

Part I

Africa

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Middle Eastern and North African Christianity

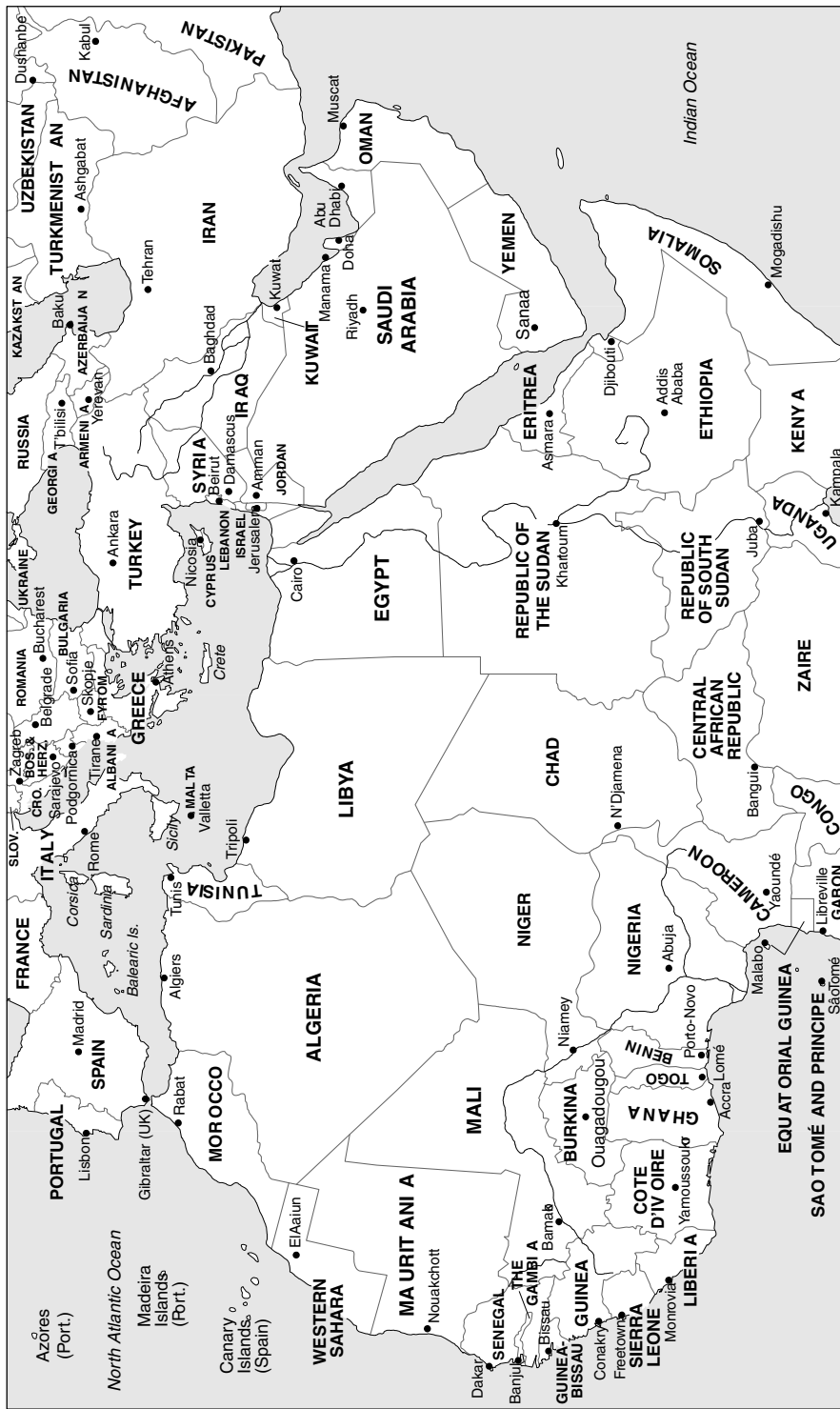
Persisting in the Lands of Islam

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Historical Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa were cradles of Christianity. Jesus spent his life in the “Holy Land” where Israel and the Palestinian territories exist today. His disciples spread the Christian message into the Roman and Persian empires in Western Asia and Northern Africa. During the next four centuries, Roman North Africa produced some of early Christianity’s most brilliant philosophers: men like Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria (Egypt); Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage (Tunisia); and Augustine of Hippo (Algeria). However, following the rise of Islam in the early seventh century, and the establishment through conquest of an Islamic empire that stretched, by 711, from what is now Morocco to the India–Pakistan border, Christianity lost ground to Islam. One scholar described Christian history in the Islamic world as a history of “hanging on”; another called it a history of “constrained lives.”¹ Perhaps deterred by impressions of chronic strain and attrition, the authors of many recent studies of world Christianity overlook the modern Middle East after sketching the region’s early place in Christian history.² Nevertheless, vibrant Christian communities remain and take pride in rich histories on which they build. Today, Middle Eastern Christians also offer lively models of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, while pursuing social service and civic engagement.

