

CHRISTIAN MINORITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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In what follows, I have chosen to restrict myself to a consideration of no more than a few of the Christian groupings and elements historically and contemporaneously present in the Middle East. Thus, I will not, except indirectly, discuss the attitudes and activities of Christians hailing from the West, even though these Christians are very obviously, and not insignificantly, overwhelmingly in the majority in the activities of such groups as the Ecumenical Fraternity and the Rainbow Group. Rather, I will focus my attention on those religious communities variously referred to as Eastern Christians, Arab Christians, arabised Christians, indigenous Christians or, in some Western circles, perhaps, as “those Christians on the other side.” Even among these Christians, I have chosen to concentrate mainly on those groups which have emerged from what historically can be referred to as “Syrian” Christianity — namely, the Orthodox (principally the Syrian, or Syriac, and Melkite, or Greek Orthodox); the Uniates (principally the Maronite and Melkite or Greek Catholics); and, to some extent, the less numerous Protestants and Anglicans. I have chosen to impose these strictures, first of all because of the limitations of space, but more importantly because, in our immediate area, these groupings constitute the dominant Christian population.

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For the sake of perspective, it might be of value to present some statistical data on these communities.¹ First, we may estimate the number of Melkite or Greek Orthodox Christians in the Middle East at approximately 650,000. With regard to the second grouping, the Heterodox Christians, often also referred to as Monophysite or pre- or non-Chalcedonian Christians, accurate statistics in general have become very problematic, due to their constant and massive emigration in recent years, particularly from Lebanon. It is very difficult today to know the situation, especially as regards the Armenians, who number somewhere between 250,000 and 300,000, depending on how many have permanently left the region as a result of the protracted civil war in Lebanon, in which they have tried desperately not to become involved. There are also some 175,000 Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox Christians. Finally, included in this group are the Coptic Orthodox Christians, who number anywhere between four and eight million faithful, depending upon whose statistics one accepts: The third group is that of the Catholic Churches, both Latins and Uniates. The largest community among the Uniates, the Maronites, numbers about 750–800,000. The Melkite (Greek) Catholics number some 350,000; the Chaldeans, 250,000; the Coptic Catholics in Egypt, 150,000; the Syrian Catholics, 100,000; and the Armenian Catholics, 50,000. The Latin Church has about 110,000 faithful. Finally, the Protestants and Anglicans together total about 250,000, some 200,000 of whom are in Egypt. One ought also to mention the some 80,000 Nestorians. These dry statistical facts clearly indicate that, together with the Copts in Egypt, the Maronites, the Melkite Orthodox, and the Melkite Catholics make up the vast majority in our more immediate region.

It should be remarked that the analytical survey of these communities which I intend to present is born out of a deep sympathy with and respect for them. It is not my intention to make value judgments, whether political or religious in nature, although such judgments, when occasionally implied, are hopefully in a constructive and positive vein. As for my frame of reference, I write as an amateur scholar and as a student of the vast field of Jewish-Christian relations. I must confess that, at least as concerns historical materials, my knowledge of the subject with which I am dealing is limited by the fact that I am almost entirely

1. It is extremely difficult to obtain accurate statistical data on the Christian communities in the Middle East today. The estimates offered here relate to the area composed of Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, and are based upon a comparison of information gleaned from conversations with Church leaders in Israel and from the following sources: Robert B. Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A political study* (London, 1979); *Oriente Cattolico, Cenni storici e statistiche* (Vatican City: Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches); and Slimane Zeghidour, "Des Millions de Chrétiens orientaux," *La Croix*, Special Edition: "Les chrétiens du Proche-Orient," December 25–26, 1983.

dependent upon secondary sources. Such dependence on the observations and analyses of others is, of course, a very dangerous exercise. I would hope, however, that my intensive contact with these communities — which in the academic world would be called field-work — might serve as a compensation for my linguistic disabilities.

