

Der Tur Abdin – lebendiges Zentrum des syrischen Christentums?

**TUR ABDIN – LIVING CENTER OF SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY?**

*Initiative Christlicher Orient, PRO ORIENTE/Salzburg und das Bildungszentrum St. Virgil*

23-24 September 2019 at **19:30**

**Mor Polycarpus A. Aydin**

*Metropolitan of the Syriac Orthodox Church in The Netherlands*

**Sehr geehrter, Lieber Herr Erzbischof Dr. Franz Lackner,**

Vom Herzen bedanke ich mich bei Ihnen für die herzliche Begrüßung, die Sie gerade ausgesprochen haben. Es ist mir ein Anliegen Ihnen heute Abend öffentlich zu danken für die Unterstützung, die Sie gerade als Erzbischof von Salzburg der Syrisch Orthodoxen Kirche entgegenbringen. Es freut mich sehr, dass sich im Laufe der Jahren über die bestehenden theologischen Verbindungen zwischen unseren beiden Kirchen, die katholische Kirche und die Syrisch Orthodoxe Kirche hinaus, eine zutiefst empfundene und gelebte Freundschaft entwickeln konnte. Durch Ihr Engagement war und ist es möglich, dass Gläubigen unserer beiden Kirchen im Studium und in persönlichen Begegnungen in der Einheit der Kirche Christi wachsen. Dafür gilt mein aufrichtiger Dank!

Ein Dankeswort möchte ich auch an die Organisatoren dieser Tagung und insbesondere Professor Dietmar Winkler aussprechen, da Sie mich eingeladen haben hier heute Abend einen Vortrag zu halten. Es freut mich, dass die Initiative Christlicher Orient zusammen mit Pro Oriente/Salzburg, und das Bildungszentrum St. Virgil auch das 30 jähriges Jubiläum des „Vereins der Freunde des Tur Abdin“ als Anlass genommen haben, diese Tagung Tur Abdin zu widmen. Auch Ihnen, lieber Professor Winkler bin ich sehr dankbar für Ihr Engagement im Dialog zwischen unseren Kirchen.

## **Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren,**

Mein Vortrag heute Abend hat als Überschrift: „Der Tur Abdin – lebendiges Zentrum des syrischen Christentums?“ Zentral in diesem Titel ist das Fragezeichen. Mein Vortrag wird der Frage nachgehen ob, Beziehungsweise, in-wie-fern Tur Abdin noch ein lebendiges Zentrum des syrischen Christentums ist oder auch weiterhin sein kann.

Um diese Frage zu beantworten werde ich zuerst kurz die historische und religiöse Relevanz von Tur Abdin für die Syrisch Orthodoxe Kirche, die Gemeinschaft sowie die einzelnen Gläubigen darlegen. Da vermutlich nicht alle Anwesenden schon den ganzen Tag an dieser Tagung teilgenommen haben, mögen es mir diejenigen, die hier waren nachsehen, wenn sie einige Aspekte nun erneut hören werden. In einem zweiten Schritt werde ich kurz die politischen und sozialen Ereignissen der letzten fünfzig Jahren im Naher Osten darlegen, welche sowohl Tur Abdin selbst wie auch die Syrischen Gläubigen berühren, vor allem da viele sich gezwungen sahen ihre Heimat in Tur Abdin zu verlassen und nunmehr im Westen leben. Somit wird dann die Grundlage gelegt sein, im dritten Teil des Vortrages das Fragezeichen im Titel meines Vortrages besser zu verstehen und zu reflektieren.

Leider ist es mir nicht möglich mein Vortrag in Deutsch zu halten. Ich bitte Sie um Verzeihung und werde nun in der englischen Sprache weiter reden.

### **1. The historical and religious significance of Tur Abdin for the Syriac Orthodox Church, community and individual faithful.**

In his remarkable trilingual book, *Tur Abdin: Living Cultural Heritage / Lebendiges Kulturerbe, / Canli Kultur Mirasi*, published in 1999 in Linz, Austria, Fr. Hans Hollerweger, a Professor Emeritus of Liturgical Science at the Theological Faculty in Linz, who is a true and dear friend of Tur ‘Abdin and its Syriac Christian Community, provides a genuine account of this ancient region and its Syriac faithful whom he first encountered in the middle of 1980s and since then continued to help and support through the Friends of Tur ‘Abdin, and Initiative Christlicher Orient (ICO).

