The Middle Eastern Christian as Agent

PAUL S. ROWE
Department of Political Studies, Trinity Western University, Langley, British Columbia, Canada; e-mail: paul.rowe@twu.ca
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The greatest accomplishment of the past ten to twenty years of scholarship on Christian groups in Middle Eastern states is the way scholars have recognized the agency of a population long objectified in both academic and polemical circles. Christians have long been viewed as the object of other actors. For some, they were mere products of Muslim societies that imposed upon them the debatably restricted or protected status of *ahl al-dhimma*. For others, they were the appendages of external forces determined to use them as devices of their interests. The concerns of such external forces only contributed to Christians' portrayal as vehicles of imperialism. Although these tropes persist, over the last several years many scholars have begun to explore the ways in which Arab and other Middle Eastern Christians operate as subjects in their own right.

In histories of the Middle East, Christians have often been portrayed as either protected, tolerated, or persecuted minorities in Arab and Islamic environments. Condescension to the toleration of Christians in Islamic societies is the boast of the Muslim apologist.[1] To Christian and Western polemicists, this treatment contributes to a pathology. Christians and Jews alike are confined to "dhimmitude," according to the controversial work of Bat Ye'or.[2] In other studies, Christians are objectified as fifth columns or pawns of Western interests. Historical pieces deal with the way that the various imperialist powers and the Ottoman capitulations, coupled with Western intellectual developments, altered the status of Arab Christians.[3] Edward Said, a product of that encounter, expresses concerns about the way Christian communities were studied in scholarship on the Middle East. At one point he even criticizes Western educational institutions for perpetuating the study of *millet* self-organization as a sort of "preferred policy solution," supporting the divide and conquer strategies that had been used so effectively by the colonial powers.[4]

Today, we begin to understand the way that Christians operate not solely as a minority or as an extension of Western civilization but also as centuries-old groups rooted in the history and culture of the Middle East. They have become self-constituting agents with authentic and resonant experiences in the politics of the modern day. For example, Nelly van Doorn-Harder's work on Coptic Nuns breaks down numerous barriers in understanding the milieu of religious activation for Coptic women.[5] S. S. Hasan likewise provides us with a detailed description of the ways in which Egyptian Copts have embarked upon "a deliberate creative enterprise" to stake out a separate realm for themselves, and Peter Makari describes how they have established partnerships with other groups to achieve common ends.[6] The story of the Christian communities of Nazareth is likewise described in Daphne Tsimhoni's detailed work on the topic.[7] The role taken by the churches in Lebanon and Egypt and by parallel nongovernmental institutions constituted by Christians have been taken up by Fiona McCallum and me.[8] Western Christians have been introduced to the diverse Christian communities of the region through a survey written for a popular audience by Bailey and Bailey.[9]

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Much of this scholarship has taken place outside the leading area studies journals such as *IJMES*. The absence of significant working groups, networks, or caucuses on the topic (until recently) helps to explain this in part. In addition, one might credit the extent to which post-Orientalist scholarship demonstrates wariness toward religion as an explanatory variable and the fear of the divisiveness of studying the unique experiences of such communities. There is little perceived gain in publishing work on a topic that does not have a large scholarly or popular constituency, and the assumption that Christian communities are in inexorable decline only serves to justify this marginality. Scholarship in this area also challenges the received disciplinary and geographic notions of the Middle East as a region. F. Gregory Gause has discussed the difficulty of matching area study with the demands of generalizable scholarship in my discipline of political science.[10] I add that my own work on the politics of Christians in the region often has a global dimension that does not always fit easily under the rubric of Middle Eastern studies.

Appropriately, Middle Eastern Christians have increasingly been involved in efforts to bring attention to their experiences. Assyrian Christians engage in study and propagation of their history and perspective, and the beleaguered Christian populations of northern Iraq register their voices through multiple channels.[11] A long-term revival has regenerated the Coptic Orthodox Church and contributed to an increased awareness of the experience of Christians in Egypt among audiences throughout the world. In Palestine, a newly energized ecumenism has led to unprecedented acts of cooperation among both established and newer churches in addition to allowing Palestinian Christians to narrate their own plight to their co-religionists abroad.[12]

The widespread concern today that Christians are in declining numbers in the Middle East easily falls prey to the enervating assertion that they are victims of persecution or mere relics of a fading past and runs the risk of once again robbing Christians of agency as powerful actors in their own societies. This is not to say that the future of their communities is uniformly rosy—a conversation with an Arab Christian in any part of the region will quickly demonstrate otherwise. Nevertheless, continued consideration and documentation of the vigorous participation of Christians in their own societies—of people who face similar and unique challenges as their compatriots—will help us better understand how Christians remain authentic and active citizens of Middle Eastern states.

NOTES

[1]The perspective is reflected in Maher Y. Abu-Munshar, *Islamic Jerusalem and Its Christians* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007).

[2]Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude*, trans. Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).

[3]For example, Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis argue, in explaining the "political restiveness" of Christian populations in the late colonial period, that at that time "[t]he disruptive notions of European thought, the Enlightenment, liberalism, and nationalism undermined the very different assumptions of Ottoman society." Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, eds., "Introduction," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, vol. 1 (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1982), 28.

[4]Edward Said, *Covering Islam* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 138. See also idem, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 191.

[5]Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Contemporary Coptic Nuns* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1995).

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[6]S. S. Hasan, *Christians versus Muslims in Modern Egypt: The Century-Long Struggle for Coptic Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 258; Peter Makari, *Conflict and Cooperation: Christian–Muslim Relations in Contemporary Egypt* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007).

[7]Daphne Tsimhoni, *Christian Communities in Jerusalem and the West Bank since 1948: An Historical, Social, and Political Study* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1993).

[8]For example, Fiona McCallum, "The Political Role of the Patriarch in the Contemporary Middle East," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2007): 923–40; Paul Rowe, "Building Coptic Civil Society: Christian Groups and the State in Mubarak's Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2009): 111–26.

[9]Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003).

[10]F. Gregory Gause III, "Pensée 3: Political Science and the Middle East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 8–9.

[11]See, for example, the Assyrian International New Agency, www.aina.org (accessed 30 March 2010).

[12]For example, the Palestinian Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre Sabeel has published a good deal of work on the Palestinian Christian population, such as that by Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin, eds., *The Forgotten Faithful* (Jerusalem: Sabeel, 2007).

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