

## **Normative Inculturation? A Thirteenth–Century Example of the Middle Ground in Relations between the Latin Church and the Church of the East**

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### **Introduction**

This paper looks at two thirteenth century accounts, the *Itinerarium* by the Franciscan William of Rubruck and the Syriac Church of the East text *Tashīthā DemārYaballāhā* (the History of Mar Yaballaha), and examines the models of comparative theology both present. While acknowledging that comparative theology is seemingly redundant between different denominations of Christianity, the ecumenical dialogue presented in both of these accounts occurred at a time when these two branches of Christianity had been separated for almost a millennium and had developed within completely different cultural backgrounds. Subsequently, both underwent dramatic changes to their worldviews: one European, the other Middle Eastern and Asian. As a result of the expanding Mongol Empire, both “Christianities” reestablished contact and were forced to examine internal conceptions of the “other” and “dialogue” as they related to their own unique cultural location. This paper examines the ways in which the authors of these accounts relate the ecumenical dialogues they record, and pays particular attention to the language and imagery by which they negotiate cultural difference, thereby establishing what Richard White terms a “Middle Ground.”<sup>1</sup> It also evaluates the comparative theological framework that evolves through its contrast of two different thought systems that, while both Christian, evolve along two very different theological and cultural paths. Finally, it uses these two accounts as historical case studies for examining the role of inculturation in comparative theology and interfaith dialogue.

### **Are history and comparative theology compatible? What is History?**

In its best form, comparative theology is dialogical and continually evolving as a result of that dialogue (Clooney, 2001, 8-10; Watson, 2009, 179-186). In applying historical examples to comparative theology, and vice versa, it is important to first acknowledge that history is also a constantly evolving process as historical analysis

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the concept of the “Middle Ground,” see White 1991; For its application in another context, see Garry Sparks, this issue.

responds to the different questions of each successive generation. Distinguished British historian Edward H. Carr also has written that establishing “basic facts rests not on any quality in the facts themselves, but on an *a priori* decision of the historian...It is the historian who has decided for his own reasons that Caesar’s crossing of that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all (Carr, 1961, 11).” He notes that “the facts of history never come to us ‘pure’...they are refracted through the mind of the recorder”(ibid., 22) and that “we can view...and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present.”(Ibid., 24) Thus, both history and comparative theology are inherently dialogical: one applies rationality to the past to understand the present, while the other applies rationality to faith to understand present belief.

In both instances, one should be aware of the ways in which inculturated responses can alter perception and thereby guide a rational response. By inculturation, I am initially taking the definition implied by *Redemptoris Missio* 52, that is “the ongoing dialog between faith and culture,”(Lenfers, 1996; PP John Paul II, 1990) but I will argue later that inculturation is potentially tricky ground for the comparative theologian. In historical method, post-colonial/structural theory is applied to historical argument, where the objective is to recapture voices left out of a Western-oriented discourse. The “inside looking outward” theological definition of inculturation implies ways in which comparative theology might be used in a similar way, but also warns of potential pitfalls. With these views of comparative theology, history, and their intersection in mind, an analysis of a historical case study and its implications for comparative theology is in order.

### **The Historical Context**

In the thirteenth century, Mongol conquests facilitated contact between Latin Christendom and the Assyrian Church of the East for the first time in almost nine hundred years. From common first century roots, these two forms of Christianity had developed along completely different trajectories over the intervening centuries. By the thirteenth century, Christianity in the Latin West had been defined by the split with the Byzantine world, the rise of the Papacy, and the fall of the Western Roman Empire. In religious culture, Augustinianism, the rise of the mendicant orders, and scholastic rationalism defined a worldview that had been shaped by over a century of crusading. In the Latin West, Christianity was the normative religion of the majority, so much so that that the world was seen in Christian terms, and the history of Europe was written in terms of its Christianization.

