Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq: Its Origins and Development to the Present Day*. Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2005. xxix, 203 p., [14] p. of plates, 3 maps. Bibliography: p. [198]–203. ISBN 0852446330 £9.99; Distributed in the US by Gorgias Press, $35.00.

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[1] Iraqi Christian visitors or immigrants in the West are often surprised by the question "When did you convert to Christianity?" Their indignant response is usually "We have always been Christian!" Indeed, Christianity had arrived in Iraq before it arrived in Britain or anywhere in northern Europe. Today the number of Christians in Iraq surpasses half a million (573,918 according to the 1997 edition of *World Church Handbook*, quoted in the book under review on p. 181).

[2] The author, Suha Rassam is a Catholic of the Chaldean rite, born in Mosul. A medical doctor, she had been an Assistant Professor of Medicine in the University of Baghdad. After coming to England in 1990 she worked in London hospitals until her retirement when she took an MA in Eastern Christianity at the school of Oriental and African Studies in the University of London. In this she is following in the footsteps of her distinguished ancestors. During the heyday of medieaval Arab civilization many famous Christian physicians had written works about history and theology, or conversely, many theologians had produced works about medicine. But, as far as I know, Rassam is the first woman to combine the two disciplines.

[3] Her book presents a history of Christianity in Iraq from the very beginnings until our own time. (The last date in the chronology is 10 April 2005, recording the appointment of Mr. Jaʿfari as Prime Minister). According to tradition Christianity was first preached in Iraq by the Apostle Thomas on his way to India and his fellow-Apostle, St. Thaddeus. Or maybe even earlier? In his Prologue to the book Monsignor Mikhael Al Jamil mentions the three Magi who had visited the Infant Jesus in Bethlehem. Could they have been Iraqis? The Magi were Zoroastrian priests, presumably ethnic Persians, but Iraq was at that time part of the Iranian (Parthian) Empire. Could they have brought back the news of the Saviour, Saoshyant foretold by Zarathushtra?

[4] The Parthian Arsacid rulers of Iran and Iraq, nominal Zoroastrians were quite tolerant of other religions. The situation

changed in 224 AD when they were overthrown by the Sassanids, ardent Persian nationalists, determined to restore the ancient culture of Iran without the foreign influences accumulated since the conquest by Alexander 500 years before. Christianity, as a foreign religion, was perceived as a threat, especially during the constant wars between Zoroastrian Iran and Christian Byzantium. The harshest and longest persecution in the history of Iraqi/Iranian Christianity took place during the forty years (339–379) reign of Shah Shapur II. The Chaldean church in Montreal is dedicated to its numerous victims, *Les Saints Martyrs d'Orient*. The situation improved when the Church of the East declared itself independent of Byzantium and Rome (like in our times the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in Communist China).

[5] During the 5th and 6th century Middle Eastern Christianity gradually divided itself into three mutually hostile groups, accusing each other of heresy. Ostensibly the conflict was over a formula expressing the human and divine nature of Christ, but cultural differences played their part. The so-called Melkites or "Royalists" (from Syriac *malkâ*, Arabic *malik*, "king") accepted the doctrine promoted by the Byzantine Emperor (and the Pope), as defined by the Council of Chalcedon. The West Syrian or Syrian Orthodox Church (known as Jacobite after its famous preacher Jacob Baradeus) was accused of denying Christ's true humanity. Finally the East Syrian Church or Church of the East, best known as Nestorian for accepting the doctrine preached by Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, condemned by the Council of Ephesus, refused to accept the term *Theotokos* (Mother of God), insisting that Mary was the Mother of Jesus the Man only.

[6] Rassam takes us through all those controversies showing us that most of them were simply misunderstandings. The disputants had been trying to apply Greek logic to issues which belonged to faith more than to philosophy. Indeed, in 1994 the "Nestorian" Church of the East and the Catholic Church have issued a joint statement expressing their agreement about the two natures and one Person of Christ. Better late than never!

[7] But to the majority of the faithful (of any denomination) more relevant than abstract questions of theology are such discernible signs as the liturgical language, Communion under both species or in the form of bread only, the direction of the sign of the Cross, left or right, married clergy versus celibate clergy (or bearded clergy

versus clean-shaven clergy), Gregorian versus Julian calendar, baptism by sprinkling with water or by immersion, the mystery of the Mass behind a screen or curtain or openly facing the congregation, segregated or merged seating of men and women in church, the presence or absence of icons... (The Church of the East rejects any pictorial representations as staunchly as Islam or some radical Protestant Churches in the West). Rassam has little to tell us about those relatively trivial (or perhaps not so trivial) matters.

