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Jean Richard – An aid to Sul Khan Saba or an opportunist?

In the historiography of Sul Khan Saba Orbeliani's diplomatic mission to Europe, the figure of Father Jean Richard, a French priest belonging to the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*, appears as an almost constant shadow to the Georgian ambassador. Father Richard emerged on the Georgian political stage at the inception of this journey, only to vanish as abruptly as he had arrived once the embassy returned to its homeland. While he successfully positioned himself as an indispensable intermediary, the true nature of his character and the underlying objectives of his assistance to Orbeliani remain subject to scrutiny.

While the ambassador's memoirs attest to Richard's valuable aid, they fail to elucidate the underlying objectives of his Georgian mission (Orbeliani 2023, 168). Was his devotion to the Georgian cause as altruistic as the primary sources suggest? Drawing upon Father Richard's extensive correspondence preserved in the archives of Paris and Rome, this study seeks to elucidate the motivations of the French missionary. Furthermore, it aims to analyze how Georgia served as a strategic asset on the complex missionary "chessboard" – a space of both collaboration and competition between the Roman *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* and the *Société des Missions Étrangères*.

Jean Richard was born in the final quarter of the 17th century, in Sablé-sur-Sarthe, within the Diocese of Le Mans. He appears to have been an only child, or at least the sole male heir, born to a family of the provincial *bourgeoisie*. After receiving his early education and minor orders in Sablé, Richard sought to expand his ecclesiastical horizons beyond the confines of his native diocese, which he evidently deemed too restrictive for his personal ambitions. This led to a strategic move to the seminary in Angers, a transition that provoked significant friction with the conservative authorities of Le Mans.

A letter dated July 27, 1710, reveals that the Bishop of Le Mans, Monseigneur Louis de La Vergne-Montenard de Tressan, explicitly refused to grant Richard his *letters dimissory* – the formal canonical consent allowing a diocesan to be ordained by a bishop of another jurisdiction (Séminaire 17, fol. 886). This jurisdictional dispute remains a pivotal point in Richard’s biography; definitive evidence of his subsequent priestly ordination has yet to be recovered in the archival record.

This initial transition marked a decisive step toward Richard’s missionary vocation. The Seminary of Angers, established in 1659, maintained, from April 1695, rigorous intellectual and spiritual ties with the Sulpician Seminary in Paris, founded in 1651 (Grandet 1893, 566–584). The latter had been organized under the aegis of Jean-Jacques Olier (1608–1657), the seminal figure of the Sulpicians, whose objective was to implement the mandates of the Council of Trent within France (Vidal 2010, 215). This Tridentine program focused on three core pillars: domestic missions in Catholic territories, the systematic establishment of seminaries, and the standardized formation of the clergy.

Consequently, Jean Richard was shaped by a modern pedagogical environment deeply rooted in the “French School of Spirituality” (*l’École française de spiritualité*) (Del Ville 2008, 305). While a comprehensive analysis of the Counter-Reformation in 17th-century France lies beyond the scope of this study, it is essential to acknowledge the specific mysticism of this period: a movement famously categorized by the historian Henri Bremond (Krumenacker 2002, 105–138). One must underscore the profound interconnectedness between the contemporary founders of these reforming congregations: the Lazarists, Sulpicians, Eudists, and Oratorians. It was within this shared reformist atmosphere that four Apostolic Vicars, all experienced missionaries, founded a society in 1658 dedicated to the evangelization of Asia. This initiative culminated in 1663 with the creation of the *Séminaire des Missions Étrangères* on lands bequeathed by the noted orientalist Bernard de Sainte-Thérèse, OCD (1597–1669), Bishop of Babylon.¹ From this point forward, the trajectory of

¹ Monseigneur Jean Duval – known in religion as Bernard de Sainte-Thérèse, OCD – was born in 1597 in Clamecy (Burgundy), and entered the Order of Discalced

French missionary activity became inextricably linked to the *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris*.

