"We have good reason to welcome the publication of Introducing World Christianity. Capably guided by editor Charles Farhadian, the highly qualified authors of this compendium lucidly interpret these times of rapid growth and often confusing change in global Christianity. The book integrates historical interpretation with perspectives informed by expertise in the social sciences, while taking account of the essentially missionary nature of the Christian Church. This will become a standard reference work."

Darrell L. Guder, Princeton Theological Seminary


This is an engaging multidisciplinary introduction to the worldwide spread and impact of Christianity. Bringing together chapters from leading scholars in history, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, this book examines the major transformations in contemporary societies brought about through the influence of Christianity. Each chapter shows how the broad themes within Christianity have been adopted and adapted by Christian denominations within each major region of the world. In this way, the book paints a global picture of the impact of Christianity, enriched by detailed historic and ethnographic material for each particular region. Throughout, the chapters examine Protestant, Evangelical, Catholic, and Orthodox forms of Christianity. The combination of broader perspectives and deep analysis of particular regions, illuminating the social, cultural, political, and religious features of changes brought about by Christianity, makes this book essential reading for students of world Christianity.
Introducing World Christianity
To Katherine, with love
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
List of Contributors viii
Foreword ix
Robert W. Hefner
Acknowledgments xi
Map 0.1 Percentage majority religion by province, 2010 xii
Introduction 1
Charles E. Farhadian

Part I: Africa 5

1 Middle Eastern and North African Christianity: Persisting in the Lands of Islam
   Heather J. Sharkey 7

2 Christian Belongings in East Africa: Flocking to the Churches
   Ben Knighton 21

3 West African Christianity: Padres, Pastors, Prophets, and Pentecostals
   Ogbu Kalu 36

4 Christianity in Southern Africa: The Aesthetics of Well-Being
   Frederick Klaits 51

Part II: Europe 63

5 Christianity in Western Europe: Mission Fields, Old and New?
   Simon Coleman 65

6 Christianity in Eastern Europe: A Story of Pain, Glory, Persecution, and Freedom
   Peter Kuzmíč 77

Part III: Asia 91

7 Christianity in South Asia: Negotiating Religious Pluralism
   Arun Jones 93

8 Christianity in Southeast Asia: Similarity and Difference in a Culturally Diverse Region
   Barbara Watson Andaya 108
9 Christianity in East Asia: Evangelicalism and the March First Independence Movement in Korea  
   *Timothy S. Lee*

**Part IV: Americas**

10 Christianity in North America: Changes and Challenges in a Land of Promise  
   *Kevin J. Christiano*

11 Central America and the Caribbean: Christianity on the Periphery  
   *Virginia Garrard-Burnett*

12 Christianity in Latin America: Changing Churches in a Changing Continent  
   *Samuel Escobar*

13 Brazilian Charisma: Pentecostalized Christianity in Latin America’s Largest Nation  
   *R. Andrew Chesnut*

**Part V: The Pacific**

14 Christianity in Australia and New Zealand: Faith and Politics in Secular Soil  
   *Marion Maddox*

15 Christianity in Polynesia: Transforming the Islands  
   *Ian Breward*

16 Christianity in Micronesia: The Interplay between Church and Culture  
   *Francis X. Hezel*

17 Christianity in Melanesia: Transforming the Warrior Spirit  
   *Garry W. Trompf*

Conclusion: World Christianity – Its History, Spread, and Social Influence  
   *Robert D. Woodberry*

Index
List of Illustrations

Maps
0.1 Percentage majority religion by province, 2010 xii
1.1 Middle East and North Africa 8
2.1 East Africa 22
3.1 West Africa 37
4.1 Southern Africa 52
5.1 Western Europe 66
6.1 Eastern Europe 78
7.1 South Asia 94
8.1 Southeast Asia 109
9.1 East Asia 123
10.1 North America 140
11.1 Central America and the Caribbean 155
12.1 Latin America 172
13.1 Brazil 187
14.1 Australia and New Zealand 204
15.1 Polynesia 219
16.1 Micronesia 231
17.1 Melanesia 245