By contrast, by the seventh century the Church of the East had evangelized along the Silk Routes as far as Tang Dynasty China. Hounded by accusations of heresy by the rest of Christianity, its wide geographic spread had brought it into contact with a

number of religions, some of which were absent in—and even unknown to—Latin Europe, such as Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, and Manichaeism. The rise of Islam and its spread into Persia and Central Asia had presented a notable competitor, and throughout Asia the Church of the East existed as one minority religion among many. Starting from a common theological ground with Latin Christendom through to the third and fourth centuries, once isolated as heretical, the Church of the East began to develop its own unique ascetic monastic intellectual tradition, in which figures largely unknown to the Latin West—Babai the Great, Isaac of Nineveh, John of Dalyatha—loomed. Interaction with Greek, Islamic, and even Chinese culture informed intellectual and theological development. Beyond the Islamic Caliphs, the only other central unifying figure had come in the form of Genghis Khan at the beginning of the thirteenth century, whose invasions of Eastern Europe finally brought these two vastly different aspects of Christianity back together.

Thus the inculturated positioning and responses of these two Christianities at the point of rediscovery provide historical case studies that are instructive for current efforts at comparative theology (Wills 2008, 13).<sup>2</sup>

### **William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium***

In 1255, William of Rubruck, a Franciscan missionary preacher, sat down in a convent in the crusader garrison city of Acre to write a detailed account of his two and a half year journey to the Mongol capital Caracorum for his sovereign, Louis IX of France. At the time of his journey, the Mongol Empire encompassed most of Asia and Central Asia, from the Manchurian coast in the East, to Persia, Kiev, and Konya in the West.

The account that Rubruck left—his *Itinerarium*—remains one of the more impressive medieval travel accounts and has been reviewed in numerous scholarly works over the years. As Peter Jackson notes, to Rubruck also rightly falls the distinction of being the first true Latin missionary to Asia (Jackson. 2005. 262.). His journey spearheaded a trend of what was to be a centuries-long Latin missionary engagement in the region. While he is also critical of many of the faiths he encounters in the *Itinerarium*, in his account Rubruck reserves his greatest criticism for his co-religionists, attacking them on grounds of heresy, sin, and doctrinal and disputational ignorance. William of Rubruck lays out several criticisms of the Nestorians he finds among the Mongols, and describes them in terms that his audience—King Louis IX of France—would understand to be both heretical and sinful. To begin with, his term for them—*Nestorini*—is in itself a pejorative term relating to the Church of the East (Brock 1996, 23-36). The term “Nestorian” is itself a reference to the Christological controversy,

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<sup>2</sup>To the Latin church, the Church of the East was what Lawrence Wills would term a seductive, similar Other, separated by language, culture, distance, time, practice, history, tradition and orthodoxy.

whereby the Church of the East is considered to have come to reject the divine and human aspects of Christ as formulated at the Council of Ephesus (431) (Brock 1996, 23-36; McGuckin 1996, 7-22; Baumer 2006,46-48). Thus for Rubruck, the Nestorians were a heretical remnant from the formative days of the early church.

### **Rubruck on the *Nestorini***

There are numerous passages in William of Rubruck's *Itinerarium* where Rubruck describes the *Nestorini* in an unflattering light. He castigates their doctrinal knowledge, their simony, their polygamy, drunkenness, and their ignorance. The following passage is very illustrative of this approach:

The Nestorians here know nothing. They perform their service and have their sacred books in Syriac, a language of which they are ignorant, and chant in the manner of our monks who are ignorant of Latin. As a result they are totally corrupt. For the most part they are usurers and drunkards, and some of them, furthermore, who live among the Tartars, have several wives just as the Tartars have...it is difficult for the Bishop (*Episcopus*) to come to these lands, and does so once in about fifty years. At that time they have all young males—indeed even those in the cradle—ordained into the priesthood. As such, nearly all of their men are priests. And after that they marry, which is plainly in contravention of the statutes of the Fathers, and they are bigamists ...by their greed and immorality they alienate the [Mongols] from the Christian rites...<sup>3</sup>

William of Rubruck also expressed great frustration and concern at the *Nestorini* for their syncretism and failure to stop what he saw as practices that were at best pagan and at worst heretical. He was deeply disturbed by their unwillingness to speak out against practices he regarded as contrary to the Christian faith, and their apparent encouragement of practices he viewed as pagan. The following quote from Rubruck on the *Nestorini* and their failure to stop offensive practices illustrates his views on the subject:

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<sup>3</sup> William of Rubruck, *Itinerarium*, XXVI:12-14; Van den Wyngaert, A. ed. *Sinica Franciscana, I. Itinera et relationes Fratrum Minorum saeculi XIII et XIV* (Quarrachi-Firenze: 1929), p. 238; see also Jackson, P. tr. and ed. and ed. Morgan, D. *The Mission of William of Rubruck* (London: 1990), p. 163-4. Jackson's translation follows the same chapter and verse schema as that of Van den Wyngaert, and I therefore use these as a common reference point in this paper: the above mention of *Nestorini*, for example, is found in both texts at XXVI:12-14. Henceforth in the following format: William of Rubruck, *Itinerarium*, XXVI:12-14.

