One

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. Small and large family groups, including young children who can barely walk and the elderly that 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, in age ranging from six to sixteen. They stand next to each other, in a long line, chant the prayers and sing the hymns in alternating choirs, meanwhile 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 the Eve of Dormition, the night before August 15, one of the major Christian festivals of the Middle East. Young and old gathers at the monastery, enjoying each other’s company as much as the tangible presence of the monastery.

A young girl speaks to me in Dutch, with a slight local accent betraying her growing up in the eastern part of the Netherlands, near Enschede. Her family originates in nearby Tur Abdin, in Turkey. This summer they came to Syria, 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 the night 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 put themselves to sleep in the ambulatory of the church. They hope for a special blessing this night, perhaps to finally get pregnant or receive healing from a lingering illness. The rest of the village, however, has a decidedly carnavalesque atmosphere, with the young adults all dressed up, walking the streets flirting and laughing, the smells of food and the sounds of music filling the air. Most people in the village seem to be awake and in the courtyards of the houses the grown-ups sit together, chatting and enjoying traditional cuisine. Not until the next morning the festival is concluded with a communal mass in honor of St. Mary.¹
The above describes a rather ordinary festival in the Middle East, not very different from the way in which Muslims, Druses or Yezidees celebrate their festivals. This is a Christian one, 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 for 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 later were denounced as heretic, like the Syrian Orthodox Church and the ‘Assyrian’ (earlier known as ‘Nestorian’) Church of the East.²

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 by a handful, whether there are twenty deacons to assist or only one, the holy liturgy forms the heart of the orthodox churches. Every Sunday, every major Christian holiday and every Saints’ memorial, the celebration of the eucharist binds together the Christian community, involving body and mind, eye, nose, mouth and ear.

These communal celebrations are complemented by a variety of rituals that reflect the personal piety of the believers: women sleeping in the church, men and women asking for a blessing by a holy man, all visiting the monasteries and the graves of the saints, taking home some earth from such graves – to obtain health, fertility, a reliable spouse and a good future for the children. In addition, many carry protective prayers on paper scrolls, tucked away under clothing or inside the house. In normative description of Orthodoxy these practices have often been disregarded, but the active participation of priests and monks suggests that these forms of religious expression form an inherent part of Orthodox religious life.³

The festivals in northeastern Syria also show that Christianity has a strong public presence in the Middle East. Though both locations are more or less Christian territory (the grounds of the monastery and a village of almost hundred percent Christian inhabitants), the festivals are not closed off from outsiders. The nearby road gives an unhampered view of the many visitors of the monastery, as do the brightly lit towers of the church in Tel Nasri. Whoever wants to join, can come and have a look – as in fact many local Muslim families do, although 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 all over Syria, like in the Khabur region, have reacted by building 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 can be interpreted as an answer to the monastery of the Syrian Orthodox. In the near future, both projects may be dwarfed by the new complex that the Catholic Syrian Christians haves started to build near Qamishli.⁴ The Catholics or Uniates form the second group of churches in the Middle East, the group which constituted the main focus of Pope Benedict’s recent visit to Jordan, Israel and Palestine. These churches mostly originate in the post-tridentine missions of the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century missions, when they could profit from the stable conditions of the Ottoman Empire. Though they separated from the Orthodox Churches, most have retained, to considerable lengths, the distinctive characteristics of orthodox liturgy and ecclesiastical organization.⁵

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western missions introduced the many varieties of Protestantism, later also of Evangelicalism en Pentecostalism, to the Middle East.⁶ This group, compared to Catholics and Orthodox, gained only limited numbers of adherents (in most countries between 1 and 5 percent of the total number of Christians) which mostly originate in the Orthodox
churches. Catholicism was more successful and in some countries, like Lebanon and Iraq, over half of the Christians belongs to a church in union with Rome. In most countries, however, the majority of Christians considers him or herself part of an Orthodox Church.\textsuperscript{7}

\textit{Two}

The girl speaking to me in Dutch was no exception: like many others she spent her holidays in the region where her parents left about thirty years ago. Then, about fifty kilometers north of the monastery, in southeastern Turkey, the Kurdish revolt was at its height. The many Christian villages in the region were caught between the two parties: they were not Kurdish enough to actively engage in the Kurdish fight for regional independence, but certainly also not so Turkish that they would support the Turkish army against the Kurds. In addition, there were other conflicts, over fertile land with the local Kurds, over education in Syriac with the Turkish authorities – like the Kurds, Christians were not allowed to teach children their own language in addition to Turkish. Both sides pressured the Christians to leave, using extortion, threats and kidnappings, underlined by anti-Islamic rhetoric. Many of the Syrian-Orthodox left Tur Abdin and arrived, via Istanbul, in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{8}

