

# Globalization, Christianity, and the Middle East

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A hot summer afternoon in the northeastern part of Syria draws to an end. More and more people enter the courtyard of the Mort Maryam Monastery in Tel Wardiyat, not far from the road from Hassakeh to Tel Tamar.<sup>1</sup> Small and large family groups, including young children who can barely walk and the elderly who rely on their walking sticks, join the crowds. Many of them enter the church, cross themselves, pray, kiss the Gospel Lectionary, and return to the courtyard. There they greet the monk Abuna Afrem, kiss his ring, and listen to his welcoming words. A little later, he starts to pray the *ramsho*, the evening prayer, assisted by a group of young boys who range from six to sixteen years of age. They stand next to each other in a long line, chanting the prayers, singing the hymns in alternating choirs, crossing themselves, and making deep bows, their foreheads touching the ground. Many of the guests join in the prayer and the rhythmic bodily movements.

Meanwhile, the huge parking lot of the Syrian Orthodox monastery fills up with cars, tables, and chairs. Families sit down to eat and drink together, chatting away the evening, gazing upon the flat fertile fields stretching towards the river Khabur surrounding the monastery. It is August 15, the Eve of Dormition, one of the major Christian festivals of the Middle East. Young

<sup>1</sup> The introduction of this paper was originally presented as the author's inaugural lecture, June 12, 2009, at Leiden University, and published in Dutch as "Globalisering, christendom en het Midden-Oosten" (Universiteit Leiden: 2009).

and old gather at the monastery, enjoying each other's company as much as the tangible presence of the monastery.<sup>2</sup>

A young girl speaks to me in Dutch, with a slight accent that betrays her upbringing in the eastern part of the Netherlands, near Enschede. Her family originated in nearby Tur Abdin, Turkey. This summer they came to Syria in order to visit family and friends, as well as the newly built monastery that fills them with pride. The girl looks forward to other kinds of parties, not in the monastery but in fancy new restaurants near Qamishli where one can pass the hot afternoons at the sparkling pool or enjoy food, music, and dance during the long summer nights.

When some of the women start to get ready to sleep in the church, we leave for Tel Nasri, a village not far away from the monastery. Here the Assyrian Church of the East organized its own Dormition festival. The brightly lit towers of the new church of St. Mary shine in the dark night. Around midnight, the festival is in full swing, although here, too, many women have gone to sleep in the ambulatory of the church. They hope for a special blessing, perhaps to finally become pregnant or receive healing from a lingering illness. The rest of the village, however, has a decidedly carnivalesque atmosphere. The young adults are all dressed up, walking the streets flirting and laughing; and the smells of food and the sounds of music fill the air. Most people in the village seem to be awake, and the grown-ups sit together in the courtyards of the houses, chatting and enjoying traditional dishes. Not until the next day does a High Mass in honor of St. Mary conclude the festival.

<sup>2</sup> This impression is mostly based on a visit to the region I made in August 2005. For a short introduction to the history and current situation of the Christians in the region, see Georges Bohas, Florence Hellot-Bellier, *Les Assyriens du Hakkari au Khabour. Mémoire et histoire* (Paris, Geuthner, 2008), Alberto M. Fernandez, "Assyrian Christian Survival on the Khabur River," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 12,1 (1998) 34–47, and Shabo Talay, *Die neuarāmäischen Dialekte der Khabur-Assyrer in Nordostsyrien* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2008).

## The Churches of the Middle East

The above describes a rather ordinary festival in the Middle East, not very different from the way in which Muslims, Druses, and Yezidees celebrate their festivals. Yet this is a Christian festival, which in its ordinariness displays many features that characterize Christianity in the region: a combination of communal rituals, individual piety, and public festivities. Much of it is characteristic of the Orthodox churches, a term that in this context I use rather loosely for those churches that in the first centuries of Christianity emerged in the Eastern Roman and Persian Empires. It therefore also includes those churches that were later denounced as heretical, such as the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Coptic Church, and the Assyrian Church of the East (earlier known as Nestorian).<sup>3</sup>

A major characteristic of this broadly defined Orthodoxy is the importance of its daily and weekly liturgies. Whether these are attended by many of the faithful or just a handful, whether there are twenty deacons to assist or only one, the holy liturgy forms the heart of the Orthodox churches. Every Sunday, major Christian holiday, and Saint's day, the celebration of the Eucharist binds the Christian community together, involving all the senses, body and mind.

