

Introducing
The CHRISTIANS OF THE MIDDLE EAST
A glimpse at their past and present
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It may come as a surprise to the average western reader that there are some fifteen million Christians who are indigenous residents of the Middle East. This is at least three times the number of Middle Eastern Jews living there. These ancient disciples of Christ have lived and witnessed their faith in the Middle East since the first century of our common era.

I would like to present a brief picture of the variety of Christian churches and church communities that constitute the large family of Middle Eastern Christianity.¹

Early Beginnings

After the gradual disappearance of Jewish Christians and the passage of the apostolic age, the majority of converts to the Christian faith came from Greco-Roman and Syrian (or Aramaic) backgrounds. These were the peoples who lived in southern Europe (mainly Italy and Greece), Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia. However, there were other converts from North Africa, especially the Copts of Egypt, and from Armenia, the land east of modern-day Turkey. Each of these communities of churches developed its own 'ecclesiastical tradition' that expressed itself in distinctive liturgical ceremonies, prayers, art, architecture and music. All these churches are still in existence today in the Middle East.

The Byzantine (Greek Orthodox) Church Tradition

The western reader may not be familiar with the Greek heritage of the Christian church. The influence of the Greek Byzantine tradition on Latin, and Russian (Slavic) Christianity is very well documented. What is probably less known is that there are vestiges of this very same Byzantine tradition in existence in the Middle East today amongst Arabic-speaking Christians. These are the Greek Orthodox faithful Christians who belong to the apostolic bishoprics of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem.

After the rise of Islam in the 7th century and the gradual spread and dominance of Arab culture all across the Middle East, these Christians embraced that culture and language as their own. Today, Arab Greek Orthodox Christians belonging to the three patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, live and thrive as vibrant church communities in the countries of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine/Israel.²

The patriarchate of Antioch is the largest of these three with more than a million members. Due to difficult historical circumstances, the location of the patriarch was removed from the city of Antioch (in modern-day Turkey) to Damascus, Syria, where the patriarch, Ignatius III, now resides. The liturgy and church tradition of the three communities is Byzantine of course, much like their Greek and Slavic counterparts.³ But their language and culture is Arabic and they identify themselves firmly and squarely with the Arab world.⁴

The Aramaic (Syrian and Assyrian Orthodox) Church Tradition

Aramaic, a Semitic language spoken by our Lord, was the *lingua franca* of Palestine and Syria during His times. The dialect He spoke is known as *West Syriac* and is still in use today amongst the Christian inhabitants of a

1 For a more comprehensive study with extensive bibliography, see the recent comprehensive reference work of some 900 pages entitled Christianity: A History in the Middle East (Habib Badr, chief editor. Middle East Council of Churches publication, Beirut: 2005).

2 Significant numbers of these communities (individuals and families) today live and/or work as migrants in the Arab Gulf states, Europe, the Americas and Australia.

3 A part of the eucharistic liturgy is still recited in the original Greek.

4 TFCC-Middle East is honored to have the Greek Orthodox bishop, Paul Yaziji of Aleppo, as one of its local board members.

few small villages in modern-day Syria. In Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), the *East Syriac* dialect was used and is commonly known as *Assyrian* or *Chaldean*.

While Greek was the language of literature and culture, the two Syriac dialects remained the language of the common people of Syria/Palestine and Mesopotamia for centuries to come after Christ. When the Islamic Arab conquests took place, Aramaic was gradually replaced by Arabic. Western and eastern Syriac became liturgical and theological languages of the Syrian and Assyrian Christians of the East, including parts of Iran.

In the 5th century, a schism appeared in the early church that divided the East Syrians (Assyrian or Chaldean) Christians from the other churches of the ancient world. The theology of a certain Nestorius, popular amongst the Assyrian Christians, was condemned at the famous Council of Ephesus in 431 CE. The first permanent church schism occurred and resulted in the creation of a separate church in Mesopotamia, sometimes known as the Nestorian Church, although it prefers to be labelled as the *Assyrian Orthodox Church*. Today its official name is *The Ancient Church of the East*. Adherents of this ancient church today live for the most part in Iraq, Iran and northern Syria. Due to adverse political developments in their region during the last century, and more recently since the start of the Iraq war, the faithful of this Church have experienced massive emigration into Europe and the United States. Sadly, today there are more Assyrian Christians living in the western Diaspora, especially Europe and the United States, than there are in the whole of the Middle East!