How have Christians fared and endured in the Islamic Middle East and North Africa, and why have their numbers declined? Historically, Muslim governments set policies that limited Christian communities. The boundaries encircling Christian communities arose, above all, from Islamic (*shariah*) laws of conversion, marriage, and inheritance. The early Islamic empire, like its successor states, also offered social and economic incentives that encouraged Christians and others to embrace Islam, thereby eliciting large-scale conversions that occurred, in most places and periods, with little or no coercion. Meanwhile, in modern times, three other factors reduced Christian communities: voluntary emigration (especially to the Americas, Western Europe, and later Australia), war-related refugee movements and population transfers, and low birth rates. Historians of the region debate the importance of a fourth factor in this contraction: the impact of contacts with Western Christians of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox varieties, from what is now France, Britain, Russia, the United States, and elsewhere. Did Western contacts, in the modern period as earlier (for example, during the Crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), bolster Middle Eastern Christians or undermine them, by stoking mistrust and resentment among Muslims? Given the current situation in Iraq, where an estimated 600,000 out of some 1.3 million Christians fled the country in the five years following the US invasion of 2003, this last question appears more relevant than ever.³



Map 1.1 Middle East and North Africa

Christian Pluralism, Early Islam, and the Terms of *Dhimmi* Life

Surveying such a long and complex history in this short space is impossible, and yet a few points are worth highlighting. By the time Islam emerged in the seventh century, Middle Eastern and North African Christians were already evincing the doctrinal and communal pluralism, or sectarianism, that became one of world Christianity's defining features. Arising initially from debates about the divine and human nature(s) of Jesus, sectarian differences coalesced in the period stretching from the fifth through the seventh or eighth centuries. In the long run, communities reinforced sectarian distinctions by using particular languages (e.g., Greek, Armenian, Syriac, or Coptic) for their church liturgies and literatures. In some cases, church-centered cultures evolved to produce, by the modern era, what scholars have described as nationalist identities. Consider, for example, the adherents of the Church of the East (sometimes called, by outsiders, the Nestorian Church). By the early twentieth century, in what is now Northern Iraq, Southeast Turkey, and Northwest Iran, members of this community called themselves Assyrians and evinced a nationalist consciousness that drew strength, first, from a literary history rooted in the Classical Syriac literature of their Church, and second, from a budding print culture in the neo-Aramaic language (which American Presbyterian missionaries helped to promote).

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (where bitter theological disputes arose over the nature of Christ), Byzantine Christian authorities in Constantinople began to persecute Egyptians who belonged to what became known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. Historians point to such persecution to explain the lack of Christian solidarity that prevailed when Muslim Arabs expanded beyond Arabia into the Byzantine imperial territories of the Levant and North Africa, and into the Sassanian (Persian) imperial territories of Iraq and Iran. Thus, for example, when Muslim armies reached Egypt in 640, local Coptic Christians greeted the invaders with more of a welcome than a show of resistance and looked for relief from persecution. One scholar suggests, "The advent of Islam may have helped to establish firm doctrinal differences [among

Eastern Christians] for the first time," if only because Islamic rule "freed Christians from the pressure of Byzantine conformity."⁴ Muslim rulers did not generally care about the sects to which Christians belonged, and this proved liberating to some Christians, even in the modern period when Catholic and Protestant missionaries were active.

In accordance with the Qur'an, which Muslims regarded as a message that Muhammad had conveyed from God to humankind, the early Muslim invaders recognized Christians and Jews as "People of the Book," meaning monotheists having scriptural traditions. To People of the Book who surrendered, the Muslims guaranteed freedom of worship and livelihood, provided that they remained loyal to the Muslim state and paid a poll tax, called the *jizya*, to support Muslim armies. Thus, by the mid-seventh century, in the emerging Islamic empire, Christians, Jews, and also Zoroastrians became *dhimmis*, meaning people who lived under the Muslim state's pact of protection. Meanwhile, from the mid-seventh century through the twentieth, Muslim governments appointed Christian and Jewish professionals to their bureaucracies, where they served as doctors, accountants, translators, and advisers. In this way Christians, like Jews, contributed to the making of Islamic civilization. Within a few centuries many Christians also made the Arabic language into their own, while Christian scholars produced a rich Arabic literature of Church philosophy.

Over generations, however, some provisions of the early conquest agreements calcified and thus marginalized Christians, while reinforcing their subordination to Muslims. By the terms of the "Pact of Umar" (as a form of the early Muslim compact with *dhimmis* was eventually remembered), Christians could not build or repair churches without acquiring permission from Muslim rulers; nor could they bear arms or serve in Islamic armies. (Note that these provisions inform laws in many Islamic countries even today.) Meanwhile, the obligations of *jizya*-paying gave Christians an incentive to join Islam as a way of easing taxes. In Egypt, especially, conversions to Islam gained momentum among Christian farmers, who faced a land tax as well. "As conversions proceeded," two demographic historians observed, "the decline in the number of taxpayers liable to pay the *jizya* resulted in an increase in the amount due per capita."⁵ Those who

remained Christian bore a heavier load. Islamic inheritance law offered further incentives for conversion: it stipulated that non-Muslims could not inherit from Muslims. Thus Christian wives of Muslim men, or Christian relatives of recent converts to Islam, lost rights of inheritance unless they, too, joined the Muslim community.

Islamic laws of conversion posed the steepest obstacles to Christian societies. Islamic law held that anyone could join Islam, but that no one could leave it once converted or born to the faith. Leaving Islam amounted to apostasy, a crime punishable by death. While Christians and Jews could join Islam, *dhimmis* could not convert to other religions; thus Jews could not become Christians, just as Christians could not become Jews. Furthermore, Islamic law deemed children of Muslim fathers to be Muslim, regardless of their mothers' religions. As specified in the Qur'an, Muslim men could marry Christian or Jewish women (on the grounds that such women were believers in God); Christian and Jewish men, however, could not marry Muslim women. Islamic law recognized slavery and concubinage, and regarded it as licit for Muslim men to have sexual relations with slaves whom they owned; the children of female slaves and free Muslim fathers were born into Islam (and freedom) as well. In the early Islamic period of imperial expansion through conquest, when "intermarriage" with Christians was common (to use the euphemistic term favored by scholars when describing Muslim men's relationships with females who may have been technically wives, slaves, or war captives), paternity offered an important route to Islamization.

