International Journal of Middle East Studies (2022), **54**, 554–558
doi:10.1017/S002074382200071X

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

ROUNDTABLE

Enabling Oblivion: Global Activism and the Erasure of Middle Eastern Christians

Paul S. Rowe

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Political Studies, Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia, Canada
Email: paul.rowe@twu.ca

The relative ignorance of Armenian narratives in the analysis of current affairs in the Middle East raised by several authors in this roundtable is symptomatic of a larger problem facing ethno-religious minorities in the region. Until the 1990s, Western exposure to Middle Eastern Christianity in both academic and popular contexts was minimal at best. Outside specific studies of notable groups, scholars largely ignored non-Muslim religious sects. At the level of popular discourse, political Islam had illuminated the majoritarian religious impulses of the region, contributing to common Orientalist stereotypes of Arab and Muslim political culture.[1] The presence of several million indigenous Christians, the vast majority of whom represented ancient indigenous communities, was largely ignored among academics and journalists. The notable exception was Lebanon, where Christian participation in the drama of the civil conflict of the 1980s was often noted in the press and occasionally scrutinized in academia.

This began to change in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The publication of journalistic accounts of the lives of Middle Eastern Christians during this period introduced them to the reading public.[2] Meanwhile, expanded interest in non-Western forms of Christianity arose out of the publication of several books on the topic by Philip Jenkins.[3] A profile of the Christian churches and organizations in the Middle East brought them to the attention of Western Christians in 2003. Bailey and Bailey's *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* was a fact book that revealed Eastern Christianity to a newly interested and largely Protestant audience.[4] It did well enough to merit a second edition seven years later. Scholars began to publish in-depth studies of the political and social context of Middle Eastern Christian communities, such as those by S. S. Hasan, Suha Rassam, and Mariz Tadros, among others, presaging a surge in interest in the first two decades of this century.[5]

[1] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Vintage, 1981).

[2] See, for example, William Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Owl Books, 1997); Charles Sennot, *The Body and the Blood: The Middle East's Vanishing Christians and the Possibility for Peace* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002); Joshua Hammer, *A Season in Bethlehem: Unholy War in a Sacred Place*, (New York: Free Press, 2003).

[3] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003); *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008); *The Lost History of Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2009).

[4] Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[5] S. S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Contemporary Egypt* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003); Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq* (London: Gracewing, 2005); Mariz Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2013).

Amid the growing interest in Middle Eastern Christianity arose several laments of the seemingly inevitable decline of their communities. A photographic spread in *National Geographic* in 2009 profiled "The Forgotten Faithful," a subheading reading in part that "native Christians today are disappearing from the land where their faith was born."[6] During Pope Benedict XVI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in May 2009, the *New York Times* reported that Christians in the Middle East were "losing numbers and sway."[7] The next year, the pontiff convened a synod of bishops in a special assembly for the Middle East, aiming to "confirm and strengthen the members of the Catholic Church in their Christian identity."[8]

The numerical decline of Christians was sometimes attributed to their lack of natural increase or their flight from economic crisis and unemployment. However, Christians and many within the general public in North America and Western Europe also were convinced that rising levels of persecution were to blame. This coalesced with a wider set of concerns about the persecution of Christians worldwide. In 1997, Paul Marshall, a research fellow at the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, highlighted this persecution in a book widely circulated among Christian evangelicals and conservative Protestants, entitled *Their Blood Cries Out*.[9] Allen Hertzke, a political scientist based at the University of Oklahoma, describes the coalition of various religious and human rights lobbies that then organized to promote the passage of an International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in the US Congress in 1998.[10] Among others, Egyptian American Coptic activists were vocal supporters of the act, presuming that it would increase pressure on a key US ally to respect the concerns of its Christian minority.[11] IRFA established the US International Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a branch of the US State Department responsible for annual reporting on issues of religious freedom throughout the world. Middle Eastern states typically feature prominently on the commission's list of "countries of particular concern" or its less severe "special watch list." Most of these states are cited for their neglect and discrimination of religious minority communities such as Christians, Yezidis, or Baha'i.