The Dormition festival also brought Christians from Iraq to the monastery. They had fled the violence that had erupted after the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In 2004, the violence began to be directed expressly at Christians, especially in Baghdad. On one Sunday in August, five churches were under attack. This coordinated violence, while the number of deaths was relatively low, brought home a clear message: we do not want Christians here. Though many Muslim leaders, of the Kurdish, Sunni and Shi’a communities, publicly condemned the violence against one of the oldest communities of the country, they nor other leaders were able to stop it. In the following years, many Christians fell victim to kidnappings, and the high sums of ransom indicated that criminal motivations were mixed with religious convictions. Many of those kidnapped were later found dead, like the Syrian-Catholic bishop Paulus Faraj Raho of Mosul, one of the many clergy among the victims. Again, many Christians fled, some to the northern part of the country that remained relatively quiet, some to Damascus in Syria and Amman in Jordan. Though some of them have recently returned, or perhaps will return if the situation remains stable, the number of Christians in Iraq has considerably declined, perhaps up to half of their previous number.\textsuperscript{9}

However, this shared history of violence and migration was not restricted to the Dutch or Iraqi families present at the monastery. The two largest communities of Christians of Northeastern Syria, the Syrian Orthodox and the Assyrians, result mainly from migrations of the early twentieth century. They arrived in the region in the twenties and thirties, following the First World War, during which Christian communities in Eastern Anatolia, Armenian, Syrian Orthodox, Chaldean and Assyrian, were deported and murdered on a large scale. Most of the Syrian Orthodox that were at the monastery that summer night, were the children or grand-children of those who had settled in the region in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{10} The Assyrians of the Church of the East, who lived in the Hakkari mountains of Eastern Turkey, had ended up in Iraq after the war. Here they hoped for a semi-independent Assyrian province, repaying them for their military assistance to the British both during and after the war. The early Iraqi independence in 1932 put an end to this expectation. The Assyrian patriarch had difficulties in accepting the new position of the Assyrians in Iraq and some of his men kept resisting and fighting the Iraqi government troops. It was, however, after a group of men had surrendered their weapons, that a group of about 350 men were massacred in cold blood in the village of Semele. In its aftermath,
most of the supporters of the patriarch accepted resettlement in nearby Syria, then under French protection.11

The above examples indicate that it is not possible to give one simple cause for violence against Christians in the Middle East. These episodes, the genocide of the First World War, the flight from Iraq in 1933, the 1970s and 80s in Tur Abdin and the present situation in Iraq, each are the outcome of a very specific, contingent historical situation, each of which needs its own detailed analysis. The most common factor is that of the destabilizing effects of war or economic crisis, causing existing boundaries between communities to be sharpened or new boundaries to be created. Put differently, as much recent research into the history of the Middle East has shown, the immediate cause of such violence is always connected to very concrete, local, socio-economic and political circumstances, often in combination with larger geo-political conflicts.12 Though, as I would hold, the immediate causes are not religious, such violence time and again is legitimized and understood in the concepts of the rivalry between Islam and Christianity. These interpretations not only take place after the events, when history is being re-interpreted in light of then-current themes and discussions, but are found also in sources written during the events itself, Christian as well as Islamic.13

Whereas the internal Islamic developments are something to be discussed by others,14 I would like to focus on such discussions within and about Christianity. In popular as well as scholarly literature, two aspects are often mentioned in connection to the violence and general situation of Christians in the Middle East: on the one hand the contribution of Christian missions to the deterioration of inter-communal relationships in the Ottoman and Persian Empires,15 on the other the ‘dhimmitude’ – the term used to characterize the attitude of Christians and Jews in Muslim-dominated societies, stressing the way in which they presumably internalized and accepted their inferiority as dhimmī-s.16

Undoubtedly Christian missions contributed to the changing relationships between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East. These missions, especially through their educational activities, became one of the most important channels through which Western varieties of modernity were introduced to the region.17 Christians profited from these modernization attempts more than Muslims, not only because they, in general, were more receptive to these innovations that were often seen as Christian, but also because they had more to gain: starting from a secondary position in the early nineteenth century, education and Western contacts provided ways to equality and full citizenship. In this, they were supported by the external political pressures from Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia, which used their political power to strengthen the position of the Christians of the Ottoman Empire,18 as well as by internal developments in Turkey, especially the Tanzimat reforms that started in 1839.19 In this process, the confidence of the Christians increased, the relative political weight of Muslims decreased, and connections between Western and Eastern Christians grew stronger. In this way, Western Christianity contributed significantly to the creation and sharpening of the social and political boundaries between Muslims and Christians. The consequences of this process, which were felt most acutely during World War I, play a role also in the contemporary world, e.g., in Iraq where Christians have to defend themselves against superficial identifications between themselves and Western Christians.

