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AN EXPLORATION  
OF THE CHRISTIAN -  
MUSLIM LANDSCAPE IN  
MODERN SYRIA AND THE  
CONTRIBUTION OF EASTERN  
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT TO  
INTERRELIGIOUS DYNAMICS

A n d r e w   A s h d o w n

Introduction

This paper considers Christian-Muslim relations in modern Syria and the importance that eastern Christian thought can make to the interreligious context within the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>

The paper concludes that the significance of the theology and spirituality of the 'Antiochene' paradigm has been under-recognised in western discourse and that, having coexisted within the cultural environment of Islam, it is uniquely placed to play a major role in Christian-Muslim dialogue and the reframing of Islam's engagement with modern society.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a brief summary of edited sections of a thesis for which the author was awarded a PhD in 2019. The work was published in November 2020 by Routledge as 'Christian-Muslim Relations in Syria: Historical and Contemporary Dynamics.' These edited sections are reproduced with permission.

## Christian landscape

Christianity is deeply embedded within the religious and cultural identity of Syria. Yet, although “eastern Christianity constitutes one of the largest Christian traditions in the world,” it has been significantly understudied until recent years.<sup>2</sup> Prior to the Islamic conquest, there was a diverse Christian presence across the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula, which evolved to include all five families of the Christian Church. Today, Damascus is home to the three Antiochene Patriarchates of the Eastern ‘Antiochian’ Orthodox, the Syriac Orthodox and Melkite Catholic Churches.

Whilst the initial Muslim invasions were often brutal,<sup>3</sup> Christians adopted the Arabic language during the 8th-9th centuries and became vital conduits of Greek philosophy and theological dialogue, playing an important administrative role in the courts of the Caliphs. The violence of the Crusades in the 11th and 12th centuries caused lasting tensions for eastern Christians with their fellow Muslim citizens. But it was also a time of encounter between western and eastern Christendom and Islam.

Under Ottoman rule, the millet system allowed non-Muslim communities a degree of administrative autonomy. However, dhimmi status imposed a second-class citizenship, subject to the jizya and multiple other taxes. The situation for Christians improved during the Tanzimat political and economic reforms in 1857–1860. However, the freedoms given to non-Muslims and the advantages these offered Christian communities through strengthening trade opportunities with Europe, caused tension and violence between Christians and Muslims that exploded into serious riots in Lebanon and Syria in 1850 and 1860.

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony O’Mahony, “Eastern Christianity and Jesuit Scholarship on Arabic and Islam. Modern History and Contemporary Theological Reflections,” in *Philosophy, Theology and the Jesuit Tradition*, edited by Peter Gallagher, Anna Abram, and Michael Kirwan, 159–186 (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 159.

<sup>3</sup> See: Bat Ye’or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam. From Jihad to Dhimmitude* (Cranbury (New Jersey), Port Credit (Ontario), and London (England): Associated University Press, 1996).

Whilst the millet no longer exists, the principles of administrative autonomy continue to be reflected in religious structures.

The Christian plurality of the region expanded in the 18th century when the Catholic family of Churches were established. Protestants arrived in the 19th and 20th centuries. Today, all five ‘families’ of the Christian Church: the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Catholic, Protestant/Evangelical and Assyrian Church of the East are present in Syria. The Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches have always found the presence of western Christianity, inherently different in structure and theology, challenging. This has often been a source of disunity and division, but ecumenical relations have much improved in recent years, especially in the face of the challenges caused by conflict and religious extremism. These challenges have also led to a significant re-examination by eastern Christians of their role and identity in the region.

Since the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Christian population in ‘Greater Syria’ has declined from about 30% of the population to less than 5%. Conflict and emigration due to economic, cultural and political factors, have all played a role in this decline. The genocide in Turkey; events in Israel/Palestine; the rise of militant Islamism; the consequences of recent regional conflicts; have all had a devastating impact on the Christian presence. And fear of the militant Islamism that has characterised most of the external ‘opposition’ in the Syrian conflict has caused many Syrians to continue to support the Syrian government during the recent conflict. As Razek Siriani writes:

The reason for the large-scale emigration is that many Christians (...) fear that a society marked by tolerance, safety, plurality and coexistence will be replaced by one that is exclusive, monolithic and fanatically Islamic. Such fears are not exclusive to Christians. Many Muslims have opted to leave the country for similar reasons.<sup>4</sup>

Yet for centuries Syria has been a place of refuge – for Armenians and Syrians, Iraqis and Palestinians. The country has played an impor-

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<sup>4</sup> Razek Siriani, “Syria,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Mariz Tadros, Kenneth Ross, and Todd Johnson, 102–113 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 109.

tant role in the renaissance of eastern Christianity. During the recent conflict, religious leaders have played a key role in peace-building initiatives and have worked hard to encourage and restore trust within society and provided significant levels of humanitarian support to local communities.

### Muslim landscape

The Muslim landscape in Syria is also far from uniform in political, social or religious expression. Pierret writes: “There is no such thing as a unified ‘Syrian’ religious scene.”<sup>5</sup> The pre-war figure of 87% of the population as Muslim includes all Muslim communities, including Kurds, Shi’a sects including Alawites, Isma’ili and Druze. There has long been resentment amongst some Sunnis that the Alawite minority have held power for over 40 years and promoted secular modernity.<sup>6</sup> Yet the Ba’ath Party, under both Bashar and his father, Hafez Al Assad, has included representation from all communities within Parliament and the Army leadership and has encouraged religious freedom. For this reason, many Syrians are opposed to political Islamism and support Arab nationalism. The tension between these two paradigms has been considerable in Middle Eastern politics in recent decades.

Islam in Syria has been deeply impacted by the Islamic ‘reform’ movements and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood was bitterly opposed to the secular nationalist movements in Syria, Iraq and Egypt. Dividing itself into political and militant wings which committed multiple acts of violence, the Muslim Brotherhood was crushed and outlawed in Syria in the 1980s. But its exiled leaders have continued to wield significant influence in supporting the militant opposition and western allies in the Syrian conflict. Nevertheless,

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed studies on the history of the Alawites, and how and why they came to hold the balance of power, see: Leon T. Goldsmith, *Cycle of Fear. Syria’s Alawites in War and Peace* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2015); Michael Kerr and Craig Larkin, eds., *The Alawis of Syria. War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*. (London: C. Hurst & Co. (Publishers) Ltd., 2015); Stefan Winter, *A History of the Alawis. From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic* (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016).

a critic of the Syrian government and former member of Parliament, Muhammad al-Habash (b. 1962) admitted: “Almost all Syrians are moderates and centrists; they do not support the war and destruction but instead seek reconciliation and coexistence.”<sup>7</sup>

Prior to the conflict, the polarisation of Sunni and Shi’a; the strengthening of Shari’a law in conservative Sunni ideology; the secular constitution of the country; the rise of minority communities; the presence of large numbers of refugees from Iraq and Palestine; the impact of post- 9/11 wars launched by the United States and its allies<sup>8</sup>, and decentralised authority within Sunni Islam – all had an effect on how the Islamic landscape was evolving in Syria.

### Muslim-Christian dynamics during the conflict

There has been interreligious engagement in Syria for centuries. And faith leaders have acted as a bridge between their communities and the political leadership. Although trust within society at large has been damaged by the war, religious leaders have sought to model good relations and have played an important role in local ceasefire and reconciliation arrangements throughout Syria. Despite western scepticism about such initiatives, dozens of religious leaders and thousands of local volunteers have been involved in these processes and fighting has been successfully ended in towns and villages throughout Syria.

Maaloula is one of the most important Christian villages in the Levant. In 2013, the village was attacked by hundreds of ‘rebel’ fighters. A village leader stressed: “We must emphasise that the so-called ‘moderate’ ‘Free Syrian Army’ were major partners in all of these. There was no distinguishing between the ‘moderate’ groups and the extremist factions.”<sup>9</sup> On 7 September 2013, the militants murdered three male

<sup>7</sup> Mohammad Abdul Al-Habash, “M.A. Al-Habash: The Crisis in Syria,” Speech at the UPF Interfaith Consultation on the Crisis in Syria Amman, Jordan, October 11-13, 2013, Universal Peace Federation, October 13, 2013, <http://www.upf.org/resources/speeches-and-articles/5718-ma-al-habash-the-crisis-in-syria>.