I. The Situation of Marginality

Having made these introductory remarks, I would like first to establish something that is perhaps obvious, but which I feel is often neglected or forgotten when considering the Christian communities in the Arab East — namely, the essential difference between the history of these communities and that of Western Christianity. Western Christians have, since early days, enjoyed the benefits, privileges and possibilities which came with being politically, religiously and culturally dominant communities. As such, they have defined not only their own position and fate in society, but often also that of marginal minority groups, most particularly that of the Jews. Christians in the Middle East, on the other hand, began, from a relatively early date, to find themselves increasingly in a minority and marginal situation, in which mere survival became a prominent and pervasive concern.

The history and fate of the Christian communities in the Middle East parallel, in many respects, the history and fate of the Jewish people in the Christian West. I wish to draw a certain analogy with the history of the Jewish people as a persecuted minority in the Christian West, rather than with the equally important history of the Jewish people in the Middle East itself,² because the former is, I feel certain, better known to the Western reader. Neither the Christians in the Middle East nor the Jewish people have historically evidenced the triumphalism which has characterized and plagued, and in many respects continues to characterize and plague, both the Christian West and the Moslem East. Rather, as particularistic and marginal minority groups, they have both suffered, and again in many respects continue to suffer, as the objects — in thought, word and deed — of triumphalistic theologies, whether emanating from the West or the East.

In stating this, it is in no way my intention to malign the Moslem world, any more than I would seek to malign the Christian West in an honest and frank discussion of traditional Christian attitudes towards and treatment of the Jewish people. Rather, my basic aim is to understand the Christian communities and peoples in the Moslem world, and here I believe that, unless one is shackled by ideological or political considerations, one must be prepared to call a spade a spade. I hasten to

2. See, for example, Norman A. Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book* (Philadelphia, 1979); Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton, 1984).

add that Islamic “tolerance” was perhaps on the whole relatively greater than that shown by the Christian West. In some respects, this tolerance served to ensure Christian survival in the Middle East, even while the centuries of Islamic rule worked to erode the energies and resources of the Christians. In the words of Robert Brenton Betts:

By the middle of the 8th century, the Christian communities and their leaders had come to recognize that the official Muslim toleration, which had seemed so attractive a century earlier [i.e., relative to the Persian and Byzantine treatment of those communities — D.R.], was in fact a rigid prison from which there was no escape, other than apostasy or flight. The *dhimmi* system [i.e., the system of “protected” status for the “peoples of the Book” — D.R.], while allowing the Heterodox Christians to keep their religion, churches, and property, and to live according to the canon law of their particular sect, condemned them in effect to a slow but almost inevitable decline and death.³

Robert M. Haddad expresses this salient feature of the history of Syrian Christians in the following manner:

If, on the one hand, the considerable autonomy granted tended to preserve the various Christian sects, their marginal status could effect ultimately only their cultural and numerical impoverishment. At few times in the course of the Muslim centuries was it other than perfectly clear to the non-Muslim that most mundane interests would be served by conversion to the faith of the prophet. Only apostasy offered the full range of possibility. Most non-Muslims were to take that step.⁴

On the eve of the Moslem Arab conquest, Christians constituted the dominant population in the region. Yet, by the time of the Crusades, the Christian population of Syria and Egypt was perhaps only half of the total population, and Arabic was rapidly replacing Aramaic, Syriac and Coptic as the first language of the indigenous inhabitants. By the 14th century, the Syriac literary tradition was, for all significant purposes, dead. By the 16th century, the Christians had been reduced to no more than 30% of the native population in the region. The reduction of the Nestorians and Jacobites was greatest, perhaps in part because they were the most exposed geographically and culturally, perhaps in part because in earlier centuries “their role... in the construction of medieval Moslem civilization was,” as Haddad notes, “of a magnitude sufficient to lead many of them to complete identification with it.”⁵

It is not possible here to trace in full detail the complex history of the struggle of Christians in the Middle East for simple survival in the face of a militant faith which was no less successful for substituting a policy of measured tolerance and

3. R.B. Betts, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

4. Robert M. Haddad, *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society: an Interpretation* (Princeton, 1970), pp. 8–9.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

studied humiliation for one of open persecution. Until our century, no attempt was made by any Moslem government to exterminate the Christians, and only relatively rare and isolated attempts were made to forcibly convert them. Nevertheless, the process of apostasy and flight, albeit gradual, was relentless. Although I do not wish to belabor this point, I cannot conclude my observations concerning the constant struggle for survival which has been the lot of Christians in the Middle East without pointing out certain details of the struggle in our own century.