In the west Syrian region, Syriac-speaking Christians lived alongside the Greek-speaking Christians in relative peace for about five centuries. They were all under the jurisdiction of the one patriarch of Antioch who sometimes came from a Greek, and at other times a Syrian background.

In the fifth century, another unfortunate dispute erupted in the East over the issue of the person and work of Jesus Christ. There were those who proclaimed that Christ had two natures, divine and human, and these came mostly from a Greek background. Others, mostly of Syrian background, spoke of Christ as having only one nature, divine and human. The latter came to be known in history as '*monophysites*' or '*Jacobites*', (in reference to their 6th century leader *Jacob Baradaeus*).

This 'Christological controversy', as it came to be known in history, bitterly divided Eastern Christendom and drew sharp lines of demarcation between the various regional churches in the area. So much so that at an ecumenical council held in the city of Chalcedon in Asia Minor in 451 CE, the Syrian Christians, supported by the Egyptian Copts and the Armenians, (the so-called *monophysites churches*) joined ranks and eventually went their separate way from the Greek Byzantine and Latin Roman churches of the rest of the ancient world.⁵ Today, the three churches, Syrian, Coptic and Armenian, are known as *non-Chalcedonian*, or *Oriental Orthodox churches*.⁶ Their communion is active and they are in dialogue with both the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox churches. They have recently reached a significant consensus on most points of difference. The restoration of full communion, however, has not yet been declared.

The Unique Case of the Maronite Syrian Church:

In the 4th century, in the region surrounding the ancient city of Aleppo, there lived a Syrian monk named *Maro* who inspired his followers so powerfully that within a generation or two after his death, they formed themselves into a separate church community enjoying relative independency from the larger Syrian Orthodox

⁵ It is worth mentioning in this context that until the eleventh century, the Byzantine Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches were in communion. The Great Schism of the year 1054 CE ended that union and thus the present day separation between the Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches still prevails.

⁶ The Armenian Orthodox Church (also known as the Gregorian Church) has since been divided into two separate patriarchates. One is located in the city of Etchmiadzin in Armenia proper, and is now no more part of the Middle East. The other is the patriarchate of the house of Cilicia, whose leader resides in Antelias, Lebanon. These Armenians used to live for the most part in Ottoman Turkey until the genocide perpetrated by the Turks against the Christians c.1916 devastated them. This tragedy caused the death of at least a million faithful residing in Turkey as well as the migration of hundreds of thousands of them to Syria and Lebanon, (mostly Armenian and Syrian Orthodox). In addition, two minor Armenian patriarchs reside in Jerusalem and Istanbul, Turkey.

church of the region. With time, the followers of Maro (*Maronites* as they came to be called), increased in number and became a 'nation-church' of their own. They attempted to take a middle stance between the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian parties who were deeply involved in the Christological controversy mentioned above.

Towards the end of the 7th century, the conflict between the Chalcedonians and non-Chalcedonians sharpened. A dispute arose over who should become the patriarch of Antioch. The Maronites, who claimed to be equidistant from both groups, offered one of their leaders, *John Maroon*, as a compromise candidate for the post of patriarch. His name was rejected by both parties. The sharp differences prevailing between them, which had turned violent at times, led to the installation of two independent patriarchs of Antioch, one for the Greek Orthodox and another for the Syrian Orthodox. Meanwhile, the Maronites decided to declare their nominee a legitimate patriarch of Antioch *for the Syrian Maronite Church*. Thus three patriarchs of Antioch were elected during that fateful decade and all three of them preside over their communities until this day.⁷

Under pressure from Arab and Islamic powers, as of the 9th century, the Maronites began to migrate from northeast Syria to the south. They eventually settled in Mount Lebanon, and parts of Cyprus. Their patriarchal See is now in the town of *Bkirki* in Mount Lebanon where the majority of the Maronites now reside. Like all other Middle Eastern Christians, the Maronites also suffer from a very high rate of migration into the world of the Diaspora. Today there are more Maronites outside the Middle East than in it!

