CHRISTIANITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: MODERN HISTORY AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY AND ECCLESIOLOGY

AN INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

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THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN THE MIDDLE EAST: REFLECTIONS ON THE THEOLOGICAL AND ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The trend towards the study of ‘world Christianity’ with a focus on Asia, Africa, and Latin America has in recent times emerged, however, little attention has been given to the Eastern Christian churches despite the fact that the Eastern Christians constitutes one of largest Christian traditions in the world.¹ Dyron B. Daughrity, however, has posited a prudent caveat: ‘the “North to South” metaphor has been helpful and challenging, but before we adopt it as rigid paradigm, we must face up to the absence of the East in that typology’.² Eastern Christian churches are mainly concentrated in Russia,
Eastern Europe, the Middle East, East Africa and in diasporas in the West.\textsuperscript{3} Eastern Christianity has about 250-300 million members worldwide, although estimates can vary, which makes it the third largest-Christian denomination with approximately 12 per cent of the global Christian population.\textsuperscript{4}

The ecclesial context for Middle Eastern Christianity is one of great complexity. Its origins are those of Christianity itself. The churches of the Middle East can be grouped into five families – Oriental Orthodox; Eastern Orthodox; ‘Assyrian’ Church of the East; Oriental and Eastern Catholic; Anglican and Protestant. Even if it cannot be summed up in figures, the reality of Christianity in the modern Middle East is first of all one of numbers. The number of Christians, unfortunately, is very difficult to discern. For some decades, there have no longer been confessional censuses in the countries of the Middle East, where governments are concerned with often

\textsuperscript{3} See the Pew Foundation report on ‘Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population’ in 2011 Online version of \textit{Global Christianity: A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population} (hereinafter \textit{Report}) at http://pewforum.org/Christian/GlobalChristianity-worlds-christian-population.aspx. The \textit{Report} estimated that there are some 2.18 billion Christians, representing nearly a third of the estimated 2010 global population of 6.9 billion. Christians are to be found across the globe which today means that no single region can indisputably claim to be the centre of global Christianity; which is not the case for other religious traditions. This is in contrast to the past when Europe held that position, for example in 1910 about two-thirds of the world’s Christians lived within the continent. Today, however, approximately one quarter of all Christians live in Europe (26%); the Americas (37%); in sub-Saharan Africa (24%), in Asia and the Pacific (13%). The \textit{Report} noted extraordinary changes in the global configuration of Christianity – in sub-Saharan Africa a 60-fold increase, from fewer than 9 million in 1910 to more than 516 million in 2010, and in the Asia-Pacific region, a 10-fold increase, from about 28 million in 1910 to more than 285 million in 2010. In China today it is estimated that up to ten per cent of the population is Christian, which is set to increase dramatically making this country, in due course, with the largest concentration of Christians in the world outstripping the US. There is a growing awareness of the Eastern Christian tradition today among Chinese Christian intellectuals as the first Christian encounter with Chinese culture and civilization: B. Vermander, ‘The Impact of Nestorianism on Contemporary Chinese Theology’, \textit{Jingjiao: The Church of the East in China and Central Asia}, Collection Serica, 2009, pp. 181-194; J. Norman, ‘Eastern Christianity in China’, in \textit{The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity}, ed. Ken Parry (Oxford, 2007), pp. 280-290.

\textsuperscript{4} http://www.pewforum.org/Christian/Global-Christianity-orthodox.aspx
veiling the multi-confessional nature of their societies. The political consequences of this policy have been highlighted in the so-called 'Arab Spring' were religious and ethnic minorities, Kurds, Shiites, Christians, Druze, in the Middle Eastern region have challenged the emergence of a dominant Sunni Islamist trend in politics. However the Middle Eastern church families represent approximately 30 million Christians of which approximately 15 million reside in the Middle East.5

The Middle Eastern Christian diaspora in North and South America, Australia and Europe is an important and dynamic reality for all the churches.6 This diaspora reality contributes to making Christian identity in the Middle East often a contested one; caught between, for example, an ‘Arab’ Christian identity and an ‘Eastern’ Christian identity. The jurisdiction of each Church normally corresponds to a definite territory, but emigration of numerous faithful has also given it a personal character. The churches have responded by creating numerous ecclesial structures in the West to help retain the link between the land of origin and these new Middle Eastern Christian spaces. This renewed ecclesiological link overcomes geography in this case, and the Eastern Churches, with regard to their respective Diasporas, behave as though they were independent structures, constituting distinct episcopacies on the same territory.7

Middle Eastern Christianity, despite being a small segment of Global Christianity, certainly less than one per cent, has a significance for the wider Christian tradition. Samir Khalil Samir, a Jesuit originally from Egypt, has set out the significance of Middle Eastern Christianity due their cultural richness,

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proud of their apostolic origins at the beginning of Christianity; a rejection of the term ‘minority’; an understanding of their vocation to be a unifying bridge between cultures, civilizations, religions East and West. The Middle East is the place of origin of Christianity and its historical and original character was formed in this early context: the Roman Empire and its Latin civilization; the Jewish and Greek world; Syriac culture. Sidney H. Griffith situates the importance of the Middle East for the history of Christianity:

‘It is important to take cognizance of the seldom acknowledged fact that after the consolidation of the Islamic conquest and the consequent withdrawal of “Roman/Byzantine” forces from the Fertile Crescent in the first half of the seventh century perhaps 50 per cent of the world’s confessing Christians from the mid-seventh to the end of the eleventh centuries found themselves living under Muslim rule.’

