Christianity and Islam: Demography in the Middle East

At all four corners of the earth: the Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia), Indonesia (Moluccas, East-Timor), Africa (Sudan), as well as the Holy Land (Nazareth), Islam and Christianity seem in contention of modem survival. Hence, the representation, which currently prevails over Europe, of a perpetual conflict. However, this vision maintained, at least in the Arab world as well as in Turkey, religious uniformity — currently the norm — does not date back to the beginning of time. Between the 7th century, which witnessed the birth of Islam, and the preceding century, the relationship between the two religions was not just conflictual. On more than one occasion and in more than one place Christianity would come to know unexpected recoveries.1

In order to estimate the changes in the relationship between Christianity and Islam, it is important to banish a priori the ideologies and the explanations while having recourse to gauges as impartial as possible. In this respect, demography is a particularly efficient tool to gauge the relative variations of the two groups by means of five processes: 1) conversion of the失效s, families or ethnic groups; 2) massacres, which remained exceptional until the early 20th century (Armenians in the Ottoman Empire); 3) immigration and emigration, by coercion or by free choice, differentiated on the basis of religion; 4) inter-marriage, between Muslim men and Christian women, which leads to a second generation of uniquely Muslim children, and 5) birth and death rates of different magnitude leading to divergence in the growth of amongst Chris- tians and Muslims.

The existing data demonstrate that for Islam to be durably installed in the Arab Orient, nine long centuries were to be necessary, from the Hegira to the end of the Mameluk. It is thus not an instantaneous religious mutation as many imagine. The conquest of souls was accelerated by the theological and national issues which undermined Christianity from within. The status of Muslims确认ed for the People of the Book had demographic effects in the opposite sense: it allowed for Christian initiatives to perpetuate themselves, but stimulated conversions at the same time. The Christian nucleus which submitting to the east of the Mediterranean re- vealed itself incompressible, which was not to the case for the Maghreb, where the dynas- ties threatened by the Christian reconquest (Almoravides and Almohades) and spurred on the zeal of neophytes, drove the last survivors of autochthonous Christianity to conversion.

The native Christianities were more than once victim to East-West confrontation, which overwhelmed the_rect of the Crusades naturally opposed Christianity and Islam but also placed face to face the Chris- tians of the East and Christians of the West who had little in common. Intimidation and humiliation imposed by the crusaders and their Latin clergy quickly transformed the mistrust into a rupture. This more than two century-long intrusion of the West was to have after effects, one of which being the appearance of a fundamentalist Islam, mistrustful of difference. It imposed itself on the Christianity of the East, reducing it in terms of population and spiritual influence. The spirit of the Crusades did not vanish all of the sudden. When, in 1380, Charles X sent his troops to tackle the coasts of North Africa, autochthonous Christianity had been gone since several centuries prior. Reviving the spirit of the Crusades, a half a millennium after the fall of Acre (1291) the monarch still re- tained the objective of reconquest, for the benefit of the ‘true’ religion, of the ancient lands of Christianity. The failure of the Christian enterprise was patent obvious in terms of religion, but paradoxically, not at all for lan- guage: nearly 40 years after independence, the degree of the French language continues to become more profound.

Because they had conquered the Christian territories before the East and the Arab Maghreb, by means of frequent marriages with Christian, Greek, or Arabian princesses and ordinary women, the Ottomans ac- quired a lot of experience in the use of inter-denomina- tional dialogue. The special treatment they reserved for Christian minorities, no- matter how few, was an echo of the superiority of the Christian birth rate. In turn, the differences in mortality increased the gap between the two religious groups, the Christians being traditionally exempt from military service, whose duration was reduced to 12 years of service only in 1912. The hundreds of armed conflicts in Ottoman his- tory accentuated an exceptionally high death rate among Muslims, who were al- ready vulnerable in times of peace. Epi- demo- logists, indeed, wrote for many years, amongst Muslims than Christians, due to differ- ences in the practices implemented to deal with them. Lastly, the development of training and modern medicine, both linked to the institutions of the millet, would con- tribute to the relatively early decrease in mortality amongst Christians.

The end of the Ottoman Empire strongly marks the end of Christianity in its Turkish component and its decline or eclipse in its Arab component. In the Ottoman Empire, or more precisely, under the Young Turks and then under the Kemalist Republic, nearly 3 million Christians have already been converted to nationalism and the birth of modern Turkey with their lives or by their exile. There were 1.2 million Armenians in 1914 and only 77 thousand left in 1927, 1.5 million Greeks before the 1914-1918 war, of which only 136 000 were ensured by the demographic change that was to mark the recording numbers of Christians. The proportion of Christians within the total population had culminated around 1914 with 26% in the whole of the Near East: 59% in Lebanon (Greater Lebanon), 11% in Palestine, 10% in Syria, 8% in Egypt and 2% in Iraq. Today, Christians have fallen below 10% (2.9 % in 1990; 40% in Lebanon, 6.4% in Syria, 5.9% in Egypt, 3.6% in Palestine (West Bank of Jor- dan, East Jerusalem and Gaza), 2% in Israel, 1.5% in Iraq. This spectacular drop which brings Christianity back to the pre-Ottoman era owes nothing to conversions, which re- main extremely rare, or to forced population displacement, nor to massacres (apart from those perpetrated in the Levant in 1915 and 1918, and in Iraq in 1933 and in Lebanon from 1975- 1990 where all the communities paid a com- mon toll with human lives). It does perhaps have a little to do with mixed marriages. The international migrations, on the other hand, contributed to a strong recomposition of the populations to be found in Istanbul and toward America, Africa or Australia of Chris- tian populations — more than that of Muslims. From a regional point of view, the emigra- tion of Christian Egyptians, Syrians, Palestini- ans, and Iraqis to Lebanon, where Christians were well represented, accelerated the emigra- tion of their presence in the countries of departure, all the while allowing Lebanon to conserve an important Christian minority. However, it was principally the trends in fer- tility, reversed in disfavour of the Christians at the eve of the 20th century, which were decisive in the decrease in Christianity. Hav- ing entered earlier than the Muslims in the process of demographic transition and hav- ing opted for smaller families, the Christians would paradoxically pay the price of this early modernization process with a decrease in their relative numbers: a phenomenon which is accentuated and paradoxically continued. Today, however, the differences in fertility according to religion are fading. Muslims are entering, just as the West, into the current of demographic transition.