

Christian Traditions in the Contemporary Middle East: A Bibliographic Essay

by Matthew Baker

When Christian communities in the Middle East receive media or scholarly attention, it is often in the context of sectarian conflict, as has recently been the case in Iraq and Egypt. Such conflict can indeed be a fact of life for many Christians in that region. Much, however, is obviously missing from the portrayals of the daily news cycle and the frequently partisan domain of the Web. Every Christian tradition, of course, has its historical origins in the area now most often referred to as the Middle East.¹ The geopolitical entities of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Israel, and the Palestinian territories—most fairly recent in their present form—remain home to a number of Christian communities, many of which have existed continuously since the faith's earliest centuries. Although they currently constitute a relatively small percentage of the total population, Christians have long played a significant role in the cultural, political, economic, and religious life of their homelands. The present essay will draw attention to English language works that attempt to convey a fuller, richer sense of the contemporary circumstances of the Middle Eastern Churches.

Christian communities have experienced the full force of some of the past century's most disruptive crises: the genocide and mass deportation that accompanied the failure and dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire; the formation of the State of Israel and the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflicts; the Lebanese Civil War; the Iran-Iraq War; the Gulf War of 1991; and, since 2003, the continuing conflicts precipitated by the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq. Given such vicissitudes, it is not surprising that their recent history has also been characterized by demographic decline. The most common, though by no means only, causes for this decline are the high rate of emigration, often prompted by economic and religious hardship, and a low birth rate relative to other groups—trends that continue to the present day.

Accurate demographic information about Middle Eastern Churches is difficult to establish, and many states do not maintain official statistics on religious affiliation. The *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) puts the Christian population of the region at around 6 percent of the total, down from around 25 percent in 1910.² One reliable estimate finds more than half of indigenous Middle Eastern Christians now reside outside the region, mainly in the Americas, Europe, and Australia.³

Keeping the basic facts about the various Middle Eastern Churches straight can be a challenge for those primarily familiar with European and American forms of Christian tradition. The most common taxonomies organize the

¹ Other terms still sometimes used include the Near East, the Levant, and the Mashreq (Arabic for "east," as distinguished from the Maghreb, or "west," the North African countries west of Egypt and which are overwhelmingly Muslim). Many discussions of Christian Churches in the Middle East, including some mentioned herein, also include Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. The national and regional boundaries do not coincide neatly with cultural and ecclesial realities. For example, the geopolitical puzzle pieces of southeastern Turkey, northern Syria, northern Iraq, and northwestern Iran were for many centuries a more unified cultural and religious zone than at present, a fact that continues to influence the situation of Christians in the region. The main focus of this essay will be Arab, as well as Greek and Armenian, traditions.

² Pacini (see below) roughly agrees on the overall percentage (6.3 percent), while differing quite significantly in some particulars. A key problem is determining the precise number of Copts in Egypt, by far the single largest indigenous Christian group. Figures have ranged from 3,000,000 to more than 10,000,000. In Egypt as elsewhere, there is a tendency for minority groups to overstate, and for governments to understate, the demographic facts. This, in addition to significant migrations of Christians from Iraq, is another reason why Christian population numbers are notoriously tentative.

³ Sebastian Brock, "The Syrian Orthodox Church in the Modern Middle East," in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Anthony O'Mahony and Emma Loosley (London: Routledge, 2010), 17.

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Churches into five main groups, or “families”: Oriental Orthodox, The Church of the East, Eastern (Greek) Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. The first three groups constitute the vast majority of the Christian population in the region. The Roman Catholic presence dates as far back as the First Crusade. Protestantism traces its Middle Eastern origins to nineteenth-century missionary activities, with Roman Catholic communities receiving a boost during the same period.

The various Church traditions are distinguished by theological, liturgical, and institutional differences. In theological terms, the key distinction among them derives from their responses to the Christological pronouncements of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). The last three groups above, for example, accepted the Chalcedonian Definition, which the Oriental Orthodox and Church of the East rejected as heretical, supporting a miaphysite and diaphysite position, respectively. There have recently been a number of attempts made to reconcile and re-establish official relationships between the various churches, however, and ecumenism has been an important emphasis of these Churches in the post-World War II period.