Middle Eastern Christianity is a very important aspect of the region’s history, society, politics and culture, despite this; the study of this tradition has not been as widely undertaken as one would have expected. One recent scholar has commented:

‘For many decades, scholarship on the modern Arab world largely avoided the topic of Christians. Area studies researchers, who traditionally viewed Islam as central to the coherent definition of the region, were disinclined to investigate the role of Christianity there. Furthermore, the histories of the Arab world’s Christian communities raised questions about sectarianism and communal politics which many scholars, both in the west and in the Middle East, were reluctant to approach. Historians responded to these difficulties by presenting Arab Christians as essentially marginal, appearing either as hapless victims of Muslim domination or as agents of the Western powers with which they have religious and political connections. Consequently, the history of Arab Christianity long remained a fringe interest, confined mainly to religious historians working on ecclesiastical history in the context of divinity schools and nearly absent from the secular study of the modern Middle East.’

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10 L. C. Robson, ‘Recent Perspectives on Christians in the Modern Arab World’, *History Compass*, 9/4 (2011), pp. 312-325. That said, the situation is changing see the following
The complex history and ecclesial culture of Middle Eastern Christianity have generally not been appreciated in the modern encounter between Western and Eastern Christianity. In many accounts the Christian East is fixed in historical terms; clearly oriented towards divisions on Christology in early Christianity. In the engagement with Western Christianity, Middle Eastern Christianity has struggled to retain its specificity. That said, the Christian tradition has been encouraged especially since the Second Vatican Council to ‘breathe fully with two lungs, the Western and the Eastern’ an expression used by John Paul II. Sebastian Brock, however, building upon this idea emphasizes that the Syriac Christian tradition adds and develops our understanding of this scheme:

‘The Importance that Pope John Paul II has consistently given to the Eastern Orthodox tradition is indeed greatly welcomed. … however, I should like to suggest that – unlike human beings! – the Church is endowed, not just with two


13 The origins of this phrase, which is often quoted, is the Russian Catholic Christian Vjačeslav Ivanovič Ivanov (1866-1949); see Vincenzo Poggi, 'Ivanov a Roma, 1934-1949', Europa Orientalis: Studi e Ricerche sui Paesi e le Culture dell'Est Europeo, 21/1 (2002), pp. 95-140.
lungs, but with a third lung as well, from which she also needs to learn to breathe once again. The concept of Christianity as coming to us in the twenty-first century through two main streams of tradition, which once can label for convenience as “the Latin West” and “the Greek East”, is a widespread one. This binary model for the Christian tradition, however, is unsatisfactory and inadequate, since it effectively leaves out of consideration a further important Christian tradition represented by the indigenous Churches of the Middle East. This third main tradition can, for convenience, be termed “the Syriac Orient”.

We might add that Middle Eastern Christianity is distinctly plural in ecclesial identity; liturgical and linguistic cultures; its orientation towards religion, politics and church-state relations in their respective societies. Paolo Dall’Oglio, an Italian Jesuit who founded the new monastic community of Dayr Mar Musa al-Habashi (St. Moses the Ethiopian) in Syria which is dedicated to ecumenism and relations between Christian and Muslims, considers this ecclesial plurality as an essential aspect of maintaining a religious and political plurality in the Middle East region today.

In recent Catholic ecclesial thought the diverse traditions of the Eastern Churches is evidently understood by Vatican II through the Scriptural figure of Pentecost (see Ad Gentes 4; Acts 2). Significantly, Peter plays a key role in the events of Pentecost. Vatican II also has fourteen quotations from the Fathers in support of an exegesis which sees the vocation of the Church to speak all languages – resisting the influence of Babel. Languages, here represent, cultures, national values, the religious experience of the peoples. Hervé Legrand, a leading Catholic ecumenical scholar, observes only when people give glory to God through these expression of their life do they worship God in their own language – thus they are saved, and a new particular Church comes into being. For Legrand ‘to reduce the proclamation of the Gospel to a single language is therefore a contradiction in terms – and to tolerate only one or two languages within the Church is a sign of heresy or schism – as St Augustine points out to the Donatists’. In this scheme the diversity of Eastern Christianity in the Middle East is therefore the Christian norm: the Syriac, Greek, Coptic, Latin, and Armenian Churches did not follow a uniform model – but each was given a liturgy, a hymnody, a theology, a law, a spirituality in profound symbiosis.17

The Jesuit theologian, who is from the Coptic Catholic tradition, Fadel Sidarouss, echoed the importance of this observation:

‘The roots of Christianity are decidedly Eastern. Consequently, when the West adopted Christianity, it in fact adopted an “other”, something different; this Eastern alterity became constitutive of its Western identity, which enabled it to be more easily open to difference throughout its long history: we may think, for example, of what we have said about reason, but also its dialogue with modernity, admittedly difficult and onerous. There is thus a qualitative difference between the Church of the West and the Churches of the East, in the sense that they have not, throughout the centuries, experienced a different “other”, which has inevitably led them to remain within the domain of an identity without formative contacts with a constitutive alterity; and when they enter into

relationship with an other – we think here of Islam – they do so in an apologetic and defensive rather than dialogical manner. Clearly, the Eastern Churches were plural from the time of their origins, and benefited from the support of Graeco-Roman culture for the first seven centuries; but with the arrival of Islam they withdrew into a “golden age” which imperceptibly became their “mythical origin” on which they dwelt without further innovation, thus privileging the “pole of identity”.

