Eastern Christians, Islam, and the West: A Connected History

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When I was preparing my PhD in 1993, the subject "Eastern Christians" or "Christians in the Islamic World" was almost nonexistent in the mass media or in scholarly works. In fact, I prepared my thesis not under the supervision of a specialist in the Middle East but rather under that of a specialist in European Catholicism during the early modern era.[1]

Today the situation is dramatically different. Public opinion, beyond the circles of activist Christians who have always paid biased attention to the subject, is regularly "informed" about the situation of Christian minorities in predominantly Muslim countries. News abounds regarding violence and injustices committed against Christians in various countries and about their ever-shrinking numbers due to emigration. However, this approach, which depicts Eastern Christians only as victims, prevents us from understanding their actual situation in the home countries or in the diaspora.

In scholarly circles, the topic of Eastern Christians is also receiving a great deal of interest. Departing from the ecclesiastical history to which it had been primarily confined, Christianity (as a community, practice, etc.) in the Middle East has become a genuine subject of research for history, anthropology, and political science. A network of scholars working in this field is emerging, which is animating and facilitating a new momentum in research on the subject. Rather than being seen as a marginal field with little relevance to the larger field of Middle East studies, recent scholarly research about Christian and Jewish minorities positions these communities and their histories as an integral part of the larger societies to which they belong—culturally, economically, politically, and demographically.

The status of Jews and Christians under Islam, which has recently been popularized with the polemical—and politically charged—neologism "dhimmitude," has to be approached carefully. Although on one level it is certainly a status of inferiority, by itself it does not define the whole experience of non-Muslim minorities in the successive Islamic empires before the reforms (Tanzimat) of the 19th century. Economic, political, social, and cultural factors played an equal if not more important role in shaping the place of Christian (and Jewish) minorities within the Middle East.

Beyond the problematic category of *dhimmī*, one of the difficulties in understanding the history and contemporary lives of Christian communities is that until recently they have been seen as immutably coherent and homogenous. Thus, we speak of the "Maronites," "Copts," and "Assyro-Chaldeans," as if they are ahistorical groups whose roots, laws, and institutions follow a linear trajectory with little if any meaningful contact with other religious minorities. This approach derives from the confusion between the reified representations of sectarian identity, tied to a certain form of ecclesiology, and the much more complex historical realities that have shaped that identity. Thus, the assertion that Christians in the Ottoman Empire since the time of Mehmet II were organized in "millets" derives from 19th-century representations of sectarian identities and not from

any tangible historical evidence.[2] Far from timeless, sectarianism was a 19th-century construct that was part of the process of creating nationalist identities.[3]

To comprehend the history of Christians in the Middle East, we have to go beyond static and opaque labels such as *dhimmī* and *millet*. Instead, we have to study the history and the dynamics of these groups and their churches as historical processes. For instance, the ecclesiastical leaders of the various churches were more often exhausted by fighting and anathematizing one another than by answering Islamic critiques. In addition, the canvassing for ecclesiastical offices and the management of the local congregations were part of a system of clientele and patronage that increased chances for internal conflicts and led to appeals to shariʿa courts and to conversions to Islam. Members of the same church were dispersed across large territories, living under various conditions. Under these circumstances historical coherence was hardly the norm. For instance, the underlying tensions that led in the 18th century to the tragic history of the Maronite nun Hindiyya al-ʿUjaimi (which went as far as murders committed under her direction in the monastery she founded) was in part the consequence of a long-running conflict between the townsmen of Aleppo and their co-religionists in Mount Lebanon.[4] Furthermore, quite often a church gets divided by political borders. The Arabic-speaking Christian citizens of Israel do not take the same positions as those who live under Palestinian or Jordanian administration, even if they all belong to the same Latin patriarchate of Jerusalem. Also, the leaders of the Assyro-Chaldean Church embrace different political positions depending on whether they are in Baghdad, Kurdistan, or exile.

In terms of the relationship between Islam and Christianity, Western public opinion is nowadays obsessed by "the clash of civilizations," the title of Samuel Huntington's influential treatise. News on Christians in Islamic countries is related to this almost eschatological vision. In this context, studying Eastern Christians offers the advantage of undermining such a dualist vision of the world. At the most basic level, this rejuvenated field of study contests the artificial binary of Islam/Christianity that allocates the "East" to Islam and positions Christianity as an exclusively Western phenomenon.[5] Instead of the stultifying binary, current research compels us to rethink the intercourse between Eastern Christians, Muslims, and the West since the early modern period. New studies on European and American Christian missions have especially helped to shift the point of view from acculturation and the dominating/dominated paradigm to new questions on interconnection, interactivity, or mimesis.