The Christian factor, however, is more complex. Recent research into Christian sources from the Ottoman period, which so far have been explored to a limited extent only, show that also before the arrival of Western missionaries, Christians of the Middle East explicitly worded their dissatisfaction with the powers that be. They too, as would the missionaries of the nineteenth century, expected Islamic dominion to end and the Middle East be restored to its rightful place as the center of global
Christendom. The coming of Western missionaries suggested that this time had now come. And while these missionaries, when they realized the political expectations of the local Christians, tried to disentangle the confluence of the Kingdom of God and the return of Christendom, their attempts were futile in the light of the growing colonial ambitions of the Western powers in the Middle East. This combination of Western colonial presence and Eastern Christian dreams encouraged local Christians to slowly, sometimes even recklessly, depart from their earlier cautious minority politics, looking for ways to attain full equal citizenship or even national independence in a Christian state. These expressions of political ideals indicate that at least in some of the Christian communities, alongside the typical quietist attitude of the dhimmi, whose politics of carefully seeking alliances and publicly showing respect for the majority deserve respect, also the ideals of Christian superiority and dominance were kept alive.

Three

Northeast of the monastery of Mort Maryam, near to Qamishli, a small white church is perched on an old tel. It has three patron saints: Mor Hadbshabbo, Mor Sharbel and Mor Jirjis. Its outer walls carry large colorful tableaus: a praying Jesus, Mary standing on the globe – naturalistic images using a global Christian iconography – alongside typically orthodox images of Mor Sharbel and Mor Hadbshabbo. On the largest one, on the outer side of the eastern wall, images of the three patron saints are combined with an image of the church itself, together with the symbols of two (often rivaling) branches of the Assyrian national movement: the red, blue and white flag with the yellow sun, in the upper left corner, and the yellow Assyrian eagle in the right corner. On the south wall of the church, the nationalist iconography is explicitly connected with the Syrian Orthodox Church, via the pictures of Naum Fayiq (1868-1930), one of the Syrian Orthodox leaders of the national movement, and the learned metropolitan of Mardin, Mor Filoxenus Yuhanna Dolabani (1885-1969), who worked tirelessly for the conservation and wider use of Classical Syriac.

Assyrian nationalism was born from the excavations of the impressive remains of the Assyrian empire in the forties of the nineteenth century. When Austen Henry Layard started to dig up Nineveh, close to Mosul in North Iraq, Christians of various Syriac churches were part of the teams. Almost immediately they linked the people that built this empire with themselves, the Christians of the Syriac tradition. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, this Assyrian nationalism had become popular among Christians in northwest Iran, North Iraq and Eastern Turkey, in all churches that used Classical Syriac in their liturgy, but also in the Protestant churches that had developed in the same period. During and after the War, Assyrian nationalism gained in visibility (also internationally) but also became more and more divided, along the lines of the different churches, or along lines of region and clan.

Assyrian nationalism is only one of the many Christian national movements that developed in the nineteenth century. Armenian nationalism, that in some ways inspired Assyrian nationalism, is generally better known. Both forms built upon existing communal structures of a shared religion (better: church), language, region and history, making use of new Western concepts of ethnicity and nationalism.

While the ethnic constructions of Assyrians and Armenians underlined their separate status within the societies of the Middle East, other Christians used nationalist discourses to motivate their participation in majority politics. This is especially true for Arab nationalism that in the mid-twentieth
century crystallized in the Ba’ath party. One of its founders, Michel Aflaq (1910-1989), was a Christian from Damascus. He, together with Muslim-nationalists, developed a secular political ideology centered around Arabic and its rich literary and religious history, building upon the literary renaissance of the nineteenth century. In his opinion, Arab Christianity formed part of this tradition, even if Islam was to be seen as its summit. This form of nationalism has shaped much of the recent political history of the Middle East, in Syria until today, in Iraq until the fall of Saddam Hussein, and in a slightly different form, also in Palestinian nationalist politics. Many Christians in these countries saw this type of nationalism as a possibility to participate politically and culturally in a way that earlier had been almost impossible.25

Which form of nationalism was the most attractive for any particular group, was most directly linked with the issue of language: Arabic versus minority languages like Aramaic or Armenian. In addition region (city versus countryside or mountain areas) and social class were important indicators. Generally speaking, Arab nationalism proofed more attractive to the Arabic-speaking urban Christians of the middle and higher classes, found most often in the Rum Orthodox, Rum Catholic, Syrian Catholic and Chaldean churches.26

All forms of nationalism, majority as well as minority variants, displayed strong secularist tendencies and were committed to minimize religion’s influence on politics. En passant, not only differences between Muslims and Christians, but also between the different Christian denominations were bridged – it has been suggested that it is precisely the internal divisions among Christians that increased under missionary influence, stimulated the rise of nationalism as a counterweight to such fracturing.27 However, more fundamental than minimizing the influence of religion on politics, was the attempt to minimize the influence of religious leaders in the political arena. Nationalist leaders, therefore, in most cases are better characterized as anti-clerical than as anti-religious: they represent a new elite that gained power at the cost of the worldly power that traditionally belonged to bishops and patriarchs.