Most readers are no doubt familiar with the fate of the Armenians in the early part of this century. A symposium on the subject, "Jews and Armenians facing Genocide," was held at the Van Leer Foundation in Jerusalem in early 1983. The same symposium could just as well have dealt with the subject, "Jews and Jacobites facing Genocide," "Jews and Nestorians facing Genocide," "Jews and Chaldeans facing Genocide," or "Jews and Maronites facing Genocide." What is often forgotten today is the extent to which many of the other ancient Christian communities in the Middle East have suffered. For example, for the Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia, as well as of Anatolia, World War I was a purgatory from which they emerged broken and decimated, a tragic chapter in a history of suffering which today, decades later, remains an omnipresent memory even to those born long afterwards.

One of the most important points which I recall from that symposium was made by an Armenian participant who noted that, after all the parallels and comparisons have been drawn between Jews and Armenians facing genocide, it must be remembered that the Armenians bear an additional burden. The genocide against the Jewish people has for the most part been admitted and acknowledged in one way or another, and only fringe groups undertaken to prove that it never took place. Some form and some degree of guilt have been expressed, and Jews have someone with whom to discuss the burdens they bear. The Armenians, by contrast, must bear the additional pain that the perpetrators do not even admit or acknowledge that there was a genocide committed, and there is relatively little discussion of it in the world today.

What was said that evening about the Armenians may also be said, perhaps even more emphatically, about the other Christian groups which I have mentioned. The scars and pains which they bear, not only from past centuries of suffering and persecution, but most significantly from the persecutions and massacres of this century, remain buried deep within their souls, and anyone who is closely connected with them knows that this pervades their thinking and influences their lives and attitudes. The fact that they do not shout their pain from the mountaintops has its reasons, to some of which I shall allude. It does not mean that the pain has subsided or that the tragedies are forgotten.

I now return to a brief and very limited survey of some of the details of this suffering in our own century. An estimated 100,000 Jacobites and Syrian Catholics are known to have perished during World War I from privation and massacre in their foothill strongholds of Urfa (Edessa) and Mardin. The Chaldean Rite, which at the outset of World War I counted slightly over 100,000 faithful, suffered the loss of six bishops, a score of priests and untold thousands of its membership, as well as the total destruction of four dioceses, which are defunct to this day. The Nestorian community lost its Patriarch, the greater part of its clergy and over half its number. In Lebanon, the previously autonomous Christian governate was abolished and an estimated 100,000 Lebanese, virtually all of them Christians, mainly Maronites, died of disease, starvation and execution.⁶

In 1933, a wave of anti-Christian sentiment swept over Iraq, culminating in the machine-gun massacre of several hundred Syrian men, women and children by the Iraqi army. Thousands of individual Nestorians, who had been pressing the League of Nations for the creation of a national homeland since 1931, fled into French Syria and were resettled along the Khabbur River in the Jazira region. If I am not mistaken, the word “genocide” was originally coined by a Jewish scholar in reference to those massacres of the Nestorians.

The Chaldean Patriarch, too, called for the creation of an autonomous state for Chaldean, Nestorian and Syrian-Jacobite peoples in Mesopotamia and in the land to the west of Mosul lying between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. In 1937, the same Jazira region to which the Nestorians had previously fled was placed under the direct administration of Damascus, against the wishes of the overwhelmingly Christian urban population. A massacre of Christians soon followed, giving rise to a strong movement for local autonomy and even independence led by the Syrian Catholic Patriarch, a movement which was finally abandoned only in 1946. One could add endless details, but I trust that the above is sufficient to explain why I am prone to perceive certain parallels between the histories of the Christians in the Middle East and of the Jews in the Christian West.