Figures
1.1 Martyrology of Coptic Saints 12
1.2 Christian Woman in Itsa, Fayoum Governorate, Egypt. 15
2.1 Anglican Bishops blessing a school bus at the consecration of the first Bishop of Kitale 24
2.2 Scott Memorial Church, Thogoto 26
3.1 Life of Olaudah 40
4.1 Women members of an Apostolic church in Botswana dressed in uniforms 57
4.2 A burial service in Botswana 60
5.1 Jesus House Ministry in Brent Cross, Northwest London 73
5.2 A women’s conference in London 74
6.1 Evangelical Pentecostal Church “Radosne Vijesti” 84
6.2 St Andrew’s Orthodox Church in Kyiv, Ukraine 88
7.1 A Syrian Orthodox Church in Kerala 98
7.2 A Khrist Panthi worshiping Jesus 102
8.1 Our Lady of Antipolo 111
8.2 Cathedral, Vigan, the Philippines 113
8.3 Good Friday procession in Larantuka, Flores, Indonesia 114
8.4 Tomb of a Toba Batak Christian, Sumatra, Indonesia 120
9.1 Women’s Bible study group in Chemulp’o (Incheon) 126
9.2 Prayer meeting in Pyongyang 128
10.1 A community of Trappist monks 144
10.2 Richard M. Nixon joins the famed Christian evangelist Billy Graham 148
11.1 Cathedral Of Santo Domingo 158
12.1 Iglesia Sarhua, Peru 173
12.2 La Paz, Bolivia 175
13.1 Deliverance from Demons 193
13.2 Brazilian Export: The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God 194
14.1 Rev. John Dunmore Lang, D.D., A.M. 207
14.2 Armed Constabulary Field Force, Parihaka 212
15.1 Papeih - Cook Islands missionary 220
15.2 “King George of Tonga” 222
16.1 Fr. Edwin McManus with students 235
16.2 Women dressed in uniform for presentation of songs at the Christmas celebration 238
17.1 Catholic Church, Ambunti, Sepik River region 250

Tables
2.1 Religious adherence in East African countries 29
10.1 The 10 largest religious affiliations
   - United States (2008) 143
10.2 The 10 largest religious affiliations
   - Canada (2001) 143
List of Contributors

**Barbara Watson Andaya** is Professor of Asian Studies and the Director of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Hawai‘i.

**Ian Breward** is Senior Fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, and Emeritus Professor of Church History in the Uniting Church’s Theological Hall, Ormond College, Melbourne.

**Virginia Garrard-Burnett** is Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas.

**R. Andrew Chesnut** is the Bishop Walter Sullivan Chair of Catholic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia.

**Kevin J. Christiano** is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.

**Simon Coleman** is Jackman Professor at the Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto, Canada.

**Samuel Escobar** is Professor Emeritus at Palmer Theological Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, and President Emeritus of the Latin American Theological Fraternity.

**Charles E. Farhadian** is Associate Professor of World Religions and Christian Mission at Westmont College, Santa Barbara, California.

**Francis X. Hezel, SJ** is a Jesuit priest who has worked in Micronesia since 1963, serving as the Director of Xavier High School in Chuuk, the Regional Superior of the Jesuits in Micronesia, and Director of Micronesian Seminar, Pohnpei, Micronesia.

**Arun Jones** is Dan and Lillian Hankey Associate Professor of World Evangelism, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

**Ogbu Kalu** was Luce Professor of World Christianity and Mission at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois, until his death in 2009.

**Frederick Klaits**, a cultural anthropologist, is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky.

**Ben Knighton** is Dean of the Research Programme at Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS), Oxford, England.

**Peter Kuzmic** is the Eva B. and Paul E. Toms Distinguished Professor of Missions and European Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts.

**Timothy S. Lee** is Associate Professor of the History of Christianity and Director of Asian Church Studies at Brite Divinity School, Fort Worth, Texas.

**Marion Maddox** is Director of the Centre for Research on Social Inclusion at Macquarie University, Sydney.

**Heather J. Sharkey** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

**Garry W. Trompf** is Emeritus Professor in the History of Ideas and Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Sydney.

**Robert D. Woodberry** is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas.
Foreword

Robert W. Hefner

When Western social theorists in the mid-twentieth century assessed the forces reshaping the modern world, few regarded religion as of much importance. Capitalism, the nation-state, education, science, and technology — these were the locomotives propelling modernity’s forward surge. The major question for these thinkers was not whether religion was still vital, but whether the forces of modernization would consign religion to the private sphere — or do away with it entirely.

