

# Hope for the Middle East

Historical Significance of the Christian Presence in Syria and Iraq

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# Hope for the Middle East

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## Hope for the Middle East: Executive Summary

Christians in the Middle East have existed for two millennia, and have at different points in history contributed to their societies in a variety of different ways. This paper focuses on the contributions of the Church in the regions of the Levant and Mesopotamia, what is now modern-day Syria and Iraq, the national borders of which are only a century old.

### Demographic History of Christianity in Syria and Iraq

Christianity in what is now Syria and Iraq can be traced back to the first years of the religion, with Bible references to early churches in the cities of Antioch and Damascus; church tradition holds that Christianity was introduced in Iraq by the Apostle Thomas, one of Christ's disciples. There is little evidence upon which to estimate numbers of Christians in the Middle East throughout history. Christianity has likely been the religion of a minority of the population of both countries for most of the past two thousand years. In those areas where Christians may have been in the majority (i.e. near what is now Turkey and Lebanon) until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, increasing pressure in the waning Ottoman empire led to significant demographic shifts and an overall decrease in the Christian population. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the Levant was part of the Eastern Roman empire, or Byzantium, which developed somewhat independently from Christianity in Europe. The Church of the East, in Iraq, was even more isolated. Syriac has long been the main language of Iraqi Christians, while after the Islamic conquests, Christians in Syria took on Arabic as their primary language.

### Social History of Christianity in Syria and Iraq

Christianity in the Middle East is diverse, with many different denominations who historically have had only limited interaction with one another, though Middle Eastern Christians often lived side-by-side. Christians in Syria and Iraq have made many social contributions through their religious activities, such as monastics and ascetics whom people of all religions approached for care and advice. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many Christian individuals and institutions became prominent in Iraqi and Syrian society, through medical care, education, cultural events and economic activity. Unlike in previous centuries, Christians who were socially engaged often adopted a secular identity. Some Christian organisations promoted the idea that one of the most important aspects of a Christian identity was commitment to social engagement.

### Intellectual and Cultural History of Christianity and Syria and Iraq

Many of Middle Eastern Christianity's greatest contributions have been intellectual and cultural. Christians have been long reputed as translators of words and ideas, bringing Greek philosophy to the Middle East through translation of Greek texts to Syriac and Arabic. Eastern Orthodox philosophy and theology include a mixture of Greek and Syriac influences. Christians also contributed to early development of the Arabic language. Many European works of secular literature were first translated to Arabic by Christians, and Christians also contributed to building a non-religious literary tradition in the Arabic language. Printing in much of the Arab world was first introduced by Christians. Christians have also made contributions in scientific enquiry and are credited with training many Muslim scholars during the early years of Islamic rule. This scholarship thrived in religious institutions, with monasteries famed as important centres of learning. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians were

known for running the best schools in both Syria and Iraq, though religious education was abolished under the Baathist regimes in both country: in Iraq Christian schools were not allowed for many years, while Christian schools in Syria taught the national secularist curriculum. Many Christian scholars, writers, musicians, artists and academics participated in intellectual activity in both countries during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Historical Christian Political Engagement in Syria and Iraq

Christendom has rarely been politically dominant in the Middle East. In Iraq, Christians negotiated treaties with their Muslim conquerors, and offered hospitality and support to Islamic leaders. Christians were active in the courts of the Caliphs, especially during Umayyad, Abbasid and Mongol rule. This prominence began to wane after the 10<sup>th</sup> century, though, and from about the 12<sup>th</sup> century until the Ottoman secular reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Christian communities were somewhat hidden from political activity. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as both countries' governments developed a distinctly secular flavour, minorities were generally treated fairly and had equal rights as citizens. Christians were active in local and national politics, and some were elected to office. A few Christian political parties were established to promote Christian identity, though they did not enjoy the support of all Christians, many of whom preferred to focus on a sense of national identity. While Protestant missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries worked hard to develop strong East-West relations, these relations broke down in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in particular after the establishment of the State of Israel. Many Middle Eastern Christians initially were brokers of East-West relations, but came to distance themselves from ties to the West.

### Economic Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

Christians may be more well-known for their intellectual and scholarly activity than for specific trades or fields of economic activity. Nonetheless, Christians have long distinguished themselves in the field of medicine, most famously comprising the majority of doctors in Umayyad and Abbasid years. Under Ottoman rule, Christians prospered in international commerce, working out of port cities in the Mediterranean to facilitate trade between America and Europe, and the Far East. Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century held a disproportionately high number of professional qualifications and higher education degrees, and also became known for their artisan craftsmanship.

### Spiritual Relevance of Christianity in the History of Syria and Iraq

Eastern Christians are diverse with a variety of expressions which have developed over the course of the past two millennia. Eastern and Western Christians split over a theological debate at the Council of Chalcedon in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, then in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries various new denominations were formed when various factions affiliated with the Pope in Rome. More recently, the arrival of Protestantism led to the establishment of new denominations. Many of the contributions described in the previous sections can be attributed to churches, monasteries and ascetics. Christians have been variously engaged in interfaith dialogue through the centuries; in fact, in the early years of Islam there were schools of Muslim thought that reflected significant Christian influence.

# Hope for the Middle East: Historical relevance of the Church in Syria and Iraq

## Introduction

Christians have existed in the Middle East for two millennia, and have played a variety of important roles at different times in history. Christian communities have made noteworthy contributions in diverse fields of society; at the same time, there have been many periods in which various Christian communities have been threatened by more numerically- or politically-dominant communities, and thus have withdrawn from visible roles.

As a part of the wider “Hope for the Middle East” project, this document complements reports about the current and future relevance of the church in Syria and Iraq by providing a brief overview of some of the historical contributions which have most marked Christian relevance in Middle Eastern society. The geographical areas of focus are the regions of the historic Levant and Mesopotamia which include modern-day Syria and Iraq. This is not intended to be a comprehensive history of Christianity in Syria and Iraq, rather to provide a historical context for understanding the continued relevance of Christianity in these countries. Various moments in two millennia of Middle Eastern Christianity will be noted, up to and including the presence of Christians in these countries under the Baathist regimes that marked the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Methodology

This research is based on extensive literature review of academic and policy research on the history of Christianity in the Middle East, as well as key informant interviews with 24 individuals of various backgrounds, including Christians and non-Christians, and Middle Easterners and Europeans.<sup>1</sup> This research has its limitations, which suggest that the topics addressed here merit further study. Most notably, while this report seeks to represent a broad perspective of views, both through the literature review and the interviews, the literature review demonstrated that this is a severely under-researched topic warranting much more primary research, and the interviewees, while presenting an expert range of opinions, cannot be seen as a representative sample.