Perhaps I might summarize this first part of my paper with what I have found to be an extremely meaningful passage by Francis B. Sayre:

A minority, sometimes welcome, sometimes not, is often wounded. It is drawn to its own community, where corporate strength is a precious resource. Survival requires special skill, special faith; the community is constantly winnowed by the loss of those without courage

6. On the massacre of the Maronites in the mid-19th century, see Colonel Charles Henry Churchill, *The Druze and the Maronites under the Turkish Rule, from 1849 to 1860* (London, 1862). As I read that book a few months ago, I continually had to ask myself whether I was reading a historical study or that morning's *Jerusalem Post*.

and those too selfish to persevere. So the little band is purged and matured, until it has a unique and precious contribution to make to the very society which is at the same time its scourge and its nourishment.

Such as been the role of Christians in the Moslem lands of the Middle East. Here [in this book — D.R.] is traced the history of their several communities in each country; complex, often tragic in the divisions among Christians themselves, but always exciting in the tracing of faith against adversity. How often it happens that special destiny is given, not to the great and complacent majorities in the world, but to the little bands of people who never succeed so well as to be able to forget the Source of their strength and life.⁷

This quotation provides a succinct summary of what I have tried to convey in this part of my paper, especially inasmuch as its essential content could just as well have referred to the Jewish people.

II. Strategies for Coping as a Minority

I would now like to move on to a consideration of that which, in the present context, I consider the most important and significant issue — namely, how, particularly during the last two centuries, Christians have sought to deal with their precarious situation as minorities in the domain of Islam in which, by virtue of Moslem definition, sustained by Moslem power, they have remained marginal minority communities. Robert M. Haddad notes that the power of marginal communities to “influence and shape [the politically dominant community] is greatest at those junctures when the characteristic institutions of the dominant community are in the process of formation, radical modification, or destruction by forces which the marginal community may or may not have helped generate but which it is able to accelerate and focus.”⁸

Such a situation indeed prevailed in the early years of Islam, when the salient institutions of Islamic civilization were taking shape, a process in which Christians played a significant and important role. The opportunity to influence and to shape society arose once again, and indeed was seized upon by many Christians in the middle East, beginning with the 19th century and especially in the wake of the Egyptian occupation of Syria (1832–1849) and the welcome reforms of Muhammed Ali, which represented the first tacit admission by a major Moslem head of state that the Islamic definitions of citizenship were unequal to the task at hand, primarily those tasks created by the increasing bankruptcy of Ottoman policy and the concurrent confrontation of Islamic society with political, cultural and economic pressures originating in the West. A similar opportunity to influence society was afforded to Jews in the Western Christian world in the wake of the so-called “Enlightenment” and “Emancipation.” In both

7. F.B. Sayre's introduction to Betts, *op. cit.*, p. xiii.

8. Haddad, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

the case of Christians in the Islamic world and that of Jews in the Christian West, the more aware and ambitious individuals among them seized the seeming opportunity to attempt to put an end to their marginality.

At this point, I would like to try to further extend the analogy to which I find myself constantly returning. To do so, I must digress and indicate a number of major trends which I feel can be observed in modern Jewish history, and in the reaction of Jews to emancipation. Again, the limitations of space force me to make rather broad generalizations, for which I hope that I will be excused. I will point to three or perhaps four major trends or paths which one finds Jews following in reaction to apparent promises of emancipation.

The first trend is that which I would label the path of assimilation: now that the dominant community and society has seemingly opened itself to us, we need no longer build fences and fortifications to protect ourselves; let us go out to embrace society and to be embraced by society. Many Jews did so, some to the extent of conversion, others to lesser degrees. At the same time, other Jews were engaged in absorbing elements from the dominant culture and religion into Judaism, often to an extent and in a manner that drastically altered the very shape of their Judaism.