There can be little doubt that such forms of secularism are no longer very popular: not only the perversion of the regime of Saddam Hussein or the failure of other Arab leaders, but also the impossibility of completely and definitely separating religion from politics, have enabled religion to return as an important factor in discussions on ethnicity and nationalism. However, even less so than in the early twentieth century, there is an exact one-to-one connection between religion and ethnicity in the early twenty-first century. Many discussions in the Middle East, among Christians themselves as well as between Muslims and Christians, imply the ideal to have religion and ethnicity connected as closely as possible. The debate over the names among Assyrian activists (alongside “Assyrian”, also “Syriac”, “Aramaic”, and “Chaldo-Assyrian” are used) is as much a debate on which group is able to set the standard of historical identification, as it is about whether or not the boundaries of ethnic identification should be congruent with religious, in this case, denominational, boundaries.

This question returns in a slightly different form in the discussion about the controversial position of converts to Christianity from majority Islamic or Jewish communities. Protestant Turks, Pentecostal Iranians or Hebrew-speaking Catholics openly question not only opinions on what is the true religion, but also the mostly implicit connections between religion and ethnicity. Though European history seemed to suggest that national identity can exist without a common religion, recent developments in the Middle East as well as in Europe show that for many people religion and national identity remain strongly connected. Even stronger: in many contexts national identity is dependent on religious identification as one of its most important unifying factors. It is this dependency that is symbolized by the iconography of the little church on the tell near Qamishli: the ethnic Assyrian identity, however
important is has been in developing a strong middle class and secular elite, is largely dependent on the
church – literally, as the wall holding the nationalist message, but much more so figuratively, as the
most reliable and enduring factor in the complex of factors that constitute ethnicity. 28

Four

“Nous sommes tous des chrétiens d’Orient,” “We are all Eastern Christians” – said the French
intellectual Jules Régis Debray at the opening of a colloquium in Paris dedicated to the “future” of the
Christians in the Middle East. 29 Mostly implicit, this thought seems to underlie many articles in the
popular media, whereas also discussions about dhimmitude and its presumed presence in Europe
(‘Eurabia’), inspired by fear of Islamic influence, seem to imply such identification.

One can hardly deny that Western and global Christianity in many ways are directly connected
with the Christianities of the Middle East. This became clear recently, when Pope Benedict visited
Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Where most of the secular media (at least in the
Netherlands) focused on the repercussions of the Pope’s visit for the relationship between Christianity,
Judaism and Islam, or between the Vatican and the State of Israel, the Pope’s sermons and speeches,
published on the website of the Vatican, indicate that his main interest was not in interreligious
dialogue. Most of his sermons were directed at a Christian public. Among these were the bishops and
patriarchs of the various Catholic and Orthodox Churches of the region (including those of Iraq and
Syria) and representatives of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. In addition, many local and
international religious orders and congregations had been invited, alongside those involved in Catholic
education, health care and social work, and numerous Catholic lay men and women. 30 At the occasion
of the mass at the Eastern Wall of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Pope said:

I hope my presence here is a sign that you are not forgotten, that your persevering presence
and witness are indeed precious in God’s eyes and integral to the future of these lands.
Precisely because of your deep roots in this land, your ancient and strong Christian culture,
and your unwavering trust in God’s promises, you, the Christians of the Holy Land, are called
to serve not only as a beacon of faith to the universal Church, but also as a leaven of
harmony, wisdom and equilibrium in the life of a society which has traditionally been, and
continues to be, pluralistic, multiethnic and multireligious. 31

Like the Pope, I hardly need to elaborate on the special position of Christians in the Middle East. In
his speeches, unobtrusive sentences refer to “places hallowed by Christ’s presence” and to the crucial
role that the land has played in the history of Christianity. In an interesting conflation of pre-modern
and modern concepts of pilgrimage, the pope acknowledged the blessings that result from the
possibility to “see” and “touch” the “historical realities which underlie our confession of faith in the
Son of God.” 32

When this special position of the Holy Land is the starting point, it seems natural that the
Christians of this land, being the direct descendants of the first Christians, with an ongoing connection
to the Holy Places, should carry a special responsibility: for the continuation of Christianity in the land
of its birth, for the protection of the Holy Places, for the dissemination of the universal message of
peace and unity, and as ‘beacon of faith’ for global Christianity. 33

Pope Benedict said hardly anything new here. His message corresponds closely to a long tradition
of Western Christian thinking about the Middle East. In the nineteenth century, building upon the
older Catholic traditions, Catholic and Protestant missionaries developed their own separate concepts
of the Holy Land, with, however, a number of shared elements: the land as being blessed by Christ’s presence, the land as a source of scholarly knowledge about the Bible and Christian history, the land as an essential part of Christendom, and the land as the location of the eschatological future, where the battle with the enemies of God would be fought and won. Note of course that in the further developments of these ideas, interesting differences between Catholics and Protestants are seen, for instance in the Catholic focus on the traditional Holy Places (during the Pope’s recent visit the issue of the Upper Room (*Coenaculum*), the presumed location of the Last Supper, was a point of discussion), over and against the Protestant preference for places ‘outside’, in the open: the Mount of Olives, the Garden Tomb and the shores of Lake Galilee.