These communal celebrations are complemented by a variety of more individual rituals: women sleeping in the church, men and women asking for a *baraka* from a holy man, and family visits to the monasteries and graves of the saints. Often the families take home some earth from such graves in order to obtain health, fertility, a reliable spouse, and good futures for their children. Some may also carry protective prayers on paper scrolls, tucked

<sup>3</sup> Ken Parry, *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007). For an introduction to the Church of the East and the Syrian Orthodox Church respectively, see : Herman Teule, *Les Assyro-Chaldéens. Chrétiens d'Irak, d'Iran et de Turquie* (Turnhout: Éditions Brepols 2008), and Martin Tamcke, *Die Christen vom Tur Abdin: Hinführung zur Syrisch-Orthodoxen Kirche* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 2009).

away under clothing or inside the house. In normative descriptions of Orthodoxy, these practices have often been disregarded, but the active participation of priests and monks suggest that these forms of religious expression are an inherent part of Orthodox religious life.<sup>4</sup>

The festivals in northeastern Syria also show that Christianity has a strong public presence in the Middle East. Though the grounds of the monastery and a village of almost hundred percent Christian inhabitants are clearly Christian territory, the festivals are not closed to outsiders. The nearby road gives an unhampered view of the many visitors to the monastery, as do the brightly lit towers of the church in Tel Nasri. Whoever wants to come and have a look is welcome – as in fact many local Muslim families do come, though mostly at times when it is less crowded with Christians. This explicit Christian presence parallels the strong public presence of Islam, which grew in recent decades through the many new mosques, big and small, that dot the country. Wherever possible, Christians in the Khabur region and have reacted by building similarly grand new churches and monasteries.

These new monasteries and churches, however, also reflect internal Christian rivalries: the huge new church of the Assyrian Church of the East in Tel Nasri is a conspicuous response to the impressive Syrian Orthodox monastery. In the near future, both projects may be dwarfed by the new complex that the Catholic Syrian Christians have started to build near Qamishli.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>4</sup> These forms have hardly been studied in any systematic way; for some indications see my “‘Let us partake, all who believe in Christ.’ Liturgy in the Church of the East between 1500 and 1850.” In Martin Tamcke (ed), *Christliche Gotteslehre im Orient seit dem Aufkommen des Islams bis zur Gegenwart*, Beirut Texte und Studien 126 (Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2008), 139–53. Erica Hunter has done some insightful descriptive work in connection to the so-called ‘magic scrolls’: “Magic and Medicine amongst the Christians of Kurdistan,” in Erica C.D. Hunter (ed.), *The Christian Heritage of Iraq: Collected Papers from the Christianity of Iraq I–V Seminar Days* (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press), 187–202.

<sup>5</sup> This is being built not far from Qamishli. In January 2009 only the outlines and foundation were visible.

Catholics (Uniates) form the second largest group of churches in the Middle East, though distributed rather unevenly: relatively big in Iraq and Lebanon, relatively small in Egypt. These churches mostly originate in the post-tridentine missions of the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century, when they profited from stable conditions in the Ottoman Empire. Though they separated from the Orthodox churches, most have gone to considerable lengths to retain the distinctive characteristics of Orthodox liturgy and ecclesiastical organization.<sup>6</sup>

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other missions introduced many varieties of Protestantism to the Middle East, which in later years included Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.<sup>7</sup> Protestants gained only limited numbers of adherents (in most countries between 1 and 5 percent of the total number of Christians), who mostly originated from the Orthodox churches. I don't need to remind you that our present host, the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, was one fruit of these Protestant

<sup>6</sup> For the history of Catholic missions, see Bernard Heyberger, *Les chrétiens du Proche Orient au temps de la réforme catholique*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 284 (Rome: École Françaises de Rome, 1994). The emergence of the Chaldean Church (out of the Church of the East) is described in detail in Albert Lampart, *Ein Märtyrer der Union mit Rom. Joseph I., 1681–1696, Patriarch der Chaldäer* (Einsiedeln: Benziger Verlag, 1966), whereas Parry and Teule (see note 2) provide additional details.

<sup>7</sup> Heleen Murre-van den Berg (ed.), *New Faith in Ancient Lands. Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, Studies in Christian Missions 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2006); see also the recent work of Martin Tamcke and Arthur Manukyan (eds.), *Protestanten im Orient*, Orthodoxie, Orient und Europa 1 (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag 2009). At the time of this writing, no in-depth studies on the history of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the Middle East have been published. See also Murre-van den Berg, "The Middle East: Western Missions and the Eastern Churches, Islam and Judaism," in Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley (eds.), *World Christianities, c. 1815–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), 458–72. This volume of the *Cambridge History of Christianity* offers a good introduction in the larger context of the missionary activities in this period.

missionary labors, which for many years now has been thoroughly in Egyptian hands.<sup>8</sup>

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The first part of this article was originally prepared as an introduction to a lecture in Leiden, in a setting in which most of the public was not familiar with Middle Eastern Christianity. For Christians in the Middle East, this first part will have been much more familiar. At the same time, I guess that they are often not aware of the specific contribution that their forms of Christianity have made to global Christianity. And thus, in the remaining part of this article, I would like to introduce what I, as an interested outsider, think are three pertinent themes of Middle Eastern Christianity: (1) the minority status of Christianity; (2) the impact of migration and globalization; and (3) the lived religion of the Middle East. I will conclude with a few notes on issues that might be of particular concern for Protestants, especially for Protestants in the Middle East who hope to contribute to the study of Arab Christianity.