**Auch Ihnen, Herr Professor Hollerweger, Lieber Hans, gilt meinem aufrichtigen Dank, da ohne Sie der „Verein Freunde des Tur Abdin“ nicht existieren würde. Ich wünsche mir, dass Ihr Buch erneut veröffentlicht wird.**

Professor Hollerweger's inspiring preface on *TURABDIN*, coupled with two introductory contributions one by Sebastian Brock, the world renowned Professor Emeritus of Syriac Studies at Oxford University, on the cultural importance Turabdin, and the other by Dr Andrew Palmer on its historical development, provide the context necessary for understanding and appreciating the Syriac Christians of the Orient as well as their social, cultural, historical and liturgical significance not only for the Oriental Christians but for all Christendom.

Through this first pictorial account of Tur 'Abdin, the holy mountain of Syriac Christianity, the author takes the reader on a captivating journey across the physical and cultural history of Tur 'Abdin in the Orient out of which Bible and Christianity sprang, and guides them through ancient churches and monasteries. It likewise introducing the region's struggling Christian community to the wider public by presenting them as a living community above all through the celebration of their ancient liturgy performed in Aramaic, the language spoken by our Lord Jesus Christ whom they witness in their daily life.

From religious point of view, Tur 'Abdin is considered the holy mountain of Syriac Christianity. Because of the monks, who lived in the approximately 80 monasteries there, the area became one of the centers of the oldest Christian traditions. Thanks to the remarkable book of Fr Hans Hollerweger, Tur 'Abdin with its beautiful landscape, and ancient historical and cultural monuments, as well as its living Christian community became better known in the West.

In his message of greeting, His Holiness, the late Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, praises Turabdin as "our holy mountain, in the soil of which are buried the precious remains of the saints, ascetics and martyrs who were our fathers." He goes further saying: "Turabdin truly means everything to us. In other words, it is a summary and complete example of the history of our Syrian Church. Therefore, the love of Turabdin has a special place in our hearts. The ancient monasteries and churches are sacred to us. As Patriarch of the Syrian Church, we regard Turabdin as a holy site, second only to Jerusalem, and look on our visits there as pilgrimages."

Also Sebastian Brock, in his introductory contribution titled "Tur 'Abdin – a Homeland of Ancient Syro-Aramean Culture" reflects about religious and cultural significance of Tur 'Abdin citing among

other things its Syriac monastic tradition, and many famous monasteries that sprung up in the course of the fifth and sixth centuries, many of which survived and some of which continue to serve as monasteries well into present day: this was the case with the Monastery of Mor Awgin who, according to the tradition was the founder of monasticism in Mesopotamia. Due to the blossoming of monasteries all over the plateau in the ensuing centuries that Tur 'Abdin has sometimes been accorded the title of "the Mount Athos of the East" by European writers.

Brock goes on further to explain saying:

Accordingly today, for many people Tur 'Abdin is renowned primarily for its numerous ancient churches and monasteries, some of which still function, despite the vicissitudes and ravages of time... For the Syrian Orthodox Church, however, it is much more than this, for Tur 'Abdin is above all the heartland of Syriac Tradition which reaches back to the early centuries of the Christian Church. Whatever the correct etymology of its name, Tur 'Abdin is quintessentially "the mountain of the servants of God", the home of numerous local saints, after whom many of the monasteries and churches that have sprung up and flourished at one period or another over the course of sixteen centuries have been named.

In addition, besides the architectural significance of some of the Churches such as that of Mor Yakub the Recluse at Salah, and that of the Virgin Mary at Hah, it is also important to bear in mind the history of Tur 'Abdin is rich in many other aspects of culture. The survival of a magnificent illuminated Gospel lectionary manuscript written in 1227. This is an example of an excellent scribal activity in the region during the 13<sup>th</sup> century which has been termed by one author as a 'renaissance' for the Syrian Orthodox Church. Recently, the Jesuit Father Vincenzo Ruggieri of the Oriental Pontifical Institute in Rome has made these jewels of Tur 'Abdin better known to the wider public through a very fine publication entitled: *The Syriac Manuscripts of Tur 'Abdin In the Fondo Grunwald*. Furthermore, Tur 'Abdin can boast a large number of Syriac authors writing in Classical Syriac, as well as the scribal activity in the transmission of Syriac liturgical and literary texts which continues up to the present day.

