

Literary works within the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch in Germany with a focus on Baden-Württemberg

JOSEF ÖNDER

The following article offers a brief sketch of the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch as the starting point for an account of the emigration of Syriac Orthodox Christians from their home countries to Germany.¹ In a further step, the next section provides the background for the discussion of Syriac publishing in Germany and in the state of Baden-Württemberg in the later part of the twentieth and the early part of the twenty-first century. I will present some of the textbooks and learning materials written for Syriac Orthodox religious education in Baden-Württemberg and Germany.² Over nine hundred Syriac Orthodox pupils participate in such classes every week in Baden-Württemberg alone. The final part of this article will discuss its topics and the training of teachers at the University of Education in Schwäbisch Gmünd/southern Germany.

The Syriac Orthodox Church in Germany

Since the Syriac Orthodox Church has also been represented in the West for over a hundred years, it has also opened up regarding ecumenism/to the ecumenical movement. Intensive contacts between the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and the Roman Catholic Church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) have led to the sacramental communion of both churches. With that, the old separation following from the discussions during the Council of Chalcedon is abolished. The Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch is represented in many ecu-

1 Cf. Claudia-Maria Corlazolli: "The Christian Syrians are ethnically Arameans of a Semitic tribe who have dwelled in the land of Aram of Damascus and Aram of Mesopotamia since the 15th century BC. The term Syrian used in connection with the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch means Arameans and therefore has nothing to do with the current Arab state of Syria," in, *Religionsunterricht von kleineren Religionsgemeinschaften an öffentlichen Schulen in Deutschland* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009), 255. Moreover, in current linguistic usage, "Arameans" and "Syrians" ("Oromoye" and "Suryoye") and "Aramaic" and "Syrian" ("Oromoyo" and "Suryoyo") are synonyms. In this article – unless quoted verbatim – the term *Syro-Arameans* denotes the ethnic group.

2 On Syriac Orthodox religious education in Germany, see Corlazolli, *Religionsunterricht*, 259–284. Cf. also <https://www.sok-bw.de/religionsunterricht> (accessed 17/7/2024).

menical bodies, for example, in the World Council of Churches (wcc) since 1960, in the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) since 1974 and others.³

Since the 1960s, Syriac Orthodox Christians, mainly from the Tur Abdin (Eng. “Mountain of the Servants”) region in south-eastern Turkey, along with many from Syria and Iraq, have lived in the Federal Republic of Germany. The Tur Abdin region is a mountainous landscape in Anatolia, in the southeast of Turkey, which in the south borders directly on Syria, in the southeast on Iraq. Its borders are (in a clockwise direction): in the north, a bend running parallel to the Tigris and connecting the cities of Diyarbakir, Batman, Siirt, Şirnak, and Cizre. The southern border passes from Cizre past Nusaybin to the town and administrative unit of Kiziltepe, located south of Mardin. The western border line stretches from Syria across the city and the county of Derik up to Diyarbakir. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Syriac Christians became a minority and suffered oppression by ethnic groups striving for independence from the Ottoman Empire. The relationship between Christians and Muslims was and is ambivalent, depending on the region.⁴

The Syriac Orthodox Church traces its origins to the Christian community of Antioch, the second urban church in early Christianity (cf. Acts 11:19–26). The apostle Peter is considered the first bishop of Antioch, and the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, who resides in Damascus, traces his lineage to him in uninterrupted apostolic succession.⁵ From the late 19th century to the present day, Syriac Orthodox Christians have faced waves of persecution. Each of these persecutions has resulted in a wave of emigration from the ancestral homeland.⁶ For this reason,

3 Cf. Wolfgang Schwaigert, “Die Syrisch Orthodoxe Kirche,” in: *G2W – Ökumenisches Forum für Glauben, Religion und Gesellschaft in Ost und West*, 1 (2011), 12–13; and Wolfgang Schwaigert, “Die Orientalischen Orthodoxen Kirchen III. Ereignisse in der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien in jüngster Zeit,” *IKZ* (2004), Heft 1–2 (Januar–Juni), 1–65; Johannes Oeldemann (ed.), *Gemeinsamer Glaube und pastorale Zusammenarbeit. 25 Jahre Weggemeinschaft zwischen der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche und der Römisch-Katholischen Kirche* (Epiphania Egregia 6), (Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt Verlag, 2011), 11–17.

4 Cf. Josef Onder, *Die syrisch-orthodoxen Christen. Zwischen Orient und Okzident*, 2nd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2015), 25–29; cf. also Helga Anschutz, *Die syrischen Christen vom Turabdin. Eine altchristliche Bevölkerungsgruppe zwischen Beharrung, Stagnation und Auflösung*, 2nd ed. (Würzburg: Augustinus Verlag, 1985), 11–14; Hanna Aydin, *Das Mönchtum im Tur-Abdin. Das Leben der Mönche im Tur-Abdin in der Gegenwart* (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 1988), 12–33; Ignatius Afrem I. Barsaum, *Statistische Erhebungen zum Turabdin* (s.l., Lebanon: publisher unknown, 1964), 13–18.

5 Cf. Ignatius Afrem I. Barsaum, *The Syrian Church of Antioch. It’s Name and History* (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 1983), 25–27.