In the wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, American foreign policy in the Middle East focused more heavily upon regime change in Iraq and the attendant promotion of democracy throughout the region. The 2003 invasion of Iraq, premised in part upon installing a democratic government, proved to be a disaster for religious minorities in that country, who were increasingly disenfranchised and targeted by extremists. American pressure on the Egyptian administration of President Hosni Mubarak to open up democratic participation in the 2005 legislative and presidential elections only served to benefit the Muslim Brotherhood. They proved an effective foil against further liberalization of the Egyptian system. Similarly, the success of Hamas in the Palestinian legislative elections of January 2006 was a harbinger of things to come after the Arab uprisings of 2011. The beneficiaries of enforced and organic liberalization and democratization in the region were the Islamists. Despite common rhetorical commitments to toleration for dhimmis, Islamists seemed likely to usher in regimes that would limit the participation of Christians in government, restrict construction of churches, or otherwise discriminate against non-Muslims. Growing concern about the plight of these religious minorities in Washington, DC, and other Western capitals

[6] Don Belt, "The Forgotten Faithful," *National Geographic* 215, no. 6 (2009): 78–97.

[7] Ethan Bronner, "Mideast's Christians Losing Numbers and Sway," *New York Times,* 13 May 2009.

[8] Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Middle East, "The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness," 2009, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20091208_lineamenta-mo_en.html.

[9] Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (Dallas: Word, 1997).

[10] Allen D. Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 183–236.

[11] Paul S. Rowe, "Four Guys and a Fax Machine? Diasporas, New Information Technologies, and the Internationalization of Religion in Egypt," *Journal of Church and State* 43, no. 1 (2001): 88–89.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382200071X Published online by Cambridge University Press

did nothing to reduce the flow of Arab Christians leaving the region, nor did it measurably improve standards of inclusion in their states of residence.

Although many Arab Christians participated in the Arab uprisings of 2011, many more were seized by trepidation over the likely emergence of political majoritarianism. The victory of the Freedom and Justice Party in the Egyptian legislative and presidential elections of 2011–12 and the contemporaneous violence involved in the descent into civil war in Syria were ominous signals for Christian communities. The disorder that followed the uprisings dealt a harsh blow to populations throughout the Middle East, but it seemed to augur worse for minorities. Reflecting on the bleak prospects for Arab Christians, Lebanese scholar Hilal Khashan wrote that "while Western governments have recognized the seriousness of the issue, the modest measures they have taken to address it are incommensurate with its gravity."[12]

In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) movement overran northern Iraq and the city of Mosul, ushering in three years of terrorist control over the region. Before the ISIS invasion, minority communities of Christians and Yezidis fled to the relatively safe territories of the Kurdish Regional Government, or to the remote areas of Mount Sinjar. The disenfranchisement of Christians in the city of Mosul was dramatically demonstrated by ISIS's identification of Christian properties open to looting with the Arabic letter *nūn*, standing for the common Muslim word for Christians, *Naṣrānī*. Stark images of the letter *nūn* on the walls of Christian homes prompted worldwide revulsion, casting minds back to the Star of David used during the Holocaust. The letter *nūn* appeared in social media posts and other publicity highlighting the majoritarian threat posed by ISIS. Heightened outrage resulted as well from news that emerged of atrocities committed largely against the Yezidi minority.

That summer, a new lobby emerged in Washington, DC, aimed at addressing the increasing persecution and devastation of Christian communities around the world, emphasizing the Middle East. Taking the title In Defense of Christians (IDC), it convened an international conference of religious leaders, politicians, and activists from 9–11 September 2014.[13] The conference shone a light on the increasing crisis among Middle Eastern Christians from northern Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, and elsewhere, and provided a platform for discussions that rarely take place in the region, given its political polarization and the limitations of ecumenical activities. Looking back on US adventures in the Middle East over the decade following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, IDC executive director Andrew Doran noted in 2014 that "it seems pretty clear to me that U.S. policy has had an inimical effect on the Christian communities of the Middle East. . . . Whatever we do seems to be the wrong move."[14] The influence of lobbies for persecuted Christian and minority communities as well as the international religious freedom community gained recognition over the following years as the Trump administration paid some attention to their concerns. Whereas the UN was faulted for downplaying ISIS attacks against Christians in its 2017 report, the US vice president announced his government's intention to fund relief efforts directly.[15] In July 2018 and July 2019, the administration hosted the first and second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, gathering together religious leaders, advocates, and politicians to discuss a variety of constituencies and minority communities.