Those wretched priests never instructed [the lady Cota] in the faith, nor did they recommend baptism to her...Nor do the priests condemn any kind of sorcery... The priests never teach them that such practices are evil. (William of Rubruck, *Itinerarium*, XXIX: 42)

Rubruck would ultimately return to Paris, where he soon disappeared from history. His observations, however, had some influence on contemporaneous thinking, as is seen in the writings of his fellow Franciscan, Roger Bacon, the *Doctor Mirabilis*.

While the *Itinerarium* of William of Rubruck is a private communication between Rubruck and Louis IX, it is clear that he shared his observations with others once he had returned to Paris. In particular, he shared his experiences with his fellow Franciscan, Roger Bacon, who included information from Rubruck—and indeed entire passages from the *Itinerarium*—in his *Opus Maior*, which was written at request of Pope Clement IV and delivered to the Papacy in 1267 (Power 2002; Charpentier, 193, 255-267). In the fourth book of that work, for example, Bacon notes that intermingled among the idolaters, Tatars and Saracens of Asia are “Nestorians who are imperfect Christians, with their Patriarch in the East, who visits the districts and ordains infants in their cradles to holy orders, because he alone ordains, and cannot visit a place more than once in about fifty years...They teach the noble sons of the Tartars the Gospels and the Faith and others also when they have the opportunity, but because of their scanty knowledge and their evil morals they are despised by the Tartars (Burke 1927, 388).”<sup>4</sup> Thus, the works of William of Rubruck came to influence and reinforce prevailing Latin views of the Church of the East as heretical, doctrinally imperfect, and corrupt. These views would continue to color perception for a few decades afterward. When the Uighur Monk Rabban Sauma would visit Rome in 1287, he would initially be met by the *curia* with skepticism toward his views and declarations of sincerity.

### **The *Tashitha demar Yaballaha***

The *Tashitha demar Yaballaha* (the *History*) provides the account of two Turkic monks, Rabban Marcos and his mentor, Rabban Sauma, who set out from their cells in Mongol China on a pilgrimage with the ultimate objective of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> They travel along the Central Asian trade routes to Mongol Persia, where Marcos is elected

<sup>4</sup>This passage in Bacon’s *Opus Maius* is a direct lift from William of Rubruck, *Itinerarium* XXVI:12-14

<sup>5</sup>This is the focus of the first half of the *Tashitha*, and is drawn from a now lost Persian account written by Rabban Sauma, with the Syriac author abridging or adding to the text according to his purpose. The second half of the text is concerned primarily with the reign of Mar Yaballaha after the death of Rabban Sauma, his relationship with various Mongol kings, and increasingly poor relations with the majority Muslim community, resulting in the massacre of Christians in Maragha and Arbil. See Bedjan 1895, 85-6; Murre-van den Berg 2006, 38.

Catholicus of the Church of the East and Rabban Sauma is sent to the capitals of Europe in an effort to gain Latin allies for the Il-Khan against the Muslims in the Levant. It is on this mission that he first meets with the College of Cardinals, and learns that the Pope, Honorius IV, has recently died. Upon his reaching Rome, the College of Cardinals immediately questions him on numerous doctrines of faith. They also express surprise at a Christian coming as an ambassador for the “King of the Mongols.” (Bedjan 1895, 57) After a somewhat lengthy discussion of doctrine regarding the Trinity, they “terminated his discourse with many arguments, but they honored him for his discourse (Bedjan 1895, 61-62).” Rabban Sauma ultimately resolves the discussion by acknowledging their authority, his obedience to them, and his desire to make pilgrimage, stating, “I have come from far lands not to dispute nor to expound upon the themes of the Faith; but to receive a benediction from the Reverend Pope and the shrines of the Saints (Bedjan 1895, 62).” He is then given a tour of the holy sites in Rome before being sent away to resume his embassy.