<sup>8</sup> Jerome Drevon, “Embracing Salafi Jihadism in Egypt and Mobilizing in the Syrian Jihad,” *Middle East Critique* 25, no. 4 (2016): 322, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2016.1206272>.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Maaloula resident in her home. 3 September 2016.

members of a family after they refused to convert. Over the following months Churches were desecrated, houses gutted, and farmlands destroyed. A villager said: “We spent hundreds of years living together without a problem. It was only after residents of the village went to live and work in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and returned with sectarian tendencies that tensions developed.”<sup>10</sup>

The Christian village of Saidnaya, whose convent has been a place of pilgrimage for Christians and Muslims since the 7th century, was besieged in 2013 by militants for 6 months. When the town was close to capture, Christian and Muslim residents joined the Syrian Army in defending the town whilst the remainder went into the churches to pray for safety. When I visited Saidnaya in 2017, the Mother Superior said to me: “When you return to England, tell them to come to Saidnaya to thank the Christians and Muslims of this town for saving this monastery and for saving Christianity in this land from the terrorists that your government is supporting.”

Across Syria, Christians and Muslims fought side by side against militant jihadists to protect their communities. In 2017, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo, Antoine Audo wrote:

At the start of the conflict, militants tried to pit Muslims against Christians, but they failed. Our country has a rich culture and history to which Syrians are loyal, regardless of religion. Syria is more than one man: this is not well understood in the West. It is important that we continue to represent Arab Christianity, to show the Muslim and Arab world that there are Christians with whom they can have a dialogue.

The extreme ideologies held by most of the militants have been well documented. But whilst sectarian dynamics have been used to intensify division, most Syrians say the primary drivers of the conflict were political and economic. However, they have also witnessed brutal sectarian violence committed by Islamist groups against any opposed to their ideology. Hence all factors have been present. And however much Islamists claim to consider the interests of all Syrians, there is little evidence

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<sup>10</sup> Former resident speaking with other Maaloula refugees at St. Saviour Monastery, Lebanon. 1 May 2017.

to suggest the truth of the claim. Healing and the rebuilding of trust between communities will take a long time.

It is not surprising that most Christians have supported the government that has protected their social and religious freedoms. Christian leaders in Syria have been heavily criticised for doing so, but their position is not just a pragmatic necessity. It is rooted in historical legal traditions by which Christian communities have been able to wield positive influence for their communities.

### Eastern Christian approaches to Christian-Muslim dialogue in Syria

In the matter of Christian-Muslim relations, western Churches and governments have neglected the importance of the eastern ecclesial Antiochene paradigm.

Here I briefly consider the work of three theologians who have been influential participants in contemporary religious and political discourse in Syria and Lebanon. They are: Georges Khodr (b. 1923), Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon; Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem (b. 1965), and Antoine Audo (b. 1946), Chaldean Catholic Bishop of Aleppo. I also consider the Protestant influence on Middle Eastern interreligious dynamics.

The eastern ecclesial paradigm is important, both because it represents 12% of the global Christian population, and because it includes Greek, Byzantine, Syriac and Latin traditions that represent a plurality inherent in Arab culture. This dynamic of 'living dialogue', though under-recognised and under-studied in wider discourse, has continued in eastern Christianity from the Church Fathers to the present day. And in a context in which Arab identity has become increasingly contested, Syria's tradition of diversity has the capacity to inform modern interreligious discourse.

### The 20th century and beyond

Western understanding of the Christian-Muslim dynamic is indebted to the work of Louis Massignon (1883–1962), a Melkite priest who

was instrumental in raising the profile of Christian-Muslim dialogue in the Catholic Church and is believed to have significantly influenced the Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>11</sup> His influence however went far beyond Catholicism. He studied with the Shi'ite scholar Ali Shariati (1933–1977), whose thought played a role in the religious revival in Iran in 1979.

