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Christianity and Islam: Demography in the Middle East

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Middle East

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At all four corners of the earth: the Balkans (Kosovo, Bosnia), Indonesia (Moluccas, East-Timor), Africa (Sudan), as well as the Holy Land (Nazareth), Islam and Christianity seem to be in a position of mutual rejection. Hence, the representation, which currently prevails over Europe, of a perpetual conflict. However, this vision maintained by events that indeed highlight religious conflicts, remains in a state of partiality and partialness. We thus see Islam reigning undivided over the societies south of the Mediterranean, all the while forgetting that in the Arab world as well as in Turkey, religious uniformity – currently the norm – does not date back to the beginning of time. Between the 7th century, which witnessed the warriors of Islam leaving Arabia, and the preceding century, the relationship between the two religions was not just conflictual. On more than one occasion and in more than one place Christianity would come to know unexpected recoveries.¹

In order to estimate the changes in the relationship between Christianity and Islam, it is important to banish *a priori* the ideologies and the explanations while having recourse to guides as impartial as possible. In this respect, demography is a particularly efficient tool to gauge the relative variations of the two groups by means of five processes: 1) conversion of individuals, families or entire groups, 2) massacres, which remained exceptional until the early 20th century (Armenians in the Ottoman Empire), 3) immigration and emigration, by coercion or by free choice, differentiated on the basis of religion, 4) inter-marriage, between Muslim men and Christian women, which leads to a second generation of uniquely Muslim children, and 5) birth and death rates of different magnitude leading to diverging rhythms of growth amongst Christians and Muslims.

The existing data demonstrate that for Islam to be durably installed in the Arab Orient, nine long centuries were to be necessary, from the Hegira to the end of the Mameluks. It is thus not an instantaneous religious mutation as many imagine. The conquest of souls was accelerated by the theological and national rivalries which undermined Christianity from within. The status that Muslims reserved for the People of the Book had demographic effects in the opposite sense: it allowed for Christian communities to perpetuate themselves, but stimulated conversions at the same time. The Christian nucleus which subsisted to the east of the Mediterranean revealed itself incompressible, which was not the case for the Maghreb, where the dynasties threatened by the Christian reconquest (Almoravides and Almohades) and spurred on by the zeal of neophytes, drove the last survivors of autochthonous Christianity to conversion.

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The native Christianities were more than once victim to East-West confrontation, which overwhelmed them. The shock of the Crusades naturally opposed Christianity and Islam but it also placed face to face the Christians of the East and Christians of the West, who had little in common. Intimidation and humiliation imposed by the crusaders and their Latin clergy quickly transformed the mistrust into a rupture. This more than two century-long intrusion of the West was to have after effects, one of which being the appearance of a fundamentalist Islam mistrustful of difference. It imposed itself on the Christianity of the East, reducing it in terms of population and spiritual influence. The spirit of the Crusades did not vanish all of the sudden. When, in 1830, Charles X sent his troops to tackle the coasts of North Africa, autochthonous Christianity had been gone since several centuries prior. Reviving the spirit of the Crusades, half a millennium after the fall of Acre (1291) the monarch still retained the objective of reconquest, for the benefit of the 'true' religion, of the ancient lands of Christianity. The failure of the colonial venture was patently obvious in terms of religion, but paradoxically, not at all for language: nearly 40 years after independence, the imprint of the French language continues to become more profound.

Because they had conquered the Christian Balkans before the East and the Arab Maghreb, by means of frequent marriages with Christian, Greek, or Armenian princesses and ordinary women, the Ottomans arrived with much experience in inter-denominational dialogue. The special treatment they reserved for Christian minorities, notably in permitting them to regroup themselves into nations (*millet*), gave rise to a revival – which was as spectacular as it was unexpected – of Christianity. The Ottomans, contrary to the generally accepted notion that was widespread since the creation of the first nation-states in the Balkans (Greece,

Serbia) and followed by those of the national entities in the Middle East, sought to control – not to denature – the populations of the immense empire they had built. For the first time since the Byzantine Empire, Christianity of the East found itself again in an immense area of trade. In Anatolia, the Ottomans permitted the recomposition of a territory where Christianity had paid the price of a religious and political anarchy, virtually having disappeared. On the contrary, under the reign of the Ottomans, the proportion of Christians in Turkey (within the current borders) and in the northern Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Israel, Iraq) was tripled: from less than 7% at the end of the Mameluk or Seldjoukide epoch to 20-21% before World War II. Istanbul counted as many Christians as Muslims in its 1881 census. On the other hand, further away from the heart of the empire, Egypt did not take part in the re-Christianization movement.