### **Rabban Sauma in Rome**

Upon the coronation of the new Pope, Nicholas IV, Rabban Sauma returns to Rome, where he remains a guest of the *curia*. As the *History* relates:

After some days Rabban Sauma said to the Reverend Pope: “I wish to consecrate [the Eucharist] that you may see our custom.” And he bade him to consecrate, as he requested. And on that day a great congregation assembled to see how the ambassador of the Mongols consecrates. And when they saw, they rejoiced and said: “The language is different, but the rite is one!” And [Pope Nicholas IV] said to Rabban Sauma: “May God receive your offering and bless you, and pardon your faults and sins!”<sup>6</sup> (Bedjan, 1895,77-78; Montgomery, 1925, 68)

Rabban Sauma then replies that he should like communion from the hands of the Pope, “so that I may have complete forgiveness,” to which the Pope replies, “It shall be so.”

Rabban Sauma stays at the Vatican throughout the Holy Week, and on leaving, the Pope presents him and his Patriarch, Mar Yabalaha, with gifts, including a “ring from his own finger (Bedjan 1895, 83).” He also provides Yabalaha “letters patent which contained authorization of his Patriarchate over all the Orientals. And to Rabban Sauma he gave letters patent as Visitor over all the Christians (Bedjan 1895, 84).” This is important, for as Visitor General, the Papacy effectively empowered Sauma with

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<sup>6</sup> The pages in Bedjan’s edited text are noted in Montgomery’s translation. I have used both in this article, making amendments to Montgomery’s translation where appropriate.

responsibility for correcting doctrine. Thus, the embassy of Rabban Sauma was a success, and while later events would largely negate his achievements, his account provides an interesting model of an individual overcoming an inculturated resistance to his own version of Christianity. Moreover this is an example of Richard White’s middle ground, a case whereby actions are used to negotiate cultural differences. In the particular case of Rabban Sauma, through demonstrating obedience to the Pope, establishing his credibility as a pilgrim, and using the Eucharist as a means of negotiating cultural difference, he was successful at mitigating an initially negative cultural response.

**“The Rite is One”: Analysis and lessons for comparative theology**

Unfortunately, it was not to last. Despite efforts by the Patriarch Mar Yaballaha to establish union with the Roman church, within the decade Franciscan and Dominican missionaries were establishing Roman churches in India and China (Baum and Winkler 2003,100-101). The accounts left by these missionaries—among them John of Montecorvino and Odoric of Pordenone—record continuing conflicts with the Church of the East, with Odoric dismissing the East Syrians of Mylapore as “useless heretics (Baum and Winkler 2003, 101).”

In recent years, relations between Rome and the Assyrian Church of the East have taken a different turn. In 1994, the Catholicos Mardinkha and Pope John Paul II made a joint Christological Declaration attributing conflicts between the two churches as “due in large part to misunderstandings (CCDCCACE 1994).” The declaration continues: “Whatever our Christological differences have been, we experience ourselves united today in the confession of the same faith...we wish from now on to witness together (CCDCCACE 1994).” Interestingly, however, the document also notes that, owing to differences in church constitution and sacrament (notably the use of words of institution (This is my body, this is my Blood—as determined by Peter Lombard), “we cannot unfortunately celebrate together the Eucharist (CCDCCACE 1994).” Given the Eucharist’s role in overcoming difference in Rabban Sauma’s case, this is instructive, and stems largely from the formalization of sacrament that occurred at the Council of Trent from 1545-1563. Thus again, a purely cultural response, in this case to European Protestantism, is brought to bear on the evaluation of the inculturated Christianity of the Church of the East, with results that impact ecumenical effort.

**Catholic-Assyrian Church of the East Dialogue**

Since 1994, continuing work has occurred to resolve this difference, and in 2001 the Papacy released its “Guidelines for admission to the Eucharist between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East,” which affirm specific rites used in the Church of the East, as sacramental for the purposes of Eucharist (PCFPCU). The

decision, nonetheless, is not without controversy, particularly among Traditionalist Catholics who frame post-Vatican II moves towards ecumenism in terms of “combat for tradition.” (SSPX)

The lesson to be learned from this history of relations between Rome and the Church of the East is one that is also very instructive for the practice of comparative theology and interfaith dialogue. Again, this speaks to the risks of inculturated response in ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, particularly when that response is rooted in religious doctrine. As *Redemptoris Missio* describes the process of inculturation:

The process of the Church’s insertion into peoples’ cultures is a lengthy one. It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation “means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures.” The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church’s reflection and practice. But at the same time it is a difficult process, for *it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith.* (PP John Paul II 1990, 52 [my italics])

As this historical example demonstrates, however, even the Roman church, and Western Christianity, is inculturated, even if the “culture” is normative from our own perspective. The historical case studies of William of Rubruck and Rabban Sauma demonstrate the types of responses that can result between even two branches of Christianity: cases where there is the meeting with an “inculturated” Christianity—such as the Church of the East—and a “normative” Christianity which regards its mission as maintaining “the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith (PP John Paul II 1990, 52).” Further, this concept of “inculturation” is not historically fixed: a primary means by which Rabban Sauma ultimately gained acceptance—the performance of the Eucharist which led those assembled to cry, “the language is different, but the rite is one!”—would have been rendered impossible by the doctrinal language put into play after the Council of Trent, a Council driven by European events that occurred almost two-hundred years after his mission. The middle ground had shifted, and this serves a note of caution for those of us engaged in comparative theology and interfaith dialogue. Since even the post-Vatican II ecumenical work is not without opposition, we must remain vigilant with regard to changing standards of “inculturation” if our activity in comparative theology is to have any permanence.



## **Normative Inculturation, Acculturation, Enculturation, and Comparative Theology**

The Comparative Theology Group and the work being done in this field is one of the more relevant bodies of work that is being undertaken today, essentially because of its dialogical nature. As Francis Clooney has written, comparative theology promotes “a new, more integral theological conversation wherein traditions can remain distinct although their theologies are no longer separable. A religion may be unique, but its theology is not.” (Clooney 2001, 8) Clooney also lays out three basic tenets for comparative theology: that theology is inter-religious and “occurs when believers begin to think through, probe, and explain what they believe,” that “intelligent inter-religious theology is already comparative theology where similarities and differences are taken into account,” and that “if theologians can profitably notice similarities and differences across religious boundaries...theology ideally becomes dialogical (Clooney 2001, 8-10).” Thus the definition for comparative theology lays out a model by which the individual must seek to understand their own cultural-theological location—their own inculturation—and undertake a process, which, by virtue of its active dialogical element, implies that it is constantly evolving. This poses a hope and a threat for the problem discussed above: presumably future theologians will still be in dialogue with those who oppose them as well.

The challenge of Comparative Theology is to be aware of inculturated responses. The case study outlined above demonstrates that such inculturated responses do not occur merely between faiths, but can occur inter-denominationally as well. As such, the role of culture is to be all the more respected in comparative theology. One hopeful aspect of Comparative Theology is that our modern day theoretical toolkit, cultural understanding, and ability to be self critical is presumably better in these post-Vatican II/post-structuralist times than it was at the height of the medieval Papacy or the Reformation. Also encouraging is a formally stated objective of pursuing more interfaith and Ecumenical dialogue.

## **Conclusion: Implications for Comparative Theology**

So what are the ways forward? In prior meetings of this group and in articles, I have argued that the use of theologically loaded terminology can be a stumbling block in interfaith dialogue, as many of these terms—such as words of institution—carry with them presuppositions. (Watson 2009, 179-186.) Taking that argument a step further here, I would argue that such terms and language are, though normative by our own standards, inculturated and evolving, and hence potentially counter to the dialogical aspects of Comparative Theology. I have suggested elsewhere that the use of meta-terminology is one means by which these loaded terms can be avoided. In this model, the use of meta-terminology can become a middle ground. As the example of Rabban

Sauma also demonstrates, sacramental actions can also become a middle ground. Thus, the study of history can aid in the development of the theoretical toolkit available to us, effectively by providing case studies of which the results are known, and providing cautionary examples as we undertake our own theological and interfaith work in the midst of an evolving, historically located culture. I hope this paper has been illuminating in demonstrating precisely how much of a challenge inculturation can pose to efforts at comparative theology.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>This paper was initially presented at the Comparative Theology Group of the American Academy of Religion, Montreal, Canada, 15 October, 2009. My thanks to Francis Clooney, Columba Stewart, Arun Jones, and Garry Sparks, who provided comments and advice on an earlier version of this paper. To them the credit: all mistakes that remain are my own.

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