Massignon regarded Abraham as the model of 'sacred hospitality.' Through mystical engagement, Massignon understood Islam as a mediator of Grace. He believed that both Christian and Muslim responses to suffering are rooted in hospitality, mutual compassion and commitment to 'the other' – the stranger. He believed that the Syriac Catholic rite, rooted in eastern tradition, could help explain Islamic thought to the West, and that "the healing of divisions between eastern and western Christians and of the antagonism between Islam and Christianity could flow from a spiritual experience of God, lived by believers open to dialogical encounter with the other."<sup>12</sup> In other words, through this 'sacred hospitality,' we can encounter the divine in the 'Other.'

Eastern Christians have had to engage with Islam for centuries in a way that western Christians have not.<sup>13</sup> It was only in the 20th Century and following Vatican II that the importance of this interreligious dynamic and eastern Christianity's contribution to it was recognised. The eastern Christian paradigm presents an opportunity for deepening understanding of political, communal and interreligious space in the modern world.

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<sup>11</sup> See: Christian S. Krokus, "Louis Massignon's Influence on the Teaching of Vatican II on Muslims and Islam," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2012.686264>; Anthony O'Mahony, "Louis Massignon: A Catholic Encounter with Islam and the Middle East," in *God's Mirror. Renewal and Engagement in French Catholic Intellectual Culture in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Stefanie Hugh-Donovan, "Louis Massignon, Olivier Clement, Thomas Merton, Christian De Cherge: Radical Hospitality, Radical Faith," *A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 55, no. 3-4 (2014): 476.

<sup>13</sup> See: Andrew M. Sharp, "Modern Encounters with Islam and the Impact on Orthodox Thought, Identity and Action," *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 5, no. 1 (2014), <https://orthodox-theology.com/media/PDF/IJOT1.2014/Sharp.pdf>.

## Georges Khodr (b. 1923)

Of all contemporary Eastern theological experts in Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue, perhaps the most influential has been Georges Khodr, the Eastern Orthodox Metropolitan of Mount Lebanon. In his published articles, he “rekindles and reawakens the Christian theological flames of the early centuries that present the primordial and the simple Christian message of divine love.”<sup>14</sup> His writings emerge from the patristic heritage and mystical theology of the Eastern Church, whose theology is rooted in an understanding of the ‘Other’ that speaks to the Christian-Muslim dynamic.

The Eastern Orthodox are the most numerous denomination in the region and their contribution to Christian-Muslim relations is important. Rooted in the Byzantine tradition and enjoying foreign protection and support, the Eastern Orthodox Church was deeply impacted by the Ottoman Empire and the imposition of the *millet* system, which allowed a flourishing of the Christian communities. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, however, the Eastern Orthodox had to renegotiate their status in a context that was overwhelmingly Muslim. This involved celebrating and affirming their indigenous Arab identity and promoting secular nationalism in order to secure equal status with Muslims.

The Eastern Orthodox community is more numerous in Syria than in Lebanon. They have “walked a thin line between Arab-Syrian nationalism and Lebanon’s uniqueness as a place where East and West could meet on an equal footing.”<sup>15</sup> The Eastern Orthodox have long sought to indigenise their theology within the culture of the Arab world in order to affirm their eastern identity. However, in the light of the rise of political Islam and Islamic extremism, that cultural identity is being contested.

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<sup>14</sup> Sylvie Avakian, *The ‘Other’ in Karl Rahner’s Transcendental Theology and George Khodr’s Spiritual Theology* (Frankfurt Am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 39.

<sup>15</sup> Sotiris Roussos, “Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East,” in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Anthony O’Mahony and Emma Loosley (Oxford, New York: Routledge, 2010), 114.

In the 1940s, Georges Khodr was instrumental in the renaissance of the Orthodox Church in Lebanon. He set up educational centres which formed a new generation of clergy and religious leaders. This also led to resurgence in monasticism and the establishment of new centres of theological study, such as Balamand University in Lebanon, a leading institution in the Middle East.

Khodr was born in Tripoli, Lebanon in 1923. His youth was spent in an Islamic quarter of the city, an experience that symbolised for him the “coming out” of Christian communities into full participation in the life of their communities. Khodr believed that Christians should be a part of the Islamic world with equal rights and that they should fully participate in the life of their compatriots.