6 The emigration of Syriac Orthodox Christians from Turkey to Germany was examined in depth by Kai Merten, “*Die Syrisch-Orthodoxen Christen in der Türkei und in Deutschland. Untersuchung zu einer Wanderungsbewegung*” (Hamburg: LIT Verlag: 1997). Of fundamental importance in this context is also Naures Atto’s study, “Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora. Identity

of the five million Syriac Orthodox Christians worldwide, around 120.000 live in the Federal Republic of Germany (almost in all 16 federal states), 30.000 of them in Baden-Württemberg.⁷

Until 1997, there was only one diocese in Central Europe. Its Metropolitan was Julius Yeshu Çiçek (†2005). He was responsible for the Syriac communities in the following countries: The Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Austria, France, Spain, Italy, and Germany.⁸ In the summer of 1997, a separate patriarchal vicariate was created for Germany. Its first Metropolitan was Dionysius Isa Gürbüz. His official seat was the monastery of St. Jacob of Sarugh in Warburg, the spiritual centre of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch in Germany.⁹ After the demise of Archbishop Julius Çiçek in 2005, the Diocese of Central Europe was restructured into the dioceses of Holland, Belgium, France and Luxembourg together, and Switzerland and Austria combined. The Patriarchal Vicar Dionysius Isa Gürbüz became Metropolitan of the Diocese of Switzerland and Austria. In 2006, the abbot of the Warburg Monastery of St. Jacob of Sarug, Dr. Hanna Aydin, was ordained bishop and Metropolitan of Germany in Damascus. In December 2012, he was succeeded as Metropolitan by Philoxenus Mattias Nayis, previously secretary to His Holiness Ignatius Zakka Iwas (†2014), Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East, based in Damascus.¹⁰

As already mentioned, around 120.000 Syriac Orthodox Christians live in Germany.¹¹ They are organized into sixty-three parishes and are led by over fifty-five priests.¹² The clergy are assisted in the organisation of the congregations by councils: parish council, women's council, and youth council.

Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora" (Leiden: University Press, 2011).

7 Cf. the website of the Erzdioezese der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien in Baden-Württemberg: <https://www.sok-bw.de/religionsunterricht> (accessed 17/7/2024).

8 On the life and work of Metropolitan Julius Yeshu Çiçek, see Gabriel Rabo, "Çiçek, Julius Yeshu," in Wilhelm Bautz, Traugott Bautz (ed.), (Nordhausen: Verlag Traugott Bautz, 2007), 308–322; cf. also the *Kolo Suryoyo* [Syriac Voice] Sonderausgabe [Tr. special edition], Gabriel Rabo, (ed.), *Sonderausgabe des Kolo Suryoyo, Zeitschrift der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Diözese von Mitteleuropa* 27 (2005; 147/3).

9 Cf. Sebastian Brock (ed.), *Die Verborgene Perle. Die Syrisch-Orthodoxe Kirche und ihr antikes aramäisches Erbe*, vol. III (Rome: Trans World Film, 2001), 72.

10 Cf. Claudia Rammelt, „Orientalisch-orthodoxe Gemeinschaften in Deutschland. Ein Überblick," in: *Migrationskirchen. Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums vor Ort*, Georg Etzelmüller, Claudia Rammelt (eds.), (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2022), 245–246.

11 The number of members varies, since many Syriac Orthodox Christians have fled to Germany since the war in Syria and Iraq and the number of members has not yet been definitively recorded.

12 Cf. the website of the Syriac Orthodox archdiocese in Germany: <https://syrisch-orthodox.org/die-erzdioezese-deutschland> (accessed 17/7/2024).

The work of the archdiocese is directed by the diocesan council, which is the highest decision-making and executive body of the archdiocese. The board of directors of the diocesan council – also known as the diocesan board or board of directors – consists of the archbishop, the chair, the vice-chair, the chief secretary, and the chief cashier. The diocesan council also includes the chief pastoral representative and his deputy, as well as six other representatives. These are elected as committee chairs – six of them – from among the members of the general assembly and two from among the members of the pastoral convention, so that the diocesan council, with the archbishop as head of the diocesan council, is made up of a total of 13 people.¹³

Furthermore, each congregation has a cultural centre or a cultural association. This is usually the sponsor of a soccer team. In addition, each community maintains a *Madrashto*, the Syriac term for a Sunday School, though lessons are regularly taught on Saturdays. Here, instruction in liturgy, catechism, and doctrine is given in classical Syriac-Aramaic (*Kthobonoyo*). According to the official website of SOKAD Youth, the official youth association of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch in Germany, the organisation was founded by Mor Philoxenus Matias Nayis in March 2013. His motto was: “Youth is the future and the foundation of the Church!” The website’s initial page stresses that the organisation is to be understood “as a member of the church and has the defined goal of continuing to support and reconcile the concerns of young people and young adults with institutional interests of the church in Jesus Christ.” In order to achieve these goals, it organised meetings of various kinds, including local and nationwide conferences, lectures and seminars with Christian and church-related content. The organisation is under the regulations of the archbishop.¹⁴

In the past, two church-oriented magazines served to promote ethnic-religious cohesion: *Kolo Suryoyo* (“The Syriac Voice”), published by Metropolitan Julius Yeshu Çiçek from 1978 to 2005, and *Tebe d’Marhitho* (“News from the Diocese”) which was published by Metropolitan Dionysius Gürbüz from 1998 to 2005. From 1989 to 2008, the Federation of Arameans (established in 1985) published the cultural magazine *Mardutho D-Suryoye* (“Culture of the Syrians”); this also served to promote ethnic and cultural cohesion.¹⁵

¹³ <https://syrisch-orthodox.org/die-erzdioezese-deutschland> (accessed 17/7/2024).

¹⁴ Cf. <https://syrisch-orthodox.org/sokad> (accessed 17/7/2024).