A second trend or path which can be observed is that of devoting one's energies and being to the framing of ideologies and institutional arrangements which are essentially designed to radically alter the traditional social structures, and to detach the new structures from the old religious foundations, which of course had been the Christian foundations. This is the path of attempting to create what later became known as "post-Christian" Europe. It is no accident that Jews comprised the vanguard of revolutionary and radical movements in nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, and for that matter continued to do so in Western Europe and the United States even into the 1960's and beyond.⁹ Jews participating in these movements intended to radically alter society and to broaden its base against the background of their own situation of marginality, of minority status and of persecution. I hasten to stress that this path also involved a degree of assimilation, or at least the abandonment of the very Jewish particularity whose continued existence this approach was intended to secure or to ensure. There is something ironical about this: setting out as a Jew to alter society in a way that will give the Jew a place in society, in the process one

9. See, for example, R.V. Burks, *The Dynamics of Communism in Eastern Europe* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 158–170, 189–190; Charles Liebman, "Towards a Theory of Jewish Liberalism," in Donald R. Culter, ed., *The Religious Situation, 1969* (Boston, 1969), pp. 1034–62; Ernest van den Haag, *The Jewish Mystique* (New York, 1969).

sacrifices his identity as a Jew. When all is said and done, this represents yet another form of assimilation.

A third trend is, of course, that of national particularism or Zionism: I can neither assimilate into nor alter society; I have no confidence in the promises of emancipation and therefore I must carve out my own little corner of the world, which of course can only be in the Land of Israel. But even here there were, and are, a wide range of opinions and approaches, apparent to anyone who studies the history of Zionism, as to what should and could be created. Some of the approaches, I suggest, also represent a form of assimilation — assimilation on the level of the community and the nation, a process of becoming a nation like all other nations until there remains little that is unique or particular.¹⁰

These are three major trends which one can observe in contemporary Jewish history. Perhaps we should add a fourth — to follow the path of continued ghetto life. There are those who follow this path to this day: neither assimilating into the dominant society nor attempting to alter society or even to carve out one's own corner in the world, one simply retreats behind walls and into fortresses in order to protect oneself and one's community.

I now return from my digression on modern Jewish history to the Christian communities of the Middle East. I am obviously implying that there are parallels here to the ways in which these Christians have sought, in the modern period, to deal with their minority situation. New possibilities, as I have indicated, opened up for them at the beginning of the last century and especially towards the middle of the last century. How, then, did they respond?

We can observe, first of all, the approach of those who chose the path of assimilation, whether through actual conversion to Islam — which option had been available throughout the centuries — or through the lesser measure of assimilation into the dominant Islamic society. As an example, I would point to the following phenomenon: though most Christians in the Arab East were not traditionally branded with physical marks of their identity, such as the crosses tattooed on the inside of the wrists of many Copts and Jacobites at an early age, the great majority of Christians in the Middle East had in the past been immediately identifiable as Christians by virtue of their name, the one means by which a person raised in the culture could, with rare exceptions, recognize the broad religious background of his neighbor. However, in this century and in our

10. Among the myriad articles and books written on the subject of Zionism and its meaning, I would especially recommend Michael Rosenak, "Three Zionist Revolutions," *Forum on the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel* 34 (1979), pp. 18–30.

own day, many Christian families have often preferred to give their children names of Arab origin devoid of specifically Islamic connotation, yet employed by Moslems; on the other hand, instances of Moslems bearing names generally associated with Christians are extremely rare.¹¹ This certainly brings to mind a similar phenomenon among many Jews in the Christian West.

A second trend has been evident in the significant role played by Christians in the attempt to radically redefine Middle Eastern society and to detach it from its traditional Islamic bases and structures, mainly through the introduction of Western norms of political and social organization, especially the territorial, ethnic, linguistic, secular and constitutional elements which seem to be the bases of the political order of liberal Europe.¹² Christians, with their long tradition of connection with the West, have played a dominant role in this attempt, partly successful, to introduce such "radical" notions into the Moslem world. The founders of most of the modern Arab nationalist movements in our region were very often not Moslems, but Christians. In following this course, Christians have been motivated largely by the desire to finally be freed from the constraints and dangers of marginality.