## Demographic History of Christianity in Syria and Iraq

Christianity in the Middle East dates back to the very origins of the religion. In Syria and the Levant, most famously, St. Paul’s conversion took place on the road to Damascus, where he had heard of a gathering of Christ-worshippers. One of the first recorded churches in history is the church in Antioch, in modern-day Antakya at the border of Syria and Turkey. Such

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<sup>1</sup> All interviewees have significant experience working professionally and personally with Middle Eastern Christians and were selected in order to represent a diversity of perspectives. Interviews were conducted during July 2015 - January 2016, over Skype, in person and through email correspondence. Both the literature review and the interviews were guided by a list of open-ended questions developed by Open Doors and adapted by the research team; this list was elaborated around the themes addressed in this report: demographic, social, intellectual and cultural, political, economic and spiritual relevance. Due to the sensitive nature of the issues addressed in this report, most contributors asked to be kept anonymous and so, out of respect for their wishes, none are named; instead, their role or title is described when data attributed to them is presented.

communities gave rise to the Orthodox Churches that continued to grow and flourish under the Roman and Byzantine empires.

**Timeline of key Empires in the Levant and Mesopotamia regions**

*n.b. the borders of these empires often shifted, hence the frequent overlap between empires*

Sasanian	224-636	Zoroastrianism
Byzantine (Eastern Roman)	330-1453	Christianity
Umayyad	661-750	Islam
Abbasid	750-1258	Islam
Mongol	1207-1368	various
Mamluk	1250-1517	Islam
Ottoman	1299-1923	Islam

The Church of the East, which is the historic name for the Assyrian Orthodox and Chaldean churches in Iraq, is said to date back to the first century as well; in the 4<sup>th</sup> century it was established under the leadership of the bishop of the Persian royal capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon.<sup>2</sup>

According to church tradition, the Apostle Thomas evangelized Mesopotamia on his way to India; then, as an Iraqi clergy member narrated, “later on two more disciples... Mar Addai and Mar Mari, came and started converting the inhabitants of Mesopotamia [Assyria and Babylonia] to Christianity. The Church of the East’s liturgy was set by Mar Mari and is still called St. Mari Liturgy.” This church grew quickly in the regions east of the Roman Empire, expanding as far as Mongolia and China. Theologically the Church of the East was initially close to churches in the Levant region, but over time developed different practices and its own doctrines.<sup>3</sup>

#### Demographic shifts over time<sup>4</sup>

Churches in the Levant, for a time following the split of the Roman Empire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, had limited contact with Western Christians, though with the establishment of trade routes and pilgrimages to the Holy Land, some contact was maintained. The Church of the East, in Iraq and further east, was even more isolated and was, in fact, often referred to by other Christians as Nestorian which was generally considered heretical.<sup>5</sup> They were also, according to some historians, the largest Christian community in the world during the 6<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>6</sup> Eastern Christianity, therefore, developed somewhat independently from Christianity in Europe.

It is difficult to estimate what percentage of the populations of current-day Iraq and Syria have been Christian at different times in history.<sup>7</sup> While it seems unlikely Christianity was ever a religion of the majority population in Iraq,<sup>8</sup> in many areas of Northern and Western Syria, i.e. areas bordering Lebanon and Turkey, Christians may have comprised the highest

<sup>2</sup> Brock, Sebastian P. 2010. “Two millennia of Christianity in Iraq” in *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April, p.176.

<sup>3</sup> Healey, John. 2010. “‘The Church across the border’ The Church of the East and its Chaldean branch.” in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Anthony O’Mahoney and Emma Loosly. London: Routledge, p.42.

<sup>4</sup> See Annex for a map illustrating the population of Christians in the final years of the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph, John. 1961. *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp.3-5.

<sup>6</sup> Bailey, Betty Jane and J. Martin Bailey. 2003. *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co: Grant Rapids, MI, p.130-131.

<sup>7</sup> See Annex for Maps illustrating estimates of demographic shifts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

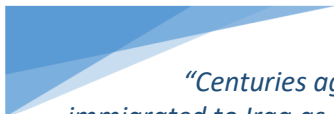
<sup>8</sup> Rassam, Suha. 2005. *Christianity in Iraq*. Herefordshire: Gracewing, see pp. 29, 81, 88.

segment of the population until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, during the first few centuries of Islamic rule, many Christians in modern-day Syria and Iraq reportedly converted to Islam, though more often for economic, political or idealistic reasons than due to attempts at force.<sup>10</sup> “The process of Islamization progressed and matured over decades and centuries largely as a result of the creation of an Islamic ambiance... Conversions carried out to preserve or promote economic, social and political interests were recorded in most regions under Muslim rule.”<sup>11</sup> During the centuries of Islamic rule that began in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, up until the emergence of the Ottoman empire in the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, those Christians who did not convert to Islam had a legal minority status regardless of what their numerical prevalence may have been.<sup>12</sup>

Syriac was long the language of Christians in the region, but by the 8<sup>th</sup> century, with the growing predominance of Islam and hence Arabic, more and more Christian scholars began to study and write in Arabic.<sup>13</sup> Most Syrian Christians also took on Arabic as their primary spoken language, while Iraqi Christian communities and some in Northeast Syria sought to preserve their Syriac tradition.