Islamic laws about conversion and Muslim status are not historical abstractions; they inform the legal systems of many states even today, and determine such things as who can marry whom, who can inherit, even who can gain child custody after divorces. In the modern era, slavery or the slave trade was officially abolished in all Muslim states, even though the Qur'an recognizes slavery, and even though residual forms of the practice sometimes persisted. (For example, Egypt abolished the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, while Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962.) But laws barring Muslims from leaving or renouncing Islam (whether for Christianity or otherwise) remain in force today in nearly all Muslim-majority states.

In practice, since the late nineteenth century, many Islamic states have merely made it impossible for converts from Islam to register their changed faith, or have subjected converts to sustained harassment, often including assault or imprisonment. Other states, such as Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, retain laws declaring apostasy from Islam a capital crime.⁶

Historically, Christian communities under Islamic rule could only grow in two ways: through natural increase, or at each other's expense. Missionary-sponsored Catholic and Protestant churches eventually did the latter, by drawing members from Eastern Orthodox communities. Christians could not evangelize among Muslims, for whom apostasy, in any case, offered grounds for a death sentence. Nor could Christians easily assert themselves by building churches, for indeed, church permits were hard to secure.⁷ These challenges to Christians have persisted, sometimes taking new forms. Consider, for example, how in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Gulf States (which lack indigenous Christian minorities) have kept church building and even church staffing to a minimum, despite the presence of large Christian expatriate or guest worker populations, including Filipinos, South Indians, and others. Thus two writers noted in 2003, "In Dubai, one of the seven United Arab Emirates, eighty thousand Catholics are associated with a single parish where only a few priests are allowed work permits." The situation in the Emirates was, at least, better than in Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims were prohibited from organizing worship.⁸

Christian Attrition in the World of Islam: Rates and Reasons

Christian communities hemorrhaged members to Islam after the early Islamic conquests of the seventh century, and yet the losses were neither automatic nor total. In some regions substantial rates of Islamization occurred in a generation or two; in other places, the diminution occurred over several centuries. Studying these patterns of Islamization is worthwhile because it helps to make sense of modern Christian demography, by showing where in the Middle East and North Africa Christianity withered, and where it stayed rooted.

In Egypt, judging by the evidence of *jizya* revenues from non-Muslims, more than half the Coptic Christian population appear to have converted to Islam within 40 years of the Muslim conquest; in Iraq, more than two thirds of the population appear to have converted within 50 years of the conquest. By contrast, conversion to Islam was much slower in Syria: there, it seems, a Christian majority persisted for nearly three centuries.⁹ In Iran, another scholar suggests, only 10 percent of the population had become Muslim by 743 (the year 125 in the Islamic calendar (AH)), though by 888 (275 AH), some 90 percent of the Iranian population were Muslim.¹⁰

In North Africa west of Egypt, “dechristianization” was more dramatic. Consider Carthage, now in Tunisia, which had once been a vital center for Christian philosophy. Muslims seized Carthage in 698. Some Christian presence persisted for nearly four centuries, judging from a letter written by the Roman Pope to a Carthaginian bishop in 1076. But by the time the crusading Louis IX of France (St Louis) died near Tunis in 1270, indigenous Christianity was long gone.¹¹ Christianity also disappeared in Nubia, now Northern Sudan, where Christian kings had been ruling since the sixth century. In 1315, a Muslim claimed the throne of Nubia; two years later, Muslims converted the “cathedral” of Dongola into a mosque. Nubian Christianity soon became extinct.¹²

Viewing history over a long duration, one can identify four other developments that affected the diminution of Christian populations. Together these “deepen[ed] the introversion of Christian communities under *dhimmi* status,” and strengthened bonds between churches and communal identities.¹³

First, there was the continued erosion of the Byzantine Empire, which survived in what is now Greece and Turkey after the Muslim Arab conquests of the seventh century. In the eleventh century, Turkish Muslim horse nomads moved into Anatolia, where they raided Greek- and Armenian-speaking Christian communities, displacing them, absorbing them through “intermarriage,” or subjecting them to Muslim rule. In 1071, Seljuk Turks defeated Byzantine imperial armies at the Battle of Manzikert; thenceforth Turkish immigration into Anatolia occurred unhindered, allowing for the long-term ethnic and religious trans-

formation of the Anatolian plateau. The final collapse of the Byzantine Empire occurred when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The Ottoman sultan, Mehmet II (“Mehmet the Conqueror”), signaled the change of imperial religion from Orthodox Christianity to Sunni Islam by immediately ordering the conversion of the church of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Meanwhile, Islam continued to spread, especially in places such as Cyprus and Crete, where Ottomans kept garrisons and where conversion to Islam offered new opportunities in the military.