[12] Hilal Khashan, "Dateline: Arab Uprisings May Doom Middle East Christians," *Middle East Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (2014): 1–9.

[13] Lauren Markoe, "'In Defense of Christians' Seeks to Protect Brethren from Egypt to Iraq," *Washington Post,* 10 September 2014.

[14] Quoted in Kathryn Jean Lopez, "In Defense of Christians," *National Review*, 15 September 2014, https://www.nationalreview.com/corner/defense-christians-kathryn-jean-lopez.

[15] Ewelina Ochab, "What Will We Tell Christian Minorities in the Middle East This Christmas?" *Forbes*, 23 December 2016, https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2016/12/23/what-will-we-tell-christian-minorities-in-the-middle-east-this-christmas/?sh=4976aa585dab; Erasmus, "The Politics of Helping Middle Eastern Christians: Good and Bad News for Beleaguered Faith Groups and Their Supporters," *Economist,* 27 October 2017, https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2017/10/27/the-politics-of-helping-middle-eastern-christians.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382200071X Published online by Cambridge University Press

Good Intentions Pave the Road

Clearly, the international campaign to highlight the plight of religious minorities has gained notoriety and some interest on the part of some Western governments. Nevertheless, there remain significant social and political obstacles to the success of such efforts. Looking back on a decade and a half of US religious freedom policy, former director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, Thomas Farr, wrote in 2013 that "the U.S. failure to advance religious freedom is due as much to the anemic nature of the policy itself, and internal resistance to its full-scale adoption" as to resistance to religious freedom abroad.[16]

Perhaps the most notable failures may be found in northern Iraq, where global actors took some interest in the resettlement of minority communities following ISIS's onslaught of 2014–17. In a recent book describing his efforts to support the survival of Christian communities in northern Iraq, Stephen Rasche relates a multitude of challenges he faced gaining access to funding, administering programs, and keeping the attention of a jaded global audience. He relates how State Department officials stood in the way of delivering support to faith-based agencies; how contractors from the Christian minority were excluded from the reconstruction efforts; and how intergovernmental organizations misspent or mismanaged funds intended to rebuild the homes and communities of internally displaced minorities.[17] Rasche goes on to illustrate the significant threat posed by the Iranian-backed *hashd al-shaʿabi* (popular militias), some of which have used the veneer of defending Christian interests to advance a pro-Iranian agenda. Under the post-invasion Iraqi constitution, quota seats are allocated to the Christian population to ensure the representation of their interests. Nevertheless, in the 2021 legislative elections, the Babylon Movement of Rayan al-Kildani, the political arm of one of the *hashd al-shaʿabi*, managed to commandeer four of the five seats, even though church authorities conclude that the movement is "not representative of Iraqi Christians."[18]

Noting the failure of many initiatives intended to preserve their presence in the region, Middle Eastern Christians have been forced into partnerships with brittle and unbending authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere. In most Middle Eastern states, non-Muslim minorities do not boast the numbers required to effect change on their own and must choose carefully whether to support opposition movements. Even so, scholars question the preference of minorities for renewed authoritarianism in spite of the democratic awakening that arose after 2011. For example, Mark Farha and Salma Mousa explore the participation of Christians in the 2011 Syrian and Egyptian uprisings. Although they argue that feelings of grievance led many Egyptian Christians to the protests in Tahrir Square in early 2011, even there the church and established members of the Coptic community remained supportive of military authoritarianism.[19] Syrian Christians generally have not taken part in the civil conflict against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, preferring to remain on the sidelines or to support the government. Ceren Belge and Ekrem Karakoç go on to report that the perception that Middle Eastern religious minorities support authoritarianism as a means of securing their communities is largely borne out by the evidence.[20] Using multinational survey data, they find that religious minorities in particular are likely to see authoritarian governments as better guarantors of minority rights than democratic regimes that would introduce majoritarian policies.

[16] Thomas F. Farr, "Religious Freedom and International Diplomacy," in *The Future of Religious Freedom: Global Challenges*, ed. Allen D. Hertzke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 342.

[17] Stephen Rasche, *The Disappearing People: The Tragic Fate of Christians in the Middle East* (New York: Bombardier Books, 2020), 67–68, 71, 78–87.