¹⁵ Cf. Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* 111, 124; cf. also: <https://www.mardutho.com/> (accessed 17/7/2024).

The Syriac Orthodox Christians have two television stations based in Sweden: Suroyo TV and Suryoyo Sat. The former has a branch in Syria and Suryoyo Sat has one in Germany. The two broadcasting networks have an important function for ethnic and religious cohesion and the cultivation of the language. According to several observers within the church, the programs of these two television stations have contributed to a more widespread familiarity with modern Syriac-Aramaic (Turoyo/Surayt), the mother tongue of a considerable part of the Syriac Orthodox Christians has improved significantly. On March 25, 2019, at the Feast of the Annunciation, a new TV channel was launched by His Holiness Ignatius Aphrem II, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East. Suboro TV is supported by the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch.¹⁶ The Syriac Orthodox communities in the state of Baden-Württemberg are led by a chorbishop, or *Khuroyo*. The Khuroyo is assisted by eight pastoral priests. There are local congregations (parishes) in the following places in Baden-Württemberg: (1) Bietigheim-Bissingen: Saints Peter and Paul; (2) Göppingen: St. Ephrem, St. Jacob of Sarug (3); Heilbronn: St. Ephrem, St. John (4) Kirchardt: St. Gabriel, St. Stephan; (5) Kirchhausen: St. Jacob of Nisibis; (6) Leimen: Mother of God; (7) Pforzheim: Syriac Orthodox Church (no name yet); (8) Pfullendorf: Syriac Orthodox Church (no name yet) and (9) Tauberbischofsheim: Syriac Orthodox Church (no name yet).¹⁷

As already mentioned, catechetical and language classes are held on Saturdays in all of these parishes. As in their home countries, the Syro-Arameans cultivate their language and traditions also in Germany, Baden-Württemberg and other host countries. This occurs in cultural associations or in the parish halls of the churches. The lessons usually focus on learning the classical Syriac-Aramaic (*Kthobonoyo*), church music (*Beth Gazo*), Sunday prayers, and other religious practices such as daily prayers, fasting and traditions related to the ecclesial feast days.¹⁸

Contemporary Syriac-Aramaic literature

At the end of the 19th century, the burgeoning literary activity of the Syro-Arameans changed considerably with the beginnings of emigration from their traditional homeland in the Ottoman Empire, today's Turkey, Syria and Iraq. These

16 Cf. the website of agenzia fides: https://www.fides.org/de/news/62408-ASIEN_LIBANON_Syrisch_orthodoxes_Patriarchat_bringt_fuer_2018_den_Fernsehsender_Suboro_TV_auf_den_Weg (accessed 17/7/2024). Cf. further Önder, *Die syrisch-orthodoxen Christen. Zwischen Orient und Okzident*, 57–58.

17 Cf. <https://www.sok-bw.de/geschichte-und-gegenwart> (accessed 17/7/2024).

18 Cf. Rammelt, "Orientalisch-orthodoxe Gemeinschaften in Deutschland," 250–251; Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* III, 124.

migrations accelerated during and after the genocide in the years 1895/96 and 1914/15. Many Syriac Christians emigrated to America, Europe, and Australia, or within the region, to new locations in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine. It was during this period that secular literature was created in addition to the ongoing production of religious publications. First and foremost among such authors was Deacon Naum Faiq (1868-1930).¹⁹ Among other things, Faiq founded the magazine *Kawkab Madenho* ("Star of the East") in 1908. In the same period, secular novels started to be translated into Syriac-Aramaic.²⁰ In his overview of Syriac writing in the twentieth century, Sebastian Brock mentions the romantic novella of Bernardin de Saint Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* translated by Paulos Gabriel (1912-1971), and Khattas Magdasi Elyas (*Myatrutho*, 1955), and *Athalie* by Racine, translated by Abrohom Isu (1978), Machiavelli's *The Prince*, translated by Gabriel Afram (1995), Hanna Salman (*Geneviève*), Boutros Saba (Fénelons *Télémaque*), Barsaum Ayyub who translated works by Khalil Gibran into Syriac. Patriarch Ignatius Zakka Iwas (†2014) translated the words of the civil rights movement song "I am black" into Syriac, perhaps inspired by his stay in the United States.²¹

Other important church leaders were active in the writing movement of the twentieth century. Among these are Patriarch Ignatius Afrem I. Barsaum (1887-1957) and Metropolitan Philoxenos Yuhanon Dolabani (1885-1969) from Mardin (southeastern Turkey). In 1943, Afrem Barsaum published *The Scattered Pearls: A History of Syriac Literature and Sciences*. This masterpiece was first published in Arabic (in Damascus) and later translated into Syriac by Metropolitan Dolabani and, more recently, from Arabic into German by Amill Gorgis and Georg Toro.²² Metropolitan Yuhanon Dolabani edited many works of the Syriac Church Fathers from ancient manuscripts during his time as a monk in Jerusalem and later in Mardin. He also kept a diary of his life in Syriac-Aramaic, which has already been published several times.²³ In total, he published 69 books, ten of which were translated from other languages. Shortly before his death, when asked if he was afraid

19 Cf. Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* II, 101; Ignatius Afrem I. Barsaum, *Geschichte der syrischen Wissenschaften und Literatur. Aus dem Arabischen von Georg Toro und Amill Gorgis* (Eichstätter Beiträge zum Christlichen Orient 2), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012), 422.

20 Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* III, 130.