Other differences stem from the liturgical languages and rites. The former include Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Arabic—or, often, Arabic in combination with one of these others. Institutionally, some groups, such as the Syrian Catholic Church and the Maronite Church, are in communion with Rome, while others are autocephalous. A further complexity is added by the fact that church polities—with the exception of the Coptic Orthodox Church, whose members are overwhelmingly located in Egypt—do not correspond to current national boundaries, and there are often at least some members of every community in each Middle Eastern country. For the purpose of establishing a basic framework for discussing the first three families above, the following table, which excludes Roman Catholic and the various Protestant denominations, may be helpful:⁴

Church	Approximate Numbers in the Middle East	Geographical Distribution in Middle East	Ecclesial Center(s)
Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite)	146,300	Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan	Damascus
Church of the East (Assyrian, Nestorian)	110,300	Iraq, Syria, Lebanon	Morton Grove (U.S.A.), Baghdad
Armenian Apostolic	348,700	Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel	Etchmiadzin (Armenia), Cilicia/Antelias (Lebanon), Jerusalem
Coptic Orthodox	6,000,000 (Valognes); 10,293,000 (<i>Atlas of Global Christianity</i>)	Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan	Cairo
Greek Orthodox	959,100	Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Egypt	Alexandria, Damascus, Jerusalem, Istanbul
Maronite	750,000 (Valognes)	Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Egypt	Bkerke (Lebanon)
Chaldean	525,000	Iraq, Syria, Lebanon	Baghdad
Syrian Catholic	101,000	Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt	Beirut
Armenian Catholic	51,200	Syria, Lebanon, Iraq	Beirut
Coptic Catholic	150,000	Egypt	Cairo
Melkite	442,800	Lebanon, Syria, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Palestine	Damascus

⁴ The table is based largely on Pacini (see below). Some figures, while disputed, are provided to give a basic idea of Christian numbers. Places listed under “Geographical Distribution” are given in descending order according to number of Christians per Middle Eastern (Arab) country, and countries with very low numbers (i.e., less than 1,000) are not given. Several commonly used alternate terms are provided for some traditions, despite potentially polemical connotations.

INTRODUCTORY WORKS

Over the years, several brief introductory texts have appeared that provide basic information about the history and contemporary facts of the five families mentioned above. Though more than twenty years old, Norman A. Horner's *A Guide to Christian Churches in the Middle East: Present-day Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa* (Elkhart, IN: Mission Focus, 1989) remains a concise starting point. The book's strengths are no doubt due in large part to the author's long acquaintance with the region. Although the demographic and political information is not current, the text contains useful historical sketches which, unlike some other overviews, touch upon the social and communal dynamics of these complex religious cultures.

A more recent introductory work is Betty Jane and J. Martin Bailey's *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2010). It covers similar ground to Horner, providing a minimum of historical and demographic information necessary to begin answering the question posed by the book's title. There are several introductory chapters to set context; a second section addresses the main church families; a third approaches the matter from the perspective of church-state relations, arranged by country. More explicitly evangelical in tone than Horner's volume, the writers' admirable enthusiasm for their subject sometimes lends itself to an uneven picture of the inter- and intra-religious tensions that can characterize these communities. Despite this shortcoming, the book remains a useful resource for those interested in a "windshield tour" of the region's Christian populations.

MONOGRAPHIC WORKS

Those newer to the subject and searching for a book-length treatment of both historical and modern aspects of Oriental Orthodoxy in the Middle East should consider acquainting themselves with Philip Jenkins's recent *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Jenkins does an admirable job of narrating the histories of Eastern Christian traditions, including those of the Near/Middle East, as well as Central, South, and East Asia. A key focus throughout is on the Syrian Churches, both Jacobite and Assyrian/Nestorian, and chapters 2 and 3 are particularly helpful in providing a vivid historical picture of those traditions. As his title suggests, Jenkins shares the pessimism of many concerning the faith's future in its places of origin. His final chapters attempt to address current events and their bearing on Oriental and other Christian communities. His notes provide useful anchor points for further research, though one laments the lack of a single, comprehensive bibliography.