[8] She strongly objects to the use of the terms "Nestorian" and "Jacobite" traditionally applied to the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church by outsiders as incorrect and even offensive. Nestorius was not even a member of the Church which goes by his name! Likewise she proposes the term "Oriental Orthodox Churches" for the so-called "Monophysite" Churches (another incorrect term thrust upon them by their opponents) which include the Syrian Orthodox Church and its sister Churches in the Middle East to distinguish them from the Chalcedonian "Eastern Orthodox Churches" of Eastern Europe which follow the Byzantine tradition (p. 63). This may work very well in English which provides us with the synonyms "Eastern" and "Oriental," but what about other languages? In French we can say *Les Eglises Orthodoxes Orientales*, but what alternative do we have?

[9] Yet the term "Nestorian," while incorrect, does have an illustrious history. Most of us have heard of the "lost" Nestorian Christianities in the heart of Asia. Persecuted or harassed in the Iranian Empire the Church of the East had sent missionaries to India, to Central Asia and China. Today some 20 million Christians in the Indian State of Kerala use Syriac as their liturgical language. Nestorian Christianity has disappeared from Central Asia and China by the 14th century, but some of its traces remain: The Mongolian language is still written in a Syriac-derived script in Inner (Chinese) Mongolia, as it was written in Outer (independent) Mongolia until the introduction of Cyrillic in 1941.

[10] The Arab Muslim conquerors were welcomed by the Iraqi Christians as liberators from the oppressive Iranian rule. Under *sharí'a* law Christians, Jews and Sabi'ans, followers of monotheistic religions mentioned in the Koran, were given certain rights as *dhimmis* ("protected persons"). Under the ʿAbbasid Caliphs, when Arab Islamic civilization had reached its apogee Christians became particularly appreciated as translators of Greek philosophy into

Arabic and as physicians. Suha Rassam quotes a story by Jâḥiz about a medical doctor Asad bin Jani who complains that he has no patients because he is a Muslim, not a Christian (p. 83). Sounds eerily familiar: In pre-War Poland Jewish doctors were perceived as more competent than their Polish Catholic colleagues. The joke went that every anti-Semite made an exception for his doctor. Understandably Christian success had created resentment. Even such leading intellectuals like Jâhiz and Tabari found it necessary to write anti-Christian polemics.

[11] At the time of the Arab conquest the overwhelming majority of Iraqi Christians spoke Syriac. Gradually they began to change their language from Syriac to Arabic although they continued to attend Syriac churches. Today Syriac-speakers are a minority, even among the Christians of Iraq. Rassam's Mosul family had always been Arabic-speaking, at least as far as her great-grandmother could remember. Our author speculates that she may be descended not from Chaldeans who had lost their language, but from Arabs who had converted to Christianity before Islam (p. 128, n. 6). She does not mention any Kurdish-speaking Christians.

[12] The Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258 was of course a catastrophe for the Arabs, but, paradoxically enough it put Christians in a position of advantage compared to the preceding period. For all their barbarity the Mongol rulers had one great virtue: complete religious tolerance. Indeed many of them were members of the Church of the East. *Jizyah*, the special tax which the *dhimmis* had to pay in lieu of military service and all other legal disadvantages affecting Christians were abolished. The year 1287 saw the first attempt at reconciliation between the Church of the East and the Catholic Church. The Patriarch Yahballaha III sent his Bishop, Bar Sauma to Rome with letters from the pro-Christian *ilkhan* of Iran, Argun Khan proposing a Mongol-Christian alliance. Perhaps fortunately no military alliance materialized, but Bar Sauma was warmly received by the Pope and allowed to participate in all church ceremonies like a Catholic Bishop in good standing. The Christian-Mongol "honeymoon" ended in 1295 when Argun's son and successor, Ghazan converted to Islam. The *shari'a* was reinstated, including all restrictions on the *dhimmis*.