Though the large-scale immigration has reduced the number of the faithful significantly, Tur 'Abdin still remains very much a spiritual focal-point, not only for Syrian Orthodox Tradition, but also for the whole of Christian tradition, since it is here, in the remaining active monasteries of Tur 'Abdin such as Mor Gabriel, Mor Yakub of Salah, Mor Yakub d-Qarno, Mor Malke, and Mor Awgin near

Midyat and Deyrulzafaran near Mardin, that a liturgical language Syriac, akin to the Galilean Aramaic that Christ will have spoken, is successfully nurtured as part of a venerable and living Tradition which has enriched, and continues to enrich, the entire Christian tradition.

What did Tur 'Abdin mean to the faith of ordinary people? The ordinary people of Tur 'Abdin are very much attached to their native soil, and they have a genuine love and affection for the land. Being rooted in the agrarian culture, the liturgy, and liturgical life of the faithful would be shaped and formed in the that religious context. Their life revolved around the Church, and the work of their hands and the first fruit of their land, as well as the their first born were often consecrated and dedicated to the Lord. The ordinary faithful would flock to the monasteries and feast days of the patron saints, many children would join the traditional seminaries, especially, that of Mor Gabriel, which I myself joined at the age of 11 and spent there 6 years together with my class-mate Isa Dogdu (one of the speakers today, who is now the Principal of the Seminary), and had received lessons in Syriac language and liturgy from Rabban Saliba Ozmen, currently the Archbishop of Mardin who is also here with us. The children who attended the church schools and traditional seminaries run by the local monasteries would be formed in a certain spirit and would learn the Syriac/Aramaic language, and not only learn the traditions by engaging in them, but who would also practice them. In this way the traditions would go under the skin of the people and thus contribute to their identity. Hence the traditions could be handed over from one generation to the other without being fossilized. The identity of the people was shaped in many ways and developed naturally. There were thus in a way three pillars: prayer (the liturgical life), study and practice of the faith in living it out with in the family and neighbors.

**2. A short overview of the political and social developments that took and are taking place in the Middle East, which impact Tur Abdin and the Syriac faithful alike, which caused many people to leave the homeland in Tur Abdin and take refuge in the West.**

As mentioned earlier, over the years, due to economic hardships, and more importantly, due to the terrible wars in the region, many Syriac Christians have left Tur 'Abdin and sought refuge in the West in the hope of finding a permanent peace and a secure future for themselves and their children. Consequently, their number dwindled over the years. As Fr Hans Hollerweger put it

“[a]gain and again, in the course of history, they have been endangered and their very existence has been threatened. As a result of involvement in the conflicts of the twentieth century many have left the region in which their ancestors had lived since pre-Christian times.” Those who remained were obviously in need of a feeling of solidarity, which Fr Hans tried to give to them through the organization of the “Friends of Tur ‘Abdin” and the foundation of the “Hilfswerk Initiative Christlicher Orient” in Austria.

Furthermore, those who have left Tur ‘Abdin and now settled in the West are extending a financial help and moral support to Tur ‘Abdin. Thanks to the generosity of the Syriac people of Tur ‘Abdin in Europe as well as the solidarity and support of sister Churches and institutions in the West, the ancient churches and monasteries of Tur ‘Abdin have been restored and renovated. New houses, church schools and community halls have been built for the remaining faithful in the villages. Furthermore, the annual visits and pilgrimages of the Syriac faithful to Tur ‘Abdin during peaceful time has strengthened the community and caused a number of ancient monasteries to flourish and attract students and visitors alike.