Few forecasts in modern social thought have proved more massively mistaken than this one. As we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century, one of the most striking characteristics of the age is the near-global resurgence of religion. One is obliged to say “near-global” because, with the notable exception of its pious immigrants, Western Europe — once thought the model for all modernizing societies — appears to be the great exception to the late-modern religious rule. But whereas scholars of modernity and religion once regarded Western Europe as a window into the soon-to-be-global, today the continent’s stark secularity seems, well, simply exceptional.

What makes the public revitalization of religion all the more intriguing is that it is not just taking place in one tradition, but in most of the world’s great religions. Whether it is Islam in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, Hinduism in India and the global Indian diaspora, Buddhism in East and Southeast Asia, Christianity in America and the global South, or any number of other faiths, the late-modern surge of religion is powerful and pervasive.

In sheer demographic and sociological terms, however, two of today’s religious revitalizations are particularly notable: Islam and Christianity. Although it is sometimes mistakenly equated with radical Islamism, the Islamic resurgence is not first of all radical but piety-minded. Unlike its militant offshoots, which have a strong presence only in select portions of the world, the resurgence in Islamic observance and sociability has been felt in virtually all corners of the globe, wherever the world’s 1.8 billion Muslims reside. Two striking sociological features of the Islamic resurgence are, first, that its leadership is overwhelmingly middle class and well educated, and, second, that notwithstanding the fact that most of its participants reject radicalism, the resurgence has been marked by a heightened interest in bringing religion into politics, enterprise, and the public sphere.

As the essays in this fine volume make compellingly clear, the global vitalization of Christianity differs in several ways from that of its Muslim counterpart. The most striking difference is that whereas the Islamic resurgence has had its most powerful impact on already established populations, Christianity’s late-modern surge has been marked by the diffusion of the faith to new lands. As the chapters in this book demonstrate, the diffusion has brought a genuine world Christianity into being. A world Christianity is a faith no longer overwhelmingly concentrated in the West, but one rooted socially and demographically in the global South. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christianity has returned to a global standing that had been lost for half a millennium after its catastrophic collapse in the Middle East and western Asia during the late Middle Ages.

Seen from the perspective of the new ecumene’s media, finances, and, for mainline denominations, centers of ecclesiastical authority, Westerners still enjoy an influence in world Christianity disproportionate to their numbers as a whole. But the growing phenomenon of missionaries being dispatched from Africa, Latin America, and East Asia to the West and other lands reminds us that it is only a matter of time before
the intellectual weight of the Christian South matches its demographic girth. It is the phenomenon of a Christianity becoming truly global, with all that means for the social and theological plurality of the faith, to which the essays in this volume bear witness.

This book’s essays also remind us of another difference between the Islamic resurgence and world Christianity. Although the leadership of the Islamic resurgence is educated and middle class, evangelical and, especially, Pentecostal Christianity in the global South tends to have a poorer and less educated profile. In the 1970s and 1980s, some Western observers saw the relative deprivation of the global South’s new Christians as proof that the main agents for the evangelical spread were North Americans. It is true that a significant portion of the funding and worship styles of Protestantism in the global South at first showed the influence of American ministries. However, as the contributors to this volume demonstrate so clearly, Christianity in the global South has long since developed an organizational dynamism of its own. In fact, it was only after evangelical and Pentecostal congregations declared their independence from their North American supporters that the new communities acquired the evangelical momentum that they now have.

As several chapters in this volume also indicate, the ascent of Southern Christianity may have a theologically conservative influence, not least of all on questions of gender and sexuality. However, the broader political impact of this self-confident Southern Christianity will almost certainly be varied—as it has been, for example, in Brazil, where evangelical voters are no more conservative than their Catholic counterparts. The variation is a sign of the fact that the center of gravity for most of the new Christian communities is not agreement on or commitment to a particular model of the state, but a concern for personal salvation, social healing, and divinely given dignity.

A distinguished scholar of world Christianity with whom I have had the great pleasure to work over the years, Charles Farhadian has brought together an outstanding team of specialists of world Christianity for this volume. Their scholarship sheds new light on just how this world Christianity came into being, and where it is going. No less important, the authors show us how it is that contrary to the secularist forecasts of the mid-twentieth century, the Christian message of otherworldly transcendence and inner-worldly optimism is as resonant and meaningful as ever for hundreds of millions of people.