Today it is a challenging task to undertake Christian theology in the Middle East responding to the numerous religious, political and cultural questions currently engaging the region. Harald Suermann, a German scholar of Middle Eastern Christianity, underlining the close links between Eastern theology and Liturgy writes:

‘Speaking of John Damascene and Ephrem the Syrian they wrote in order to contemplate the eternal mysteries, and their theology is considered as outside time’. However, studying the hymns of Saint Ephrem leads to the conclusion that he battled against the various heresies of his region. He was aware of the currents of thought of his era and built his theology on that thought. As to John Damascene, his theology is also a dialogue with his times: should Islam be considered a religion or a heresy? What is the place of icons in churches? Should we serve the new masters? In short, “the great Eastern theological texts were written in a precise context, responding to the pressing questions of the time”. This dialogue was continued later. Following the Muslim conquest, theologians began to express themselves in Arabic, thus also enabling dialogue between Christian theology and Muslim thought. Later, Muslims gained an awareness of Greek knowledge through Christian intermediaries. With the arrival of Western theologians, those in the East sought to assimilate their theologies. Finally, there was a period characterised by “the pure reception of theology and less by adaptation to the demands of time and place”. However, the renewal of the Coptic Church and theological thought in the context of Palestine and Israel are striving once again to respond to the burning questions of our time.

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20 Quoted in Sicking, ‘Théologie orientale’, p. 313
It is therefore clear for Suermann that theology must be closely connected to the questions which concern the Christians in our own time. In this connection, he enumerates a series of problems with which Eastern theology should concern itself today: the exodus of Christians from the region. Many leave their countries for economic and social reasons. Should the Church not speak prophetically, as did the ancient prophets? Alongside renewal, there is also a form of ‘conservatism’ which marginalises the churches and renders them passive and of no consequence on the political and social scene. This phenomenon requires reflection on the relationship between Church and society. Many Christian thinkers today urged a new ‘political-theology’ which takes seriously the re-ordering of religious culture across the region. The former Melkite Archbishop of Beirut, Grégoire Haddad is often cited as an example of this type of engagement especially in arguing for an open laïcité.\(^{21}\) The crisis in the relationship between religion and politics in the region was taken up by the Special Assembly of Bishops for the Middle East which was held in Rome in October 2010.\(^{22}\) Mouchir Basile Aoun sees Haddad’s emphasis on Liberation as the key idea:

‘The word liberation does not figure prominently in the lexicon of Christian communities in today’s world. Rather, the key word is survival. This is because Christian faith is seen as inflicting a heavy burden, a requirement for confinement to defending the physical existence of individuals and groups which, in Lebanon and in other countries of the Arab world, continue to depend on the message of Jesus Christ. However, there is a dividing line between liberation and survival which betrays the state of paralysis into which Christian witness delivered within societies existing in the Arab world runs the risk of falling. The theological originality of Grégoire Haddad has been to recentre this witness on the demands of a liberation which modern Arab man desires with all his heart. Since for him liberation remains the best guarantee of survival. In effect, to physically survive without engaging in the liberation of Arab man resembles more of a spiritual death, since true Christian survival in the Arab world belongs more in


the register of evangelical boldness. The Christian thus finds himself invited to expend his energies in order to defend the life of others.23

A significant challenge for Christianity in the Middle East has been ecclesial division, a situation which urgently requires an ecclesiology which proclaims unity in diversity, an ecumenical theology concerned to change perspectives through real understanding and knowledge.24 The challenges of diversity are especially creative for an exploration of ecclesiology. Jean Corbon, the well-known Catholic ecumenist, wrote: ‘The Christian Middle East appears as the microcosm of the universal ecumenism: there where the greatest diversity had abounded in division, the grace of Communion in unity has over-abounded.’25

The following examples demonstrate that difference is now to be seen as enriching rather than dividing. The Balamand Declaration and its rejection of ‘uniatism’ which was considered a major obstacle in relations between Eastern Catholics and Eastern Orthodox.26 The ecclesiological notion of a ‘return to the Catholic Church’ was declared obsolete. Catholic proselytism at the expense of the Orthodox is excluded – replaced by a desire for collaboration in evangelization. Vittorio Peri has reminded us that the ecclesiological teaching and canonical praxis of both Catholic and Orthodox Churches expressed this conviction, this however has changed on the whole if the realization that their relation of communion was better described by the theology of Sister Churches rather than by the theology of ‘returning’ to one Mother Church, which each identified exclusively with themselves.27 Despite the importance of this document in the history of relations between the Catholic and the Orthodox churches the Balamand process has met with a

mixed reception across Eastern Catholic and Eastern Orthodox ecclesial communities. While Balamand sought to formulate the road to reconciliation in the best way possible – and put forward a coherent programme for catholicity – the question of the relationship between the entire Church, diocesan Churches and regional Churches (patriarchates) has not been satisfactorily solved. One side clings to autocephaly, the other papal primacy – convincing neither their dialogue partner nor in fact themselves – aware that a better response is required, indeed, and possible. This must be achieved not in opposition but in collaboration. A further example is the Melkite project for union with the Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch reflects deeply the scale of the change of attitude. Unique in the region, it nevertheless demonstrates an increasing awareness by the Churches of the Middle East of sharing in the destiny of the Arab Muslim world. Since the Second Vatican Council, relations between the two Melkite Churches of Antioch have become more and more fraternal, giving rise to a deeper reflection about the reunification of the Antiochian Patriarchate. The project of ecclesial communion, presented in a statement following the meeting of the Melkite Catholic Synod of July 1996, is the fruit of a series of efforts undertaken to bring these two Melkite branches of the Antiochian Patriarchate closer and was a very bold undertaking which was slowed due to by Rome and Constantinople being uncertain how a local agreement might impact upon their relations in a wider setting.