In the course of following either the path of assimilation or that of attempting to radically alter traditional Islamic society, a severe conflict has been created in those Christians who chose these paths between the desire to identify with one's own minority community and, on a wider scale, with the Christian West and its cultural values, and the seemingly contradictory effort to establish one's Arab identity as a justification for one's presence in a predominantly Moslem society. The problem facing these Christians as citizens of the newly independent Arab and, with the exceptions of Lebanon (so far) and Israel, Moslem states, has arisen over the question of which of these two main streams in world society is to be emphasized in their own personal identity and outlook. Sadly, one of the ways in which many have sought to resolve this severe crisis of identity is by attacking the Jewish State. I would suggest that the often-negative views of these Christians towards Israel are generally not the result of an actual and honest encounter with the Jewish State and the Jewish people, but are, in large measure, the result of traditional Christian theological attitudes vis-a-vis Jews and Judaism, which have not been reexamined in the Eastern Churches, as they have to some degree in the

11. See Betts, *op. cit.*, pp. 116–119, for discussion and examples of names illustrating this point.

12. See, for example, George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (Beirut, 1939); Leonard Binder, *The Ideological Revolution in the Middle East* (New York, 1964); Albert H. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age* (London, 1962), esp. Ch. 10, "Christian Secularists," and pp. 273–289; and Donald M. Reid, "The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5 (1974), pp. 177–193.

Western Churches, and which have been enhanced by the struggle to justify the Christian presence in predominantly Moslem society. It is a sad irony of contemporary history that, among the persecuted Christian minorities in the Middle East, some have sought to prove themselves to the Moslem majority by standing in the forefront of the attempt to malign and condemn another indigenous minority, namely, the Jewish people and its sovereign, autonomous existence in the State of Israel, which is threatened and terrorized by the same intolerant triumphalism faced by Christians in the Middle East for centuries.

Permit me to illustrate my point by two telling examples. The first concerns the celebrated decision of Vatican Council II in the 1960's to reexamine the historical position of the Catholic church with regard to the role of the Jews in the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Almost from the moment the decision was announced, the Christian Arab leadership, lay and clerical, Catholic and Orthodox, came under heavy Moslem pressure to thwart the Vatican move. Due largely to the subsequent pressures exerted on the Vatican by this Christian Arab leadership, as well as by certain conservative elements in the Church, the final declaration ruled simply that responsibility for the death of Jesus "cannot be attributed to all Jews." An earlier passage, much more specific in its content and particularly odious to the Eastern Christians, which stated that the Jews should not be considered guilty of deicide, was omitted in the final draft. But even after the adoption of the watered-down final version, Christians demonstrated in large numbers in Aleppo and even in Jerusalem. The Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch, Theodosius VI, publicly asserted that the cry of the Jews before Pilate — "his blood be upon our children" — implicated all unconverted Jews, living and dead, in the responsibility for "this odious crime." The Jacobite Patriarch, Ya'qub III, charged that the freeing of the Jews of the blood of Christ is the greatest of sins. He was joined by Theodosius in charging that the Council's decision "undermines the basic principles of Christianity." The then Patriarch of Jerusalem, the late Benedictus, who was later frequently to be charged as a collaborator with Israel, stated simply and, I would say, diplomatically, that the decision was "inconsistent with Holy Scripture." In Aleppo, the city's Grand Mufti railed for three hours against the Council's decision, while the Syrian Catholic Bishop and other clergy listened with fear and trembling.¹³

My second example can be stated much more briefly. It concerns the prominent role played by certain Orthodox and Protestant Arab Christian delegates at the 1975 Nairobi convocation of the World Council of Churches, in the concerted but thankfully unsuccessful move to condemn Zionism, not only as a racist but also as an atheistic movement, obviously in emulation of the infamous UN declaration in the same vein.