These differences, however, are insignificant in view of the structural resemblances, also with regard to the position of the Eastern Christians in these concepts. In both traditions the local Christians figure as an instrument to attain higher objectives in the Middle East: the conversion of Jews and Muslims, the recovery of the land from Islamic rulers or the protection of the Holy Places for the benefit of Western pilgrims. To attain such goals, they had to be converted to Western types of Christianity, because the Eastern churches generally were judged as heretical or at least wanting in many respects. Despite the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism in the kind of Christianity they prefer, the mechanisms are much the same: Eastern Christians are expected to function as a kind of Trojan horse for Western Christianity, to represent, keep and spread its ideals in its land of origin.

Compared to the nineteenth century, today’s Western churches generally are more positive about Eastern Christianity. This is not only caused by the Orthodox Churches’ growing interaction with Western Christianity and its taking over some of its theologies and practices. Sometimes, earlier negative stereotypes have changed to the exact opposite, to a sincere and deep admiration of these Middle Eastern traditions. This was expressed by the Pope when he referred to their “ancient and strong Christian culture”, as it is reflected in growing attention to the non-Greek, i.e. Semitic or Syriac roots of Christianity – one may think here of the popularity of William Dalrymple’s *From the Holy Mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* and Philip Jenkins’ *The Lost History of Christianity*. In my opinion, however, the underlying mechanism has changed less than the change of tone suggests: also today Eastern Christianity is seen as the paper unto which Western Christianity can write its history, also today Eastern Christians are seen as representatives from the West, and also today, their threats are seen as threats to Christianity in the West. Parallel to the growing presence of Islam in the West, these threats also literally are identified as the same: that of Islam as the enduring and most dangerous rival of Christianity: “Nous sommes tous des chrétiens d’Orient”.

**Five**

Though I do not regard such forms of identification as irrelevant for scholarly research and academic teaching, such motivations tend to narrow the explanatory schemes in understanding developments in the Middle East. Identification all to easily leads to copying of the agendas of those involved, in East and West, and one risks that the rivalry between Islam and Christianity becomes the only relevant theme.

As the above will have made clear, I certainly do not propose to circumvent this topic that needs to be addressed when studying Christianities in the Middle East. Rivalry between these two major religions is important in understanding the public presence of Christianity, the violence that this group once and again has endured, the way in which religion is connected to national identity and the way in
which the ‘West’ remains fascinated with what happens in the Middle East. The expertise of my colleagues here in Leiden, in the fields of Islamic theology and jurisprudence as well in the complex historic and social realities of the Middle East, will help to keep this topic on the agenda without reverting to simplifying stereotypes.

However, the academic study of Middle Eastern Christianity is more than a way to study the more or less successful variants of the plural societies of the region. Despite the fact that there is already a longstanding history of research into so-called ‘non-Western’ Christianity, until today there is a strong tendency to approach Christianity as if it is no more than a Western, usually Protestant, religion, with on the one hand its more orthodox and evangelical forms, on the other the liberalist interpretations of the 1970s and later. If and when Christianity in other regions and continents is being taken into account, the questions and themes of European Christianity seem to be leading, especially since Euro-American Christianity is seen as the only source of Christianity in other parts of the world. However, Christianity in Mexico, Kenya, the islands of the Pacific, India or China, each developed its own characteristics that cannot be reduced to Western import.

As I hope to have made clear today, this is also true for Christianity in the Middle East. Its relaxed connections between religious ritual and popular festivals, the haunting memories of genocide and deportation, national pride that as a matter of course includes the church, and its direct identification with the apostles of the first Christian century, distinguishes these Christians from those in other parts of the world. From a Western perspective, colored by recent Christian hegemony, public secularization and strong individualization of religious belief and practice, such Christianity may seem as strange as Islam. One of the most important goals of the study of Eastern Christianity is to describe and analyze this strangeness, understanding Middle Eastern Christianity in its Middle-Eastern context.

Finally, in view of this particular chair, the study of Middle Eastern Christianity, can and should provide a way to better understand the global varieties and internal dynamics of Christianity. It is this global dynamic that in earlier approaches to both ‘World Christianity’ and ‘Eastern Christianity’ has not been given full attention. In all of the four themes that I discussed today, the interaction between various forms of global Christianity is crucial to the processes. Marian devotion in Syria, also among the Orthodox, is strongly influenced by Latin Catholic practices. This includes the use of the typical sky blue color, the scarves from Lourdes and the ubiquitous rosaries. The congregational worship of charismatic Maronites in Lebanon or Pentecostals in Tehran witness to the fact that such Western (or ‘southern’) influences enriched Middle Eastern Christian ritual. On a much wider scale, Western-Christian concepts of eschatology, nationalism, secularization and individualization, thoroughly influenced thought and practice of the local churches.