The Christological agreements with between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox churches have developed with much success. The origins

of this are not just with the meeting of Paul VI with heads of the Oriental Orthodox churches after the Second Vatican Council but had been prepared by with the encyclical ‘Sempiternus Rex’ of Pius XII which declared that the so-called but wrongly described, ‘monophysitism’ of the non-Chalcedonian Christians was purely verbal. Frans Bouwen, a Catholic member of the Official Dialogue Commission between the Oriental Orthodox and Catholic Church has written: ‘One of the most significant events in the history of the present-day ecumenical movement and one of the richest promises for the future is, beyond any doubt, the Christological consensus that has emerged, in the course of the last decades, between the churches that recognized the Council of Chalcedon and those that did not, since it was held in the year 451.’

The third example is the agreement for Eucharistic hospitality between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church with the acceptance of the anaphora of Mar and Addai is remarkable. Relations between Protestant Christianity and the Eastern churches in the Middle East have not been without difficulties; however in recent times evangelical groups have been successful in the East.

However, it is clear that whilst Christianity in the Middle East faces great challenges today; Middle Eastern/Eastern Christian theology, political thought and ecclesiological culture is rich, complex and creative. Mouchir Aoun has helpfully articulated the challenge for Christian religious thought in the Middle East:

‘Today, the term Eastern or Middle Eastern theology comprises a number of concepts. [...] it designates, above all, a triple task, the classic one of reviving the

Patristic tradition dear to those in the East, one with a modern resonance, the inculturation of the Christ event, and finally, one of contextual significance, the updating of the kerygmatic content.\textsuperscript{37}

To deepen our contextual understanding for theological reflection in the Middle East today, the French Jesuit and long term resident of Lebanon, Thom Sicking, has insisted that theology in the East must confront a number of challenges:\textsuperscript{38}

1. A great diversity of Churches with differences and divergences, each having its own history and identity.
2. An environment marked by Islam and by Judaism and Hebrew culture in Israel.\textsuperscript{39}
3. The Churches of the region most often find themselves in a minority position: a situation which influences their behaviour and reflection both in their relations between themselves and in those which they have with non-Christian communities.
4. Close ties with the West and with Western Christianity in particular, considered both as an asset and a threat.
5. Significant emigration of their faithful, resulting in local Churches (the patriarchate of Antioch, Alexandria, or Jerusalem) becoming ‘universal’ Churches.

Recently we have witnessed the emergence of distinct theological thought among Middle Eastern Christians, for example Palestinian Liberation Theology;\textsuperscript{40} the revival of the eremitical tradition in the Maronite

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{37} H. Hirvonen, \textit{Christian-Muslim Dialogue: Perspectives of Four Lebanese Thinkers} (Leiden, 2013).
\item \textsuperscript{38} Th. Sicking, ‘Une saine reflexion théologique ne peut ignorer le context régional’, in \textit{Quo Vadis, Theologia Orientalis?} Actes du Colloque «Théologie Orientale: contenu et importance» (TOTT), Ain Traz, Avril 2005 (= Textes et Etudes sur l’Orient Chrétien N° 6, CEDRAC, Université Saint Joseph) (Beirut, 2008), pp. 45-60.
\end{itemize}
Church;\(^{41}\) monastic renewal in Syria\(^ {42}\) and Egypt\(^ {43}\). The Emeritus Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah developed a unique exegetical language for reading the Bible in the Holy Land.\(^ {44}\)

If Egypt, historically, and up until the most recent events, presents a decidedly complex and turbulent image of relations between Islam and Christianity, the country of the Nile may nevertheless be justly considered as one of the birthplaces of the encounter between Christianity and Islam.\(^ {45}\) Co-existence between Copts and Muslims has lasted for almost fourteen centuries: although, today, in the international context and with collaboration between nations, this co-existence has changed. Copts and Muslims

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co-existed alone, without the intervention of other parties – at least until the 19th century – which has given rise to a strong feeling on the part of the Copts of being a completely isolated minority confronted by a majority. Today, even if this balance of power continues, the fact remains that it is not the same, thanks precisely to the internationalisation of relations within the Egyptian nation and between Christian and Muslims in the global context.

There has also been a reclaiming of the style of theological reflection of the Church Fathers in the early church in the context of Christian engagement with Muslims and Islam. Shenouda III (1971-2012), the late Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church had been noted reflecting a ‘qur’anic’ style of preaching which would often gain him an audience among Muslims.

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46 According to Bernard Meunier the term ‘Church Fathers’ dates back to the patristic period itself. It is rooted in Scripture but around the middle of the 4th century, and especially in Athanasius of Alexandria, it takes on a new meaning in a specific context, the Council of Nicaea. Those who took part in this first ecumenical council were to be the ‘fathers’ of the faith defined by the creedal definition drawn up there. The Fathers are therefore first and foremost the council fathers. The expression was then extended to cover the other ecumenical councils, or in certain cases isolated authors; however, it is not as individuals that the Fathers are authoritative, but as a communion, whose particular function is to define the faith (B. Meunier, ‘Genèse de la notion de « Pères de l’Église » aux IVe et Ve siècles’, Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques, 93/2 (2009), pp. 315-331).

The return to the Church Fathers has also been felt in other religious contexts; see eds. S. Scatena, J. Sobrino and L. C. Susin, Fathers of the Church in Latin America, Concilium, 5 (2009).


We should also note that Eastern Christianity, though the Church of the East, opened up an engagement with Muslims which still helps to shape the ‘canon’ of Catholic thought Islam.\(^5\) During the Asian Synod in 2003 which discussed the important relations between Christians and Muslims, the Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Syria and leading Eastern Catholic theologian, Antoine Audo set out his vision: “To survive and develop as living churches in the Arab and Muslim world of the Middle East, Christian Arabs or Asians need a spiritual vision of their relation with Islam, seeing themselves as sent by Christ to be witnesses of love”, and that evangelization in those lands requires Christians to live “within Islam, that is, to form an integral part of society, of the Arab and Muslim culture without complexes, but at the same time to be witnesses of the evangelical liberty in ways that go beyond this culture, seeking to read the language of the Qu’ran as a language of human relations”.\(^5\)

The role of the patriarch as a representative of the Christian church in the public sphere in the Middle East has grown in importance, especially within the wider context of religious leadership taking a more public role in the Middle East. The patriarch has often acted as an intermediary between the Christian community and the state; however, this role has not been universally welcomed among Christians.\(^5\) That said between 2011 and early Challenges for the Twenty-First Century’, in *Christian Responses to Islam: Muslim-Christian Relations in the Modern World*, eds. A. O’Mahony and E. Loosley (Manchester, 2008), pp. 86-104.