13. Betts, *op. cit.*, pp. 156–161.

We also, of course, find advocates among Christians in the Middle East of the path of national particularism. I have indicated that, in fact, several Christian groups in this century have attempted to follow the path of “auto-emancipation” or of national particularism. In most cases, following this path proved disastrous, particularly after the departure of Western co-religionists, most especially the French. That this approach is still championed by some Christians is all too obvious to anyone who reads the morning newspaper.

Finally, there are those Christians in the region who tend to seek the preservation of some kind of “ghetto” setting. To some extent, it has been the policy of the Armenians to protect themselves by not becoming involved on anybody’s side — politically, religiously or culturally — and to preserve and protect their own separate and particular identity, language and customs.¹⁴

We can observe, as I have already begun to do, that the advocates of the various paths are fairly clearly divided along the lines of the divisions among the Christian communities themselves. It is not possible in the present context to trace in detail all of the reasons why a particular group of Christians has tended to follow one path rather than another, and one can only briefly indicate some of the factors involved. The first and second paths — those of assimilation into the majority group or of attempting to radically alter society — have been dominant among the Orthodox Christians. I believe that the Orthodox tendency to follow the paths of assimilation or of attempting to alter society in a way that emphasizes Arab unity and the ethnic and linguistic commonality of Christians and Moslems is in part the result of the dictates of demographic realities. The Orthodox have been the most widely dispersed of the Christians in the Middle East and were everywhere a minority; it was thus only natural that the pressures to follow these paths were greatest for them. A further reason can be found in the rather deep resentment of the West which one can note among the Orthodox Christians as a consequence of those efforts of Western Christianity that gave rise to the Uniate Melkite Rite, which greatly drained the elite of the Orthodox community, leaving those who remained even more exposed to the pressures of the dominant society in which they were dispersed. We might also point to certain Russian influences on the Orthodox. Beginning in the middle of the last century, Russian Christianity tended most frequently to side with the Arab Orthodox in the well-known Arab-Greek conflict, and to encourage and promote the “Arabness” of these Christians.¹⁵

14. See, for example, Avedis K. Sanjian, *The Armenian Communities in Syria under Ottoman Dominion* (Cambridge Mass., 1965).

15. See, for example, Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843–1914* (Oxford, 1969).

We can note that the first two paths have also been adopted for the most part by the Protestant and Anglican Christians, many of whom were formerly Melkite Orthodox. These small communities are the creation of Western missionaries, who brought with them Western notions of ethnicity and linguistic unity. It seems only natural that, having been trained in these Western notions in a network of schools, beginning with the Syrian Protestant College (later called the American University), many Protestant and Anglican Christians in the Middle East have been among the most vocal advocates of “Arab” unity and “Arab” nationalism.

The Maronites have obviously been preeminent among those following the path of national particularism. The reasons behind this are, again, complex; most important among them have been the communal security afforded by a long tradition of close links with Western Christian allies and by geographical concentration in fairly easily defended areas in the mountains of Lebanon. We can observe a similar trend, and for similar reasons, among the Melkite (Greek) Catholics in Lebanon, though far less so among their co-religionists hailing from Syria. Melkite Catholics in Lebanon have generally, though perhaps less forcefully, supported the Maronite position of Christian particularism, while those influenced by the Syrian setting have tended to stress Arab unity and identity in a manner similar to the approach of their Melkite Orthodox counterparts.¹⁶

Finally, as I have indicated, the Armenians and perhaps to some extent the Jacobites have tended towards the “ghetto” solution to their problem as minorities in the predominantly Moslem society.

III. Conclusion: Possibilities for Dialogue

I would like, in conclusion, to share some reflections on the question of the possibilities for dialogue between Jews and the Christian communities and their representatives about whom I have written above. As I indicated at the beginning, it is neither insignificant nor unexpected that literally no one representing these Christians participates in the existing forums of Jewish-Christian dialogue. For the most part, they will argue that the dialogue which Western Christians carry on with Jews does not concern them and does not deal with the problems which preoccupy them. I basically agree with them; while I believe that some form of dialogue between Jews and Eastern Christians is both possible and desirable, given properly qualified individuals, it seems to me that it must, at least initially, be conducted separately from the Jewish-Christian dialogue in which Western Christians engage. We must recognize that that which motivates Western Christians to enter into dialogue with Jews cannot similarly motivate Eastern