### Christians in Syria and Iraq in the 20th Century

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian communities living in the waning Ottoman Empire, especially in the areas that are now Turkey, came under increasing pressure. While in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire *tanzimat* reforms had sought to enact a policy of equal status for religious minorities, this policy was never fully instituted; rather, growing tensions with Europe created a space in which the Ottoman rulers, already feeling their power diminishing, felt threatened by the Christian minorities living in their midst, especially in the Anatolia region of modern-day Turkey.<sup>14</sup> In the forced deportations and massacres that resulted in the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many fled to what is now Iraq or Syria, while others emigrated to other parts of the world. This resulted in an overall decrease in the Christian population of the region, as well as major demographic shifts. For example, while Armenian communities had been present in the Levant for centuries, many were small or in decline. In 1914, however, Armenian



*“Centuries ago Christians immigrated to Iraq as a safe haven from the Ottoman Empire, Iran, and other places. And when we came Iraq became our home, our country. We have no allegiances and we’re not fighting anyone in our own country... which makes us the best citizens, if someone would actually take advantage of that.”*  
-Iraqi Clergy member

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<sup>9</sup> For maps illustrating some of the clustering of Christians and trends in percentage: “Christians of the Middle East: Demographics in 1914” by Dr. Michael Izady at [www.Gulf2000.Columbia.edu/maps.shtm](http://www.Gulf2000.Columbia.edu/maps.shtm). Accessed <http://i.imgur.com/D9mpBHf.png> 28 Feb 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Haddad, Robert. 1970. *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 8. See also: Bulliet, Richard W. 1979. *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period*. London: Harvard University Press; Smith, Jane. 2015. “Muslim-Christian Relations: Historical and Contemporary Realities.” Harvard Research Encyclopedias online.

<sup>11</sup> Levtzion, Nehemia. 2007. *Islam in Africa and the Middle East: Studies on Conversion and Renewal*, edited by Michel Abitbol and Amos Nadan. Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, p.9.

<sup>12</sup> Khoury, George. No date. “Advent of Islam and Christians of the East.” Catholic Information Network and Phoenicia.org. Accessed <http://phoenicia.org/christiansmea.html> 28 Feb 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Brock 2010, p.180

<sup>14</sup> Chatty, Dawn. 2010. *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp.51-18.

refugees began to flee south from Turkey, bringing new life to pre-existing Armenian communities and creating new ones.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, the centre of “Armenian-ness” came to be seen as in Lebanon and Syria in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than in Armenia itself. Similarly, many Western Assyrians fleeing massacre by Turks and Kurds fled to Qamishli and Hassake, cities in Northeastern Syria, during 1914-1923. Iraq still holds larger and more prominent Assyrian communities than Syria, though.<sup>16</sup>

## Social History of Christianity in Syria and Iraq

Over the centuries, a continually increasing number of Christian denominations have existed side-by-side in the Middle East. For example, there are both Catholic and Orthodox iterations of the Syriac, Church of the East, Melkite (Greek), and Armenian churches; furthermore, since the arrival of Protestant missionaries in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, various Protestant churches have been established.

### Christian Society

Interaction between Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic churches has traditionally been limited and continues so to this day. Indeed, from the establishment of Uniate, or Eastern Catholic, churches around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, until the 1990s, there was no visible meeting between Orthodox and Catholic leaders.<sup>17</sup> In Iraq there has been even less contact across ecumenical lines than in other countries of the Middle East. Nonetheless, ecumenism at the grassroots level has been a part of everyday life for Syrians and Iraqis through the centuries. “These minority communities, often living in a diaspora situation, shared the same difficult life, recognized each other’s presence and tradition, venerated the same saints and martyrs.”<sup>18</sup> So, while Orthodox Christians may claim that they are more truly indigenous than Catholic Christians, and that Protestants are a Western implant in the Middle East, Christians in Iraq and Syria generally share a common Christian identity.<sup>19</sup>

### Historical engagement of Christians in their Societies

Christians in Syria and Iraq have played a notable role in their societies in various fields, usually very explicitly through religious activities. For example, in the early years of Christianity (3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries), famous ascetics throughout the region were venerated, and people of all religions would come to them for care and advice. While there were many Christians living as hermits in desert areas, other ascetic communities were active in helping the sick and needy, and engaged in community life.<sup>20</sup> As early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of the East engaged in religious dialogues with Muslims.

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<sup>15</sup> John Wholly. 2010. “The Armenian Church in the contemporary Middle East”, in O’Mahoney and Loosly eds., p.79.

<sup>16</sup> Isaac, Mardean. 2015. “The Assyrians of Syria: History and Prospects.” on *Syria Comment*, December 20<sup>th</sup>. Accessed at: <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/the-assyrians-of-syria-history-and-prospets-by-mardean-isaac/>

<sup>17</sup> Bouwen, Frans. 2010. “Unity and Christian Presence in the Middle East.” In *The Catholic Church in the Contemporary Middle East*. Anthony O’Mahoney and John Flannery, ed.s. London:Melisende, p.87.

<sup>18</sup> Bouwen 2010, p.93.

<sup>19</sup> Rabo, Annika. 2012. “‘We are Christians and we are equal citizens’: perspectives on particularity and plurality in contemporary Syria” *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations*, 23(1), p.82.

<sup>20</sup> Rassam 2005, see pp.54,71



## Christians in Syrian and Iraqi Society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian engagement in Iraqi and Syrian societies increased, often in the form of individual Christians playing a role in social affairs, rather than through church or religious activities. Following the formation of the Iraqi state in 1921, Christians established schools and hospitals, created literature and media, and launched businesses, factories, athletic clubs and art galleries. An Iraqi clergy member recounted that, as secular-minded people, Christians could work with secular Muslims, creating a positive competitive environment that built a sense of excellence. Another member of clergy shared that he studied Shari'a for four years before becoming a priest. During these years, the Chaldean [Catholic] church, which is the largest denomination in Iraq, prospered but also became vulnerable for its affiliation with the Baathist regime. In comparison, the Assyrian and other Orthodox churches often found themselves caught up in power politics between Kurds, Ottomans and British, and may have thus shied away from visible societal engagement.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, youth organisations in the Levant sought to revive Christian identity while instilling a sense among Christians that they should engage in their society rather than withdraw into Christian communities. Being Greek Orthodox, that is, a member of Syria's largest Christian denomination, became more frequently associated with a political and social status, rather than with religious beliefs or practices.<sup>22</sup> In fact, during the



*The Orthodox Youth Movement, founded in 1942, had its centres in Beirut and Latakia. It sought to revive the intellectual and spiritual life of the Orthodox community and promote a pride in Christian heritage over a sense of victimhood; in order to do so, it set up educational centres throughout the country.*

*-in Roussos 2010, p. 117.*

years of Baathist rule, churches were one of the most visible expressions of civil society in Syria. A development researcher observed that, while prior to the current crisis in Syria there was not much active civil society, mosques and churches were not subject to as many restrictions as secular organisations, and so international faith-based organisations were more likely to engage in programming in Syria than their non-religious counterparts. Christian schools and hospitals were also highly respected.