2013 patriarchal leadership in the Middle East has been renewed with the head of the Maronite Church Patriarch Boutros Raï; Tawaros II of the Coptic Orthodox Church; Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, John X; and Patriarch Louis Sako I Raphael of the Chaldean Church being newly elected.

There are other shared characteristics among the Christians in the Middle East: anxieties in the face of the re-awakening of a militant Islamism; a deep awareness that in Islam the marker is between Muslim and non-Muslim not between different types of Christian; growing marginalization of erratic identities in modern states; especially in the context were religious identity reinforces nationalist ideology, for example in Turkey between Sunni Islam and Turkish nationalism;53 Shiite Islam and Iranian nationalism;54 Judaism and Israeli identity; growing exodus to destinations outside of the region. For example it is now estimated some 300,000 Iraqi Christians have left since 2003.55

On the other hand one can point to the ‘semi-resurrection’ of the Copts;56 the increasing participation of the laity; new ecumenical perspectives; monastic renewal; and fervent piety. For Christians in the East, the twentieth century, which began with the Armenian genocide, ended with the rapid losses due to the migrations by Christians from the East to the West. The prophets of the ‘death’ of the Christians of the East had no lack of arguments to condemn the millions of Eastern faithful who remained behind to an end which was nigh. Paul Rowe has however reminded us that, the ‘widespread concern today that Christians are in declining numbers in the Middle East easily falls prey to the enervating assertion that they are victims of persecution or mere relics of a fading past and runs the risk of once again robbing Christians of agency as powerful actors in their own societies”57.

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The Oriental Orthodox Churches

The Oriental Orthodox tradition (Coptic, Armenian and Syriac) are dominant in the Middle East, with the Coptic Orthodox Church being the largest among these churches. The doctrinal position of these churches is based on the teachings of the first three ecumenical councils: Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381) and Ephesus (431). They have traditionally rejected the Council of Chalcedon (451). In fact the Oriental Orthodox tradition consists of the following ecclesial communities: Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate of Egypt; Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East, Damascus; Armenian Apostolic Church: See of Etchmiadzin, Armenia and Catholicosate of Antelias, Lebanon; Orthodox Church of Ethiopia; Orthodox Church of Eritrea; Syrian Orthodox Church of Malankar. In the wider Middle East the Armenian Apostolic Church governs a community of some five million people, scattered, like all the Armenians, across the globe. The Armenian church is represented today by two Catholicossates: Etchmiadzin, which has primacy in the Caucasian and diaspora region, and Sis (See: Antelias) which has authority over most of the Orthodox Armenians of the Middle East; and two Patriarchates: Jerusalem and Constantinople. The Syrian Orthodox Church, whose Patriarch Ignatius Zakka II is based in Damascus, is today connected to the many millions of Syriac Christians in India through the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church. The Coptic Orthodox Church in mainly based Egypt.

The Oriental Orthodox churches have been depicted in western and Byzantine church history as isolated from the rest of the Christian world and concerned with mere survival. This was, to a certain extent, true. A significant feature of Oriental Orthodoxy has been persecution and genocide suffered under Byzantine, Muslim and Ottoman powers. On the whole,
relations between the Oriental Orthodox churches and the Latin Crusaders states were good, which encouraged at times important ecclesial and theological dialogue. Oriental Orthodox Christian tradition has been marked by this suffering – leaving a permanent ‘wound’ on its life, witness, theology and spirituality.61

Another reason for the Oriental orthodox tradition to be less known to Western Church historians and theologians was the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries produced a three-way split among the Christian Churches which still continues to this day, although it is only among the Churches of Syriac liturgical tradition that all three doctrinal positions are represented. These controversies were originally over how best to describe the relationship between the divinity and the humanity in the incarnate Christ – for the Orthodox and Catholic (and derived Reformed) traditions the Council of Chalcedon had settled the matter in 451. The Arab invasions and the rise of Islam in the seventh century effectively fossilized this division. Since the 1960s, these churches began a process of rapprochement with both the Catholic and Orthodox churches which has significantly altered this situation. Pope John Paul II and the Syrian, Coptic and Armenian Orthodox Churches have signed ‘Common Declarations of Faith’ on the nature of the Incarnate Word. However, doctrinal divergence remains unresolved on numerous other matters.62

The Eastern Orthodox Churches

The Eastern or ‘Byzantine’ Orthodox Church in the Middle East is composed of the four ancient patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. These are autocephalous churches, each independent and self-governing. The independence between the four churches is


administrative; some pre-eminence is given to the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople but it ‘is one of honour and not authority’ however each patriarch has its own metropolitans, bishops and synod. The four patriarchates have a shared identity based upon doctrine, patristic theology, liturgy, ecclesiology and canon law.

The following common challenges have been posed by history for Eastern Orthodoxy in the Middle East: relations to Islam, relations to Russian Orthodoxy and the Russian State, relations to Rome and Eastern Catholicism, relations to Protestantism – European then American, friction and conflict among the four sees, and the problem of relations between the Greek hierarchy and the Arab Orthodox. Eastern Christianity in the Middle East had often to face these challenges within the context of Islamic conquest, conversion and settlement, the long centuries of Ottoman rule in which the only difference that really mattered in religious terms was the Muslim one, and an emerging modern synthesis between Orthodoxy and nationality which was in turn a Christian ‘revivalist’ response to political domination in the late Ottoman period.

