

## NESTORIUS AND THE NESTORIANS.<sup>1</sup>

BY THE EDITOR.

THE Nestorian Church is a sect which calls itself Chaldæan Christianity. In its doctrines it follows Nestorius, who was patriarch of Constantinople (428-431) where for three years he exercised an unusual power but succumbed in the conflict with his rival Cyril mainly through the intrigues of Pulchria at the court.

Nestorius had been ordained a presbyter at Antioch and in his theology he followed the austere traditions of the Antiochian school. When called to Constantinople as patriarch he came with the intention of establishing the "pure doctrine." In his installation sermon before the emperor, he said: "Give me a country cleansed of heretics and I will return heaven to you in its place. Help me to overcome heretics and I will help you to conquer the Persians."

Nestorius combined with his zeal for the truth the awkwardness of the monk who was not fitted to cope with the complicated conditions at the capital, the power of the emperor as head of the Church, the intrigue of the court and the influence of the masses. In those days dogmatic subtleties and theological terms became issues of great controversies and Nestorius took special exception to the name "Mother of God" which was commonly attributed to Mary. The term was an old pagan expression and is a literal translation of the Egyptian *Neter Mut* by which Isis was addressed by her devotees.

A presbyter of Nestorius, Anastasius of Antioch, who had accompanied his master to Constantinople, once preached a sermon in which he declared, "Call ye not Mary, mother of God, for she was but human and God cannot be born of a human being."<sup>2</sup>

These words gave great offense, for the term "Mother of God" was very dear to the Egyptian Church and had been adopted by the

<sup>1</sup> This historical note contains further information with regard to the Nestorian Christians whose remarkable monument in China was the subject of several articles in the January *Open Court*.

<sup>2</sup> Socrates, *Hist. Ec.*, VII, chap. 32.

other congregations. But Nestorius supported his presbyter and thereby was implicated in a struggle with the worshipers of Mary. He was accused of splitting up the personality of Christianity into two separate beings, Christ born of God in eternity, and the human Jesus, son of Mary. Cyril succeeded in having Nestorius deposed and exiled from Constantinople, but he himself although he remained in possession of his episcopacy and income, did not succeed in forcing his view upon the emperor and the Church at Constantinople. Nor was the difficulty removed, for the struggle continued to upset the Church for a long time. The adherents of



THE CROSS ON THE TOMB OF ST. THOMAS NEAR MADRAS.

Nestorius, however, who dominated in the Church of Syria and spread over the Orient, separated themselves from the Church and recognized the bishop of Silencia as their head, under the name of Catholicus. They distinguished themselves through learnedness and established good schools wherever they went. Their main seat and center of learning was Nisibis. The Nestorians sent out missionaries toward the East and counted many adherents in Persia, Syria, India and Tibet. The Indian Nestorians are commonly called St. Thomas Christians, and there is a remarkable monument left of them near

Madras which is mentioned by Marco Polo and is regarded as the tomb of St. Thomas,<sup>3</sup> the first Christian apostle to India. The Nestorian Church upon the whole follows the ritual of the Greek Church. Part of them united again with the Roman Church and are now commonly called United Nestorians. The others who have remained independent recognize as their Catholicus, a patriarch by the name of Max Simeon, residing at Kotchinas near Julamerg, in the territory of the Hakkiare, a tribe of the Kurds. They are strongly under Russian influence, and it is not impossible that in time they will join the Greek Church.

At present they are weak in numbers and influence. They may not be more than one hundred and fifty thousand souls, but in former days they were a flourishing Church, and for a time it seemed as if Nestorian Christianity would be the state religion of Tibet. From Tibet it spread even into China where it was welcomed by the emperor and had a fair chance of competing with Buddhism and Confucianism for supremacy. It is strange how Nestorianism lost its hold on the Tibetans and the Chinese. We would scarcely know how powerful they once were in the center of Asia had not a happy accident brought to light that remarkable slab which is a document of the Nestorian presence in China. This monument, it must be remembered, is the oldest confession of Christian faith in any comprehensive form that has come down to us in the original from past ages. It was erected in the year 781 A. D. while the oldest extant manuscripts of New or Old Testament are of a much later date.

<sup>3</sup> It may be of interest to note that the cross preserved on the Nestorian stone bears great resemblance to that on the tomb of St. Thomas the Apostle, near Madras, India, which for good reasons is assumed to date from the same century and of which Marco Polo gives an interesting account in Chapter XVIII of his well-known book of travel. We reproduce the picture from page 353 of the edition of Henry Yule published by Charles Scribner's Sons.