## Intellectual and Cultural History of Christianity in Syria and Iraq

Many of Middle Eastern Christianity's greatest contributions over the centuries have been intellectual and cultural. Christians have particularly distinguished themselves in language and translation, philosophy and education.

### Early Linguistic Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

In the early spread of Christianity, Christians, especially further East in what is now Iraq and Iran, spoke primarily Aramaic, the language said to have been spoken by Christ; early converts to Christianity were expected to learn Syriac, which is a version of Aramaic.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Healey 2010, pp.47-48.

<sup>22</sup> Roussos, Stirs. 2010. "Eastern Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East", in O'Mahoney and Loosly eds., p.117.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, Gareth. 2012. "What is Aramaic and Syriac?", on *Politics, Theology and Christian Humanism*, 3 September: <https://christhum.wordpress.com/2012/09/03/what-is-aramaic-and-syriac/>

“Syriac had become the sacred religious language of Eastern Christians just as Latin was to become the sacred language of the Roman Church.”<sup>24</sup> Over time, some tension grew between those who used Greek philosophy to formulate theological ideas, and the ‘true Eastern’ Christians. As Greek influence grew, most Christian scholars began to learn Greek even if Syriac remained their preferred language. Syriac language and culture have long distinguished Eastern Orthodox churches, “and over the centuries [they] had a rich cultural history with great personalities and centres of learning.”<sup>25</sup> These included prestigious and influential schools and institutions of theology, philosophy, biblical studies, history, sciences, music, medicine and languages. Languages taught at these institutions included Greek and Syriac, and eventually Arabic.

Christians also contributed to the early development of Arabic language. Long before the advent of Islam, Christians were using Arabic script: Arabic inscriptions that date back to as early as 328CE have been found in what is now Syria.<sup>26</sup> These are mostly connected to church liturgies, as are early Christian contributions to Arabic poetry.<sup>27</sup> Arabic poetry pre-Islam seems to have emerged primarily in regions where Christian tribal groups lived. So, though few specific early Arabic poets have been identified as Christian, many lived in areas known as Christian regions, and much of this early poetry contains references to Biblical concepts and terms.<sup>28</sup>

#### Christians as Translators of Words and Ideas

With the rise of Islam, Christians continued to play an important role in linguistic development and translation. One heralded contribution of Christians in the early centuries of Islam, which has had a deep and lasting impact, is in the translation of Greek texts to Arabic. Early Islamic Caliphs, especially in the early years of Abbasid rule, sought to acquire scientific, medical and philosophical knowledge, and to contribute to those fields.<sup>29</sup> The Caliphs and most of their Muslim citizens did not speak Greek, though, so they turned to Christian scholars, who had extensive experience translating between Greek and Syriac. Initially, translation was Greek to Syriac, then Syriac to Arabic.<sup>30</sup> Islamic scholars were thus able to access philosophical and scientific writings and build on that knowledge. “In this way the Syriac Churches contributed to the intellectual heritage of the Islamic world, which in turn was to influence the medieval western world,”<sup>31</sup> by making possible famed Islamic contributions in fields such as algebra and astronomy.

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<sup>24</sup> Rassam 2005, p.16.

<sup>25</sup> Rassam 2005, p.69.

<sup>26</sup> Shahid 2005, p.226.

<sup>27</sup> Brock 2010, p.15.

<sup>28</sup> Shahid 2005, p.226.

<sup>29</sup> Brock 2010, p.178.

<sup>30</sup> For a detailed exploration of this movement and mention of specific Christian scholars engaged in the Translation movement, see O’Leary 1979, chapter 12.

<sup>31</sup> Brock 2010, p.15.

*“Greek scientific thought had been in the world for a long time before it reached the Arabs, and during that period it had already spread abroad in various directions. So it is not surprising that it reached the Arabs by more than one route. It came first and in the plainest line through Christian Syriac writers, scholars, and scientists.”*

-O’Leary, De Lacy. 1979. How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, accessed <http://www.aina.org/books/hgsptta.htm> 28 Feb 2016.

Even after Islamic academies grew and became self-sufficient, Christians remained active in translation, since they had more frequent contact with Western societies than did other residents of Syria and Iraq. “Especially in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, contact between the Chaldean Church and Rome resulted in a considerable amount of translation into Arabic (and sometimes Syriac) of European literature, mostly Latin religious works”,<sup>32</sup> but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of secular literature as well. Printing in much of the Arab world was also first introduced by Christians, often with help from European missionaries.

Indeed, in an era before globalization and internet communications, Christians used their personal and religious networks in both the Middle East and Europe to promote the sharing of ideas between the two regions. During the Arabic cultural renaissance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christian scholars played an important role in rekindling Arabic literature and building a non-religious literary tradition in the Arabic language.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, in Syria and Lebanon, the most prominent and respected institutions of higher education in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were the Jesuit University and the Syrian Protestant College.<sup>34</sup>

### Christian Scholarship

Another area in which Christians have made important contributions in Syria and Iraq is scientific enquiry. During the early centuries of Muslim rule, Christians trained many Muslim doctors and scientists and worked alongside them.<sup>35</sup> This was especially noteworthy in Iraq while the seat of the Abbasid caliph was in Baghdad. “The tolerance and strict sense of justice of early Muslim rulers, combined with an eagerness to learn from their cultured subjects, led to progress and affluence... Iraqi Christian scholars, doctors and scientists played a major role.”<sup>36</sup> Both Muslim and Christian doctors, teachers and lawyers were often educated in Christian institutions.