21 Ibid.

22 See for the German version Ignatius Afrem I. Barsaum, *Geschichte der syrischen Wissenschaften und Literatur. Aus dem Arabischen von Georg Toro und Amill Gorgis* (Eichstätter Beiträge zum Christlichen Orient 2), (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2012).

23 The latest edition of the diary was published bilingually (Syriac-Aramaic and Turkish) in Istanbul by Zeki Demir, *Mardin Metropoliti Mor Filüksinos Hanna Dölebanî'nin Yasam Öyküsü ve Günlüğü*, (Istanbul: Anadolu Ofset, 2019).

of death, he answered his students with the following words: “I’m afraid that the pen will fall out of my hand and I won’t be able to write anymore.”²⁴

Other personalities from the twentieth century who are still on the lips of Syriac-Aramaic clerics and literary figures are Abdelmesih Na‘man Qarabashi and Yuḥanon Qashisho. The latter wrote a short story called “Narmasin’s Rocket”.²⁵ Like no other, Qarabashi shaped the Syriac-Aramaic catechetical schools with his language books. Whether in the old homeland or in Europe, his books are still widely used in many catechetical and language schools. Although these were written over fifty years ago, their structure and methodology make them the most formative works for both students and teachers.²⁶ Qarabashi also wrote one of the earliest accounts of the genocide, which has been translated into several languages, *Dmo Zliho* (“Bloodshed”).²⁷ Finally, he was very important for shaping the church liturgy: he wrote prayers and songs for the entire year which, after having been reviewed by the Liturgy Commission of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch, were approved by the Head of the Church Patriarch Ignatius Jacob III. (†1981) for usage in the transnational Syriac Orthodox Church. Metropolitan Julius Yeshu Çiçek later published these in the Netherlands in the book *Kinotho, Church Hymns of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch*.²⁸

With the founding of the Diocese of Central Europe in the Netherlands in 1986, Metropolitan Julius created the Bar-Hebräus-Press publishing house (currently Bar ‘Ebroyo Press) on the premises of the St. Afrem Monastery in Glane-Losser. His intention was to reproduce the liturgical books of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and, beyond that, the literature of the Church Fathers. By the time he died († 2005), he had published and copied 131 different works in his publishing house, a total of 395.000 printed copies. In the beginning, that is, before the Syriac-Aramaic language was encrypted into the computer, Metropolitan Julius copied the liturgical manuscripts and works of the Church Fathers by hand, in his beautiful handwriting. He was later able to benefit from the computer typeface designed by George Kiraz in 1988.²⁹

24 Josef Önder (ed.), *Syrisch-Orthodoxe Religionslehre 5/6* (Auf dem Weg zum Glauben 1), (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2019), 127.

25 Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* 111, 130.

26 For contemporary reprints of these books, cf. the webpages of the Mor Ephrem bookshop (<https://morephrem.shop>; accessed 20/7/2024).

27 The Syriac-Aramaic manuscript was translated into German by Amill Gorgis: Na‘man Mschiho Abed Qarabash, *Vergossenes Blut* (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2002).

28 Cf. Julius Yeshu Çiçek (ed.), *Kinotho, Kirchliche Hymnen der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien*, 2nd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 1993).

29 Cf. Rabo, “Çiçek, Julius Yeshu,” 308–322; Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* 111, 126–127.

With the emigration to the West, the Syro-Arameans also started to publish a variety of cultural magazines, following up on various journals that were published in the homelands. What was difficult in the homelands was now made easier in Europe and America because of greater political freedom and increased technical and financial possibilities. For the purpose of this contribution, especially the journals in the German-speaking realm are important to mention, such as *Mardutho d-Suryoyo* (Gütersloh/Heilbronn, Federation of Arameans [Suryoye] in Germany; since 1989): Syriac-Aramaic (*Kthobonoyo*), German, Turkish, Modern Syriac-Aramaic (Turoyo) and *Nuhro* (Vienna; 1976-79): Syriac-Aramaic, German, Arabic, Turkish; and *Voice of Turabdin* (Linz; since 1995): Syriac-Aramaic, German, English, Turkish, and *Tebe d'Marhitho* (Kirchardt; since 2000): Syriac-Aramaic, German. Note, however, that some of the journals published in the Netherlands would also include German, in addition to Syriac, Turkish and Dutch sections. These include *Qolo Suryoyo* (St. Ephrem Monastery/Netherlands; since 1978): Syriac-Aramaic, German, Arabic, Turkish, *Shemsho* (Enschede, Federatie Turabdin; since 1985): Syriac-Aramaic, Dutch, German, Arabic, Turkish, and *Shoesheto Suryoyo* (Enschede, Suryoye Aramese Federatie; since 1981): Syriac-Aramaic, Dutch, German, Arabic, Turkish.³⁰

Almost all of these magazines that were published in classical Syriac-Aramaic or in the modern Syriac-Aramaic dialect Turoyo/Surayt and in the respective national languages have ceased to be published today. The main reason for this is the fact that the digital media have gained the upper hand, while small print runs have made publications more difficult to finance. In addition, many of the older generation of Syro-Arameans were illiterate, making it more to find a sufficient readership, especially when publishing in the classical or vernacular Syriac languages.

The production of Syriac-Aramaic literature in Germany and Baden-Württemberg

Syriac-Aramaic literature in Germany and Baden-Württemberg is primarily associated with the Syriac Orthodox Diocese of Central Europe. Germany was part of this diocese, whose first bishop was Metropolitan Julius Yesu Çiçek, whom we already mentioned above. Since he founded the Bar 'Ebroyo Press, a large number of books were published there.³¹ In the years from 1980 to 2000, in addition to

³⁰ For these journals, see Brock, *Die Verborgene Perle* 111, 125; further: <https://www.mardutho.com/> (accessed 20/8/2024).

