

ROUNDTABLE

How Does New Scholarship on Christians and Christianity in the Middle East Shape How We View the History of the Region and Its Current Issues?

Introduction

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Eastern Christians and Christianity have been elided from Middle Eastern studies. The purpose of this roundtable is to bring their stories back into scholarly focus through the interventions of five scholars: Febe Armanios, Bernard Heyberger, Fiona McCallum, Paul Rowe, and Nelly van Doorn-Harder.

Rowe and Heyberger each critique the ahistorical views of Christians in the Middle East as either *ahl al-dhimma* or agents/collaborators of Western civilization. In the first case, the authors contend, these communities appear as insular, marginalized objects of history whose interactions with the larger Ottoman, Mamluk, or other milieus is limited to state exactions and persecutions. In the latter case, and with rare exceptions (e.g., the *nahḍa* period), this collaboration is read as suspect. Rowe and Heyberger argue, in their separate essays, that we need to transcend these jaundiced views and begin to see the Christian communities as agents of history with complex pasts that transcend sectarian boundaries.

To that end, the essays of Armanios, McCallum, and van Doorn-Harder present this new approach in their overview of the scholarship on Coptic and Maronite Christians produced over the past decade or so. Armanios discusses the shift in Coptic Studies of the early Islamic, Fatimid, Ayyubid, Mamluk, and Ottoman periods. Van Doorn-Harder looks at new scholarly works that focus on Copts during the 19th and 20th centuries. Finally, McCallum explores studies that are interdisciplinary in nature and that focus on the increasingly important Middle Eastern Christian communities in the diaspora as well as the transformation in the modern Maronite church.

Obviously these short contributions do not cover the myriad other equally important Middle Eastern Christian communities (Melkite, Orthodox, Assyro-Chaldean, etc.) nor do they tackle all the thematic approaches to the study of these communities. Rather than an exhaustive survey, the purpose of this roundtable is to call for reintegrating Christians and Christianity into Middle Eastern studies as a critical part of the narratives of the region.