In one of his most influential articles, Khodr writes: “If obedience to the Master means following him wherever we find traces of his presence, we have an obligation to investigate the authentic spiritual life of non-Christians.”<sup>16</sup> For Khodr, it is the Trinitarian ‘economy of the Spirit’ which makes the presence of Christ possible and the living of authentic spiritual lives “possible for all human beings, regardless of any religious restrictions.”<sup>17</sup> He writes: “The Spirit operates and applies His energies in accordance with His own economy and we could, from this angle, regard the non-Christian religions as points where His inspiration is at work.”<sup>18</sup> If that is so, then Christ cannot be “owned” by some people and not by others, and we have a duty to discern Christ in others.

Khodr criticises western theology for its exclusive dogmatism and believes Eastern Christianity’s mystical approach to theology represents a truer reflection of Christian theology and spirituality. The pervasiveness of western thought and civilisation, he believes, is spiritually destructive, since the West tends “to consider man as the centre of the

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Khodr, “Christianity in a Pluralistic World - the Economy of the Spirit,” *The Ecumenical Review* 23, no. 2 (1971): 118–119, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.1971.tb01114.x>.

<sup>17</sup> Aviakian, *The ‘Other’*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Khodr, *Christianity in a Pluralistic World*, 125–126.

universe.”<sup>19</sup> By contrast, eastern spirituality, with its spirituality of detachment and pursuit of truth, is a place where the spiritual life can become “incarnate in history as a movement, ready to be transmitted by utilizing the instruments of knowledge, even politics itself” in the service of humanity.<sup>20</sup> Khodr believes that eastern culture and spirituality have the capacity to “help Europe to transcend itself” and to be spiritually renewed in the service of humanity.<sup>21</sup>

His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II. Patriarch  
of the Syriac Orthodox Church (b. 1965).

The Syriac Orthodox Church is part of the Oriental Orthodox family of Churches.<sup>22</sup> Following the Council of Chalcedon (451CE), the Oriental Churches were isolated from Roman and Byzantine Christianity.

The Syriac Orthodox Church has a rich history and liturgical tradition. Situated originally in Antioch, the See was forced to move owing to persecution. In the 13th century it settled at the monastery of Deir ul-Zafaran in Mardin in Eastern Turkey until 1933. Following the Sayfo massacres the Patriarchate moved to Homs and then in 1959 to Damascus.

In 1995, it was reported that there were 89,000 Syrian Orthodox in Syria, representing about 10% of the Christian population. Due to political instability and religious persecutions its numbers have declined in the Middle East, but grown significantly elsewhere, particularly in Europe, Lebanon, and America. Patriarch Aphrem was born in Qamishle, Syria, and studied in Lebanon, Ireland, and Egypt. Amidst the conflict, the Syriac Orthodox presence in Syria has remained influential. The Patriarchal Headquarters at Ma'aret Saidnaya trains clergy from

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<sup>19</sup> Metropolitan Georges Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2016), 97.

<sup>20</sup> Khodr, *The Ways of Childhood*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>22</sup> See: Aho Shemunkasho, “Oriental Orthodox,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Mariz Tadros, Kenneth Ross, and Todd Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 247–258.

all over the world and, reflecting the Church's emphasis on education, a new University was opened there in 2018. Additionally, the charitable work of the Church through the St. Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee is benefiting thousands of people across Syria. Patriarch Aphrem's representative role as religious leader both nationally and internationally is significant and in this role his speeches offer a window into a Syrian Christian response to the contemporary context and to Christian-Muslim relations.

The importance of the presence of Christians in the Middle East is often stressed by both Christians and Muslims in Syria. In a lecture in 2015, entitled, 'Do Muslims Need Christians in the Middle East?', Patriarch Aphrem said:

I believe that Muslims need Christians to challenge themselves to live in a pluralistic and multi-religious society where they can affirm their religious identity without being afraid of the other...Living together should be conceived by Muslims and Christians alike as a divine vision and plan. We Christians believe that God has placed us in the region with the mission of spreading love, tolerance and enlightenment.