[18] Knox Thames and Sarhang Hamasaeed, "A New Test for Iraq's Democracy and Stability," United States Institute of Peace, 7 March 2022, https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/03/new-test-iraqs-democracy-and-stability.

[19] Mark Farha and Salma Mousa, "Secular Autocracy vs. Sectarian Democracy? Weighing Reasons for Christian Support for Regime Transition in Syria and Egypt," *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 2 (2015): 178–97.

[20] Ceren Belge and Ekrem Karakoç, "Minorities in the Middle East: Ethnicity, Religion, and Support for Authoritarianism," *Political Research Quarterly* 68, no. 2 (2015): 280–92.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382200071X Published online by Cambridge University Press

What is more, critics of religious freedom advocacy argue that the promotion of minority interests in the Middle East is inherently associated with questionable philosophic or ideological programs. Elizabeth Shakman Hurd argues that the emphasis on religious belief as a means of identifying minority groups undermines the case for their participation in "crosscutting, nonsectarian forms of politics."[21] She concludes that advocacy that reinforces the religious differences between minorities in places such as Syria only serves to promote the very sectarianism that promotes discrimination in the first place.[22] In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age,* published in 2016, the late Saba Mahmoud delivered a more targeted critique of religious freedom advocates in the context of the Middle East, including those who promoted the passage of IRFA. In her view, these advocates reify religious minorities to categories of religion and belief more appropriate to the Western liberal and Protestant tradition.[23] She argued that religious freedom advocacy as applied in the case of Egypt only serves to consolidate power in the hands of ecclesial authorities, notably the Coptic Orthodox Church.[24] Elsewhere, it presumably forces minorities into the uncomfortable embrace of their own problematic religious authorities—who may stand in opposition to the very individual freedoms Western advocates seek to promote.

Protection of religious minorities in the Middle East also may be tainted by associations with right-wing populism and theocratic movements in various states. For example, the government of Hungary announced its intention to support the reconstruction of Christian communities in Iraq via "Hungary Helps," committing more than $30 million to the effort.[25] The support provided by Hungary to reconstruction in northern Iraq is part of a larger political strategy of the authoritarian populist prime minister Viktor Orbán to court traditionalist Christian support. Similarly, Melani McAlister argues that the religious freedom lobby in the United States travels comfortably with the populist agenda of some individuals within the Republican Party, having enjoyed the support of prominent members of the Trump administration from 2017 to 2021.[26] The impediments to faith-based groups referenced by Rasche above likely relate to unease in bureaucratic ranks about the ideological relationship between populists in the White House and promotion of the rights of minorities abroad.

Contributors to this roundtable have emphasized the invisibility of Armenian and ethnoreligious minorities in the Middle East. Such invisibility harms our scholarship and policy responses to ongoing genocide, armed conflict, and discrimination. It is true that there remain formidable practical, political, and ideological barriers to responding to the plight of indigenous Christians in the Middle East. But it is by no means clear that scholarly and popular attention to the topic will readily improve policy responses to their decline and persecution. The project is fraught with practical barriers, suspicions of ulterior motives, questionable partnerships with authoritarian regimes, and the ideological freight of populist cheerleaders. At the same time, the numbers of indigenous Christians continue to decline, as Middle Eastern societies prove inhospitable to true pluralism. Notwithstanding the many snares that impede action on Middle Eastern minorities, what can be done to promote pluralist ways of accommodating minority communities? Can the campaign for pluralism succeed when it is so politically manipulated and maligned? As scholars and politicians debate the dangers of cultivating support for minority communities, will those same communities merely fall into oblivion?

[21] Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 42.

[22] Ibid., 114.

[23] Saba Mahmoud, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 92.

[24] Ibid., 39.

[25] Shaun Walker, "Orbán Deploys Christianity with a Twist to Tighten Grip on Hungary," *Guardian*, 14 July 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/viktor-orban-budapest-hungary-christianity-with-a-twist.

[26] Melani McAlister, "Evangelical Populist Internationalism and the Politics of Persecution," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 17, no. 3 (2019): 105–17.

Cite this article: Paul S. Rowe (2022). "Enabling Oblivion: Global Activism and the Erasure of Middle Eastern Christians." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* **54**, 554–558. https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382200071X