³¹ After the demise of Metropolitan Julius, the publishing house continues its work of publishing books in different languages, see Mor Ephrem Bookshop (<https://morephrem.shop>, accessed

Metropolitan Julius Çiçek, more people copied liturgy books by hand and made them available to the congregations in Europe, such as Pastor Yusuf Demir (†2005) from Kirchartd, Pastor Petrus Ögunc (†2014) from Dasing, Subdeacon Ishok Esen from Gütersloh, and Subdeacon Sleman Hauschab from Bebra. Their copies were photographically reproduced and distributed.³²

With the reorganization of the Diocese of Central Europe, Germany was organised into an independent patriarchal vicariate. Two strands in literary production can be observed in the last ten years: further copying of liturgical books and the publication of textbooks and teaching materials for Syriac Orthodox religious education. Pastor Abdulmesih Nergiz from Paderborn and Deacon Yuhanon Savci from Gießen copied the liturgy books of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch on the computer and translated individual volumes into Turoyo. These publications can be found all over Europe as well as in Turkey in the Syriac Orthodox Church. In addition to the works of these two copyists, a number of other liturgical books have also been published by deacon Yuhanun Savci Gießen, Germany.³³

In the field of Syriac literature, the tireless commitment of Amill Gorgis from Berlin deserves special mention. In the early 1990s, he translated the sacraments of baptism, marriage and other fundamental works into German on behalf of Metropolitan Julius; they were published by Bar-Hebraeus-Press and are now used in all churches in German-speaking countries. At the same time, these translations functioned as a bridge between Syriac Orthodox, Protestant, and Roman Catholic pastors when administering the sacraments during ecumenical weddings or at ecumenical services. In addition to these liturgical publications, Gorgis also translated historical works into German, such as Aphrem Barsoum's *Scattered Pearls* (together with Georg Toro) as well as Ishāq Armale's and Na'man Mshiho's works on the genocide of 1915.³⁴

After Metropolitan Philoxenus Mattias Nayis took office in 2012, the St. Jakob von Sarug publishing house was founded in the German monastery of the same

20/8/2024). See further Heleen Murre-van den Berg (this volume) and Murre-van den Berg, "Language and Religion in the (Re)Making of the Syriac Orthodox Communities in Europe," in: *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories*, 179–197, Birgit Meyer, Peter van der Veer (eds.), (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

32 Note that in the 1990s others started to produce academic work in the German-speaking countries, usually as part of their studies (Bachelor's, Master's, Diploma theses or Doctoral dissertations), including Hüsnü Acar, Gabriel Rabo, Sabo Hanna. The latter also published a very useful Syriac-German/German-Syriac dictionary.

33 Cf. his Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/183852948341360/posts/httpkthobe-hitonoyede/1185123528214292/>) for current and past publications (accessed 20/8/2024).

34 On the first, see note 22; Amill Gorgis and Dorothea Weltecke (ed.), *Ishāq Armale: Die Schlimmsten aller Katastrophen für die Christen* (Schola Nisibina 3), (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021).

name. Various works have appeared since, such as the “Voice of the Shepherd” (*Die Stimme des Hirten*) in Syriac-Aramaic and German. Furthermore, important works by the Church Fathers have been (or are being) published in Syriac-Aramaic and German to this day.³⁵

In the field of translations of world literature into modern Syriac-Aramaic (Turoyo/Surayt), the research centre for Aramaic Studies Nisibin [*Nisibin Aramäische Studien*] based at the University of Heidelberg has made a name for itself. In recent years, they have translated a number of important works of world literature into modern Syriac-Aramaic. Children and young people can read these publications in their mother tongue and practice this language. Among others, they published *Le Petit Prince* (“The little Prince”) by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the *Schachnovelle* by Stefan Zweig, *The Prophet* by the Lebanese-American poet Khalil Gibran, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by the German-American children’s book author Eric Carle and *Little Red Riding Hood* by the Brothers Grimm.³⁶

In addition to the positive effects of emigration, the Syriac Orthodox Christians also feel the need to practice their modern Syriac-Aramaic mother tongue. To help in this process and to learn the language systematically, the “Shlomo Surayt” project, headed by Professor Dr. Shabo Talay of the Freie Universität Berlin, was launched. The textbooks and online courses are available in various European languages and deserve great praise and recognition.³⁷

Syriac Orthodox religious instruction in schools in Baden-Württemberg

Works were also explicitly published for Syriac Orthodox religious education in Germany, in Syriac-Aramaic (*Kthobonoyo*) and German. In order to understand the concept of the teaching and learning materials that are used at the state schools in Baden-Württemberg, the subject of Syriac Orthodox religious education is presented first.

In a number of German states (*Bundesländer*), the Syriac Orthodox Church, alongside the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, has been permitted to provide religious education within the school system. According to Article 7, paragraph 3 of the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany and Article 18 of

³⁵ Books are available at the book shop in the monastery St. Jakob von Sarug in Warburg.

³⁶ Cf. <https://www.nisibin.de/publikationen> (accessed 22/9/2024).