Christian scholarship was closely integrated with the religious life. Monasticism played an important role in scientific, as well as spiritual, development.<sup>37</sup> In addition to being places where people sought spiritual instruction and encouragement, monasteries were important centres of learning where many original scientific works were written. Muslim citizens often visited Christian monasteries, as did Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphs themselves. Furthermore, both before the rise of Islam and during centuries of Islamic rule, the Church

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<sup>32</sup> Brock 2010, p.182.

<sup>33</sup> Meyssan, Thierry. 2011. “The Christians of the Orient Stand Up Against the New Western Colonialism” in *Oriental Review*, Oct 15: <http://orientalreview.org/2011/10/15/the-christians-of-the-orient-stand-up-against-the-new-western-colonialism/>

<sup>34</sup> Haddad 1970, p.79.

<sup>35</sup> Healey 2010, p.44.

<sup>36</sup> Rassam 2005, p.81.

<sup>37</sup> AbouZayd, Fr. Safiq. 2005. “Ascetic Movement in Syria, Iraq and Palestine.” In *Christianity: A History in the Middle East*, ed. Habib Badr. Beirut: Middle East Council of Churches Studies and Research Program, p.398.

of the East was active in sending missions eastwards to Asia as well as to the Arabian Peninsula, taking books and establishing schools, hospitals and monasteries.<sup>38</sup>

In Syria, there was a similar intellectual and aesthetic creative phase, but it was shorter-lived, mainly up to and during the years of the Umayyad Caliphate.<sup>39</sup> After that, while there is less evidence of Syrian Christian creation and contribution to scholarly innovation, Christians were still active in the scholarly fields, mostly engaged in commentary and compilation.

In both Syria and Iraq, as the prominence of the Syriac language waned and the educational achievements of Muslim scholars grew, Christian learning and thinking continued but was less influential. From approximately the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, while less visible, monasteries and Christian enclaves were still seen as 'civilised' and as places of learning, but were somewhat isolated. There was, however, a "Syriac renaissance" during the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, during which there was renewed interaction between Christian and Muslim scholars, and in which works by famous Muslim writers were translated to Syriac. This season also had an artistic expression, in, for example, illuminations and calligraphy of Gospel lectionaries in Arabic and Syriac script, as well as innovations in metalwork and architecture.<sup>40</sup>

#### Christian Intellectual and Cultural Activity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christians continued to contribute in the fields of intellectual activity and education, and were known for running the best schools in both Syria and Iraq. In Iraq, following World War I, "schools for girls and boys were established in which religious education could be given, as well as fulfilling the national curriculum."<sup>41</sup> When Baathist rule took over in the 1950s, private, and hence Christian, education was abolished. In response, churches started to organize their own system of religious education for parishioners through after-school and weekend programmes. More recently, following the establishment of the Kurdish-administered region of Northern Iraq in 1992, then the 2003 invasion which abolished Baathist rule in the rest of the country, Christian schools have once again flourished and are still known for the quality of their education. Christian schools continued to exist in Baathist Syria, though their influence was limited to teaching the Syrian national curriculum.

Throughout the past century, Christians also continued to contribute to artistic and intellectual activity in both countries as members of cultural societies, writers, musicians and artists. Furthermore,



*Assyrians ran a number of cultural organizations in Northeastern Syria. Until the 1970s, the Mesopotamian Center (Nadi Rafidayn) made an important contribution to the identity of the Assyrian Christian people as an ethnic group. In the 1960s the Assyrian soccer team was the leading football club in Syria. During the late 1950s the Mesopotamian Center served as a catalyst for the creation of the first Assyrian political and cultural movement.*  
-Assyrian Diaspora Organisation Representative

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<sup>38</sup> Rassam 2005, p.37.

<sup>39</sup> Haddad 1970, p.11.

<sup>40</sup> Brock 2010, pp.180-181.

<sup>41</sup> Rassam 2005, p.136.

in both countries, many prominent university lecturers/professors were Christian throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Historical Christian Political Engagement in Syria and Iraq

Christendom does not have a history of political dominance in the Middle East, except for a brief period under Roman, or Byzantine, rule which extended to Syria but not to Iraq, where before Islam, Christians were a minority religion and Zoroastrianism dominated. Even so, in the early years of Christianity, Iraq served as a safe haven for Christian refugees fleeing persecution in the Roman empire.<sup>42</sup>

### Political Relations with Muslim Caliphate

When Muslims conquered Iraq in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Christians negotiated treaties with the new rulers to ensure their ongoing existence and right to practice their faith. An Iraqi clergy member pointed out that monasteries throughout the region offered hospitality to Muslim armies, and that there are various mentions in Islamic literature about Christian institutions offering help to Muslims.

In the years of Abbasid and Umayyad reign, and later under Mongol rule, Christians contributed in a variety of ways in the courts of the Caliphs. As seen above, many Caliphs often sought advice at monasteries, and Christians could be found in the trusted circles and households of Caliphs, for example as their personal physicians. The political prominence of Christians declined between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries as a result of shifts in the Islamic empires; their influence was further diminished as Muslims became more educated and hence less dependent on Christians, Arabic grew in influence leaving Syriac less important, and churches faced diminished and shrinking congregations due to a growing number of conversions to Islam.<sup>43</sup> By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Iraqi Christians were living mostly in enclaves which remained hidden to much of the world until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Syrian Christians only fared slightly better.<sup>44</sup> Even so, though hidden from social and political processes, these communities continued to thrive with an inward focus.

### Christians under Ottoman Rule

In Ottoman years, both Christians and members of other religious minorities were able to assume some political significance, due to local structures put in place by the Ottoman rulers.<sup>45</sup> The Ottoman Millet system assigned each religious grouping as its own semi-autonomous 'millet'. "All Christian communities within the Ottoman empire welcomed attempts at secularization of the state and the elimination of *dhimmi* status that followed the *tanzimat*."<sup>46</sup> For the first time in their history, apart from a short period during Mongol rule, the Christians of Mesopotamia were considered equal citizens before the law."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Rassam 2005, p.29.

<sup>43</sup> Rassam 2005, pp.88-89.

<sup>44</sup> Hunter 2005, p.xviii.

<sup>45</sup> Healey 2010, p.45.


<sup>46</sup> '*dhimmi*' refers to minority status under Islamic law, and '*tanzimat*' refers to the Ottoman secular reform movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

<sup>47</sup> Rassam 2005, p.123.