Whereas Western hegemony caused many ideas to travel from West to East, global influences also traveled in the opposite direction. The new forms in the East are not identical copies of their Western originals but rather the result of creative combinations resulting from local pick and choose from the whole missionary package. And after the global contacts of Middle-Eastern Christians intensified as a result of the twentieth-century diaspora and new fast and cheap ways of communication such as telephone, the world wide web and satellite TV, these Christians more and more began to influence other types of Christianity. This included the formation of orthodox churches in unexpected contexts such as Japan and Indonesia, but also the renewal of Western Christianity through the venerable spiritual traditions of the East.

In Jerusalem, the Pope characterized this city as a “microcosm of our globalized world.” The Christianity of the Middle East presents another of such microcosms, reflecting the varieties and dynamics, or, one might say, the tensions and rivalries, of World Christianity. Though light may not
come only from the East, the study of this microcosm can help us to identify the problems as well as the answers given so far.


3 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 (Beiruter Texte und Studien 126: Beirut: Orient-Institut Beirut, 2008), 139-153. 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.

4 This is being built not far from Qamishli; in January 2009 only the outlines and fo...


6 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 en Arthur Manukyan (eds), Protestanten im Orient [Orthodoxie, Orient und Europa, Band 1] (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag 2009). At the time of writing, no in-depth studies on the history of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches in the Middle East have been published.

7 It is difficult to find reliable numbers of Christians in the Middle East, partly because of the diversity of Churches that not always keep accurate track of membership, partly because the difficult demographics in general. Compare David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; 2nd ed.). 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 seem already to high for 2001 (e.g., in the case of Lebanon where official numbers are given that are kept high for political reasons), partly because considerable numbers of Christians left since that time. On the Ottoman period, see Youssef Courbage, “Démographie des communautés chrétiennes au Proche-Orient. Une approche historique,” Confluences Méditerranéen 66 (2008), 27-44. In the same issue (entitled Chrétiens d’Orient) also other articles discuss the demography of Middle Eastern Christianity.


9 The history of these recent events has not been written yet; for a first inventory see Preti Tanega, Report: Assimilation, Exodus, Eradication: Iraq’s minority communities since 2003 (© Minority Rights Group International 2007, website: http://www.minorityrights.org/5728/iraq/sources-and-further-reading.html; last checked 15/6/9). See also the website of Aina International News Agency (www.aina.org; last checked 15/6/9) for the Assyrian perspective. For an overview of the discussion within the Assyro-Chaldean community world wide, see my “Zinda Magazine en de “Chaldo-Assyriërs” van Irak: een minderheid met een missie”, in Tom Mikkers, Ineke Smit (red.), Tussen Augustinus en athéisme: Kerkhistorische Studiën 2006 (Leiden 2006), 175-185.

10 For their history, see Bohas & Florence Hellot-Bellier, Talay, Teule and Tamcke (n.1 and 2); the inclusion of the Syriac communities among what is generally seen as the Armenian genocide, is discussed in David Gaunt, Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I (Piscataway NJ: Gorgias Press 2006). The Armenian genocide has been studied widely, for a somewhat broader approach, see Razmik Panossian, The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars (New York: Columbia University Press 2006).


12 See, e.g., the story of the priest Melki Tok of the village of Miden in Tur Abdin. He structured his narrative of his kidnap by a Sunni-fundamentalist Kurdish group in 1994 through the opposition between Islam and Christianity and the connection between the local Syrian Orthodox community and that of the diaspora (especially in Germany): see Shabo Talay, *Lebendig begraben. Die Einführung des syrisch-orthodoxen Priesters Melki Tok von Miden in der Südosttürkei. Einführung, Aramäischer Text (Turoyo), Übersetzung und Glossar* [Studien zur Orientalischen Kirchengeschichte, Band 29] (Münster: LIT 2004).

13 One might think here of the study of the ways in which Islamic societies dealt with religious minorities, especially in what is called the Ottoman ’millet system’. For a concise overview, see Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

14 This neologism was popularized by Bat Ye’or; compare her first work: *Le Dhimmi: Profil de l’opprimé en Orient et en Afrique du Nord depuis la conquête arabe* (Paris: Editions Anthropos, 1980), whose English translation introduced the word to the wider intellectual debate: *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (London: Associated University Presses, 1985), even stronger so after her second book was translated: *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (idem, 1996). Both books were published with a foreword by Jaques Ellul.