Robert W. Hefner
Director, Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs, Boston University
This volume would be impossible without the authors who contributed chapters contained within it. So I begin by thanking each author for his or her contribution. Our authors span the globe and thus are in a superb position to provide scholarly reflection on their region. Gratitude goes to my teachers and other scholars who have shaped my thinking about the complexities of world Christianity: Miriam Adeney, Stephen Bevans, Peter Berger, Benny Giay, Robert Hefner, Lewis Rambo, Dana Robert, Lamin Sanneh, and Andrew Walls. A special thanks goes to Darrell Whiteman, with whom I share areal interests, for his helpful comments on the Introduction. As a faculty member, I thank the administration and my colleagues at Westmont College for their support and the faculty development grants that have enabled me to complete this project, especially Bruce Fisk, Maurice Lee, Tremper Longman III, Chandra Mallampalli, William Nelson, Richard Pointer, Caryn Reeder, Helen Rhee, Warren Rogers, Curt Whiteman, and Telford Work. The book has come into existence due to the guidance and perseverance of the editorial team at Wiley-Blackwell: Isobel Bainton, Lucy Boon, Helen Gray, Rebecca Harkin, Andrew Humphries, and Bridget Jennings. Most importantly, I want to express my love and appreciation to my wife, Katherine, and sons Gabriel and Gideon, who allowed me time away from the family to complete this book.

Charles Farhadian
Santa Barbara, California
Map 0.1  Percentage majority religion by province, 2010
An introduction to world Christianity poses several problems that are by no means particular to the discipline of studying religions. My challenge lies in distinguishing this book from the numerous publications of the last two decades. In a nutshell, this book seeks to explore world Christianity through the complexities of global interdependence and globalization by investigating the dynamic nature of social, cultural, political, and religious encounters with Christianity. World Christianity consists of the diverse forms of indigenous Christianity unified worldwide not by political, economic, cultural, linguistic, or geographic commonalities, but by communities of faith responsive to God’s forgiveness through Jesus Christ, attentive to being individually and corporately shaped by the Bible, and animated by the Holy Spirit to be witnesses to the Gospel across cultural and linguistic boundaries. Christianity, then, is inherently missionary in its approach to the world, seeking to be enacted within cultures and societies worldwide. Until recently two major paradigms have dominated the interpretation of world Christianity. This book contributes to a third paradigm.

The first paradigm, surfacing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sought to map Christianity’s presence on the world stage. In the words of American historian Kenneth Scott Latourette (1884–1968), “One of the most striking facts of our time is the global extension of Christianity.” This interpretation of world Christianity stressed the Western-initiated Christian mission movement propelled by Western powers in introducing Christianity to “pagans,” also frequently emphasizing the “national mission” of the expansion of North American and European civilization (including democracy, individual rights, individual conscience, voluntary associations, and social and economic free enterprise). Many American scholars upheld the perspective that exporting American civilization was quite benign, and, in fact, the national mission of Western nations at times coalesced quite conveniently with Christian missions, being stimulated partly by Enlightenment assurances of progress and development.

The second paradigm, appearing in the last few decades of the twentieth century, interpreted world Christianity as polycentric in nature, where each center possessed equivalent yet independent authority. This interpretative paradigm sought to avoid privileging a single command center (e.g., the West) that navigated the global flow of Christian movements and discourse. Moving past colonial interpretations in order to illustrate local agency even in the face of colonial domination, these scholars underscored the results of Christianity as nation-making, increasing literacy rates, introducing modern education and healthcare, the heightening of cultural confidence, and the burgeoning of historical agency in postcolonial contexts. Christianity, scholars noted, gave those
colonized the confidence to overturn colonial regimes – because Christianity contained a message of human liberation and reconciliation with God. Researchers employing this paradigm highlighted the demographic shift of Christianity to the global South that gave rise to innovative theologies and new Christian discourses – a “new Christendom,” in Philip Jenkins’s words, that challenged and enlivened Christianity in the global North by Southern Christianity’s more conservative biblical hermeneutics and original theological thinking emerging from contexts of suffering and poverty. Biblical translation into indigenous languages and the contextualization of Christian theology provided the combustible energy that propelled Christianity around the world, making the faith meaningful in all kinds of contexts. This approach added significantly to our understanding of world Christianity, particularly in terms of how it demonstrated the powerful and unpredictable ways that the biblical message transformed people and nations.