Christians used their growing economic visibility and international networks as a platform to participate in, though rarely challenge, public discourse.<sup>48</sup>

### Christians in Politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, prior to and during Baathist rule

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, after World War I, Islam was instituted as the official religion of Iraq, but Christians and other minorities had full and equal rights. Most Christians did not seek special privileges, and in fact many believed that foreign intervention on their behalf made their situation worse in the long run. Then, and later under the Baathist regime, minorities in Iraq were generally treated fairly, as long as they respected government policies. In fact, they were perceived by the regime to be too small to pose a political threat and thus were seen by some as privileged. Under Saddam Hussein, some Christians were able to rise to positions of prominence, including as cabinet ministers and in other influential roles. Christian religious institutions enjoyed government protection and the government facilitated Christian cultural events. "A sense of belonging to the country as an Arab, an Iraq and a Christian was encouraged but only through being a Baathist."<sup>49</sup>



*"Michel Aflaq was born in Damascus to a middle class Greek Orthodox Christian family, Aflaq was first educated in the westernized schools of French mandate Syria, where he was considered a "brilliant student"... Aflaq became a school teacher and was active in political circles. In September 1940, after France's defeat in World War II, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar set up the nucleus of what was later to become the Ba'ath Party."*

"Michel Aflaq" on Philosophers of the Arabs, accessed [http://www.arabphilosophers.com/English/philosophers/modern/modern-names/eMichel\\_Aflaq.htm](http://www.arabphilosophers.com/English/philosophers/modern/modern-names/eMichel_Aflaq.htm) 28 Feb 2016

In Syria, many Christian Arabs described themselves as nationalist and secularist, in part to resist Islamist tendencies. In the 1990 parliamentary election, approximately one-third of seats were reserved for independent candidates, and a candidate from an Assyrian party won a seat.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, in both countries, according to an advisor on interfaith relations, Christians were often accused of supporting the regimes uncritically, and as being inward-looking without any vision for society at large.

There were also Christian opposition groups in both countries, usually affiliated to specific denominations of Christianity, most notably Assyrian and Armenian parties. Zow'a Party, an Assyrian Democratic Movement, was established in 1979 to represent the interests of Iraqi churches and to defend and promote Assyrian identity. Not all Christians supported the movement, though. "To a certain extent, this idea met with resistance in ecclesiastical circles, which feared that the accent on a common ethnic and cultural identity could threaten the denominational identity and weaken the leadership of the religious leaders."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO) in Syria, established 1957, "sought democratic reform of the Syrian

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<sup>48</sup> Roussos 2010, p.108.

<sup>49</sup> Rassam 2005, p.149.

<sup>50</sup> Perthes, Volker. 1992. "Syria's Parliamentary Elections." In *Middle East Research and Information Project*, Vol. 22, January/February: <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer174/syrias-parliamentary-elections>.

<sup>51</sup> Teule, Herman. 2009. "The Christian Minorities in Iraq: The Equation of Religious and Ethnic Identity." in Timmerman, Christiane, Johan Leman, Hannelore Roos and Barbara Segaert eds: *In-Between Spaces: Christian and Muslim Minorities in Transition in Europe and the Middle East*. Brussels: Peter Lang, p.50.

state as well as to secure recognition of the Assyrian identity and a more meaningful place for Assyrians within the country”.<sup>52</sup>

### Christians, Missionaries and International Relations

As mentioned above, during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim Ottoman rulers came under increased pressure from European influences. This continued outside interference in Ottoman affairs angered Muslims, and at times Christian minority communities living in the Ottoman empire were associated with European governments who often saw Christians as their allies in the Middle East. This undue attention was one of the many reasons for the killings and displacements of Christians in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>53</sup>

Missionary endeavours in the Middle East also grew over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the outset of World War I, there were Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant missionaries hailing from France, Germany, Russia, Great Britain and the United States; while British and American Protestant missionaries were largely independent, other European missionaries were often openly associated with the policies and diplomatic efforts of their home countries.<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, the American Protestant enterprise has perhaps been the most politically controversial. When Protestant missionaries arrived from the United States on Mediterranean shores in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they worked hard to develop strong relations between the United States and their host countries. Arab Christians often were the ones brokering this relationship, which brought new educational investment to the Middle East and increased opportunities for economic trade. However, over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those relations deteriorated as American foreign policy decisions reflected less and less an interest in the well-being of the majority of the population of the Middle East. In one critique, “a growing Arab faith in America” was followed by “a sudden, ever more bitter disenchantment. The pivot is 1948 and the crucial U.S. role in helping to create and then defend the exclusively Jewish state of Israel in what had been historically a multi-religious land.”<sup>55</sup>

As the negative fall-out of, and potential further incrimination which might result from, association with the so-called West, continued, Arab Christians increasingly distanced themselves from associations to Europe or the United States. So, while the main mediators between the U.S., Europe and the Arab world previously had been Christians from Syria, Palestine and Lebanon, many Middle Eastern Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century preferred to maintain positive ties to their local ruling forces. Furthermore, as did most of the governments of the Middle East, after the withdrawal of European protection in the years following the end of World War II, the governments of Syria and Iraq placed increasing restrictions on the activities of missionaries.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Isaac 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Chatty 2010, p.58.

<sup>54</sup> Tejirian, Eleanor H. and Reeva Spector Simon. 2012. *Conflict, Conquest and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East*. Chichester: Columbia University Press, p.138.

<sup>55</sup> Makdisi, Ussama. 2010. *Faith Misplaced*. Accessible Publishing Systems PTY, p.vii.