The reasons for this exceptional rise in Eastern Christianity up to the beginning of the 20th century reside in the quasi-disappearance of conversions to Islam (sometimes even acting in the opposite sense, as did the Chebab emirs in the Lebanese mountains). It also resides in the rarefaction of mixed marriages, and immigration of Christians encouraged by the Ottoman leaders from the Balkans or even Western Europe towards Arab or Turkish cities (Aleppo or Istanbul, for example). Still more decisive was the differential demographic growth which worked in favour of the Christians: stronger stability of marriage favouring greater procreation, a phenomenon which seems to go back far in time, for the 9th-century writer Al Jahiz had already noted that thanks to their monogamy the Christians 'filled the earth'. In Lebanon and in Turkey, censuses attest the superiority of the Christian birth rate. In turn, the differences in mortality increased the gap between the two religious groups, the Christians being traditionally exempt from military service, whose duration was reduced to 12 years of service only in 1812. The hundreds of armed conflicts in Ottoman history accentuated an exceptionally high death rate among Muslims, who were already vulnerable in times of peace. Epidemics, indeed, were far more lethal amongst Muslims than Christians, due to differences in the practices implemented to deal with them. Lastly, the development of training and modern medicine, both linked to the institutions of the *millet*, would contribute to the relatively early decrease in mortality amongst Christians.

The end of the Ottoman Empire strongly marks the end of Christianity in its Turkish component and its decline or eclipse in its Arab component. In the Ottoman Empire, or more precisely, under the Young Turks and then under the Kemalist Republic, nearly 3 million Christians were to pay the shock of nationalisms and the birth of modern Turkey with their lives or by their exile. There were 1.2 million Armenians in 1914 and only

77 thousand left in 1927; 1.5 million Greeks before the 1914-1918 war, of which only 136 thousand were to survive in Istanbul and just 10 thousand in Anatolia 13 years later. In the Arab world, on the other hand, it was not massacres or exile but rather a differential demography that was to mark the receding numbers of Christians. The proportion of Christians within the total population had culminated around 1914 with 26% in the whole of the Near East: 59% in Lebanon (Greater Lebanon), 11% in Palestine, 10% in Syria, 8% in Egypt and 2% in Iraq. Today, Christians have fallen below 10% (9.2% in 1995): 40% in Lebanon, 6.4% in Syria, 5.9% in Egypt, 3.8% in Palestine (West Bank of Jordan, East Jerusalem and Gaza), 2% in Israel, 1.5% in Iraq. This spectacular drop which brings Christianity back to the pre-Ottoman era owes nothing to conversions, which remain extremely rare, or to forced population displacement, nor to massacres (apart from such cases as the Nestorians and Chaldeans in Iraq in 1933 and in Lebanon from 1975-1990 where all the communities paid a common toll with human lives). It does perhaps have a little to do with mixed marriages. The international migrations, on the other hand, contributed to a strong recomposition of the population: long-distance emigration towards America, Africa or Australia of Christian populations – more than that of Muslims. From a regional point of view, the emigration of Christian Egyptians, Syrians, Palestinians, and Iraqis to Lebanon, where Christians were well represented, accelerated the reduction of their presence in the countries of departure, all the while allowing Lebanon to conserve an important Christian minority. However, it was principally the trends in fertility, reversed in disfavour of the Christians at the eve of the 20th century, which were decisive in the decrease in Christianity. Having entered earlier than the Muslims in the process of demographic transition and having opted for smaller families, the Christians would paradoxically pay the price of this early modernization process with a decrease in their relative numbers: a phenomenon which worsened over the generations. Today, however, the differences in fertility according to religion are fading. Muslims are entering, just the same, into the current of demographic transition. ◆

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Notes

- For more developments, see Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews in Islam*, London/New York, Tauris, 1997, 242 p. and Philippe Fargues, *I cristiani arabi dell'Oriente: una prospettiva demografica*, in Andrea Pacini (ed.); *Comunità cristiane nell'Islam arabo: la sfida del futuro*, Fondazione Agnelli, Torino, 1996, 406 p.

Christianity of the East by Rite and Country (in thousands) 1995

Church	Egypt	Lebanon	Syria	Iraq	Jordan	Israel	Palestine	Turkey	All countries
Copt (all rites)	3238.9	1.9	0.0	1.8	1.2	0.8	2.8	0.0	3298.0
Greek Orthodox	4.4	294.8	503.0	0.8	81.4	33.0	41.6	13.9	972.9
Maronite	2.5	490.9	28.0	0.0	0.0	7.3	0.3	0.0	529.0
Greek Catholic	4.7	255.2	111.8	0.7	22.1	43.9	4.4	0.0	442.8
Armenian Apostolic	7.6	196.4	111.8	25.0	3.5	1.3	2.9	68.3	416.8
Chaldean Catholic	0.5	4.9	6.7	390.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.8	409.2
Jacobite	0.2	14.7	89.4	37.2	2.2	0.1	2.5	39.9	186.2
Latin	3.8	2.9	11.1	5.2	34.9	13.2	15.2	5.7	92.0
Protestant	20.9	20.2	20.1	5.8	4.4	4.5	4.8	5.2	85.9
Syrian Catholic	1.3	19.7	22.4	55.5	0.0	0.1	0.5	1.7	101.2
Nestorian	0.0	4.9	16.8	87.7	0.0	0.0	0.9	0.0	110.3
Armenian Catholic	0.6	19.7	24.6	5.5	0.4	0.1	0.3	5.1	56.3
Total Christian	3336.4	1326.2	945.7	615.5	150.1	104.3	76.2	146.6	6700.6
Percentage in population	5.7	43.8	6.4	2.9	4.2	2.1	3.8	0.2	4.0

Source: Youssef Courbage and Philippe Fargues, *Christians and Jews in Islam*, London/New York, Tauris, 1997, p.209