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to find reliable statistics for Christians in the Middle East, partly because churches that do not always keep accurate membership records and because of the general difficulty of obtaining good demographics in the region. Compare David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). For the year 2001 they indicate the following percentages of Christians: Iraq 3,1%, Iran 0,5%, Turkey: 0,5%, Israel 5.7%, Palestine 8.5%, Jordan 4.5%, Lebanon 52.9%, Syria 7.8% and Egypt 15.1%.; on average 6%. It is likely that these numbers are lower today, partly because some of these numbers already seem too high for 2001. For example, in the case of Lebanon official numbers are recorded at high levels for political reasons – that is, to disguise the reality that considerable numbers of Christians have recently left the country. For the Ottoman period, see Youssef Courbage, “Démographie des communautés chrétiennes au Proche-Orient. Une approche historique,” *Confluences Méditerranée* 66 (2008), 27–44. In the same issue (entitled *Chrétiens d'Orient*) see also other articles on the demography of Middle Eastern Christianity.

## Minority Christianity

The most important issue that is put on the table time and again, both by Christians in the Middle East and by Christians (and others) outside the Middle East, is the issue of minority Christianity. How is Christianity in the Middle East going to survive in what looks like an increasingly hostile context, and how can a small minority (in some countries bigger than in others, but practically everywhere under the same pressures of decreasing social and political influence) sustain itself and contribute positively to the societies of the Middle East? These societies, as I hardly need to explain in these uncertain days, are in need of citizens who are committed to the welfare not just of their own community, but to society as a whole. I won't go into the issue of the origins of this minoritization, which would be a complex discussion about factors that involve conscious political acts that favor one group over another, and in its most extreme form, lead to violence and the expulsion of Christians or other groups. It also involves the higher pace of modernization among Christians, leading, among other things, to the most important concrete factor, the lower birthrates among Christians than among Muslims. But it also involves issues of perception and choice. In societies where religious belonging is seen as the most important social factor, Christians can come to be considered a minority much more easily than when social and political organization is also possible on other terms, such as (secular) political ideologies, class, profession, and educational background.

Whatever the reasons for the minority status that many Christians feel they have today, the most important questions for Christians in the Arab world, as in the Middle East more generally, are how they are to address imbalances, contribute to society as a whole, and avoid a narrow-minded focus on religious boundaries (even those within the Christian community) that can easily obscure shared interests. These are not easy tasks in today's Middle East. In the early days of the popular protests known as the Arab spring, the fight against the legacy of past and present dictators may have stimulated alliances that cut across sectarian bounda-

ries, but now amid the difficulties of building new societies, people easily fall back on the apparent safety of their religious groups.

## Migration and Globalization

The girl at the monastery who addressed me in Dutch was not exceptional. Like many others, she spent her holidays in the region her parents had left about thirty years ago. At that time, about fifty kilometers north of the monastery in southeastern Turkey, the Kurdish revolt was at its height. The Christian presence in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq has fundamentally changed over the last hundred years through the increased migration of Christians to other parts of the world. More than any other type of Christianity that I am aware of, Middle Eastern Christianity has come to know what it means to be a global community, whose members, while maintaining their deep commitment to their local, national, and regional origins, have become integrated in a worldwide community. This has many implications for what Middle Eastern Christianity is and how it may develop in the years to come. Much of this we take for granted as being part of the world we live in, like our increased awareness of what is going on outside our own countries, or the global youth culture of music, film, and Facebook.

The effects of globalization also include the ongoing and even increased involvement of migrants in other parts of the world with the world back home. This involvement may support the Christians in the Middle East or complicate their lives because of the different context in which these migrant Christians find themselves. One effect of globalization is directly connected to the previous point: migration is often the result of the minoritization of Christians, a process that intensifies as Christian communities are increasingly striped of their most talented young men and women. In addition, geopolitical developments, which often have little to do with the actual situation in the Middle East, further exacerbate differences between Muslims and Christians, thus



making it even harder to establish a civil society where different groups live together peacefully.