<sup>56</sup> Tejirian and Simon 2012, p. 199

## Economic Contributions of Christians in Syria and Iraq

At different points in history, Christians have played various roles in the economies of their societies. While Christians may be more well-known for their intellectual and scholarly activity than for specific trades or parts of the economy, some moments of economic activity can be highlighted, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### Medicine

During the early centuries of Islamic rule, Christians distinguished themselves in the field of medicine and for their knowledge of Greek and Indian medical practices. Many Christian doctors were associated with the famed medical school of Gundishapur (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries), in modern-day Iran near the border with Iraq.<sup>57</sup> Some historians estimate that two-thirds of doctors in Abbasid and Umayyad dynasties were Christian.<sup>58</sup> Of particular note, one Christian family, the Bakhtisho family, contributed seven generations of personal physicians to Abbasid Caliphs, providing almost exclusive medical care to the rulers over the course of approximately 3 centuries. Other Christian doctors also had notable influence at court.<sup>59</sup>

### Trade

Under Ottoman rule, after centuries living mostly in isolated communities, many Christians moved back to cities, invested in education, and increasingly took on professions as artisans, traders, lawyers, doctors and educators. Many also became quite prominent in international commerce. Due to presumed religious and cultural ties to the West, trading companies like the East India company hired mostly Christians or Jews in Iraq. Many became wealthy through this trade activity.<sup>60</sup> Many Levantine Orthodox also prospered, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, engaging in commercial trade through the Mediterranean ports of Lebanon and Syria.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Christians were active in attracting international commerce to Middle Eastern shores.

### Christian Distinctions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Economies of Syria and Iraq

The waves of Christian migration from the Ottoman Empire to Syria and Iraq in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought people with specialized skills, for example in watch-making and jewellery making, and Christians became known for their craftsmanship. Christians also pursued higher education and professional qualifications in a variety of fields. Some key contributors suggested that, in the words of one commentator on interfaith relations, “because they lived as a minority Christians tended to compensate through achieving higher



*“In the early stages of several important new developments, whether literary or scientific, Christians, who have always been a significant presence in professional fields such as medicine, science, engineering, and education, have played a vital enabling role, facilitating important developments that might not, or indeed sometimes could not, otherwise have developed without their presence and participation.”*

*-Brock 2010:182-183*

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<sup>57</sup> Brock 2010, p.178.

<sup>58</sup> Brock 2010, p.179.

<sup>59</sup> Rassam 2005, p.82.

<sup>60</sup> Rassam 2005, p.123.

<sup>61</sup> Haddad 1970, p.79.



*“Before the current war and in the early days of Saddam, Christians were finally allowed to access education and work, so they took advantage of the opportunities straight away and rose to the top in many fields, like education and medicine.”*

*–Iraqi Clergy*

education degrees and professional skills (doctors, engineers, businessmen, etc.)”  
Indeed, a member of the Iraqi clergy cited that in the census of 1957, Iraqi Christians represented 10% of the population but 23% of the people who had higher degrees.

Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Iraq and Syria were financially independent and self-reliant. International trade, however, was a field in which most Christians began to limit their activity, for political reasons, not wanting to associate themselves unnecessarily with Western influences.

## Spiritual Relevance of Christianity in the History of Syria and Iraq

Most of the above-mentioned activities of Christian communities in the region were distinctly religious and a part of their religious tradition. Historically, Middle Eastern Christians have integrated their spiritual life with all other aspects of their societal engagement. This final section will thus highlight some uniquely Middle Eastern beliefs and practices.

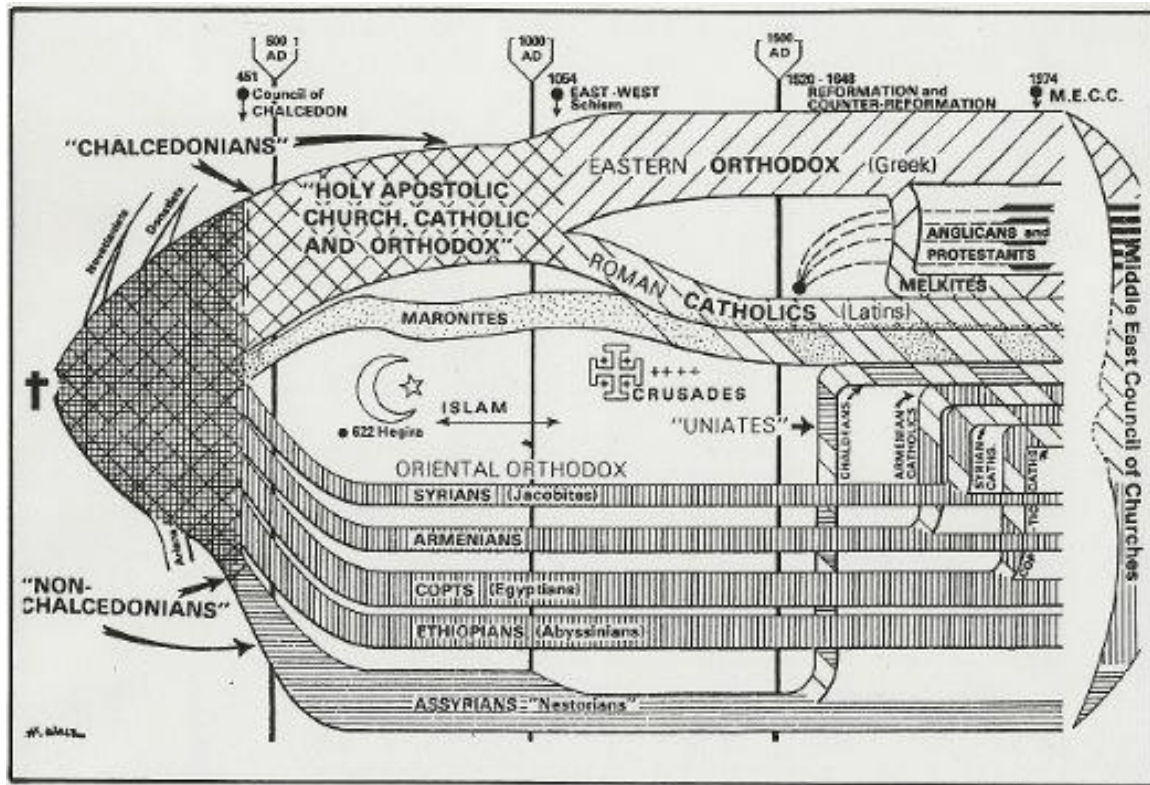
### Development of Eastern Christianity

The key historical moment which divided the Eastern and Western churches was the Council of Chalcedon (451CE), over a theological dispute regarding the nature of Christ. Those who felt the Chalcedonian definition of faith was unsatisfactory became the Syriac Orthodox (which eventually led to Greek, Armenian, Ethiopian and Coptic) and Church of the East. Since the split of Rome, they had already been somewhat independent from Western Christians, but after the Arab conquests in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, almost all interaction ceased. Only a few Chalcedonians lived in Islamic lands; meanwhile, many monasteries and Christian schools of the Eastern tradition, commonly referred to now as “Orthodox” Christians, flourished.