This book contributes to a third paradigm, which builds on the contributions of earlier approaches. Given that earlier paradigms in the study of world Christianity were heavily historical, this book widens our interpretative scope by drawing connections between social, cultural, political, religious, and historical forces and their uneven relationships with Christianity. Along the way, authors keep a watchful eye on the emergent styles of citizenship, mobilization, and subjectivities as a result of Christianity, since the adoption of Christianity appears to have led to the transformation of individual and corporate identities, enabling love for one another and for God. Such changes have immense social, cultural, and political consequences. Anthropologist Kenelm Burridge, referring to transformations brought by Christianity, suggested that this “new consciousness requires a new world in which to realize itself. And if that new world is not there, the new consciousness seeks to create it.”3 The social, cultural, and political results of this transformation of consciousness warrant our attention.

Scholars have used several metaphors to communicate the dynamic growth of Christianity across cultural and linguistic frontiers, with the most popular being Christianity as movement (e.g., “the world Christian movement”). For two decades media researchers, geographers, demographers, and economists have used an additional metaphor – that of flows – to speak about how ideas, people, and technologies migrate across spatial frontiers.4 When researchers use the metaphor of movement to describe Christianity, they recognize that Christianity too exhibits a kind of flow – since Christian missionaries, discourses, and institutions embody the message of Christianity, especially when traveling across cultural and linguistic spaces. Naturally, the communication of Christianity is not through disembodied voices (except, I guess, through the medium of radio or Internet); communicators of the faith are themselves carriers of ideas, technologies, institutions, and preferences which recipients have (mis)understood as part and parcel of the communication of the Gospel. Bible translators, too, are embodied subjects who communicate messages about Christianity both discursively and non-discursively, even while they work to translate the Bible into vernacular languages. Their physical presence matters and carries with it an embodiment of Christian faith. As Bishop Lesslie Newbigin has pointed out, there is no pure, decontextualized Gospel. So our task here is to investigate the historical, cultural, social, and political forces that in part serve as carriers of the tradition.

Christianity is movement – a flow, a traveling religion, at home yet never completely domesticated in any particular location. Yet there is more, since the flow of Christianity is characterized by varying rates of change, moments of acceleration and deceleration that partly account for the changing nature of world Christianity itself. In our analyses, it is critical to capture the processes and speed of the flows of these global itineraries of Christianity, paying attention to what Ulf Hannerz calls “the multicentricity of flows, to crisscrossing flows, and to counterflows.”5 Under conditions of globalization, cultural and religious flows over wide distances have become commonplace, such as when denominational boards or ecumenical bodies make decisions that affect churches located far from those centers of decision-making. As you read these chapters, keep an eye on the directions of those flows. By underscoring the polycentric nature of the Christian ecumene, as though world Christianity consists of equally authoritative centers spread out around the globe, one might overlook the fact that some forms of Christianity (e.g., North American Christianity) still exhibit immense influence on the rest of world
Christianity, not the least in terms of economics, worship styles, and theological and biblical standardization through its publishing houses.6

Christian transformations of cultures and societies that occurred as a result of the circulation of people, ideas, technologies, and institutions marked boundaries. While marking boundaries, this circulation also helped to establish means of transport for all kinds of personal and corporate mobilities out of locales, increasing communication between distant (and transnational) congregations and lessening ecclesiastical isolation. What is important to recognize is that world Christianity is not only dynamic but relational, with the historical paths observed by historians serving as channels of flows whereby ideas, people, technology, money, and information traveled. Christianity is a traveling religion. And studying world Christianity helps us to appreciate its translocal, interconnected nature.

The investigation of Christianity as “world Christianity” is a recent phenomenon. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes that the phrase “world Christianity” first appeared in Francis John McConnell’s Human Needs and World Christianity (1929).7 But the term “world Christianity” was popularized through a series of publications beginning most notably with Dana Robert’s essay, “Shifting Southward: Global Christianity since 1945” (2000), Philip Jenkins’s The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity (2002), and Lamin Sanneh’s Whose Religion is Christianity?: The Gospel Beyond the West (2003). Since these publications, a proliferation of books and articles have sought to illuminate the implications of the demographic shifts of Christianity worldwide, where since the mid-1980s roughly 60 percent of the world’s Christians resided in the global South. That Christianity was the largest world religion was nothing new. What was novel was the identification of Christianity as a worldwide religion linked historically and ontologically as the body of Christ through time and space. The rising numerical predominance of Christianity in the global South compelled Western scholars to take seriously non-Western varieties of Christianity.