During the Crusades of the 11th to 14th centuries, the Maronites came into close contact with the West and established strong ties with Rome and the Papacy. As a result, and with time, the Maronite Church submitted to the authority of the Roman Pontiff and is now an *Eastern Catholic Church* by affiliation. It retains its distinctive Eastern Syriac heritage as far as its liturgical and monastic traditions are concerned.⁸

The Eastern Catholic (Uniate) Churches:

'Uniate church' is a technical term that refers to Eastern churches from the Greek, Syriac, Assyrian, Coptic and Armenian traditions that are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church and are somehow under the jurisdiction of the Pope.

The origin of the phenomenon of 'uniatism', as it is termed, goes back to the time of the Crusades when intense and long-term interaction and contacts were made between the invading European military, political and ecclesiastical powers, and the local Christians of the Middle East. One of the results of this encounter, both positive and negative in nature, was the attempt of western Christians to bring eastern Christians into submission to Roman Papal authority.

These attempts were partially successful, and as a result, three types of Eastern Catholic churches emerged: The first is the Maronite Church described above, an eastern church under Roman influence as a whole. The second and more prevalent type are the Uniate churches proper. This is a collection of Eastern Catholic churches that split from their Eastern Orthodox mother communities and affiliated themselves to Rome, but held on to their Eastern liturgical rites and liturgies. Thus in the Middle East today there exists five Eastern Catholic church communities side by side their Eastern Orthodox counterparts. These are *the Greek Catholic Church*, found in Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine/Israel, Jordan and the Diaspora: *the Syrian Catholic Church*,

⁷ The Syrian Orthodox patriarch, like his Greek Orthodox counterpart, also now resides in the city of Damascus, Syria, after he was expelled from Antioch.

⁸ FTCC-Middle East has members of the Maronite Church on its local Board.

found mostly in Lebanon, Syria, parts of Iraq and the Diaspora: *the Assyrian (Chaldean) Catholic Church*, mostly in northern Syria, Iraq and the Diaspora: *The Armenian Catholic Church* found in Lebanon, Syria and the Diaspora, *and the Coptic Catholic Church*, which is overwhelmingly in Egypt.

The third type is the *Latin Eastern Church*, i.e. the local Roman Catholic Church in the Middle East. This is a church whose members are Middle Eastern through and through, but whose liturgy and traditions are completely western and Roman Catholic.⁹

There are thus seven Eastern Catholic churches working together under the umbrella of the *Conference of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the East*. The patriarch of the Latin Church resides in Jerusalem; those of the Greek, Armenian and Syrian Catholic churches reside in Lebanon. The Coptic Catholic patriarch is in Cairo, while the Chaldean patriarchal See is theoretically in Baghdad, Iraq.

The Protestant and Episcopal Churches

The 19th century saw the emergence of Protestant and Anglican churches in the Middle East due to missionary activity from the West. Reformed, Presbyterian and Congregational missionaries mostly from the United States and the United Kingdom established local Protestant, or evangelical churches in Lebanon, Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor. Anglican (Episcopal) and Lutheran churches from Great Britain and Germany emerged in Palestine/Israel and Jordan during that same period of time. In the 20th century, Baptist and other conservative evangelical denominations entered the field and established local churches in all these countries.

Thus all the major Protestant church communions exist side by side the other ancient churches, with the vast majority of their converts coming from these very churches themselves! However, good ecumenical relations prevail between the traditional eastern churches and the mainline Protestant churches. Almost all of them have joined together under the umbrella of the Middle East Council of Churches. Conservative evangelical denominations, that have traditionally refrained from joining the world-wide ecumenical movement, are not members; neither is the Assyrian Church of the East.¹⁰

⁹ Since the Second Vatican Council, the language of the liturgy has been arabized. But the content remains essentially that of the Roman Mass.

¹⁰ See the chart attached to this article at the end. Historical disputes between the Coptic and Assyrian churches have temporarily delayed the membership of the latter in the MECC. However, full membership of all eastern Catholic churches in the Council is a distinctive feature of this regional ecumenical organization.