While Jean Richard was formed within the pedagogical framework of a modern seminary steeped in the French School of Spirituality, his missionary aspirations appear to have preceded his formal entry into the priesthood. Indeed, a missionary trajectory was envisioned for him even prior to his ordination. However, this advancement was significantly impeded by the canonical requirement of the *titulus beneficii* (ecclesiastical benefice).

In 17th-century France, the ordination of a secular priest was legally and canonically impossible without the guarantee of a stable income derived from a benefice (Bonzon 2008, 69–92). Correspondence from Richard’s father reveals a critical tension: although a benefice was available in the vicinity of the family estate, it carried a strict requirement of residency, rendering it fundamentally incompatible with a career in the foreign missions (AMEP, Séminaire 17, fol. 843). This situation highlights the primary obstacle to Richard’s ecclesiastical advancement: his lack of independent wealth. While his family belonged to the provincial middle class, they lacked the financial capital necessary to secure a high-ranking or non-resident benefice. Furthermore, his parents remained resolutely opposed to his missionary vocation, withholding both their financial sup-

Carmelites in Paris. Distinguished by his oratorical prowess, he rapidly secured an influential network of supporters within the French ecclesiastical elite. In a departure from the standard missionary cursus of his predecessors, Duval was elevated to the episcopate prior to his departure for the Levant. Consecrated Bishop of Babylon in August 1638, he sailed from Marseille in July 1639, reaching Isfahan a year later. During his tenure in the East, Duval gained firsthand experience in the complexities of Persian and Mesopotamian missionary dynamics. Upon his return to France, his objectives were twofold: to provide a strategic diplomatic report on the missions to Cardinal Richelieu and to establish a dedicated French missionary institution. Drawing upon the expertise acquired as Bishop of Babylon and benefiting from the powerful patronage of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament (*Compagnie du Saint-Sacrement*), he became a foundational figure in the creation of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (*Missions Étrangères de Paris*) in 1663. Although he never returned to the Orient, he retained his episcopal title until his death in Paris on April 10, 1669, leaving a legacy that shifted the center of French missionary gravity from individual mendicant efforts to a centralized, secular clerical society. Adrien LAUNAY, *Histoire générale de la Société des missions étrangères*, vol. 1, Paris, Téqui, 1894, pp. 1–61.

port and their paternal blessing, thereby creating a double impasse, both economic and symbolic, for the young cleric.

Notwithstanding the persistent difficulties in securing a non-residential benefice, Jean Richard eventually seized a concrete opportunity to deploy to the Persian mission. In 1707, Monseigneur Louis-Marie de Saint-Olon (1637-1717), exhausted by two decades of episcopal duties and 40 years of missionary labor spanning from Lviv to Isfahan, petitioned Rome for the appointment of a coadjutor (Darricau 1958, 14-55). His recommendation was successful, as noted in the *Annales Catholiques*: “Gatien de Galisson, born in Angers in 1658, canon and vicar general of Saint-Martin de Tours, consecrated in Paris on October 28, 1708” (Chantrel 1905, 474).

The appointment of the new Coadjutor Bishop of Agathopolis proved providential for Richard: Galisson maintained close ties with the Seminary of Angers and, by extension, with Richard’s own clerical protectors. Throughout 1709, as the expedition was organized, Richard’s name emerged as a primary candidate, and he was one of the few to remain in consideration until the final selection. Despite the fierce opposition of his parents, who actively sought to obstruct his departure (AMEP Séminaire 17, fol. 771), Richard remained undeterred. In a fascinating self-examination preserved in the archives, he weighed five arguments in favor of his departure against 13 for remaining in France (AMEP, Séminaire 17, fol. 785). He dismissed the majority of the latter, stopping only briefly to consider the fragility of his own health, before reaffirming his resolve. By February 1710, with all canonical and familial obstacles effectively bypassed, the Bishop of Toulon announced Richard’s imminent departure for Constantinople (AMEP Séminaire 17, fol.787). Demonstrating a palpable urgency to begin his mission, Richard boarded the vessel of famed corsair Jacques Cassard, choosing not to await the slower departure of Bishop de Galisson.