The Syriac community however has been subject to extreme persecutions. During the Sayfo massacres of 1915 it is estimated that over 500,000 Syriacs were murdered. And recent massacres by ISIS and Islamists of Syriac Christians in Iraq and Syria have reignited memory of this history. The kidnap on 22 April 2013 of two Aleppo Archbishops, Syrian Orthodox Archbishop Gregorios Ibrahim and Eastern Orthodox Archbishop Paul Yazigi, has had a profound impact on the Christian communities. In response to the increased rise in sectarianism both in Syria and across the Middle East, Patriarch Aphrem says:

Fanaticism and religious extremism should not be allowed to spread in the region. It should be made known to all that Christians will not abandon their faith or alter their way of living because of the ideology of individuals and groups to whom moderation is foreign and tolerance is alien. We will continue to live in peace with the millions of peace loving Muslims, Jews, and other religious groups in the Middle East. As Christians, our mission is to spread love, peace, and harmony in the world.

Patriarch Aphrem has been a strong critic of western support for militant groups. Speaking at the launch of a Report on Religious Freedom at the House of Commons, London, on 24 November 2016, he said:

It is very important to identify who our persecutor is. The report suggested that the persecution of Christians in Syria is done by both State and non-State groups alike. We do not see it as such. The Syrian government has always been supportive of Christians. In Syria, violence against Christians is inflicted by the terrorist groups, including ISIS and Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda), who desire to wipe us out of Syria. It is not the government, or any official state authority that is committing violent attacks against Syrians. In Syria, all discrimination and persecution that the Christians are currently suffering from, are carried out by the terrorist groups, some of which are internationally recognised as ‘moderate opposition.’

Another significant Syrian cleric is Antoine Audo, Chaldean Bishop of Aleppo. The Chaldean Church is Syriac but in full communion with Rome and remains a truly indigenous, eastern expression of the Catholic Church.

Like Khodr, Audo’s theology and spirituality is rooted in the patristic tradition.

In an interview in December 2016, he said:

Christians accept plurality. We cannot reflect on our shared existence in Syria without dialogue, but this is often more difficult for Islam, which finds it difficult to enter dialogue at a critical and historical level, and often, dialogue will consist simply of affirmative speech. Islam in the Middle East cannot get away from the struggle with modernity and faces a problem with the idea of secularism, as this attacks something very deep within Muslim thought. But there is a difference between public and private speech, since many Muslims recognise that without Christians, Syria will lose both its quality of life, and its unique identity.<sup>23</sup>

Audo affirms the importance of eastern Christian identity but cautions against it becoming inward and distrustful of others. He states that Christians should engage politically, socially and culturally and that the interreligious encounter that takes place daily should develop into deeper dialogue.

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<sup>23</sup> Interview with Bishop Antoine Audo in Damascus. December 2016.

He writes: “A re-reading of the contribution of eastern Christians to the development of Arab and Muslim civilisation allows us to envisage ways of openness, trust and conversion.” Most importantly, eastern Christians have “opened up spaces within the fabric of Muslim-Arab culture, spaces of freedom and communication between faith and reason” and are uniquely placed, in a context where Arab Muslims feel threatened in the face of modernity and globalisation, to enable dialogue with Muslims. “Finally,” writes Audo, “true Islam must understand that it will not be able to modernise itself without there being peace with Christians. This road to peace will lead it to be liberated from all its complexes of fear of the other.”<sup>24</sup> The vocation of eastern Christians is therefore “to become a bridge, or better, a model of communion between the Christian west and the Muslim world.”<sup>25</sup>

### The Protestant and Evangelical Churches

Though numerically small, the contribution of Arab Protestant Churches to religious discourse in the Middle East is significant. Protestant Arab Christians have been termed a “double minority” – “a minority within a Christian minority”.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, their contribution to religious discourse, education and health provision, economic and political life are significant. Protestant and Evangelical Christians number only about 0.3% of the population. There has historically been a problematic relationship between the Protestant Churches of the Middle East and those of the eastern traditions. Questions of identity arise at the interface between eastern Christian and reformed western tradition. However, ecumenical relations have much improved in recent years.