16. R.M. Haddad, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 74–75.

Christians. Western Christians, in seeking to engage in dialogue with Jews, do so, it seems to me, for essentially religious and theological reasons, related to a religious crisis growing out of the Nazi Holocaust and its exposure of the bankruptcy of traditional Christian attitudes towards and treatment of Judaism and the Jewish people. Most Jews, on the other hand, come to the dialogue not for religious reasons, but mainly for historical or sociological reasons, most especially with a view towards combatting anti-Semitism and to ensure for Jews a better and safer future in this world. This lack of symmetry between the Christian concern for theological safety and security and the very different Jewish concern for physical safety and security is, regrettably, not always recognized by the participants in the dialogue, and has thus at times given rise to misunderstandings and disappointments. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the dialogue between Jews and Western Christians will and must continue to be thus structured, at least for the foreseeable future.

From the survey presented above, it should be understood that the Eastern Christian communities cannot easily be fitted into this dialogue. That which preoccupies them has far more similarity with the preoccupations of Jews than with the theological concerns and crises of their Western co-religionists. Therein may lie the basis for conversations between Jews and these Christians. We could, for example, on the basis of our common predicament, fruitfully compare notes on the merits and dangers of the various paths to which I have referred, and concerning which Jews and Eastern Christians have accumulated considerable experience in the course of the last two centuries. To what extent has the path of assimilation been a successful one? Was there any country where Jews were more assimilated than Germany at the beginning of this century? To what extent has the path of attempting to radically alter society borne the promised fruits? Has the so-called post-Christian society in Europe and Russia truly made room, without question, for Jews? What has been the ultimate fate of those Christians in the Middle East who fostered and championed Arab nationalism? Jews and Christians in the Middle East could share notes as well regarding the advantages of national particularism, though certainly each must reach its own conclusions independently.

Needless to say, there are many difficulties to be overcome if such a dialogue is to take place on a significant level and on a permanent basis. Christians in the Middle East are clearly preoccupied with the tensions between East and West, between Christian and Moslem, between Christian and Christian, to an extent and in a way that makes it extremely difficult for them to consider a dialogue with Jews. Jews, on their part, find it difficult to distinguish among different Christians, particularly as Eastern Christianity, too, has its share of triumphalistic anti-Jewish theologies and attitudes, even while there have been fewer opportunities and possibilities to put them into practice. Nevertheless, I

would like to believe that such a dialogue is possible. In so far as it is to take place in this country, each side will have to accept the burden of responsibility for the welfare of the other side. Jews, as the majority in this land, must bear the full responsibilities incumbent upon them in their treatment of and relations with the Christian communities who are minorities not only in the Middle East, but in Israel as well. Meeting these responsibilities is the essence of my duties within my official capacity. In working with these communities on behalf of the Government, we are constantly conscious of the heightened sensitivities, fears and suspicions which their history has produced in them — fears and suspicions not unlike those understandably imbedded, today no less than in the past, in the Jewish psyche. Like Jews, these Christians desire respect and acceptance as they are, without demands or pressures to abandon their unique and particularistic identities, traditions and customs. As Jews, we must ensure that they effectively receive and enjoy such respect and acceptance.

For their part, Christians, in their struggle with the Islamic world, a struggle which has little to do with the State of Israel, must avoid or free themselves of the tendency which I have noted to make of Israel and the Jewish people a scapegoat to be sacrificed in order to appease those Moslem overlords who desire to maintain their traditional colonial hegemony over the Middle East and over its many and diverse ancient ethnic and religious communities.

These are some of the elementary requirements, both on the Jewish and on the Christian side, if such a dialogue is to get off the ground. As I have said, I believe that, at least initially, it will have to be conducted as a separate enterprise, which I believe could be tremendously fruitful and which might eventually have implications for and influence upon the dialogue between Jews and Western Christians.

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