From the point of view of structures, Orthodoxy is divided between the four Patriarchates, one of which Antioch, which has authority over the Orthodox communities in Syria and Lebanon (Arabic-speaking) as well as their diaspora, represents the great majority of its faithful in the Middle East. As such, this is the real face of the Arab Orthodox community. Its leader, today Patriarch John X, who resides in Damascus, can be considered to be the leader of the Orthodox in the Arab Middle East. In the Diaspora Eastern Orthodox Christians who originate from the Middle East number at least 500,000, two-thirds of who are in South America (Brazil and Argentina) and the rest in North America. These expatriate communities almost exclusively come under the Patriarchate of Antioch. Antioch has experienced a significant ecclesial and theological renewal, however, this is now in question with the on-going civil conflict in Syria which threatens the long-term prospects for Christianity in that country.

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The Patriarchate of Jerusalem leads a community of about 70,000 faithful divided between Israel, Palestine and Jordan, Arabic speaking, but the senior clergy, including the Patriarch are Greek; its raison d’être is above all the exercise of Orthodox rights in the Holy Places.65 The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem is also home to Arab Orthodox Palestinian Christians who have developed a distinctive religious and political culture in the context of the Holy Land and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and encounter.66 However this is supplemented by large numbers of Orthodox Christians now living in the State of Israel either as migrant workers, for example many thousands of Romanians, or the many tens of thousands of Orthodox who arrived among the large wave of Russian ‘Jewish’ migration in the last two decades of the twentieth century.67 The Russian Orthodox Church68 and the Georgian


Orthodox Church\textsuperscript{69} both have had an important historical presence in the Holy Land which has recently experienced a revival since the end of the Soviet Union and the Georgian state achieving independence.

The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Patriarch Bartholomew, lives in Istanbul, which has primacy of honour among the Orthodox but whose real jurisdiction, reduced to the smallest part by all the autocephalous Patriarchates which have appeared in the Balkans since the nineteenth century, is today over communities in northern Greece, the islands of the Aegean, Turkey, and (extremely importantly in contemporary terms) for Orthodox churches emerging in western and newly independent states of Eastern Europe. However, the significance of the Ecumenical patriarchate for the global Orthodox Church cannot be underestimated.\textsuperscript{70}

\textbf{THE EASTERN CATHOLIC CHURCHES}

The Eastern Catholic families of churches, as with their Orthodox counterparts, represent an extremely complex ecclesiology, which broadly reflects the context of the Syrian conflict since 2011, has posed as a protector of Christianity in the Middle East. The Russian Orthodox patriarch Kirill visited Damascus in November 2011 during which he emphasised the connection between Moscow and Antioch, opening an exhibition in Damascus on the historical and contemporary relevance of this relationship; the Russian patriarch launched the Arabic translation of his book *Freedom and Responsibility* and strongly suggested that political change must occur peacefully in Syria based on internal dialogue in which the future of Christians in Syria had to be guaranteed (see A. O’Mahony, ‘From Arab Spring to Winter’, *The Tablet*, 3 December 2011, pp. 4-5). The Orthodox Church is an important domestic political constituency for the Russian State and a foreign-policy actor in its own right; see Daniel P. Payne, ‘Spiritual Security, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Russian Foreign Ministry: Collaboration or Coop-

\textsuperscript{69} The Eastern Orthodox world of Europe, especially the Georgian Orthodox Church in the context of the Georgian state regaining his independence, has sought to regain a foothold in the Holy Land. The Georgian Church was historically centred on the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem which for the past three centuries has been under the jurisdiction of the Greek Orthodox patriarchate of Jerusalem is trying to assert its religious and cultural presence. See ‘Georgia’s new ambassador to Israel bears a heavy cross’ [http://www.haaretz.com/news/features/georgia-s-new-ambassador-to-israel-bears-a-heavy-cross-1.422488]; G. Peradze, ‘An Account of the Georgian Monks and Monasteries in Palestine’, *Georgica* (London), 5 (1937), pp. 181-246.

\textsuperscript{70} S. Akgönül, *Les Grecs de Turquie: processus d’extinction d’une minorité de l’âge de l’État-
that of their sister-churches of the same rite. There are six patriarchal churches: Latin, Melkite, Syrian, Armenian, Coptic and Chaldean.

The emergence of Hebrew Catholicism in the modern state of Israel might be seen as the most recent expression of Eastern Christianity in the Middle East.\textsuperscript{71} There are also many millions of Christians who live and work in the Arabian Gulf states, among whom there are significant numbers of Middle Eastern Christians/Eastern Christians.\textsuperscript{72}

The Maronite Church, which has its origins in the fourth or fifth century, has no Orthodox equivalent. The Maronite Church has approximately one million members in Lebanon but up to three million faithful scattered throughout the world – for example 700,000 in Argentina, 500,000 in Brazil, 150,000 in Mexico, 200,000 in North America and 150,000 in Australia. It emerged gradually over many centuries in the province of the Patriarchate of Antioch, from a small rural Syrian community quite distinct from the rest of the Chalcedonian Church which was then in real decline. Maronite identity is complex: accepting the Council of Chalcedon, Syriac in rite, and Catholic in faith and discipline, and in union with the See of Rome. The future of the Maronite Church, although it does not bring together all the Lebanese Christians, has been largely confused with that of Lebanese Christianity, even that of Lebanon itself, whose spirit of survival through difficult times it incarnates.\textsuperscript{73}


\textsuperscript{72} D.W. Winkler estimates that nearly half of all Catholics who live in the wider Middle East today are ex-patriot or migrant workers, across the region but mainly in the Gulf area: ‘Katholisch sein im Nahen Osten: Rückblick auf die Sondersynode im Vatikan’, \textit{Stimmen der Zeit}, 229/1 (2011), pp. 30-38.