[13] Iraq was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1534. The Ottomans governed their recognised non-Muslim minorities through the *millet* system. *Millet*, derived from Arabic *milla* ("sect")

means "nation" in Turkish. Each "nation" was given a large measure of inner self-government with the Patriarch or leader holding civil as well as ecclesiastical authority with the responsibility of collecting taxes for the Ottoman Government.

[14] The origins of the Chaldean "Uniate" Catholic Church can be traced to 1552 when a rival Patriarch of the Church of the East, John Sulaqa asked for and was granted recognition by the Pope. The Patriarch Shimʿon VIII Dinkha, recognised as head of his *millet* had him thrown in prison by the Ottoman authorities. The union lasted on and off with the two lines of Patriarchs exchanging their positions until it became permanent in 1830 when John VIII Hormiz was given by the Pope the title "Patriarch of Babylon over the Chaldeans." The Chaldean Catholic *Millet* was recognised by the Ottoman authorities in 1844. Today the Chaldean Catholic Church forms the largest Christian community in Iraq. The Iraqi Christians are perfectly justified in their proud boast "We have always been Christian," but they stand on less firm ground when they claim "We have always been Catholic."

[15] Meanwhile the Church of the East, much reduced in numbers found refuge in the almost inaccessible Hakkâri Mountains in southeast Turkey. Its faithful, claiming descent from the ancient Assyrians displayed the war-like qualities of their ancestors. No Ottoman military or tax collector dared enter their territory. The chiefs of their seven tribes bore the grandiose title *Malik* ("King" in Arabic). Over the seven Kings stood the Patriarch of the East whose office had become hereditary from uncle to nephew in the Mar Shimʿun family. Their virtually independent state bore a remarkable resemblance to Montenegro, unconquered by the Turks and likewise ruled by hereditary (uncle to nephew) Orthodox Bishops.

[16] During the First World War, the Assyrians, encouraged by Russian and British agents, openly rebelled against their nominal Turkish overlords. Driven out of Turkey into Iran whose declared neutrality was respected by neither party they captured the largely Assyrian city of Urmiyé. They held their own against Turkish, Iranian and Kurdish attacks until August 1918 when they decided to trek south to British-occupied Hamadan. Some fifteen out of sixty thousand perished on the way. The British, who had by that time occupied most of Iraq, removed them to Baʿqubah where they trained the wild mountain guerrillas into a modern army. The so-

called Assyrian Levies ranked among the toughest soldiers in the British Empire, equal to Sikhs and Gurkhas. Their loyalty to their British allies would cost them dearly.

[17] By 1920 the British liberators of Iraq had outstayed their welcome and an uprising broke out in the South. It was put down, largely with Assyrian help, but the British were forced to grant self-government to Iraq with Faysal I as King. Formal independence followed in 1932. Rassam greatly admires King Faysal for his lack of prejudice against religious minorities. She quotes him with approval (p. 134): "I do not want to hear that this country contains Christians, Jews or Muslims because *we are all Semites* [emphasis added by the reviewer] forming one nation called Iraq..." True, the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Jews and the Arabs are Semites, but the Kurds are not. Rassam does not comment.

[18] With Iraqi independence the British disbanded the Assyrian Levies, hated by the Arab Muslim population. Fearing the worst, the Assyrians refused to surrender their arms. A clash with the Iraqi Army became inevitable. King Faysal, very ill, tried to avert the tragedy, but was ignored by his Prime Minister, Rashid Ali al-Gaylani, a Fascist who would stage a pro-German coup d'état during the 2nd World War. Meanwhile his government created a general panic by exaggerating reports about the strength of the Assyrian rebel forces and the danger they represented. Unable to hold their own against the Iraqi Army the Assyrians were massacred in the summer of 1933. King Faysal died soon afterwards. The Patriarch of the East, Mar Eshai Shimʿun was expelled from the country and not allowed back until 1970. Needless to say, the Assyrian problem did not make life easier for the other Christian communities in Iraq.

[19] In 1958 the Iraqi Monarchy was overthrown and a Republic proclaimed. In 1968 power was seized by the Baʿath ("Renaissance") Party, an Arab nationalist party founded by a Christian Arab political philosopher, Michel Aflaq. Its secular nationalism appealed to many young Christian Arab intellectuals. "A sense of belonging to the country as an Arab, an Iraqi and a Christian was encouraged but only through being a Baʿathist" (p. 149). Saddam Hussein succeeded Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr as President in 1979. Whatever his misdeeds as a ruthless dictator he never perpetrated nor permitted any iniquity against the Christians. He appointed many Christians to high positions including the

Deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz. If Christians suffered under his regime, it was not specifically as Christians but like all Iraqis.