³⁷ The Surayt-Aramaic Online Project (SAOP) was co-financed by the European Union’s Erasmus+ program, among others. Nine institutions were involved; the text books have been published in six different languages: German, English, Dutch, Swedish, French, Arabic. For more on the project, cf. <http://www.surayt.com/> (accessed 22/9/2024).

the constitution of the state of Baden-Württemberg, Syriac Orthodox religious education has become a regular subject for which the state and church bear joint responsibility. It is issued according to the School Law in accordance with the teachings and principles of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch (Article 96, paragraph 2 SchG).³⁸

In the 2024/2025 school year, eleven teachers taught over 900 students at seventy-three schools. Syriac Orthodox religious education takes place in Elementary schools, Lower secondary schools/junior high schools, and High Schools,³⁹ with the curriculum publicly available on the internet. Beginning with the 2022/2023 school year, Syriac Orthodox religious education is also being taught at vocational grammar schools.

The books and didactic materials required for school lessons are published by the school superintendent's office in Göppingen. At some schools, due to the smaller number of students, students in grades five and six, seven and eight, nine and ten, or five to ten are taught together.

The website of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports ("Kultus, Jugend und Sport") of Baden-Württemberg – which presents the Educational curriculum of the schools, succinctly summarizes the aims of the Syriac school curriculum, focusing on the importance of the faith of individual pupils as well as on their contribution to a harmonious and tolerant society at large:

The central task of Syriac Orthodox religious education is the introduction to life with God and the Church, the promotion of the development of the baptised into responsible Christians and the ability to properly understand the world and society. It is part of the school's mission to provide a globally aware education that respects human dignity and interreligious dialogue. In addition, it makes an important contribution to the integration of young Syriac Orthodox schoolchildren, regardless of whether they were born in Germany or arrived as refugees. Religious education teachers are particularly qualified to do this because they have mastered the languages of the Orient.

³⁸ Cf. <https://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/,Lde/LS/BP2016BW/ALLG/SEK1/RSYR/LG> (accessed 22/9/2024).

³⁹ The syllabus can be found at the website of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports in Baden-Württemberg: <https://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/,Lde/LS/BP2016BW/ALLG/GYM/RSYR> (accessed 17/7/2024).

The Syriac Orthodox religious education helps the students to find their personal, religious, and cultural identity and is a companion on the way to developing a personality with skills such as empathy, tolerance, and charity. Further tasks are the introduction to a conscious life with the church, to an understandable celebration of the holy liturgy, to the internalisation of a Christian ethic that respects human dignity with a view to one's own identity, knowledge of the history of the Syriac Orthodox Church, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and the history of the Syriac-Aramaic ethnic group with its highs and lows.

Important positive influences upon the school culture come from the Syriac Orthodox religious education, for example, through the organization of church services, social projects, and the teaching of rules and rituals of living in peace and harmony with others from different backgrounds. Training in polite behavior, the handshake when greeting and constructive social behavior play a special role.

At school and in society, the Syriac Orthodox religious education unfolds its positive effect by addressing respect for human dignity, the idea of tolerance and commitment to peace, justice, and the preservation of creation in such a way that it is emotionally accepted and thus controls the reflection upon one's own attitudes and behaviour.⁴⁰

In the year 2000, the "Syriac Orthodox School Superintendent's Office of Baden-Württemberg" [*Syrisch-Orthodoxes Schuldekanat*] was established as the central office for teaching matters. This office was created when the responsibility for the subject "Syriac Orthodox religious instruction" was transferred from Kirchartd to the school superintendent and state coordinator of Baden-Württemberg in Göppingen. This was set in motion by the previous Syriac Orthodox Patriarch, Ignatius Zakka Iwas (†2014). The School Superintendent's Office is located in Göppingen in southern Germany.⁴¹

The school superintendent is supported by teachers who teach on a voluntary basis. State coordinator and school superintendent Dr. phil. Josef Önder (the author of this article) is responsible for the pedagogical aspects of the subject. In

⁴⁰ <https://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/,Lde/LS/BP2016BW/ALLG/SEK1/RSYR/LG> (accessed 26/9/2024).

⁴¹ Önder, *Die syrisch-orthodoxen Christen*, 58.

practical terms, this means to keep in touch with the Ministry of Education and regional councils in Baden-Württemberg as well as the exchange with the school authorities and principals of the various types of schools. In addition, the school superintendent's office maintains close contact with the local school superintendents, senior church councils, and ordinariate councils of the Protestant and Catholic sister churches. As a rule, the school superintendent sits in on the teaching colleagues in Baden-Württemberg once a year and carries out his responsibility to comply with his obligations to the state and the church. On the other hand, he has the obligation to the church to provide for new church members. The school superintendent's office trains the teachers at regular intervals through continuing education courses and is responsible for the publication of books for religious education. As is customary in the Protestant and Roman Catholic Churches in Germany, there are also regular continuing education courses for the teachers in Syriac Orthodox religious instruction.⁴²

The 2016-curriculum is divided into content-related and practice-related competencies. The practice-related competencies are divided into five competency areas: (1) perceiving and presenting; (2) interpreting/explaining; (3) evaluating; (4) communicating; and (5) designing. In addition, there are seven content-related competencies, following a uniform formal structure for all school types (with the exception of the upper level of the high school, *Gymnasium*): (1) human being, (2) world and responsibility; (3) Bible; (4) God; (5) Jesus Christ; (6) Church; (7) religions and belief systems.⁴³

What is so special about the Syriac Orthodox curriculum of 2016 for the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch? There is no comparable plan anywhere in the Syriac educational world that addresses all aspects of being human. Pupils not only learn about God, Jesus Christ and the Bible. They also discuss topics such as nature and the environment, Buddhism, Hinduism, human dignity, ethics, understanding roles in life, conscience, basic questions of life, finding identity, and many other topics that they would not have been able to learn about in their old homelands of Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. In the homelands, church education was oriented towards catechism and their own church or religion, whereas in cosmopolitan Germany, the educational canon is broader. Here, the pupils, for example, in the sixth-grade programme, not only get to know their own denomination within what is understood as a "church" but also learn about the Protestant and Catholic churches and other local faith communities, becoming acquainted with ecumenism.