The Protestant presence in the Middle East dates to the early 19th century, the first Protestant congregation being formed in Beirut in 1827. In 1920 the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon

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<sup>24</sup> Antoine Audo, “Eastern Christian Identity: A Catholic Perspective,” in *The Catholic Church in the Contemporary Middle East*, ed. Anthony O’Mahony and John Flannery (London: Melisende, 2010), 36–37.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Mitri Raheb, “Protestants,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Mariz Tadros, Kenneth Ross, and Todd Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 269.

was formed. Wahba identifies three key areas in which the contribution of the Protestant and Evangelical Churches in the Middle East has been significant: preaching and teaching (including through media); education, through numerous institutions; and through the provision of social services to all communities.<sup>27</sup>

Reflecting on the post ‘Arab Spring’ context, a 2017 study entitled ‘Christian Citizenship in the Middle East. Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?’ suggested:

Throughout the history of the Arab Region, Middle Eastern Christians, inspired by the teachings of the scriptures, have lived at the intersection of two allegiances: allegiance to their Christian mission, and allegiance to their Middle Eastern citizenship.<sup>28</sup>

In 2006, George Sabra, Principal of the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, wrote an article confronting this issue. Sabra discusses the dilemma of being Christian in a predominantly Islamic context and suggests two ways in which Christians have responded to this reality. The first, he describes as ‘Arab Christian.’ This paradigm seeks to avoid estrangement with Muslims and underlines a sense of identity with Arab culture, history, and Islamic civilisation in order to find common ground and ensure positive coexistence. The second which he terms ‘Eastern Christian,’ affirms the distinctiveness of Christianity in relation to Islam and seeks to preserve Christian freedom and identity, maintaining “a critical distance from Islam and Islamic culture and tradition.”<sup>29</sup> These two responses to Islam have only been possible because of what he calls the ‘western’ factor. ‘Western’ influence is nothing new. Since biblical times, Middle Eastern society has been influenced by Greek philosophy and language, and since the 5th century Byzantine controversies divided the eastern churches.

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<sup>27</sup> Wafik Wahba, “Evangelicals,” in *Christianity in North Africa and West Asia*, ed. Mariz Tadros, Kenneth Ross, and Todd Johnson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 286.

<sup>28</sup> Mohamed Girma and Cristian Romocea, eds., *Christian Citizenship in the Middle East. Divided Allegiance or Dual Belonging?* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017), 19.

<sup>29</sup> George Sabra, “Two Ways of Being a Christian in the Muslim Context of the Middle East,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 17, no. 1 (2006): 46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410500399342>.

The 'Arab Christian' position has been associated with the Oriental and Orthodox Church, which supports Arab nationalism and tends towards anti-Ottoman, anti-Western, and anti-Zionist positions. The 'eastern Christian' position has come to the fore in recent years and presents "a sense of identification and continuity with the West," in which eastern Christians feel more 'at home' in the worldwide Christian family.<sup>30</sup> Lebanese academic and philosopher Dr Charles Malek (1906–1987) stresses that the relationship between East and West is historic and that western civilizations have left a lasting "imprint" on eastern Mediterranean culture and history. This pro-western attitude is reflected in sympathy towards western politics, which has led to tensions with and suspicion of those who hold to this position. However, most eastern Christians are proud of their Arab ethnicity and grapple daily with the complexity of possessing multiple identities.

These two 'ways' of Christian self-identification are both present in Syria but are not mutually exclusive. As Sabra says, both outlooks contain "some truth" and remain part of the dilemma of being Christian in a Muslim context.

There have been considerable efforts to improve ecumenical relations in recent years. However, there remain long-standing theological and ecclesiastical tensions between the Eastern churches and those of Protestant origin. Without question, the western churches are bearers of westernised ecclesiastical structures and theological traditions, some of which sit uncomfortably with those of eastern Christianity. The latter's patristic traditions and spirituality of the desert with their emphasis on hospitality and engagement with alterity offer rich resources for inter-religious dialogue.

Protestant Christianity, with its emphasis on incarnational theology brings great benefits to the region in the fields of education and social welfare. Eastern Christianity, with its trinitarian emphasis and affinity to mysticism is gifted in reflecting relationality amidst plurality and spirituality in the midst of struggle. The two 'wings' of Christianity and their theological approaches each bring strengths that can enhance and complement the other.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 48.

This tension requires further study. In the history of eastern theology and spirituality, and of eastern Christianity's engagement with Islam lie significant resources for engaging with the complex interreligious dynamics that prevail in the region and also for the strengthening of the ecumenical dynamic in the region.

### Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the encounter between Christianity and Islam in Syria and considered a few eastern theological contributions to that discourse. There remains commitment to the preservation and improvement of interreligious relationships, but given the level of suffering and destruction experienced within Syria and the fragmentation of society, priority has been given to the humanitarian response. Given the rise in militant Islam, Arab religious identity is now contested and requires renewed discourse.

A re-reading of the Christian contribution to the development of Arab and Muslim civilisation will help understanding of the roots of Christianity. The Orthodox and Oriental Churches, the monastic movement, the spirituality of the desert and patristic theology all offer a key to reconnecting with the spirituality and culture within which early Christianity engaged with Islam and to challenging the violent ideology that has characterised the militant Syrian opposition. Similarly, recognition of plurality in Arab religion and culture and eastern Christianity's capacity to engage with it offers potential for grappling with the post-conflict context in Syria. Such dialogue will be a necessary part of healing and establishing stability in Syrian society.

Amongst many Syrians, there is a fear that the rise of Islamism, even if defeated, might lie dormant in loyal adherents until the next opportunity arises to assert itself. This fear alone causes continued emigration. Christian leaders in Syria have often been criticised for 'siding' with the Syrian government. Such a view underestimates the influence of the historic role of religious leadership in Ottoman society and the social, cultural, and religious complexity of the contemporary context in which religious leaders play an important representative and intermediary role, often acting as 'critical voices' in politics. Religious leaders have

played an important leadership role during the conflict, most taking a critical stance against violence and radical ideology and becoming involved in local and national reconciliation initiatives.

The Christian presence in Syria, though seriously weakened, remains a dynamic, diverse, influential, and vital part of Syrian society. Its engagement at all levels of society and with all communities, represents a positive foundation for learning from the conflict and helping the country restore trust in society, reconcile fractured communities, overcome sectarian fears and encourage and nurture frameworks for political dialogue. Plurality and difference define Syria. This plurality represents both a challenge and a resource for the future. Whatever the future holds, it is hoped that the political space that emerges will be a dialogical one which the secular and diverse religious mosaic of Syrian society can peacefully cohabit.

It is estimated that 50% of Syria's Christians or more have left the country since the beginning of the war. How many will return? It is impossible to predict what impact this will have on Syrian society.

The future role and identity of Islam in Syrian society and its relationship with modern statehood will be crucial to the stability of the society that emerges in the years to come. The extent to which contemporary and particularly juridical expressions of Sunni Islam are able to sustain the space in which religious pluralism and freedom of religious practise are maintained, will determine future levels of communal trust and the survival of religious plurality in Syria. Therefore, studies within Islam of these issues are essential to assisting a secure religious future.

The breadth of the Christian presence distinguishes Christianity in Syria, and the shared culture and experience of the Eastern Churches makes them a significant resource for the worldwide Church in discerning and developing future models of Christian-Muslim engagement. The 'Antiochene paradigm,' rooted in cultural, theological and historical frameworks familiar to both Islam and Christianity and holding an important position within the wider ecclesiastical and political context has been neglected by the worldwide Church for too long. The Antiochene patristic theological and spiritual approaches to interreligious dynamics, given contemporary voice by modern theo-

logians and Church leaders, have a much more important role to play than has hitherto been recognised.

Since it embraces cultural diversity and the equal distribution of resources in a way that radical Islam does not, Christianity has the potential for bringing a helpful contribution to political, social, and religious discourse. There is deep concern amongst many Syrians – Sunnis included – that in a Sunni-led state, an interpretation of Sunni ideology would take precedence that would undermine ‘democratic’ processes and plural religious and cultural space. Is there a conflict between what might be called the ‘right to rule’ and the need for pluralising ‘space’ within society? Post-conflict Syria will need to find a way of dealing with such questions and the multiplicity of identities.

Syria has been through one of the most violent conflicts the world has seen in recent decades and the interreligious dynamic has survived. Until now, the interreligious context in Syria has been insufficiently understood and studied. In seeking a clearer understanding of that dynamic and in a reframing of eastern Christianity’s ecclesiastical, theological and spiritual traditions, lies the potential for discerning new frameworks of religious and political engagement, a sustained embrace of plurality and a significant contribution towards lasting peace.

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