Second, there came the Crusades, which were disastrous by many counts. The Roman Pope, Urban II, started these wars in 1096 when he answered the Byzantine emperor’s plea for help against Turkish incursions by sending armies. Crusaders slaughtered indiscriminately, and undermined the already fragile Byzantine Empire by laying waste to Byzantine territories. Their actions soured Orthodox–Catholic relations for almost a millennium. The Crusades also stoked anti-Christian violence among Muslims, who suspected local Christians of sympathizing with the Crusaders. This was particularly true in Egypt, where the Mamluk dynasty rose to power in 1250 and, within 25 years, uprooted the last Crusader kingdom from Jerusalem. Coptic chroniclers described the Mamluk period as an age of persecution and martyrs, when Muslim mobs destroyed churches, killed Copts, and created an atmosphere of fear in which many Christians converted to Islam. By the time the Mamluk era ended in 1517, Christians accounted for perhaps 7 percent of Egypt’s population – about the same proportion as in the late twentieth century.¹⁴

The third development, which affected the region corresponding to Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, came from the thirteenth-century Mongol conquests, which devastated urban and rural areas and felled the Abbasid Empire, centered in Baghdad, in 1258. In the fourteenth century, the conqueror Tamerlane (1336–1405) ravaged many of the same lands. Tamerlane was technically a Muslim, but like the Crusaders, slaughtered people and waged wars without regard to religious identities. Consider that at the height of the Abbasid era (c.1000) the Church of the East had sent missionaries from Baghdad to China and India and had developed a “supra-ethnic and multi-lingual identity.” After the Mongols, Tamerlane, and

some waves of forced conversions, this Church was so shrunken, and so geographically curtailed within Iran and Iraq, that it was becoming less of a “World Church” than an (ethnic) Aramaic-speaking entity, with adherents taking refuge in isolated mountainous regions.¹⁵

The fourth development consisted of a series of plague outbreaks that ravaged the Middle East and North Africa and left Christian monasteries, important centers of Church scholarship, as “conspicuous casualties.” The worst of these outbreaks was the Black Death, which killed a quarter to a third of the region’s population in the 1340s; another bad outbreak occurred less than a century later, in 1429. Whereas in the desert of Wadi al-Natrun in Egypt there had been about a hundred monasteries before the Black Death struck in 1347–48, there were only seven left by the early 1400s. Monasteries in Palestine, including ones in Nazareth and Hebron, also vanished.¹⁶

Once consolidated, the Ottoman Empire (which stretched at its peak in the sixteenth century from Algeria to Iraq) brought stability to its domains. The Ottomans recognized Christians and Jews as belonging to *millets*, meaning religious communities. Ottoman authorities mediated civil administration (e.g., tax collection) through the religious leaders of these *millets*, and allowed communities to manage their internal affairs. The chief Christian liaison in this system was the Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul, whose relationship with Ottoman authorities enhanced the prestige of the Greek-speaking Orthodox community relative to other Christians. By dividing society into religious segments, the Ottoman *millet* system may have helped Christians to retain communal coherence. Division aided survival, since when “populations tended to live in greater separation from one another, even within the same town . . . there was less occasion for meeting and thus much less intermarriage [with Muslims].”¹⁷

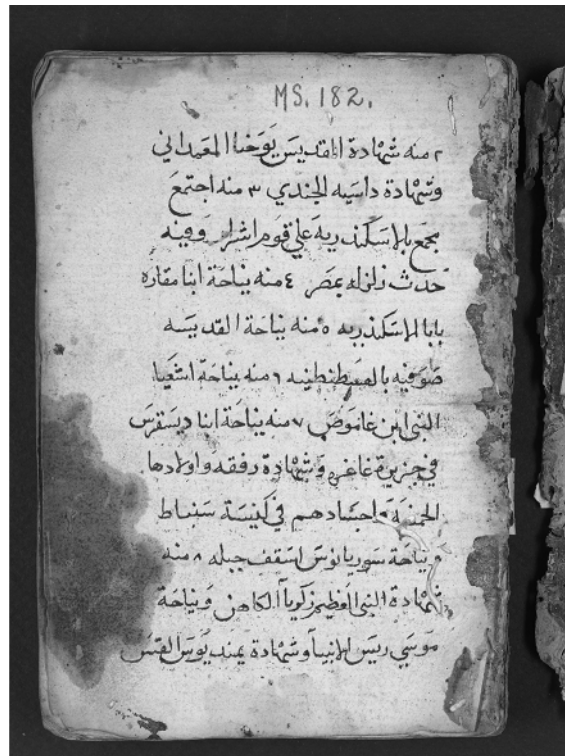
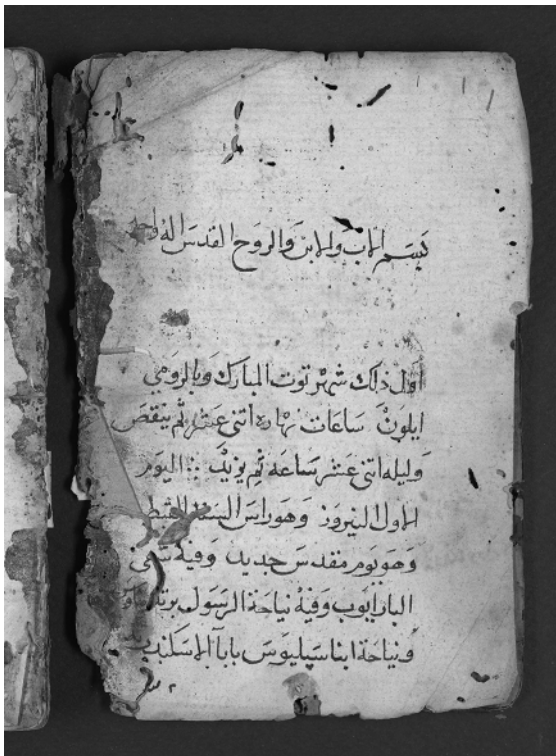