42 See <https://www.sok-bw.de/landeskoordination-und-schuldekanat> (accessed 26/9/2024).

43 See <https://www.bildungsplaene-bw.de/Lde/LS/BP2016BW/ALLG/SEK1/RSYR> (accessed 29/9/2024).

With the 2016 curriculum, a new way of thinking or approach to the various topics in Syriac Orthodox religious education emerged. While the texts of the liturgy in Classical Syriac-Aramaic were read with the children when religious instruction was established in the 1994/1995 school year, the content was, however, not discussed because there were no translations. Therefore, the Baden-Württemberg Ministry of Education decreed in 2005 that this was no longer possible.⁴⁴ The texts also had to be available in German if they were to be taught in Syriac Orthodox religious instruction in German schools. The *LITURGIA* series⁴⁵ was therefore launched by the Syriac Orthodox school superintendent's office with the 2016 education plan. To date, "The Celebration of the Anointing of the Sick" and "The Funeral Liturgy" have already been published.⁴⁶ In the near future, all prayers and songs that are recited throughout the church year during the celebration of the Eucharist will be published, with parallel texts facing of Syriac-Aramaic and German. The students who will use these books in class thus will be able not only to read and sing the texts in Classical Syriac-Aramaic, but will also be able to discuss the content with the religion teacher in German. If all goes according to plan, by the year 2030, all liturgical texts of the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch will be published in two languages.

A second series was launched with the 2016 education plan, which is named *On the Way to Faith: Syriac Orthodox Religious Education*. This was planned to become a six-volume series of which volume 1 (for grades 5/6) has been published. Volume 2 for grades 7/8 is currently in the design phase and will most likely be released this year. Volume 3 for grades 9/10 is being developed and will be published in 2026, and the two volumes for primary school (4/5) will be taken on in 2028.

What is so special about these books? These books follow a certain structure of thinking in eight dimensions or topics that are reflected in each of the books (and which are close to those that have been prescribed by the government as mentioned above): (1) prayer; (2) human beings; (3) world and responsibility; (4) God – our Father in heaven; (5) Jesus Christ loves us; (6) Bible and Tradition; (7) the Church – work of the Holy Spirit; (8) other religions and worldviews.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ The curriculum for the years 1994 and 2005 can be viewed here:

<https://www.sok-bw.de/religionsunterricht> (accessed 29/9/2024).

⁴⁵ For more information cf. <https://www.sok-bw.de/lehr-und-lernwerke> (accessed 29/9/2024).

⁴⁶ Cf. Josef Önder (ed.), *Beisetzungsliturgie für Frauen. Nach dem Ritus der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien* (*LITURGIA* 2), 3rd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar 'Ebroyo Press, 2022); Josef Önder (ed.), *Beisetzungsliturgie für Männer. Nach dem Ritus der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien* (*LITURGIA* 3), 2nd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar 'Ebroyo Press, 2022); Josef Önder (ed.), *Die Feier der Krankensalbung. Nach dem Ritus der Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche von Antiochien* (*LITURGIA* 1), 2nd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar 'Ebroyo Press, 2018).

⁴⁷ For more information cf. <https://www.sok-bw.de/lehr-und-lernwerke> (accessed 01/10/2024).

All of these dimensions, which to some in the Syriac community might appear Western, are reflected in the religious education class in the public schools, anchored in the curriculum plan and filled with Syriac Orthodox content. For example, learning the basic prayers is very important in Syriac Orthodox religious education. For this reason, every religious lesson begins and ends with a prayer in Syriac-Aramaic.⁴⁸ Students learn the prayers that are appropriate for their age level. Starting from the topic of human beings, pupils deal with the topics of community, creation, strengths and weaknesses. Syriac-Aramaic Church Fathers who have commented on the above-mentioned content are used and discussed in the classroom, often in both Syriac and German. In this series of books, the authors, under the direction of Dr. Önder, have based themselves on similar education projects of the Protestant and Roman Catholic sister churches with respect to design, tasks, etc., while the content is purely Syriac Orthodox. The book for grades 5/6 is currently also being translated into classical Syriac-Aramaic and can then be used in the catechetical schools in Turabdin, Syria, or Iraq.

Another series of textbooks is called *On The Way To Prayer [Auf dem Weg zum Beten]*. To date, two volumes have been published: *Spirituality Of Children And Young People* and *Spiritual Orientation For Every Day*.⁴⁹ Volume I is a translation from the German book “Oh mein Gott! Jugendliche beten – fromm, frei und herzerfrischend”⁵⁰ into classical Syriac-Aramaic. It includes prayers written mainly by German and Syriac Orthodox students at the Dr.-Engel-Realschule, a secondary school in Eislingen/Fils under the guidance of Dr. Josef Önder and the Protestant religion teacher Dirk Schwarzenbolz.⁵¹ Volume II is a translation of prayers from Syriac Church Fathers from Classical Syriac-Aramaic into German. These two volumes are used to start and end each religion lesson. The teacher greets the students at the beginning of the religion lesson. After the greeting, the student who has prepared a prayer from these books at home for class in either Syriac-Aramaic or German comes forward. The class stands, everyone crosses themselves,

48 On the practice of teaching cf. Linda Kaplan, „Syrisch-orthodox in der zweiten und dritten Generation. Beobachtungen einer syrisch-orthodoxen Religionslehrerin” in: *Migrationskirchen. Internationalisierung und Pluralisierung des Christentums vor Ort*, Georg Etzelmüller, Claudia Rammelt (eds.), (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2022), 283–286.