The second significant divide for the Eastern churches was when the Uniate Churches (Eastern Catholics) separated from their Orthodox counterparts in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, affiliating with the Pope in Rome. This division was spurred by a question of leadership rather than theological disputes per se. The third important historical divide came when Protestant missionaries came to the Middle East around the 19<sup>th</sup> century, bringing Western Reformed theological teachings, attracting new members from the Eastern churches and hence adding to divisions between the various Christian denominations in the Middle East. These divides have defined the various denominations of Christianity in the Middle East. The following diagram gives a summary of the development of the various Christian traditions.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Source: Jerusalem and Middle East Church Association, accessed 27 April 2016  
<http://imeca.org.uk/sites/default/files/images/History%20smaller.jpg>



### Religious Art and Asceticism

Eremitic, or hermit, communities in Syria and Iraq, especially those from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, are an important part of the region’s heritage. These communities were mostly led by individual ascetics, who maintained a strict ritual of prayer and religious practice and lived a self-sacrificial lifestyle; many of these attracted large followings.<sup>63</sup> Through these and other religious communities, Christian Arab artistic production flourished as a deep and lasting articulation of the faith and spirituality expressed by the members of these communities.

“The numerous monasteries in Syria, Palestine, Lebanon and Mesopotamia which members of the [Syrian Orthodox] church established are the best testimony to its ascetic and mystical character.”<sup>64</sup> Liturgy, music, icons and mosaics are among the types of artistic production that emerged from these communities and have arguably influenced both religious and non-religious creative expression over the years.<sup>65</sup>

*St. John of Damascus (8<sup>th</sup> century) had been the chief financial officer of the Umayyad Empire before retiring to Mar Saba as a Monk. “John was allowed to devote himself to religious poetry, which became the heritage of the Eastern Church, and to theological arguments in defence of the doctrines of the Church, and refutation of all heresies. His three great hymns or “canons,” are those on Easter, the Ascension, and Satan Thomas’s Sunday.”*

### Interfaith Dialogue

In Abassid years, there was extensive Christian influence on Islamic thought.<sup>66</sup> Through dialogue

*St. John of Damascus (8<sup>th</sup> century) had been the chief financial officer of the Umayyad Empire before retiring to Mar Saba as a Monk. “John was allowed to devote himself to religious poetry, which became the heritage of the Eastern Church, and to theological arguments in defence of the doctrines of the Church, and refutation of all heresies. His three great hymns or “canons,” are those on Easter, the Ascension, and Satan Thomas’s Sunday.”*

*“St. John of Damascus” on Catholic Online, accessed [http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint\\_id=66](http://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=66), 28 Feb 2016*

<sup>63</sup> AbouZayd 2005, p.395.

<sup>64</sup> Rassam 2005, p.71.

<sup>65</sup> Kerr, David. “A Western Christian Appreciation of Eastern Christianity” in Bailey and Bailey 2003, p.8-9.

<sup>66</sup> Rassam 2005, p.86.

between Christians and Muslims, Islamic schools developed which believed in such theological concepts as free will, rejection of the Qur'an as the uncreated word of God, the accuracy of the Bible, and Jesus as crucified and the ideal of purity. One such school even included Christian members. This season of high inter-faith tolerance lasted from about the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Some time later, around the 13<sup>th</sup> century, under Mongol rule there was some limited communication between the Middle Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Around this time, the Crusades also brought Eastern churches into contact with Western Christianity, though this contact was not often positive. In fact, relations between Eastern and Western Christians may have further deteriorated, as many Orthodox Christians were among the victims of the Catholic Crusaders,<sup>67</sup> and others, such as the earliest Maronites in Lebanon, began to leave their Eastern Orthodox churches to convert to Roman Catholicism.<sup>68</sup> In more recent years, interfaith dialogue was limited in the Middle East, with Christians promoting an image of themselves as secular and nationalist Iraqis or Syrians, rather than engaging in debates which might be seen to challenge Islam.

## Conclusion

Christians in the Middle East have long existed in various different denominations and interacted with their evolving society in a variety of ways. Perhaps most consistently, throughout the course of history, Christians have been known for their intellectual and scholarly activity, contributing to knowledge creation and translation of ideas, and encouraging philosophic and academic ties between different parts of the world. Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian religious institutions were respected centres of social and scientific activity and much of Christians' contribution to artistic and linguistic development was through practices of spiritual worship. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, more Christians entered the public space, engaging in economic and political discourse, but took on an increasingly secular-nationalistic identity in the newly-formed countries of Iraq and Syria.

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<sup>67</sup> Bailey and Beiley 2003, p.50.

<sup>68</sup> O'Mahoney and Loosly 2010, p.8-9.



This is part of the *Hope for the Middle East campaign*, a project carried by a group of organisations that aims to guarantee a solid place and future for Christians, and other religious minorities, in the Middle East as a valuable, integral part of society. This includes actively seeking the support of political and religious authorities, both national and international, which will contribute towards the possibility of safe return for those who have had to flee their home or country.

## Contributors:

For 60 years, Open Doors has worked in the world's most oppressive countries, empowering Christians who are persecuted for their beliefs. Open Doors equips persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries through programs like Bible distribution, leadership and discipleship training, providing relief, and supporting their livelihood. We also raise awareness through advocacy and encourage prayer for them. <https://www.opendoors.org/>



Served helps local churches serve their communities by supporting children of conflict through quality education. Currently with projects in Lebanon, Iraq and Brazil, Served develops quality research and strong partnerships in order to support churches' purposeful engagement in their communities during times of crisis. Read more at: <http://served.ngo>



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Middle East Concern (MEC) is an Association of established Christian agencies and individuals promoting freedom of religion and belief in the Middle East and North Africa, with a special focus on the Christian communities. Read more at: <http://www.meconcern.org>



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