For example, the Monastery of Mor Awgin on Mount Izlo which was abandoned for a very long time has been inhabited again thanks to its energetic young Abbot Joachim who is native of Tur ‘Abdin and had immigrated together with his parents to The Netherlands in the 1980s and later joined the Patriarchal Seminary in Damascus to study theology and subsequently returned to Tur ‘Abdin to reopen the monastery and live there. Today, he is accompanied by a new monk and novices and young seminarians who flock to him to study the Syriac language and liturgy, Bible and liturgy, and learn about spiritual life.

Consequently, Tur ‘Abdin has shown signs of revival and plays a religious, cultural and educational role in the life of the Syrian Orthodox Church both at home and beyond.

Furthermore, thanks to Fr Hans Hollerweger who through his remarkable books, *TURABDIN: Living Cultural Heritage*, and *Bei den Christen im Orient: Begegnungen, Erfahrungen, Hilfen* successfully conveys to the readers a sense not so much of the remoteness of Tur ‘Abdin in the Orient and its Christian Community but rather of their immediacy and relevance thanks to the sustainable bridge built by Hans Hollerweger, a loving spiritual father from the West who orients the heart and minds of the Westerners to the Orient.

Especially, his last book *Bei den Christen im Orient: Begegnungen, Erfahrungen, Hilfen* is a very engaging narrative of the wounded Christian Orient, challenging in its way as it holds up a mirror to the last 25 years of the Christian communities' struggle and suffering there, but ultimately deeply positive, affirming of so much of what makes Fr Hans Hollerweger's sustainable bridge, paved with love and solidarity with the Christian brothers and sisters of the East, worth walking and advocating.

**Having said this, now I would like to consider the question mark in the title of my presentation. Is Tur 'Abdin still a living enter of Syriac Christianity?**

It is true that the number of Syriac Christians living in Tur 'Abdin and the Middle East due to hardships and successive wars in the region has dwindled tremendously. Consequently, the majority of the Syriac Christians today live not in the East but in the West, especially, Europe. Since the majority of the Syriac Christians have settled down in Europe and are now very much integrated to the European life and culture, they have established churches and monasteries as well as educational theological institutions such as the Master's Course of Syriac Theology founded here in Salzburg, and that of Mor Ignatios Seminary in Sodertalje, Sweden.

I would like to say that it is true that emigration from the land of the forefathers and mothers in the Semitic world, where the Bible and Christianity sprang, has depopulated the area of Christians and their witness to Christ and left many sacred and cultural monuments of great beauty and magnificence to be destroyed and left in desolation. Moreover, the recent tragic developments in the Middle East have threatened the very existence of the Syriac Christians and all the Middle Eastern Christians in their ancestral homelands. The war in Iraq and now in Syria has not only claimed the life of many people, and led to the kidnapping of a number of prominent religious leaders such as the Metropolitan Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Bolous Yazigi, but also forced very large numbers of the Middle Eastern Christians to emigrate to the West where they find themselves having to adapt to a new life in a society that is deeply secularized and to a certain extent unconcerned with their plight.

On the other hand, we find some signs of hope for the future. There is now an indication of monastic revival in the Syriac-Orthodox Church and a growth in the number of monks, thus assuring a supply of bishops for the future (bearing in mind that in the Orthodox tradition bishops are drawn from the monasteries). Furthermore, the Western Diaspora has opened new horizons and

offered many opportunities for the Syriac Church and community, especially, in the fields of education, media and publishing. Conversely, the Western Diaspora has given the opportunity for the Western Churches to come into direct contact with, and learn from the experience of, the different Syriac Churches with their own rich and distinctive history and spiritual heritage.

Finally, I would like to say that while Tur 'Abdin is sadly depleted by large-scale immigration to the West and consequently has lost its strength in number, and thereby some of its vibrance and vitality. Nevertheless, it remains a spiritual focal-point for the Syriac Orthodox Tradition. At the same time, we see that the Western Diaspora has given rise and opportunity to the Syriac Christians in the West to begin to function as a living center in albeit in feeble complementarity to their homeland Tur 'Abdin, the living center of Syriac Christianity. Borrowing the metaphor of two lungs, the Syriac Church is now trying breathing with two lungs: Tur 'Abdin in the East, and Europe in the West.

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**Danke für Ihre Aufmerksamkeit!**