49 Cf. Josef Önder (ed.), *Spiritualität von Kindern und Jugendlichen (Auf dem Weg zum Beten 1)*, 2nd ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2020); Josef Önder (ed.), *Geistliche Orientierung für jeden Tag (Auf dem Weg zum Beten 2)*, 116th ed. (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2024).

50 Cf. Josef Önder and Dirk Schwarzenbolz (eds.), *Oh mein Gott! Jugendliche beten – fromm, frei und herzerfrischend: ein interkonfessionelles Projekt der Dr.-Engel-Realschule Eislingen* (Glane-Losser: Bar ‘Ebroyo Press, 2019).

51 For more information cf. <https://www.dr-engel-realschule.de/schreibende-schule> (accessed 01/10/2024).

and the student recites the prayer. After the prayer, the teacher begins the lesson. The hour ends in the same way. All three series are provided with QR codes. The students can scan the QR codes with the iPads available at school and work on the content during the lesson. They can listen to the liturgy texts in Syriac-Aramaic and learn them in class or at home.

Two other books are worth mentioning here: The works *Aram and Aurora. An Aramaic-German friendship or Something More? (Vol. 1)* and *Aram and Aurora. The decision?! (Vol. 2)*. Both novels were written by students under the direction of Dr. Önder at the Dr.-Engel-Realschule (secondary school) in Eislingen/Fils.⁵² They address the immigration of a Syro-Aramean to Germany and his integration into German society. The topics of friendship, culture, the Syriac Orthodox Church, manners and customs, dying, death and resurrection, homosexuality, and much more are the content of these volumes. Since these books were written by a multi-ethnic student body including those of German, Syro-Aramean, Turkish and Yazidi backgrounds, their content is also diverse. These books were translated into English and Classical Syriac-Aramaic and are also used as teaching aids for Syriac Orthodox religious education in grades 9/10, as well as in German lessons at German schools. These books are also used in Turkey, where the Classical Syriac-Aramaic version⁵³ is used in teaching in catechetical and language schools. At home, the children read contemporary literature in classical Syriac-Aramaic with secular vocabulary. They not only learn everyday words in the classical language, but also about how children in Germany think and live.

Teaching material (workbooks/teaching projects) similar to the projects in Baden-Württemberg are also published for Syriac Orthodox religious instruction in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany). This project is led by state coordinator Augin Yalcin with the participation of Georg Bubolz.

Another important series is that of the *Lives of the Syriac-Orthodox Church Fathers* and books for children, which are published by religion teacher Eliyo Aydin. This is also used in Syriac Orthodox religious education both in North Rhine-Westphalia and in Baden-Württemberg.⁵⁴

Thorough teacher training is fundamental to teaching. For this reason, an academic course in *Syriac Orthodox Theology and Religious Education* was established

⁵² For more information cf. <https://www.dr-engel-realschule.de/schreibende-schule> (accessed 03/10/2024).

⁵³ Cf. Josef Önder (ed.), *Aram and Aurora. An Aramaic-German Friendship ... or may it be more than that?*, Vol. I & II (*Yulfono Yayınları 1*), 3rd ed. (Istanbul: Anadolu Ofset, 2024); cf. further Josef Önder (ed.), *Und plötzlich war es still ... Der Exodus der Christen, Jesiden und Muslime aus Syrien und dem Irak*, 3rd ed. (Weikersheim: Margraf Publishers, 2023).

⁵⁴ See <https://morephrem.shop/index.php?route=product/category&path=45> (accessed 03/10/2024).

in the 2020/2021 winter semester at the ecumenical institute of the University of Education in Schwäbisch Gmünd (southern Germany) for future Syriac Orthodox religious teachers. This is the first institution worldwide to offer such a course and from which Syriac Orthodox religious educators graduate who are later employed in state schools. The course is open to all students enrolled at the University of Education. The course programme is made up of four modules which provide a basic introduction to Biblical theology and history, to patristic theology and world religions, Syriac Orthodox ritual and practice, and Syriac Orthodox religious teaching and didactics.⁵⁵

Conclusion

Although emigration to the West was very painful for the first generation, there are many positive things to be said about Syriac-Aramaic literature in the diaspora as well as in the original homeland. In the last forty years, Syriac Orthodox authors have done a lot of work, published, and, above all, revived the works of the Syriac Orthodox Church Fathers.

If one looks at the Syriac Orthodox religious education in Germany and Baden-Württemberg, one may note how, in these lessons, Syriac Orthodox pupils get to know their faith and deepen it while they also engage with socio-political issues. The relevant literature – mostly in two languages – is available to both students and teachers. The teaching and learning materials that were published by Syriac Orthodox authors and are used in the classroom are on a par with the learning materials of the sister denominations. Remember that only recently, one could only write Syriac-Aramaic by hand, whereas today, more than fifteen fonts are included in modern word processing programs so that Syriac Orthodox writers, educators, and theologians can do the same as authors in almost any other language.

55 For more information cf. <https://www.ph-gmuend.de/studium/studiengaenge/zertifikatsstudien-gaenge/zertifikats-studium-syrisch-orthodoxe-theologie/religionspaedagogik> (accessed 03/10/2024).

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