By April 1711, Bishop de Galisson and Jean Richard had reached Constantinople, from where they embarked on a maritime transit toward Armenia (AMEP Lettres de Perse 354, fol. 241-251). Their subsequent journey proceeded by caravan through Erivan and Tauris, eventually crossing into Georgian territory. They arrived in Tbilisi in late June 1711, where they were received by the mission of the Italian Capuchins (AMEP, Lettres de

Perse 354, fol. 365). Their arrival marked the beginning of Jean Richard's direct engagement with the Georgian mission.

According to a formal agreement concluded with Bishop Pidou in September 1710, the administrative jurisdiction of the region was strictly partitioned: the titular bishop retained guardianship over Georgia, the two Armenias, and Nakhichevan, while the Coadjutor was entrusted with Baghdad, Basra, Mesopotamia, and Assyria (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 354, fol.160). The decision to exclude a French bishop from direct jurisdiction over Georgia was informed by cautionary reports preserved in the *Chronicle of the Carmelites of Persia* (Chick, 1939). These records advised against the mixing of nationalities within a single mission. However, during their residence in the summer of 1711, Bishop de Galisson and Jean Richard cultivated a close rapport with the resident Capuchins, knowing that the latter had long been neglected by their own superior. Pidou was French and a member of the Theatine order, which did not please the Capuchins, who were in conflict with the Theatine missionaries in Mingrelia. Consequently, the Capuchins shifted their allegiance to the new coadjutor, submitting a formal written supplication requesting his ecclesiastical protection.

In the autumn of 1711, the two missionaries proceeded toward Tabriz. During this period, Bishop de Galisson drafted a comprehensive report regarding his residence in Georgia, a document oscillating between a missionary relation and a formal travelogue (AMEP *Lettres de Perse* 354, fol. 301-308; 325-327). In it, he delineates the socio-political climate of the region and recounts his audiences with King Vakhtang VI (1675-1737).

On December 8, 1711, Galisson elevated his diplomatic efforts by addressing a concise memorandum directly to King Louis XIV (1638-1715). In this appeal, the Bishop emphasized the Georgian prince's profound affinity for France, his proficiency in the French language, and his purported "desire for reunification with the Catholic Church," asserting Vakhtang's steadfast commitment to a "Christianity which no one has ever been able to make him abandon" (AMEP *Lettres de Perse* 354, fol. 365). While the Bishop eventually established his residence in Isfahan, Jean Richard remained stationed in Tabriz, serving as a pivotal liaison with Tbilisi.

On May 24, Richard informed his superior of an impending visit from the Georgian prince and his principal advisor, the Catholic monk Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani (AMEP *Lettres de Perse* 354, fol. 477). Concurrently, the Bishop's dispatches to Paris highlighted the perceived advancement of Catholicism within the Kingdom of Kartli. He framed the sovereign's inclination toward ecclesiastical union as a strategic opportunity that could be realized through the decisive intervention and protection of the French Crown.

Following the death of the Bishop on September 27, 1712, during the height of diplomatic negotiations, Father Jean Richard, the former coadjutor's principal assistant, was appointed Vicar General by Bishop Pidou on November 12, 1712 (AMEP *Lettres de Perse* 354, fol.541). Richard viewed this rapid promotion as a significant advancement in his ecclesiastical career. Consequently, he redirected his professional focus toward the ongoing negotiations with Georgia, presumably anticipating that a successful union would secure his own elevation to the episcopate. While the subsequent mission of Sulkhan-Saba Orbeliani to Europe is a matter of established historical record, this study focuses specifically on Richard's role within the negotiations conducted in Paris and Rome.