[20] Like every historian who has drawn her narrative down to her own time, Rassam is forced to make a comment about the current situation. She has little sympathy for the American-led invasion, as is shown by her use of the term "occupation," a term the self-proclaimed "liberators" of Iraq would protest against. She quotes with approval the joint statement of the Bishops of Mosul of all denominations (p. 190): "...We ask the occupying forces and all foreign armed people to leave the country." The "foreign armed people" are Muslim volunteers come to Iraq to fight the Americans. They have carried out indiscriminate killings, not only of Americans and the new Iraqi Army and Police, but of ordinary Iraqis, Christians and Muslims. They have carried out bomb attacks against Christian churches which have been condemned by all Iraqi Muslim religious leaders, Sunni and Shiʿa. Since the book was published Shiʿa and Sunni mosques have also been destroyed by bombs, so that now all Iraqis, Christians and Muslims are in the same desperate situation. The last chapter "Iraq under occupation and transitional rule" does not make happy reading, but the overall message of the book need not be pessimistic. Iraqi Christians (and all Iraqis) had survived persecution, foreign invasion, civil war in the past and this could be the ultimate lesson from history.

[21] The bibliography consists of two sections: "Publications in English" (p. [198]–202) and "Arabic publications and translations" (p. 202–3). There are no French works listed, not even J.M. Fiey's monumental *Assyrie chrétienne*, although Rassam had learnt French in L'Ecole de la Présentation, a girls' school in Baghdad directed by French nuns and indeed she mentions Fiey in note 32 on p. 75 without giving the title of his book. The Arabic titles are given in English translation only, without the Arabic original, neither in transliteration nor in the original script. Now suppose I want to look up Al-Kaisi, Abd al-Majid Hasib, *The Political and Military History of the Assyrians in Iraq* in a library catalogue? I have to translate it back into Arabic *Târîkh al-Athûrîyîn al-Siyâsî wa-al-ʿAskarî fî-al-ʿIrâq* (?) and hope that this is how the title goes in the original, but how can I be sure? There are glossaries of Syriac and Arabic terms (p. [194]–197), but no index, which would have been very useful.

[22] Syriac and Arabic names in the text are spelt phonetically, not according to any exact transliteration, as we would expect in a book written for the general public. However there are many typos, no doubt the fault of the English printer, e.g., the name Bakr is spelt Bakir, both in the case of the Caliph Abu Bakr (p. 73, n. 18) and of President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr (p. 148).

[23] An unfortunate slip of the pen occurs on p. 173: In enumerating the Chaldean churches outside Iraq the author counts "two in Iran." Maybe she means the two Archdioceses, Tehran and Urmiyé. As to parish churches, there are in Sanandaj (the former See of the Archbishop of Tehran), in Salmas, in Kermanshah, in Hamadan, and in Ahvaz.

[24] The fourteen pages of black-and-white photographs will give the Western reader a direct feeling of Iraqi Christian culture, although they do not give full justice to the rich ecclesiastical architectural heritage of Iraq.

[25] The book fills a much needed lacuna. Most educated Westerners have heard of the Copts in Egypt, the Maronites in Lebanon, but the presence of the Chaldeans and other Christian groups in Iraq is largely unknown. Although the book is written with the general reader in mind, the Orientalist scholar will find much useful information in it. Its scope extends beyond its stated subject matter. Iraq is not an island, geographically or figuratively speaking, and Iraqi Christianity is placed within a wider context. We learn about the history of the Christian Church and its Christological controversies of interest to theologians, about the history of the Middle East, and of the neighbouring countries, Iran, Syria and Turkey. I believe that the history of a religious or ethnic minority throws a new perspective on our view of the society in general. ("Black Studies" teach us something not only about the history of Black people in North America, but also about American and Canadian history as such). The author's references to her personal experience as an Iraqi Christian add a lot to the charm of the book. There are those who believe that a scholarly work has to be dry and impersonal, excluding any "anecdotal" material to be truly "academic." This reviewer does not share that view and would recommend the book to all readers interested in Iraq and the Middle East.