

The Jesus Sutras, by Martin Palmer

reviewed by [Leo D. Lefebure](#) in the [February 27, 2002](#) issue

The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity. By Maartin Palmer. Ballantine, 304 pp., \$24.95.

It has become commonplace to criticize earlier generations of Christian missionaries for exporting Western European culture and demanding that people around the world adopt European forms of life and thought on becoming Christians. Combined with this critique has been widespread interest in the possibilities of inculturation, the incarnation of the gospel in different cultures, as Christians have interpreted Jesus in relation to the images and roles of other religious traditions.

Because knowledge of the historical forms of Christianity in Asia has been severely limited, Western Christians have often assumed that inculturation is a new project. They have thought that the significant history of Christianity began within the borders of the Roman Empire and later moved from the Mediterranean basin to Northern and Eastern Europe. That the Church of the East, which developed during the first centuries in the Persian Empire, eventually spread along the Silk Road into China and flourished for centuries throughout central Asia largely has been forgotten.

The constant tensions between the Roman Empire and the Sassanian Empire in Persia prevented the leaders of the Church of the East from attending any of the early church councils. They accepted the decisions of Nicaea and the First Council of Constantinople, but they rejected the condemnation of Nestorius at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Because of this, they misleadingly and inaccurately have been labeled "Nestorian," though Nestorius, the patriarch of Constantinople, was not even a member of the Church of the East, let alone its founder.

During Christianity's first millennium, the Church of the East engaged in large-scale experiments in expressing Christian faith in the languages of Central and East Asia, presenting Jesus and his teaching in terms that Buddhists and Taoists could understand and appreciate. A large stone stele, carved in 781 and discovered in about 1625 in a field near Xian (the former capital of China and the famous site of

the terra cotta warriors), recounts the first mission of the Church of the East to China in 635 and Christianity's subsequent growth and success there. In addition to this important witness, since the late 19th and early 20th centuries scholars have been aware of a number of Christian texts, written by members of the Church of the East in central Asia and China between the seventh and 11th centuries, which weave together Buddhist and Taoist imagery with the teachings of Jesus.

Martin Palmer, director of the International Consultancy on Religion, Education and Culture, is a scholar of Chinese literature and culture who earlier translated a number of important ancient Taoist texts. In this volume he and a team of scholars--Eva Wong, Tjalling Halbertsma, Zhao Xiao Min, Li Rong Rong and James Palmer--explore the history of the Church of the East's mission to China, recounting its successes and setbacks and translating nine Central and East Asian Christian texts from this period.

These texts approach traditional Christian theological issues from East Asian perspectives. Western theologians pondered how an eternal, unchanging God could create a world in time. The Chinese Christian "Sutra of Origins" describes the act of God in creation as *wu wei*, a traditional Taoist term for "actionless action"--effortless, unforced action beyond the dichotomy of acting and not-acting. "So the One Sacred Spirit is the embodiment of *wu wei*, originless origin, and nonsubstantial substance."

The "Sutra of Jesus Christ," probably compiled around 650 c.e. in China, brings Jesus into harmony with other religious figures: "The Messiah was orbited by the Buddhas and arhats [disciples of the Buddha who have attained semidivine status]. Looking down he saw the suffering of all that is born, and so he began to teach." "The Sutra of Returning to Your Original Nature," most likely composed by the monk Jingjing, a priest of the Da Qin monastery and the greatest writer of the Church of the East in China, presents Jesus teaching with vivid images: "There are misers who do nothing but accumulate wealth. / They wear themselves out with no end of pain / And they can't take any of it with them. / They are like little clay bottles filled with sea water: / How can you hope to catch the vastness of the sea / In something so tiny?"

This volume is a splendid and important contribution to our knowledge of the history of Christianity and interreligious contacts. The one weakness of the discussion is that in their reflections on contemporary Christianity the authors state that the traditional condemnation of the Church of the East by the Church of the West still continues. But on November 11, 1994, Pope John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV, catholicos-patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, signed the Common Christological Declaration,

which resolved the age-old dispute over Christology and Mariology and led to the training of future bishops of the Church of the East in Catholic institutions. In surveying the Church of the East around the world today, the authors also fail to mention its members in the U.S. The catholicos-patriarch, the world leader of the Assyrian Church of the East, lives in the north suburban Chicago area.