Although Richard traveled as an escort to the Georgian ambassador, his objectives remained aligned with French geopolitical interests in the Levant and the Near East. Notably, he carried correspondence from Shah Soltan Hoseyn (r. 1688-1727) to King Louis XIV, an exchange that served as a precursor to the 1715 Persian embassy famously satirized by Montesquieu (AMEP, *Correspondance* 18, fol. 691). As a matter of fact, his presence is more frequently documented within the political intrigues of Versailles than in the standard reports of missionary activity.²

² An *abbé Richard* reappears in Maurice Herbettes's account of the Persian embassy to France (1714-1715). While his involvement in that specific episode lies outside the primary scope of this study, his presence therein warrants acknowledgment. Herbette admits to possessing limited biographical data on Richard, identifying him as a Jesuit – a claim contradicted by the present research – and noting his close association with Galisson. The latter, whose primary objective was the “defense of French interests”, receives a disparaging treatment from both Herbette and the Persian ambassador, Mehemet Riza Beg. Maurice HERBETTE, *Une ambassade persane sous Louis XIV, d'après des documents inédits*, Paris, Perrin, 1907, p. 11.

Richard was intimately acquainted with France's Eastern strategy, which sought to establish a sphere of influence through the Franco-Ottoman alliance and strategic ties with the Khanate of Crimea (Veinstein 1969, 423-425). The court of Bakhchisarai, asserting its genealogical seniority as descendants of the Golden Horde, remained resistant to Ottoman suzerainty.

Within this complex diplomatic landscape, France sought maritime access to the Black Sea, and Richard quickly recognized that the region of Mingrelia represented an ideal strategic foothold for such an expansion. During his tenure in Europe, Father Jean Richard thus proposed the establishment of a new French mission in Mingrelia, to be placed under the jurisdiction of the *Missions Étrangères*. Richard argued that the Theatine Order, officially recalled in 1692 (ASPF Acta 62, fol. 238), had effectively abandoned the region, leaving a vacuum that the Patriarch of Mingrelia purportedly sought to fill with French Catholic missionaries.

In 1714, Richard presented this proposal in Rome, asserting that he possessed both the Patriarch's endorsement and the formal support of the Georgian Capuchins. This initiative, seconded by Sul Khan-Saba Orbelliani, was formally deliberated by the General Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide* on July 24, 1714 (ASPF Acta 84, fol. 442). Richard's petition was ambitious: he requested the dispatch of missionaries and the founding of a college, while further advocating for the appointment of a resident Latin Bishop to be stationed in either Georgia or Mingrelia.

The proposal was revisited during the congregation of August 6, 1714, with renewed emphasis on the strategic necessity of deploying French personnel. It was argued that priests from the *Missions Étrangères* would achieve higher levels of local acceptance due to their clerical dress, which closely resembled that of the Theatines and the Basilians. Furthermore, the strategy dictated that these missionaries secure land and present themselves in a medical capacity to facilitate their integration (ASPF, Acta 84, fol. 491).³ This initiative, which enjoyed royal patronage, was formally presented by the French Ambassador to the Holy See, Cardinal Jo-

³ “[...] saranno più accetti li sacerdoti della Missione Francese, perché sono d’habito simile alli Teatini, e quasi simile [verso] à quello de Basiliani e sarà necessario, che habbiano qualche fondo ivi in terreno, e s’introduchino come Medici per essere accetti.”

seph-Emmanuel de La Trémoille (1659-1720), who deferred the selection and nomination of specific missionaries to the king (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 355, fol. 63-66). By December 1714, the *Propaganda Fide* had granted its formal blessing to the Mingrelian mission. However, the Sacred Congregation explicitly clarified that the mission's administration fell under the jurisdiction of the French missionary institute rather than its own direct authority (ASPF, Acta 84, fol. 707). Consequently, from early 1715, Richard devoted himself to the logistical organization of the mission, notably forgoing requests for *viaticum* or ecclesiastical subsidies, thereby asserting a degree of financial independence.