In this context, a new problematic on reciprocal perception between Occidentals and inhabitants of Muslim states arises, with a key role ascribed to Eastern Christians in the building of these reciprocal images. From the 17th century, they turned to the West and became at the same time the first participants/initiators of the literary and cultural Arabic revival (*nahḍa*). This process was part of their attempt to reshape their own identity through negotiating relations with (and between) their Muslim milieu and European powers, groups, and individuals. Those Christians who adhered to Catholicism, such as the Maronites, were the first to interact with European cultures but consequently also the first to assume critical and defensive positions against it. By embracing historical and philological Western sciences they began to rediscover and construct the history and sources of Eastern Christians and the Islamic Middle East, thus contributing to the making of modern identities, especially Arab identity. In a similar vein, in the 1950s and 1960s, at the time of Vatican Council II, the opposition of the Eastern Catholic Christians

to so-called "latinization" was a fight against Western cultural imperialism. During the second half of the 20th century, including within the Eastern Christian Churches, there was a quest for *turāth* (heritage) and *aṣāla* (authenticity), which Christians shared with non-Christians in the Middle East. Thus, Eastern Christianity (and the study of it) undermines the pretext of a culturally based bifurcation of the world into "West" and "Islam" and posits in its stead a far more fluid civilizational definition and more complex interactions than the eschatological and confrontational model of Huntington's clash of civilizations. It is actually significant that in his book *Orientalism,* Edward W. Said, who was an Eastern Christian, completely ignores the Eastern Christians who played a very important role in the building up of European Orientalism.[6]

However, the problem is not simply one of Western misconception, neglect, or misconstruction of the subject of Eastern Christianity. An objective approach to the study of Eastern Christianity also requires some critical distance from, and independence with regard to, the subjects under study. These are seldom available to researchers working within the context of denominational universities and churches in the Middle East. The work of such scholars often tends to be defensive and salutary of their own congregation in order to reinforce their sectarian identity. Recalling the antiquity of the Church, its liturgical and monastic tradition, its long partnership with the West, its resistance to Islam or "heresy," or its resistance to the West and its integration into the Arabic Islamic world, aims to confirm the legitimacy and reinforce the unity of the group from the inside and to claim attention and respect from outside. In a similar vein, the traumatic events of the 19th and 20th centuries, and the distressing situations at the beginning of the 21st century, influence how the past and the present are envisioned. The massacres of 1860, of 1915, and of the Lebanese civil war, in addition to recent attacks against Christians in Egypt and Iraq, are always remembered and often recalled. In these ways, the narratives of Eastern Christians produced from within the community remain, for the most part, mired in polemics.

The production of a discourse based on the methods and ethics of the humanities could help people to move beyond these traumas, to calm the suffering of the memory, and to begin to discover new facets of the history of Eastern Christians. The work of the historian, especially, is a work of keeping the events at a distance, of rendering them harmless by building a rational discourse around them that offers a vision of the past that will be acceptable to everyone. To put it in another way, historians offer several interpretations of the past, which together commence and engage a dialogue that allows for multiple perspectives. As Paul Ricoeur eloquently puts it, the historian helps the society to treat the pain of remembrance and contributes in this way to leaving the dead to rest in peace.[7] The new scholarship on Eastern Christians is a beginning to this process.

NOTES

[1]Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient au temps de la Réforme catholique* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, Bibliothèque des Ecoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, 1994), 284.

[2]Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, 2 vols. (New York/London: Holmes & Meier, 1982).

[3]See, for instance, Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998); and Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of*

Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000).

[4]Bernard Heyberger, *Hindiyya (1720–1798), mystique et criminelle* (Paris: Aubier, Collection historique, 2001). Akram Khater, *Embracing the Divine: Passion, Politics and Gender in the Christian Middle East, 1720–1798* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

[5]About the cultural context of Eastern Christianity in the first centuries of Islam, see Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008).

[6]In a similar vein, Fernand Braudel, speaking about "highland liberty" in the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains, in his famous *Méditerranée*, sees there only "Kurds, Druzes, and Metwalis," ignoring completely the Christians. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II*, 5th ed., vol. 1 (Paris: Armand Colin, 1982), 35.

[7]Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).