15 Compare alongside Kieser, Makdisi (n.16) and Murre-van den Berg (n.6) also my introductory article “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), 458-472. This volume of the *Cambridge History of Christianity* offers a good introduction into the larger context of missionary activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

16 Note, however, that the connection between a Western Christian ideology and the political agendas certainly was not one to one; on the British case, see Eitan Bar Yosel, *The Holy Land in English Culture, 1799-1917* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 2005).


18 This development needs further research, for an overview, see H.L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language. The Introduction and Development of Literary Urnna Aramaic in the Nineteenth Century* (Publication of the “De Goeje Fund” no. XXVIII, Leiden 1999), 35-8; see also Wolhارت Heinrichs, “The Modern Assyrians – Name and Nation,” R. Contini (ed), *Semitica: Serta Philologica Constantino Iseretelli Dicata* (Turin: Silvio Zamorani Editore 1993), 99-114. Kieser (n.16) has more on missionary involvement in the development of nationalism.

19 On Armenian nationalism, see Panossian (n.10); on the Assyrians, see in addition to the literature in the previous note, also Joseph (n.12) and, from a post-war nationalist perspective, the Anglican missionary W.A. Wigram, *Our Smallest Ally: A Brief Account of the Assyrian Nation in the Great War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), and *The Assyrians and

25 On Arab nationalism, see Bassam Tibi, Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997; eerste druk 1981) and Aided Dawisha, Arab Nationalism in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003). Twentieth-century Arab nationalism has strong roots in the nineteenth century, see the classic work of George Antonius, The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938); this work, however, underestimates the importance of Ottoman nationalism in the Arab provinces, see recently Keith David Waterpauw, Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism and the Arab Middle Class (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2006) who takes the multi-religious middle class of Aleppo as starting point for his analysis.

26 Compare my “Classical Syriac, Neo-Aramaic and Arabic in the Church of the East and the Chaldean Church between 1500 and 1800”, in Holger Geella, Margaretha L. Folmer (eds.), Aramaic in its Historical and Linguistic Setting [Veröffentlichungen der Orientalischen Kommission 50], (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2008), 335-352, and “Chaldeans and Assyrians: the Church of the East in the Ottoman Period”, in Hunter (ed.), The Christian Heritage of Iraq (n. 3), 146-164.

27 Murre-van den Berg, From a Spoken to a Written Language, 75.

28 All too often, the development of ethnic identities among the Christian communities of the Middle East have been interpreted one-sidedly as Western influence. It is not difficult to trace such Western influences: via missionary schools, commercial contacts and study abroad new ideas on people and nation also reached Eastern Christians. Undoubtedly, modern nineteenth-century Christian nationalism was largely dependent on influences from America, France and Russia. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that through the ages orthodox theology stressed the importance of ‘nation’ as the primary constituent of ‘church’. The use of local languages in the liturgy, too re-emerging under Protestant influences, relies on older orthodox preferences for linguistic contextualization. Also the idea of the twelve apostles which each converted a specific part of the world and raised an independent church with specific cultural characteristics connects the concepts of nation and church – regional autonomy is fundamental and underlines the national character of the church. I wonder whether without this older theological basis enlightenment nationalism had raised the same enthusiasm among Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians. On this topic, see also Panossian (n. 10) who argues along the same lines for the Armenians.

29 See Bernard Heyberger, quoting this in “Les chrétiens d’Orient entre le passé et l’avenir,” Les Cahiers de l’Orient 93 (2009), 9-21. The reference took place on 16 to 17 November 2007, and was organized by the École Pratique des Hautes Études and the new Institut Européen des Sciences Religieuses, founded in 2005, among others by Debray. In France there is a lot of public attention for the position of Christianity in the Middle East, also from intellectuals like Debray who considers himself as an ‘atheist Christian’. In addition to the above magazine, bookshops carried: Antoine Sfeir, Chrétiens d’Orient: Et s’ils disparaiissaient? (Montrouge: Bayard, 2009) and Annie Laurent, Les chrétiens d’Orient vont-ils disparaître? Entre souffrance et espérance (Paris: Salvador, 2008). These works, different from the more academic issues of Les Cahiers de l’Orient and Confluences Méditerranée (n. 7), use Bat Ye’or’s dhimmitude phramework. The ‘disappearance’* of Christians from the Middle East is an important theme elsewhere, e.g. the cover story of the June issue of National Geographic (2009, “Arab Christians: The Forgotten Faithful”), Der Spiegel in the same period published a special issue devoted to Jeruzalem (3/2009), with an article “Exodus ohne Ende” on the Christians of Israel/Palestine and a series of articles under the title “Jesuansehnsuch, Jerusalemwahn”.

30 See the Vatican’s website (www.vatican.va > The Holy Father > Travels > Apostolic Voyages outside Italy > Holy Land (May 8-15, 2009)) (last checked, 17-06-2009).