In correspondence dated October 1711, Jacques-Charles de Brisacier (1642-1736), Superior of the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, informed Bishop Louis-Marie Pidou of the arrival of a new coadjutor. Due to a shortage of available personnel, the coadjutor was accompanied only by Father Jean Richard. While an experienced missionary, Father Gaud, was technically available, his candidacy was dismissed following his prior expulsion from Persia due to documented conflicts with his ordinaries (AMEP Correspondance 18, fol. 63). Although the dismissal of a missionary under such scandalous circumstances may seem anomalous to modern scholars of the Georgian missions, such occurrences were far from isolated within the Persian context. Indeed, upon his arrival, Bishop de Saint-Olon's initial reports depicted a diocese in disarray. After decades of episcopal absenteeism and leaders prioritizing careerism over pastoral care, the local clergy appeared as a disparate collection of secular priests characterized by indolence or, in more severe cases, moral failings such as gambling and brawling. As a Theatine deeply committed to the principles of the Counter-Reformation, Saint-Olon spent two decades spearheading the restoration of the diocese, laboring to enforce clerical discipline and ensure that only those committed to the missionary vocation remained within the clergy.

Pidou, however, maintained a profound disdain for personal ambition. Consequently, the series of letters dispatched in 1714, in which Richard reported on the progress of the Mingrelian mission and relayed directives from the *Propaganda Fide*, were met with significant coldness.

The Bishop's disapproval was compounded by the nature of Richard's rhetoric: in his efforts to secure the mission, he leveled severe ac-

cusations, including charges of apostasy, against his colleagues the Mingrelian Theatines, among them Father Gaetano Turco. These allegations were formally communicated to the Bishop of Babylon, but were ultimately rejected by the Theatine Order (ASPF, SOCG 593, fol. 584-585). The case eventually reached the Tribunal of the Holy Office, which determined that the uncorroborated testimony of a single individual was insufficient for a conviction (ADDF, Decreta 168 (1710), 372 v). In the absence of further evidence, the Holy Office declined to condemn Father Gaetano Turco.

These maneuvers severely compromised Richard's standing with his superior. Although Richard's position as Vicar General made him a logical successor, the Bishop pointedly declined to endorse him, advocating instead for the candidacy of a member of the regular clergy. Consequently, it cannot be argued that Richard's proposed Mingrelian mission enjoyed any substantive local support.

Although Richard secured the formal blessing of the *Propaganda Fide* and the patronage of the French Crown, the financial burden of the enterprise remained a domestic responsibility. The Crown endowed this nascent mission with an annual annuity of 7,000 *livres*, while the *Séminaire des Missions Étrangères* prepared a contingent of five or six young priests under the direction of Alin, the designated superior of the new foundation. However, the project was abruptly halted by the death of Louis XIV on September 1, 1715. The ensuing minority of the heir and the complexities of the Regency triggered significant internal power struggles, leading to the abandonment of Louis XIV's expansive Eastern policy.

This period marked a notable shift in French foreign relations, as the state pivoted toward the Americas, a strategic realignment that would characterize much of the eighteenth century. Furthermore, the King's demise suspended the diplomatic protocols that had previously facilitated French transit through the Ottoman Empire. These compounding factors led the Superior of the House, Abbé Jean Bonnet, to observe in January 1716: "The death of the King has suspended, if not entirely annihilated, the project of the Mingrelian mission. God has His times and His moments, which must be awaited with patience so as not to forestall His designs" (Congrégation Saint Vincent de Paul 1902, 591-593).

By the spring of 1716, as he prepared to depart from Marseille, Richard remained ostensibly optimistic regarding the viability of the Mingreli-

an mission, even initiating the preliminary recruitment of personnel. This confidence, however, was quickly eroded upon his return to the Levant. During a stay at the French embassy in Constantinople, Richard learned that Sulkhan Saba Orbeliani's reception in Georgia had been remarkably cold, and that the prospect of an ecclesiastical union had effectively stalled. Consequently, Richard diverted his route through Erivan to Persia, and he eventually settled temporarily in Isfahan.