The other Oriental Catholic Churches are all branches from the Orthodox and pre-Chalcedonian Churches. The oldest is the Catholic Chaldean Church, formed in 1553. Because of the dispersed population after the First World War, and then following the massacre of 1933 in Iraq, today it is more numerous than its equivalent – the ‘Assyrian’ Church of the East. Its main strength is in Iraq, with minorities in Iran and Lebanon. The relatively small Syrian Catholic Church was formed following a schism in the Syrian Orthodox Church in 1663 but was not definitively established until the end of the eighteenth century. Mostly represented in Syria and the Lebanon, it is led by a ‘Patriarch of Antioch and the East of the Syrians’. The Armenians also, since the 18th century, have had a Catholic branch, called the ‘Patriarchate of Cilicia of the Armenians’ which brings together 550,000 faithful living both in the Middle East and the rest of the world. The Coptic Catholic Church emerged in the late nineteenth century and be extended to throughout the world. In November again according to Jobe Abbass, Cardinal Angelo Sodano responded to the letter of March 2001 and the persistent question it posed. He quotes Sodano: ‘It is appropriate here to recall the so-called “principle of territoriality”, firmly maintained by all the ecumenical councils, including Vatican Council II, in light of which the Holy Father wishes the Codex Canonum Ecclesiarum Orientalium to be elaborated. The members of the Commission that prepared the Code, among whom figured prominently the six Eastern patriarchs, showed to have understood this perfectly when, during the plenary assembly in November 1988, they withdrew, after the Holy Father’s reminder, a motion signed by fifteen members, in which they aimed at obtaining the extension of patriarchal jurisdiction to the whole world’, quoted by Abbass from Cardinal Angelo Sodano, ‘Discorso di S. Em. Angelo Sodano ai partecipanti al Simposio’, in Ius Ecclesiarum vehiculum caritatis, p. 590, note 9 (J. Abbass, ‘Updating the Particular Law of the Maronite Church’, in Il codice delle chiese orientali. La storia le legislazioni particolari le prospettive ecumeniche. Atti del convegno di studi tenutosi nel XX anniversario della promulgazione del codice dei canoni delle chiese orientali, sala San Pio X, Roma, 8-9, 2010 [Rome, 2013], pp. 172-193, at p. 190).


century with its own patriarch; it is today mainly based in Egypt with approximately 250,000 members. The Greek Catholic, ‘Melkite’ Church was born in the eighteenth century following a schism in the Antiochian Patriarchate of the Greek Orthodox Church. It is as large as its Orthodox equivalent, but fewer than half its members are still living in the Middle East (mainly in Syria and Lebanon). This Church, Byzantine in rite and Arabic-speaking, only has one Patriarchate, of ‘Antioch, and all the East, Jerusalem and Alexandria’. 

The Assyrian Church of the East

The Assyrian Church of the East is one of the oldest Christian churches in existence, founded on the eastern marches of the Byzantine Empire and in Persia following the condemnation of ‘Nestorianism’ by the Council of Ephesus. In 1964 it was split into two branches, one of which, the ‘Catholicosate of the East of the Assyrian Church of the East’ is led by Mar Dinkha IV, who lives in Detroit and the other, the ‘Catholicosate of the East of Old Catholic and Apostolic Church’ has Mar Addai II, who lives in Baghdad, as its leader. The Church of the East, after many centuries of isolation from the rest of the Christian world, has emerged renewed in the later part of the twentieth century with ecumenical dialogue as an essential element of that revival. Mar Dinkha IV met Pope John Paul II in 1984 and signed a ‘Common Declaration of Faith’ in 1994. An unprecedented Eucharistic sharing agreement signed in 2001 in the Vatican between the Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church crowned these achievements.

78 I. Dick, Les Melkites (Turnhout, 1994).
THE FUTURE OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

For Christianity in the Middle East the last hundred years has witnessed a profound series of crises. Displacement by war, genocide and interreligious conflict, leading to loss, emigration and exile has been the main experience of Christianity in the modern Middle East. Against this background of displacement, when allowed, Christians have sought to resettled and build anew. They have been able to make a significant cultural, political and economic contribution to Middle Eastern society.

After the fall of the Baathist régime in 2003, the Christians in Iraq became ‘the canaries in the coal mine’ for the greater Middle East. The extent to which they are tolerated in the new Iraq was being watched closely by the Maronites of Lebanon and other non-Muslim populations of the region. The Christians in Iraq are deeply affected by the rise of radical Islamic tendencies in the majority Shiite and the former ruling class, the Sunni minority. For Iraqi Christians the continuing spectre of growing insecurity, which has lead to church bombings, kidnapping and assassinations, has created a situation which has caused them to leave in large numbers – as many as 300,000 have left Iraq, never to return. Others are refugees in the region: some 150,000 in Syria and up to 40,000 in Jordan although these numbers have significantly declined as these Iraqi Christians have moved outside of the region. Some states, especially in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, have welcomed these newcomers and hope that they will stay, bringing their skills, and some hope that their presence will add to diversity in society which in turn will help support ‘moderate’ politics. In fact, previous generations of displaced Christians, particularly Armenians and other oriental Christians, arrived in Lebanon and made that country (before the civil war, 1975-1990) a leading cultural and economic space for the region.

