion.

What Nestorians taught Chinese is not yet exactly known. However, Nestorians put an emphasis on the love, mercy, and kindness in actual practice of lives. Also, they were known for honoring the equality of humans and for helping the poor. Ritually, they fasted, kept in silence, and meditated. Additionally, they worshipped and praised seven times a day, praying for the dead and the living. On the seventh day, they celebrated a sacrifice, a kind of Holy Communion.

Then, just why did Nestorianism evaporate during its peak, dispersing away from

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<sup>26</sup> Mar Aprem, *Nestorian Missions*, 72.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 55-56.

Chinese culture? Nestorianism withstood 250 years in the Roman Empire. It was during the time that Nestorianism nourished on stability and benefit. In spite of financial support it received, it did not last. This is something to grasp attention in analyzing the contextualization process that did not continue on.

It is easier to focus on the problem if we approach the issue through the view of Samuel Moffett. There is more than one answer to the issue but there are possible inferential answers. We must search for answers in various aspects such in religion, theology, missions, and in politics.<sup>28</sup>

First is the religious oppression toward Christians in the 9th century. This was not anti-Christ type of rebellion but was rather a hatred toward foreigners. This was a torture toward denominations that may weaken national identity in the time when incompetent kings came into power. This was suppression for the “non-Chinese religions”. Not only Christians, but Buddhism and Manichaeism was also included in the list. In the year 845, there was a big persecution on Buddhism.

The place of the churches faded as Nestorianism was noticed to be the religion of “Persia” or a foreign religion. Foreign religions such as Nestorianism and Zoroastrianism were considered as a different form of heresy that departed from Buddhism to Chinese people.<sup>29</sup> It was probably impossible for foreign religion to continue its worship service in times when Buddhism was being oppressed and banished. People who worked as priests were imposed to refrain from priesthood and returned back to work as people who pay taxes. Those who stayed in power forcefully exiled foreigners and sometimes kept them in confinement.<sup>30</sup>

Second reason why Nestorianism did not settle in during Tang dynasty is because of its theological controversy. Nestorianism is criticized for uniting its messages with Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism to the point where Christianity was spoiled. All the more, there was a bigger issue in regard to the theological aspect of Nestorianism. The view on divinity and personality of Christ and discussion on the matter of titling Virgin Mary was all reserved.

In some of the documents such as “The Sutra of Mysterious Rest and Joy” and “The Sutra on the Origin of Origins”, it claims that the signs of syncretism is shown because of its Taoistic colors residing within the messages. There is rare usage of Christian terminologies and it cannot be considered as contextualization. On the other hand, theologically, there seems not to be a big argument in regards to Christology, Soteriology, and on explaining the Ten Commandments.

J. Legge responds to the question ‘why Nestorianism failed’ by stating that there was no Gospel to it. From time to time, his words are not persuasive. As one example,

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28 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*. Vol. I (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publisher, 1992), 303.

29 John Foster, *The Church of the T'ang Dynasty* (N.Y.: The Macmillan Company, 1939), 121.

30 Ibid.

“The Jesus–Messiah Sutra” contains the content from ‘the great fall’ to ‘atoning death’; from ‘birth from the Virgin’ to ‘the death on the cross’; from ‘the Ten Commandment’ to ‘the repentance’; from ‘the eternal punishment for not believing’ to ‘the salvation according to the faith and not actions’; from ‘the curse on the idols’ to ‘the love of the enemies’; from Apostle Paul’s recommendations on “submitting to the authority” to “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, and caring for the widows and orphans”. Moffett refutes that it contains the contents of the full Gospel.<sup>31</sup>

Nestorians complied to the view that salvation can only come from Christ and that it is the Great Commission to spread the message. Therefore, theological ideas were not an issue. Then what happened to Nestorianism that once used to be successful in the 7th and 8th century suddenly disappeared in the 9th and 10th century? This remains to be the pursuing question. The focus is pinpointed toward the possibility of syncretism that may have pervaded.

Even with positive evaluations made on its theological aspect, other documents show mixed usage of the term Lord God and Buddha. This could be because early missionaries had faults in understanding difficult Chinese characters to a full extent. However, it is more than a considerable mistake. “The Jesus–Messiah Sutra” was written three years after the very first Nestorian missionary Alopen entered into China. The confusion mentioned in “The Jesus–Messiah Sutra” was repeated in the 8th century, or about 100years onward. This was enough to distract people’s understanding of Christian spiritualism. Of course, the mixture of terminology usage was to make connecting point to Chinese people. However, the point of view was only focused in understanding the culture and eventually led to perverting the uniqueness of Christian truth.<sup>32</sup>

On the surface, there may not be any theological issues involved. To the core, problems on ‘omissions’ rather than ‘adaptations’ emerge. Even Nestorianism epitaph, a reliable source, does not mention anything about Christ’s death on the cross and resurrection. Moreover, there is not a significant mention of the Bible, the foundation of theological research.<sup>33</sup>

Decisively, in regards to contextualization, one of the reasons why Nestorianism faded in China is because Nestorian churches existed not as that of Chinese but as that of foreigners. Missionaries were all Persians and many of the names recorded in the epitaph were Syrian names along with names from the borders of Central Asia.

In short, a religion that does not flourish belong to become a religion for the foreigners and fail to establish as a native religion.

There is one more thing to consider. Various elements were pointed out as a source for the collapse of one religion. The sources can be religious persecution,

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31 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. I. 309.

32 Ibid., 310.

33 Ibid., 312.

theological negotiation, outside force, and so on. One thing not to ignore is that Nestorian churches were under the protection and support of imperial family.<sup>34</sup> Particularly, depending on the authoritative powers for its survival is treacherous and the future, in such case, is uncertain.

While examining the settlement, success, and the fall the Nestorianism, it is not too much to prioritize latent elements that must be avoided while spreading the Gospel. One is that the transmitter of the Gospel must hesitate to pass on their own cultural heritages at the same time they are spreading the Gospel. Another is for the sake of preserving the Gospel. The Bible must be received as the Word of Lord God and must be conveyed through the Gospel to others. The lesson we learn from the above, from the perspective of evangelical contextualization, is that it is detrimental to translate and apply to recipient's culture by replacing or abolishing the biblical messages.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 313.