The death of Bishop Pidou, on November 20, 1717, briefly revived Richard's episcopal aspirations; yet, despite his persistent efforts, he failed to secure the Bishopric of Babylon. Richard's reputation was further tarnished by his failure to remit the funds entrusted to him by Bishop Pidou (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 355, fol. 329), an act of financial negligence that his missionary colleagues frequently cited as characteristic of his broader fiscal impropriety (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 355, fol. 379). This lack of financial integrity serves as a definitive coda to his Near Eastern tenure. Following a period of residence in Muscovy, he ultimately returned to Europe.

In 1720, Richard petitioned for a departure to Louisiana, a territory under French sovereignty since 1682, yet there is no evidence to suggest that this mission ever materialized (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 355, fol. 407). Unverified contemporary reports allege that he was formally expelled from the *Missions Étrangères de Paris* (AMEP, *Lettres de Perse* 355, fol. 450), a final indignity that underscores the complete erosion of his standing within the institution.

Father Jean Richard's profile diverges significantly from the conventional missionary archetype. Indeed, historical records offer scant evidence of his religious devotion. While his conduct may not have been overtly scandalous, he attained a certain notoriety among his peers in Persia, who primarily recalled the substantial debts he incurred and his failure to remit funds entrusted to him in Constantinople. Driven by professional ambition, Richard appears to have viewed the East as a theater for career advancement, aiming for an appointment as Bishop of Babylon or Georgia, or perhaps envisioning a diplomatic role at the head of a French consulate in Mingrelia. In this regard, Richard is emblematic of the politicized French court ecclesiastics of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

Although Georgia served merely as a stepping stone in his personal trajectory, his maneuvers had lasting institutional consequences: Mingrelia was formally detached from the Georgian mission and placed under the jurisdiction of the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*. While the Lazarists were briefly considered for the mission in 1715, the region remained technically within the Parisian's purview. However, this administrative claim was never fully realized. When Rome inquired in 1746 whether the *Séminaire des Missions Étrangères* intended to maintain its presence in Mingrelia, the response was, as documented in the archival correspondence, "quite negative" (AMEP, Rome Procure 17, fol. 101). This exchange effectively marked the conclusion of the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*' abortive missionary enterprise in Mingrelia.

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Jean Richard - An aid to Sul Khan Saba or an opportunist?

An examination of accounts documenting Sul Khan Saba Orbeliani's diplomatic journey through Europe consistently foregrounds the figure of a French Catholic clergyman, Father Jean Richard, who appears to have served as a close and constant companion to the Georgian ambassador throughout the mission. This missionary, affiliated with the *Société des missions étrangères de Paris*, emerges at the outset of the journey and recedes from the historical record upon the ambassador's return to Georgia — a pattern that invites critical scrutiny. While Richard demonstrably positioned himself as an indispensable intermediary, the precise nature of his motivations and the extent to which his assistance was genuinely altruistic remain open questions.

The present study draws upon Jean Richard's correspondence, preserved in archival collections in Paris and Rome, to reconstruct the French missionary's objectives and to situate his engagement with Orbeliani within the broader context of Catholic ecclesiastical politics. Particular attention is paid to the strategic significance that Georgia held on the missionary field contested between the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* and the *Société des missions étrangères de Paris* — two competing institutional actors whose rivalry fundamentally shaped Catholic missionary activity in the Caucasus during the early eighteenth century. Through this archival and historiographical analysis, the study seeks to illuminate how Georgia functioned not merely as a site of genuine religious outreach, but as a calculated asset in the geopolitical and ecclesiastical rivalries of the period.

Keywords: *Sul Khan Saba Orbeliani; Jean Richard; Société des missions étrangères; Propaganda Fide; Georgian diaspora; Catholic missions; Caucasus; early modern diplomacy*