Figure 1.1 Martyrology of Coptic Saints (Arabic, n.d. [circa 14th century]). Courtesy of the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

Meanwhile, for Arabic-speaking Christians who lived along the Eastern Mediterranean coast, Ottoman stability, together with new economic opportunities for coastal trade with Europeans, translated into greater prosperity. Prosperity, in turn, led to greater education and better health among Christians. The result, some scholars argue, was that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian Arabic-speaking communities rebounded in the Eastern Mediterranean, reaching perhaps 20 percent of the population in some areas.¹⁸

The Modern Period: New Opportunities, New Strains

The very conditions that enabled Christians to prosper in the Ottoman era made them, by the nineteenth century, more vulnerable vis-à-vis Muslim society. By some accounts, in nineteenth-century Syria and Palestine, local Muslim-Christian relations grew strained as some Christian merchants flaunted wealth and behaved without the discretion expected of *dhimmis*. In this period, when the Ottoman state's power was waning relative to the rest of Europe, "Local Christians [began to] serve for some Muslims . . . as convenient surrogates for the anger that could only rarely be expressed directly against the Europeans."¹⁹

Muslim anger was mounting for three reasons. First, European Christians, and increasingly their local Christian protégés, were benefiting from the Capitulations, a series of fiscal and legal privileges granted by treaty. Second, European powers were asserting special relations with local Christians in ways that challenged the jurisdiction of Ottoman Muslim authorities. (Thus, in 1740, France secured the right by treaty to protect Catholics in the Ottoman Empire, and above all, the Maronites of Lebanon who had recognized Vatican authority during the Crusades; in 1774, Russia claimed kindred rights vis-à-vis Orthodox Christians.²⁰) Third, European powers were encroaching on Ottoman territories and were also whittling away at other parts of the Muslim world, such as Iran (under the Qajar dynasty) and the Mughal Empire of India. For example, in 1804, 30 years after seizing the Ottoman Crimea (now in Ukraine), Russia ex-

propriated Georgia and part of Azerbaijan from Iran. In 1830, France conquered Algeria and developed it as a settler colony; in 1881, France also occupied Tunisia. In 1839, Britain annexed Aden, in Yemen, which held a strategic position on maritime routes to India. In 1878, Britain persuaded the Ottomans to grant Cyprus as a naval base. In 1882, Britain invaded and occupied Egypt. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, European speculators also secured monopolies over Middle Eastern commodities and services, ranging from Caspian Sea caviar to toll-paying traffic through the Suez Canal. These conditions left many Muslims feeling beleaguered, and prompted some intellectuals to articulate ideologies of pan-Islamic solidarity that inspired modern Islamist movements while harkening back to the era of Muhammad (c.570–632) and his early successors.

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was also losing ground to nationalist secession movements. In the 1820s, Greek nationalists waged a successful war for independence that drew British, French, and Russian support. Fearing that nationalism would "infect" other large Christian communities (who accounted for approximately 24 percent of the Ottoman Empire's population in 1876²¹) and eager to maintain British support against Russian expansion, the Ottoman sultan issued an edict called the *Hatt-i Humayun* in 1856. This edict declared equality between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the empire, abolished *dhimmi* status and the *millet* system, and promised that Christians in the Ottoman Empire could serve in the military and freely secure church-building permits in proportion to their numbers. In practice, however, popular assumptions about the place of Christians relative to Muslims persisted, while the edict, to the extent that it was advertised, may have only aggravated tensions between the religious communities.

In the long run, Ottoman attempts to generate a sense of empire-wide identity failed to win the hearts of the Armenians, who claimed a Christian history going back to the conversion of King Trdat around the year 300, and who, in an age of growing nationalism, recalled a history of independent Armenian Christian statehood. From 1894 to 1896, Ottoman authorities responded to a series of Armenian revolts in Eastern Anatolia by massacring untold thousands. Armenians faced more violence after 1908, when a group of

Turkish nationalist military men called the “Young Turks” seized power in Istanbul. In 1915, amidst World War I, Ottoman soldiers and Kurdish mercenaries perpetrated massacres that were so severe that Armenians today call them genocide, meaning a concerted attempt at annihilation. The massacres of 1915 killed an estimated 1–1.5 million Armenians (or one third to one half of all Armenian people), while survivors dispersed widely, to Syria and the Nile Valley, and further afield to North America.²² Debates over what happened persist. The government of Turkey, which succeeded the Ottoman state in Anatolia and Thrace, has continued to deny that mass killings or a genocide occurred and has described the massacres as a response to Armenian disloyalty and complicity with Russia during the war. Turkey has tried to stifle citizens who question this official version of history. In 2005, for example, it prosecuted the Turkish novelist (and later Nobel laureate), Orhan Pamuk, for “insulting the nation” by mentioning the deaths of a million Armenians.