Globalization also affects the way in which Christianity in the Middle East develops. This phenomenon predates the twentieth century: Roman Catholic and Protestant missions are early examples of the same tendencies: ideas and religious practices came from Europe or the U.S. to the Middle East and, despite resistance, led to hybrid forms of religion. For example, Orthodox Christianity was deeply influenced by the visual culture of the Catholics (think of the depictions of Mary, or the wide presence of Leonardo's Last Supper) and, later, by the emphasis on the Bible and an active personal faith by the Protestants. This kind of mixing and matching goes on even as we speak, the most recent example can be clearly seen in the influence of Pentecostal styles of religion on the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant communities of the Middle East.

## Lived Religion

Let me now return briefly to the description of the Dormition Festival in northeast Syria, with which I introduced this talk. As I said, in its ordinariness this festival displays many features that characterize Christianity in the region: a combination of communal rituals, individual piety, and public festivities. Despite minoritization, relatively decreasing numbers, and economic and political hardships, Christians in the Middle East have succeeded in creating what I think is a distinct and important form of Christianity today. This is a form that manages to combine and hold in creative tension three crucial dimensions of Christianity: public, individual, and communal. This is a configuration that often has been lost in Western varieties of the faith. It is also a form that, I think, is still not sufficiently understood.

Earlier, scholars of Eastern Orthodox Christianity tended to focus mostly on two things: theology and theological literature. They dug deeply and generally with much profit into the history of dogma and the various ways in which these dogmas were ar-

articulated in the East. Other scholars took the route of studying the liturgies of the East. Starting from these texts, they either tried to reconstruct the actual liturgies or to focus on the dogmas as they were expressed in the liturgies. Even interest in the rich Christian poetic literature often tended to focus on dogma. Of course, there is little amiss with this approach, which has left us with many publications on such Orthodox subjects as the role of the incarnation or, its companion, deification. Recently, discussions on Orthodoxy have been supplemented with studies on the role of nationalism among Orthodox Christians, especially because of developments in Russia and other Eastern European countries.

It is time, now, I think, to look at Orthodoxy also from the perspective of what scholars today call “lived religion” – that is, how religion is practiced in real life. Sure, many of the earlier themes will return, and incarnation will be an important concept to grasp in order to understand how Orthodox Christians create a religious life where there is a fluid boundary between the secular and sacred, and between this life and the next. It will also help to articulate the role of women in this process, a subject that scholars frequently overlook when dealing with the official texts of theology and liturgy. Yet it is women who cook the food for fast days and holidays, who visit the monasteries and bring back the sacred dust or the blessed bread to their husbands and children, and – alongside men – teach children to read and pray.

## Conclusion

A few words in conclusion. I hope to have made clear that I think there is more than enough to be studied regarding the Arab and non-Arab Christians of the Middle East, much that so far has hardly been touched upon, and much that will be important to more than a few scholars or these Christians themselves. For the themes of globalization, minoritization, and lived religion are important to Christians and scholars of religion everywhere.

Let me end, however, with some reasons why Protestants, in the Middle East and elsewhere, should be as interested in these

questions as much as anyone else. As we all know, Protestants have tended to overlook Eastern Christianity. The Catholics made a much better enemy – at least until the middle of the twentieth century. And the Orthodox could hardly be considered friends since they appeared to be so different. Here in Cairo and elsewhere in the world this has changed. There are two major reasons for this.

The first is that Protestants, having become increasingly involved in the Middle East, are gradually coming to respect the wide varieties of Christianity that are possible and even integral to the faith. As Christian witnesses in the region where Christianity was born, both liberal and conservative Protestants have come to learn that the Middle East is more than Islam and Judaism. For Protestants, the Christianity of the Middle East has become an essential part of the region and not simply an outdated form of the faith that will eventually be replaced by other more viable forms.

The second is that – following up on that last point – Protestants have come to discover that Middle Eastern Christians offer the Christian world not only a rich past but ideas and practices that may help Protestants to rethink their faith in ways that will help to meet the challenges of the modern world. With their rich heritage of public presence, communal rituals, and private piety, Orthodox Arab Christians provide a healthy counterpoint to Protestantism's narrow focus on individual faith as the one and only thing of importance. Through its customs and rituals, Orthodox Christians may teach Protestants something of the importance of the tangible, visible, and olfactory. Practically speaking, they may come to appreciate that the faith can be experienced in specially prepared food, strewn flowers, processions, bowing, rosaries recited, and making the sign of the cross.

Such a re-evaluation of customs, which were rejected in the early phases of Protestantism and reencountered through missions in the Middle East, may raise serious questions about Protestant theology and practice. In attempting to answer these questions, Protestants may come to better understand the rich heritage of Christianity in the Middle East in all of its forms, Arab and non-

Arab, Orthodox and Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal. Perhaps Western Protestantism and Middle Eastern Christianity will find ways to mutually enrich each other as well as Christians elsewhere in the world.

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