A couple of other book-length treatments of the history and contemporary conditions of Christians in the Middle East are especially to be commended. The first is Robert Brenton Betts's *Christians in the Arab Middle East: A Political Study* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978). Betts lived and taught for many years in the region and distinguished himself as an important scholar of minorities in the Middle East. A background section summarizes the historical framework through which to understand twentieth-century events, and a further section deals with, as the title indicates, the political significance of Christian communities, a factor without which they cannot be fully understood. Also useful is Kenneth Cragg's well-regarded and readable *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). Like Betts, Cragg resided for years in the Middle East, at one point serving as the Anglican Assistant Bishop of Jerusalem. The first half of the book covers similar ground to Betts's volume, though with a somewhat broader brush. In this regard, the reader might choose the first portion of either Betts or Cragg and come away with a comparable grasp of the Churches' historical underpinnings. The final chapters address important subjects such as the role of Christians in the Nahda, or Arab "renaissance," of the late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which helped modernize education, politics, and the Arabic language, as well as in the harrowing Lebanese Civil War. His chapter on art and liturgy in Arab Christian traditions is an illuminating explication of their aesthetic dimension.

An important, recent contribution to the literature is Sidney H. Griffith's *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Unlike Cragg, of whose work Griffith is somewhat critical due to its emphasis on issues of decline and failure, the book examines "religious, cultural, and intellectual achievements of Arabophone Christians."⁵ While a common narrative emphasizes the eclipse of Eastern Christianity with the coming of Islam in the eighth century C.E., Griffiths shows that Christians under Islam, writing mainly in Arabic and Syriac, continued to play important roles within the dominant Islamic cultures of which they were a part. Important but often-neglected figures such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq (ca. 808-87) and Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286) are discussed. He explores the communal identities that have developed, and how the groups in question coped with a changing status with regard to both Islamic and Christian powers, while continuing to make vital contributions to philosophy, theology, and other disciplines. This important book will command the attention of anyone interested in better understanding the vibrant, complex historical and theological background of today's Middle Eastern Christian communities.

Also worth noting is Antonie Wessels's *Arab and Christian?: Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen, the Netherlands: Pharos, 1995), which approaches the subject by way of chapter-length treatments of the main groups and introduces key historical, theological, and political themes, bringing them up to date to the time of publication. The translation can be awkward in places, but the volume is frequently cited and offers a valuable introduction to the Middle Eastern Churches.

A work not to be missed by those interested in today's Middle Eastern Christians is William Dalrymple's engaging and winsomely written *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey Among the Christians of the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998). A combination of history and travel writing, the book chronicles the author's pilgrimage in the footsteps (more or less) of the sixth-century monk and writer St. John of Moschos (d. 619) and provides insights into both the heritage and contemporary fate of the Turkish, Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, and Egyptian Christian communities. Although he has been criticized for taking too romanticized a view of certain of the communities he chronicles, the reader will undoubtedly finish the book with a more vivid understanding of the subject.

Charles M. Sennott's *The Body and the Blood: The Middle East's Vanishing Christians and the Possibility of Peace* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001) focuses a journalist's lens on the Christian groups in the Holy Land. Though a decade old, it remains a useful aid in understanding the complex political and cultural dynamics of that troubled region.

EDITED WORKS

Two recent edited volumes greatly enhance the understanding of Middle Eastern Christianities and help bring the discussion very much up to date. *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), edited by Andrea Pacini and translated from Italian, considers the current struggles of Middle Eastern Christians from a range of political, demographic, and communal perspectives. While there is a necessary consideration of historical factors, the focus throughout this volume is on understanding the contemporary context. Containing work by leading scholars in their respective areas, it has chapters addressing the significance of Islamization,

⁵ Griffiths, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, 2.

nationalist movements, emigration, problems of minority status and citizenship, cultural contributions to areas such as literature and journalism, and the economic significance of Christian Arab communities in the region. It contains extremely useful appendices summarizing the rites of the various churches and their jurisdictional range—two of the most complex and potentially confusing aspects of the subject. It also has a glossary of key terms.