During World War I, the Assyrian Christians of Southeastern Turkey faced a similar trauma at the hands of Ottoman Turkish and Kurdish soldiers, leading some to describe these killings as genocide too. In the long run, the institutional dislocation of Assyrian Christian culture was dramatic, insofar as the high leadership of the Church of the East eventually packed up and left. “The Church of the East,” notes one historian, “is no longer in the Middle East but in the diaspora. After years of exile in Cyprus and Great Britain, Mar Shim’un XXIII Eshay (1920–75) settled in the United States, around 1961.” Claiming a venerable history in the Tigris-Euphrates basin that stretches back to the dawning years of Christianity, the Church of the East now has its patriarchal headquarters in Chicago.²³

At its best, the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural empire in which Sunni Muslim authorities maintained an atmosphere of stability and relative tolerance vis-à-vis Christians and Jews. However, the Turkish Republic that succeeded the Ottoman Empire was not – and did not want to be – multicultural. The Armenians of the future Turkish republic were either destroyed or dispersed, while a population exchange in 1922 – according to which Greece and Turkey swapped Christian “Greeks” in Turkey for Muslim

“Turks” in Greece – eliminated Turkey’s Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians almost entirely, while also ensuring greater cultural homogeneity for Greece. In 2008, Turkey’s population was 99.8 percent Muslim. Proportionally speaking, neighboring Syria had a much larger Christian population (estimated at 16 percent of the total population), as did Egypt (10 percent) and Jordan (6 percent). Iran’s Christian population was less than 2 percent.²⁴

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some Lebanese Christians were also uprooted. In 1860, civil war broke out in Mount Lebanon, dividing people not only by religion but also, and perhaps more importantly, by class (landowners versus peasants).²⁵ This war sharpened sectarian lines and in the long run helped to shape what analysts have called Lebanon’s “confessional politics.” After 1860, sectarian and social tensions in Lebanese society propelled both Christians and Muslims to seek opportunities abroad, particularly in the Americas. More than a century later, in 1975, another civil war broke out in Lebanon, prompting further dispersions of Christians. Although reliable population data is lacking, analysts now assume that Christians are no longer the largest religious cluster within Lebanese society. That distinction goes to Shi’a Muslims, who are believed to outnumber Lebanon’s Sunni Muslim and Druze populations too.

No discussion of Middle Eastern diasporas is complete without reference to Palestinian Arabs. In 1900, Christians accounted for some 16 percent of the population of Palestine.²⁶ Following the declaration of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, Christians were among the Arabs who fled amid war or were pushed out by Jewish armies. Their numbers also shrank as a result of voluntary emigration. Today, minute Christian populations (less than 2 percent) are found in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

In the twentieth century, another factor appears to have led to the diminution of Christian communities, relative to Muslim majorities: Christians had smaller families. This situation may have correlated to Christians’ higher rates of education, later marriage ages among females, and wider access to contraception. In Egypt, for example, a local Protestant organization known as the Coptic Evangelical Organization of Social Services (CEOSS) began in 1957 to educate villagers about family planning; later, CEOSS



Figure 1.2 Christian Woman in Ita, Fayoum Governorate, Egypt. Photograph courtesy of Hands along the Nile Development Services, Inc.

cooperated with the Egyptian government in sponsoring family planning clinics and distributing contraception among married Christian and Muslim women. For Christians, smaller families may have functioned as another strategy for survival: parents could spend more on their children's education or on helping to establish their livelihoods when there were fewer mouths to feed.

In the midst of social changes and political upheavals, and in spite of their small numbers relative to Muslims, Christians remained active members of Arab societies. Just as Arabic-speaking Christians developed a thriving intellectual life in the early and middle centuries of the Islamic era, so did many contribute to the *nahda*, meaning the modern Arabic cultural revival.²⁷ In the twentieth century, Arab Christians also distinguished themselves in film (such as the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine) and popular mu-

sic (such as the Lebanese singer Fairouz). Christians also played active roles in secular Arab nationalist movements in which Muslim identity was not a prerequisite, while a few played controversial roles in Arab politics. Consider Michel Aflaq (1910–89), who was born into a Greek Orthodox family. Aflaq was the ideological founder of the secular pan-Arab Ba'th Party, which drew men like Hafiz al-Asad (ruled Syria 1971–2000) and Saddam Hussein (ruled Iraq 1979–2003) as party members. Consider, too, George Habash (1926–2008), who came from a Palestinian Christian family: after the Six-Day Arab–Israeli War of 1967, he founded the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Believing that violence was a legitimate tactic in the Palestinian national struggle, Habash in 1970 orchestrated a series of airplane hijackings that added a new tool to the kit of modern terrorism.

Missionary Legacies, Ecumenism, and Social Activism

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Middle Eastern Christianity became even more diverse than it had historically been. This was largely the result of foreign Catholic and Protestant missions that fostered new churches, while inspiring local Christians to undertake missionary work at the grass roots. Two points are worth noting here. First, studies of the modern missionary movement must reckon with the controversial history of Western imperialism, since Catholic and Protestant missionaries were only able to expand in the Middle East and North Africa to the extent that they did because the British and French empires offered protection. Second, histories of local or “native” Christian missionaries – including pastors, priests, nuns, and lay evangelists, as well as catechists, Bible Women, and colporteurs – are still largely unwritten. Until more research is done, historical accounts of modern missionary activities in the Middle East and North Africa will invariably center on foreigners.

Catholic missions in the Middle East can be traced to the Crusader era, and even included, in 1219, the visit to Egypt of St Francis, who made peaceful overtures to Muslim rulers. In the centuries ahead, Catholic missionaries reached out to Eastern ecclesiastical leaders, prompting some, like the Maronites of Greater Syria, to recognize Vatican authority. Later, some Armenians, Assyrians, Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox, and Copts identified with Catholicism as well. Catholic missionary activities among Orthodox Christians gained new momentum during the late nineteenth century and resulted in the continued growth of Catholicism in places like Upper Egypt, where some adherents of Coptic Orthodoxy joined Coptic Catholic communities. Today, the Middle Eastern Catholic churches, which preserve non-Latin liturgies and some distinct customs, are known as “Eastern rite” Catholic churches. In the early twenty-first century, Eastern rite Catholic churches were also flourishing in the diaspora, while some – such as the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the US – were successfully attracting members who were not of Middle Eastern heritage.