31 Ibid; “Mass in the Valley of Josaphat in Jerusalem (May 12, 2009)” [emphasis mine]. See also his speech in Nazareth, where he compared Christianity of the Middle East with the young girl Mary, insignificant and modest, but chosen to be an instrument for the salvation of mankind: “Celebration of vespers with bishops, priests, men and women religious, ecclesial and pastoral movements of Galilee in the upper Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth (May 14, 2009)”: “In the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Christians form a minority of the population. Perhaps at times you feel that your voice counts for little. Many of your fellow Christians have emigrated, in the hope of finding greater security and better prospects elsewhere. Your situation calls to mind that of the young virgin Mary, who led a hidden life in Nazareth, with little by way of worldly wealth or influence. Yet to quote Mary’s words in her great hymn of praise, the Magnificat, God has looked upon your servant in her lowliness, he has filled the hungry with good things. Draw strength from Mary’s canticle, which very often we will be singing in union with the whole Church throughout the world! Have the confidence to be faithful to Christ and to remain here in the land that he sanctified with his own presence! Like Mary, you have a part to play in God’s plan for salvation, by bringing Christ forth into the world, by bearing witness to him and spreading his message of peace and unity”. Note that in the same sermon, the Pope explicitly mentioned the Hebrew-speaking Catholics: “And in this place where Jesus himself grew to maturity and learned the Hebrew tongue, I greet the Hebrew-speaking Christians, a reminder to us of the Jewish roots of our faith.”

32 Ibid; “Mass in the Valley of Josaphat in Jerusalem (May 12, 2009)”: “Dear friends, in the Gospel we have just heard, Saint Peter and Saint John run to the empty tomb, and John, we are told, “saw and believed” (Jn 20:8). Here in the Holy Land, with the eyes of faith, you, together with the pilgrims from throughout the world who throng its churches and shrines, are blessed to “see” the places hallowed by Christ’s presence, his earthly ministry, his passion, death and resurrection, and the gift of his Holy Spirit. Here, like the Apostle Saint Thomas, you are granted the opportunity to “touch” the historical realities which
underlie our confession of faith in the Son of God.” On the one hand Benedict refers to the immediate, bodily connection to salvation via see, touch and experience (part of pilgrim theology from the third century onwards), on the other hand to the relationship with the “historical reality” – a term that refers to nineteenth and twentieth-century fascinations with the Holy Land as a source of scholarly knowledge about the Bible and early Christianity. For this historicization of pilgrimage, see n.34.

33 Note that the Pope, probably intentionally, does not mention the ongoing rivalry between Catholics and Orthodox, and between the various Orthodox communities, with respect to the possession and maintenance of the Holy Places. For the Holy Sepulcher, where this rivalry is most acute, see Raymond Cohen, *Saving the Holy Sepulcher: How Rival Christians Came Together to Rescue Their Holiest Shrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008).


36 A possible exception to this pattern were the Christians of the American Colony in Jerusalem; they appear to ignore the Palestinian Christians almost completely, first in the context of a millenialist worldview focusing on the restoration of the Jews, later from a liberal Protestant perspective that sees itself (also after living in Palestine for fifty years) as ‘transnational’ and non-Palestinian; compare Murre-van den Berg, “‘Our Jerusalem’: Bertha Spafford Vester and Christianity in Palestine during the British Mandate,” in Rory Miller (ed.), *Palestine, Britain and Empire: The Mandate Years* (Aschgate; in press).

37 Dalrymple’s book was published in 1997 (London: HarperCollinsPublishers). Its continuous popularity (recently a new Dutch edition was published) has the unfortunate effect of suggesting that the difficult situation in Turkey in the late 1980s and early 1990s is still unchanged. Jenkins’ book (*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: Harper, 2008), has not yet received much public attention in the Netherlands. Both the title and the contents do not do justice to Christianity in the Middle East, not only because his extensive bibliography indicates that one can hardly speak about a ‘forgotten’ history, but also because the book presents a romanticizing and essentialist image of this type of Christianity. In addition, his discussion of ‘decline’ of Eastern Christianity is one-sidedly informed by the rivalry between Islam and Christianity.


40 Paus, ibid, Valley of Josaphat, “Jerusalem, in fact, has always been a city whose streets echo with different languages, whose stones are trod by people of every race and tongue, whose walls are a symbol of God’s provident care for the whole human family. As a microcosm of our globalized world, this City, if it is to live up to its universal vocation, must be a place which teaches universality, respect for others, dialogue and mutual understanding; a place where prejudice, ignorance and the fear which fuels them, are overcome by honesty, integrity and the pursuit of peace. There should be no place within these walls for narrowness, discrimination, violence and injustice. Believers in a God of mercy – whether they identify themselves as Jews, Christians or Muslims – must be the first to promote this culture of reconciliation and peace, however painstakingly slow the process may be, and however burdensome the weight of past memories.”

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