O'Mahony and Loosely's (eds.) *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East* (London: Routledge, 2010) provides substantial, readable treatments of the Syrian, Maronite, Assyrian, Coptic, Armenian, and Eastern (Greek) Orthodox traditions, as well as a succinct political and theological overview. Each chapter does an excellent job of offering a holistic view of its subject and includes very current information. Like the Pacini volume, the scholars represented, including the editors, are among the most important figures writing in the field.

Also noteworthy is Badr et al.'s *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut, Lebanon: Middle East Council of Churches, Studies & Research Program, 2005). It addresses both historical and contemporary topics, with a number of chapters written by members of indigenous Middle Eastern traditions. Most significant perhaps is a final section on ecumenism, a movement, especially since World War II, which has been an important, if not always realized, aspiration of many of these Christian communities.⁶

REFERENCE WORKS

Several reference works are worth consulting for the historical and cultural background they provide on Middle Eastern Christianity. A. J. Arberry's (ed.) *Religion in the Middle East* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969) remains useful in this regard. Part two of the first volume contains substantial articles on the various churches, including the Coptic, Armenian, and Assyrian, as well as an introductory article by W.H.C. Frend providing a manageable survey of the historical landscape. Volume 5 of *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), edited by Michael Angold, contains excellent historical and contemporary overviews of Byzantine (Greek) and Russian Churches, with section 3 focused on the Oriental Churches. Like Arberry, the historical and cultural canvas is quite broad.

Two recent volumes from Blackwell will be particularly useful. *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007) offers more than twenty article-length chapters providing historical, theological, and practical overviews of each tradition, and include well-chosen and thorough bibliographies. Particularly relevant and engaging topics include Arab Christianity, Armenian Christianity, Coptic Christianity, Oriental Liturgical Traditions, Hagiographic Traditions, and a chapter on sociological approaches to Eastern Christianity more generally. The last three of these are especially helpful in going beyond a mere history of ideas approach and help develop a fuller sense of the "felt life" of the traditions in question. For example, noted liturgical scholar Bryan D. Spinks provides an overview of daily offices, as well as marriage, funeral, ordination, and Eucharistic rites. The chapter on Oriental iconographic and architectural heritages introduces each main tradition and discusses key examples. A substantial bibliography is provided for continued, more detailed study. A related work, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001), provides access to key terms, events,

⁶ The official site of the Middle East Council of Churches (<http://www.mec-churches.org/>), though irregularly maintained, contains some fairly current information on participating bodies and initiatives. At the time of writing, its News Briefs section (http://www.mec-churches.org/news_brief/news_brief_main.htm) provides updates on MECC activities up to August 2008.

and persons relevant to understanding Middle Eastern church traditions. A good number of these are several pages in length and offer bibliographical guidance, while others are quite brief.

Finally, a couple of forthcoming reference works will no doubt be making vital contributions to the study of Middle Eastern Christianity: *The Orthodox Christian World* (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2011) and the *Encyclopedia of Eastern Orthodox Christianity* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, forthcoming 2011).

SUMMARY

Following the bibliographic trails begun in the preceding works will lead the reader to a range of primary and secondary resources treating many aspects of the various traditions addressed in this essay, including works dealing in greater depth with the particular Churches. As this essay was being completed, dramatic events have been unfolding in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere in the region. The broader consequences of these events, as well as their significance for the Christian communities there, are uncertain. Some continue to urge a more integrated role for the Churches in public life, while others warn of further marginalization. It is hoped that the works recommended above will provide useful guidance to those interested in learning more about the contemporary circumstances of these important and dynamic Christian traditions.

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