These troubled times have seen ecclesial institutions, settled in one place for many centuries, being displaced. For example, the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate which was located at the Monastery of Mor Hananyo (Dayr az-Za’faran) ‘near Mardin since the thirteenth century was transferred to Homs in modern Syria in 1923 and Damascus in 1950 due to the destruction of

the Syrian Orthodox community at the end of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic. The Chaldean Patriarchate moved from Mosul to Baghdad in 1950. With the ongoing conflict in Iraq and the difficult security situation in Baghdad, it might be set to move again.

The long centuries of Ottoman domination fossilized the churches in their division. Modern crisis and contemporary ecumenism are beginning to bring down the barriers. In recent times remarkable developments have taken place in the ecumenical relations between churches in the Middle East, both on bilateral and multilateral levels – agreements that allow partial mutual participation in sacraments, formation of future priests and catechesis. Three main factors can be identified as being responsible for these developments: the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century and the establishment (in 1948) of the World Council of Churches, the Second Vatican Council, and the large-scale emigration from the Middle East to Europe, the Americas and Australia. Although this large-scale emigration has in general been disastrous from the point of view of the life of the indigenous Christian Churches in the Middle East, there have at least been two good consequences: emigration to western countries has provided the possibility of publication without censorship, and it has brought the existence of particularly non-Chalcedonian Churches more into the awareness of the Western Churches – thus providing an opportunity and incentive for theological dialogue.

Modern times have brought about a profound change in the configuration in Christian presence in the Middle East. In the last days of the Ottoman Empire Christians made up 20-30% of the population. The Armenian genocide, the massacre of the Syriac Christians and the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey (there is still debate about numbers but

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approximately a million and half Orthodox Christians and half a million Muslims) had a radical impact. Today there are barely 200,000 Christians in a population of seventy million in the modern Turkish republic, although there might be up to two million people of Armenian descent who issue from the large numbers of Christians, mainly women and children, taken as slaves or forced into Islam at the fall of the Ottoman Empire. A number of these each year re-trace steps to their (often grandmothers’) original Christian faith.86 Christians in Syria are down from 20% before the Second World War to fewer than 10% today. The on-going conflict in Syria has already displaced tens of thousands of Christians within the country; mainly moving to Lebanon or leaving the region entirely.

During the Lebanese Civil War some 670,000 Christians were displaced as opposed to 160,000 Muslims. Lebanon always had a Christian majority, but no longer. This has allowed the Shia community to emerge as the majority community and its political organizations, such as Hizbullah, to try and capture the state and challenge traditional Maronite Christian dominance. Since the beginnings of the 1960s and the internal Kurdish-Iraqi war some one million Christians have left their northern Iraqi mountains and homelands to go into the lands of emigration. During this period Baghdad gained large numbers of Christians and the Chaldean patriarchate relocated there in 1950. Today we have seen a reserve movement with Iraqi Christians moving north into the Kurdish region. Since 1948 some 230,000 Christians have left the Holy Land. The Christian population of Jerusalem may be down from 30,000 in 1948 to 5,000 today.87


The Christian communities have inevitably lost many of their most educated and young members. The churches thus not only lose part of their future but also the potential leadership that should be charting the communities’ fortunes. In some communities this has seen more men leave than women and this has changed the gender balance. Christian women marry Muslim men and this fractures the Christian population and diminishes it, with implications for property rights and the education of children. Emigration creates significant pastoral issues, societal weakness and cultural disorientation.

All are aware that churches have lost many millions of their people to emigration, and that their diaspora communities have grown correspondingly, but the question of presence is a dynamic one. Today, large numbers of non-indigenous Christians, brought by the global economy, have come to live and work in the region. 250,000 Christian workers are estimated to be in Israel and have been there for some time. These are made up of Eastern European and Asian workers. There are large numbers of Filipinos, and increasingly Sri Lankans, Indians and Africans in the region, for example approximately 140,000 Asian workers in Lebanon, eighty per cent of whom are women. At times the traditional churches have been slow to provide pastorally for them, although this situation is now slowly changing. 88

In this changing situation, patterns of authority have altered. Somewhat marginalized by secular politics, the patriarchs of the different Churches have emerged as significant voices for Christianity in the political ‘public square’. In the context of profound social and economic dislocation created by modernity, leading to political upheaval and lack of ‘legitimate’ political structures, religious revival has brought these traditional loci of authority to the fore. 89

To sum up, Christianity originated in the Middle East. The Christian presence there today bears witness to the global Church of the unity of its origins and the diversity of its expression. Christians also help maintain and sustain the diversity in the Middle East. However, there has been large-scale

of Christians flight from the Middle East in the modern period; the recent conflict in Iraq and Syria has significantly weakened the Christian presence. Christianity in the Middle East has a witness beyond itself: let us hope that the churches of East and West rise rapidly rise to this challenge for the key to the future of this important region may lie with the few.

Abstract

Middle East Christianity in the context of the trend towards the study of World Christianity is relatively little studied especially with regard to its Eastern Christian character. Eastern Christianity in the Middle East is a complex reality of various liturgical and theological cultures – Armenian, Coptic, Syriac, Greek and Arabic. Middle Eastern Christian ecclesiology is expressed by the Oriental Orthodox churches; Eastern Orthodox churches; six Eastern Catholic patriarchates; the Church of the East; and various protestant denominations. Eastern Christian theology is marked by a creative richness: ecumenical exchange in Christology and ecclesiology; an emerging political theology especially in relation to Islam; and a retrieval of the style of ‘the Church fathers’. Middle Eastern Christianity, however, is challenged by a series of deep crises: war and inter-religious conflict; an intra-Muslim struggle between Sunni and Shiite; lack of religious freedom; significant migration of Christians from the region.