In Egypt and Western Asia, as missionary activities burgeoned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholics concentrated almost completely on Eastern Christians, among whom they established modern schools. The legacy of Catholic education endures today, for example, in the prestigious, Jesuit-founded Université Saint-Joseph of Beirut. By contrast, in Northwest Africa, and especially in the French settler colony of Algeria, some Catholic missionaries initiated missions to Muslims, thereby challenging the traditional Islamic ban on Christian evangelization among non-Christians. For example, in 1868, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, founded a mission popularly called the White Fathers (after the color of the missionaries’ robes), which later expanded into sub-Saharan Africa. The White Fathers attracted few Muslim converts, although they did have a substantial cultural impact on some Berber-speaking communities in Algeria’s Northern Kabyle region. Likewise, Charles de Foucauld (d. 1916), a former Trappist monk and hermit who inspired the foundation of the Order now known as the Little Brothers of Jesus, undertook a mission to Muslims in the Algerian Sahara. Like many other Catholic and Protestant missionaries of this period, Foucauld made pathbreaking contributions to linguistic analysis – in his case by compiling a Tuareg dictionary and grammar, along with studies of the Tuareg *Tifinagh* writing system.

The Moravian Brethren, who arrived in Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century and worked there for 40 years, were among the first Protestant missionaries to approach the Middle East. Yet sustained Protestant missionary activities only took off in the early nineteenth century, when organizations like the British Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) (a joint Congregationalist-Presbyterian enterprise), and the German Missionary Society (Basel Mission) began work in the Eastern Mediterranean lands of the Ottoman Empire. CMS and American Presbyterian missionaries eventually expanded eastward to Iran, and (together with Italian Catholics) southward into Sudan. Protestants of many other denominations and nationalities arrived too, including Scottish and English Presbyterians (some of whom focused exclusively on missions to Jews), as well as German, Dutch, Swedish, and Danish organizations

that operated schools, orphanages, and medical clinics in such places as Jerusalem, the Suez Canal Zone, and Kurdistan. In 1884, American Mormons (Latter-day Saints) also arrived, pursuing mission work first in Anatolia and later in Syria and Palestine. Protestants left some enduring educational legacies, among them the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the American University in Cairo (AUC).

By the time of World War I, American organizations were sending the largest Protestant missionary contingents to the region, and women were outnumbering men on mission rosters – a position that enabled them to provide schools and services for females. American missions were increasingly diverse: by 1914, for example, there were Methodists in Algeria, Pentecostals in Egypt, and Reformed Church of America missionaries in Oman and the Persian Gulf region.²⁸ Some of the most important Protestant missions were publishing missions (especially the British and Foreign Bible Society and the American Bible Society), which worked with scores of other mission societies to translate, publish, and distribute the Bible. The Nile Mission Press of Cairo shipped books and pamphlets throughout the Middle East and North Africa, but also to places like China, South Africa, and Venezuela, wherever Muslims (including Arab émigrés) were found.

Many Protestant missions focused on Muslim evangelization, although conversions from Islam were rare. By the 1950s, one missionary estimated that there were only about 200 living converts from Islam in Egypt, while another source, from the same period, estimated a similar number in Morocco.²⁹ Missionaries pointed to Muslim social sanctions against apostasy to explain the lack of converts. Concerns over barriers to conversion from Islam led some missionaries to advocate religious human rights, to press the issue of religious liberty with the League of Nations, and later, to support the promulgation of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948.

In the mid-twentieth century, when the French and British empires began to contract through decolonization, Muslim nationalists throughout the Middle East and North Africa enforced new restrictions on Christian missionary activities. In some cases, postcolonial governments nationalized mission schools and

hospitals. In other cases, they expelled particular missions (e.g., the (British) Egypt General Mission, in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis) or deported Christian missionaries en masse (as in Sudan, vis-à-vis both Catholic and Protestant missionaries, between 1962 and 1964). In still other places (notably in Libya and Algeria), governments banned the import of Arabic Bibles. Postcolonial governments also reinforced the traditional ban on Christian evangelization among Muslims, interpreting such activity as a challenge to “public order.” On such grounds, for example, the (Anglo-American) North Africa Mission lost its legal status in Algeria in 1977. In Israel, meanwhile, Jewish organizations also agitated for restrictions on Christian missionary activities.

The departure of foreign missionaries prompted indigenous churches to assert independence and to cultivate local Christians as church leaders. Meanwhile, foreign Christian organizations looked for new ways to spread their message. Some harnessed radio and later satellite television as transnational broadcast media (using places like Cyprus for their stations), while others initiated work among Muslim diasporas, for example, among North Africans living in France.³⁰

In the late twentieth century, Christian communities inside the Middle East also developed social service programs, many of which Catholic and Protestant missionaries had pioneered. In some cases Christian organizations developed partnerships with international, non-faith-based philanthropies. In Egypt in the late 1950s, for example, both Catholic and Protestant organizations secured grants from the Ford Foundation of New York, for agricultural development and job-training programs. Other Christian organizations supported public library projects and micro-credit lending programs that could benefit mixed Muslim-Christian communities. Part of the goal, as one Egyptian Christian leader explained it in 2005, was to develop a culture in which Christians could live with Muslims as neighbors and fellow citizens, not as *dhimmis*, while together addressing the needs of the larger society.³¹

In 2001, one Lebanese Protestant leader looked back on the history of foreign missions with ambivalence, and expressed concern about the challenges of building unity among Middle Eastern Christians in the face of dwindling numbers. “In retrospect,” he wrote,

“it is impossible to deny the fact that the Protestant presence in the Middle East has played, and continues to play, a divisive role in the church history of the region – exactly as the Roman Catholic presence has and still does.”³² This assessment may be too bleak. For in spite of its internal divisions, Middle Eastern Christianity has in the past century offered impressive models for ecumenical dialogue and cooperation. Consider the evolution of the Near East Christian Council (NECC), which was founded in 1929 as a forum for dialogue and cooperation among the major Protestant missions in the Middle East and North Africa. In the early 1960s, Middle Eastern Christian leaders assumed leadership of this organization and changed its name to the Near East Council of Churches, while retaining the NECC acronym. By this stage, the Orthodox churches were participating actively in NECC discussions. In 1974, the NECC evolved into the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC). The MECC, in turn, reached a milestone in 1990 when the Catholic churches (Maronite, Melkite, Coptic Catholic, etc.) officially joined. Strikingly, the MECC’s own website acknowledges the organization’s roots in the NECC but harkens back to an even earlier moment of ecumenical overture: namely, 1902, when Yoachim III, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople, issued an encyclical calling for Christian unity and Orthodox reconciliation with Catholics and Protestants.³³

Regardless of its “true” beginnings, ecumenism in the Middle East has not been a mere discussion piece for NECC or MECC meetings. Since the 1960s (a generation before the Catholic churches formally joined the MECC), ecumenism has grown at the grass roots through programs, such as Egyptian rural literacy campaigns, that have drawn Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches together. Ecumenism has also flourished in academic settings, at places like the University of Balamand in Lebanon. Founded in 1988 under the sponsorship of the Antiochan Orthodox Church, and built on the site of a Cistercian monastery dating to the late twelfth-century Crusader era, the University of Balamand identifies itself as a “private secular institution [aiming] to serve all people without regard to race, religion, gender, and ethnic consideration.” Operating trilingually, in Arabic, French, and English, the university also proclaims a

goal of promoting “human rights, democratic institutions, and Christian-Muslim understanding,” while encouraging research on the history and pluralistic culture of Arab Christianity.³⁴

Conclusion: The Future of Middle Eastern Christianity

There is a practical reason for the growth of Middle Eastern ecumenism. With their numbers diminishing, Middle Eastern Christians often describe feeling increasingly vulnerable within Islamic societies, particularly during times of political and economic malaise. Hence Middle Eastern Christians are allowing sectarian differences to recede for the sake of common survival.

As dwindling communities, Middle Eastern Christians are also eager to bolster and retain the goodwill of Muslim friends and neighbors. They welcome dialogue with Muslim organizations like the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS), founded in 1994 by the Jordanian prince El Hassan bin Talal. Based in Amman, this institute sponsors local and international conferences, and describes itself as a “venue in the Arab world for the interdisciplinary study and rational discussion of religion and religious issues, with particular reference to Christianity in Arab and Islamic society.”³⁵ More recently, the institute has broadened its focus to study Muslims in predominantly Christian societies, such as the US. The RIIFS promotes a vision of a diverse but tolerant world in which Christians and Muslims can flourish together.

Today, churches in the Middle East function as vibrant centers of worship and social activity. Yet full of life as they are, the reality is that Christian populations are unlikely to grow or even hold their numbers in coming years. As one observer of Arab Christianity has noted, “Where there is tension within society, and discrimination between religions, and where increased Islamization marginalizes followers of other faiths . . . there is little incentive to stay when family members press invitations to join them overseas and the prospects at home are dim.”³⁶ The future of Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa holds uncertainties.

Many Christians have already left and others are still leaving, with the result that diasporic Middle Eastern churches are now flourishing in cities like Sydney, Los Angeles, and Toronto, as well as in small towns like Södertälje, Sweden, and Teaneck, New Jersey. Consider that the Coptic Orthodox Church alone, which had only seven churches in the diaspora in 1971, was by 1999 claiming almost 80 churches in North America, 26 in Australia, and 30 in Western Europe.³⁷ By 2000, diasporic churches had become transnational churches or “World Churches,” much as the Church of the East had been a millennium ago, when it was sending missionaries from Baghdad to Tibet and India’s Malabar Coast.³⁸ Today’s diasporic “World Churches” also have the power to lend financial support and engage in political advocacy on behalf of Christians remaining in the Middle East. However, their intervention may come with a price, if they confirm suspicions among Middle Eastern Muslims regarding the loyalty of local Christians.

During the late nineteenth century, as one historian suggested, local Christians in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire served for some Muslims as “convenient surrogates” for frustrations that Muslims could not vent against Europeans.³⁹ In the early twenty-first century, when the US and its allies were embroiled in Iraq and Afghanistan, when the Israeli–Palestinian conflict remained unresolved, and when the world was still grappling with fallout from the September 11, 2001, attacks and the resulting American “war on terror,” one could say much the same about the vulnerability of Middle Eastern Christians. Between the tug and pull of East and West, Middle Eastern Christians must find ways to survive in the region where Christianity was born.

In sum, Christian peoples have had an illustrious history in the Middle East and North Africa, and have richly contributed to the political, economic, and cultural heritage upon which Islamic civilization has built. Christians have been, and will continue to be, integral members of Middle Eastern societies.

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