This book advances a third interpretative paradigm, which combines both historical breadth and social scientific depth. Why is this approach so important? Too often interpretations of the worldwide Christian movement fixate on analyses of Christianity during the period of European colonial expansion, when Western missionaries often made what Ben Knighton has called “strange and inevitable bedfellows” with colonial powers. Such analyses coupled Christianity with empire-building to demonstrate that their combined efforts led to the erosion of local cultures. There are two problems with such an interpretation of world Christianity. First, this interpretation overlooked the fact that local recipients of Christianity maintained their agency even in the face of the powerful forces of Church and empire. New forms of Christianity emerged, despite the motivations of colonialists or missionaries and the antipathy of Church authorities. Second, an interpretation that investigated only a narrow band of history, namely the period of European colonial Christianity, sidelined centuries of pre-colonial (e.g., patristic and medieval) and postcolonial (e.g., from mid-twentieth-century) historical accounts. Such a truncated historical perspective leaves us with an incomplete picture of the nature of world Christianity because it gives interpretative privilege to only one period of history. Nevertheless, we need more than a broad historical perspective to understand world Christianity. To complement the breadth of historical analysis, we need the depth of what can be unearthed through social scientific investigation, since social scientific perspectives help us see Christianity as events that have transformed cultural, social, religious, and political domains. Thus our approach here has combined historical and social scientific insights.

Driving this book is a simple question: “What difference has Christianity made in the world?” This is a worthwhile question given the fact that adherents to Christianity make up about 33.2 percent of the world’s population.8 Authors begin their chapters with a brief historical overview of a particular region, then launch into an analysis of regional aspects of world Christianity by employing a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Conspicuously absent are the voices of theologians and biblical scholars, not because these perspectives cannot teach us something valuable about the nature of world Christianity, but because our focus is on the social, cultural, and political changes afoot as a result of Christian presence. The temporal focus is late modernity, which witnessed the rise of nation-states, intensification of globalization, increase of the influence of science and technology, and the proliferation of mass media.
Notes and References


4 A helpful theoretical positioning of religion as movement, flow, travel is provided by Thomas A. Tweed, Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 57.

5 Ulf Hannerz, “Flows, Boundaries, and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology” (Plenary Lecture at the Twentieth Biennial Meeting of the Associacao Brasileira de Antropologia at Salvador de Bahia, April 14–17, 1996).


7 Ibid., 34.

Part I

Africa
Middle Eastern and North African Christianity Persisting in the Lands of Islam

Heather J. Sharkey

Historical Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa were cradles of Christianity. Jesus spent his life in the “Holy Land” where Israel and the Palestinian territories exist today. His disciples spread the Christian message into the Roman and Persian empires in Western Asia and Northern Africa. During the next four centuries, Roman North Africa produced some of early Christianity’s most brilliant philosophers: men like Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria (Egypt); Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage (Tunisia); and Augustine of Hippo (Algeria). However, following the rise of Islam in the early seventh century, and the establishment through conquest of an Islamic empire that stretched, by 711, from what is now Morocco to the India–Pakistan border, Christianity lost ground to Islam. One scholar described Christian history in the Islamic world as a history of “hanging on”; another called it a history of “constrained lives.”\(^1\) Perhaps deterred by impressions of chronic strain and attrition, the authors of many recent studies of world Christianity overlook the modern Middle East after sketching the region’s early place in Christian history.\(^2\) Nevertheless, vibrant Christian communities remain and take pride in rich histories on which they build. Today, Middle Eastern Christians also offer lively models of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, while pursuing social service and civic engagement.

How have Christians fared and endured in the Islamic Middle East and North Africa, and why have their numbers declined? Historically, Muslim governments set policies that limited Christian communities. The boundaries encircling Christian communities arose, above all, from Islamic (shariah) laws of conversion, marriage, and inheritance. The early Islamic empire, like its successor states, also offered social and economic incentives that encouraged Christians and others to embrace Islam, thereby eliciting large-scale conversions that occurred, in most places and periods, with little or no coercion. Meanwhile, in modern times, three other factors reduced Christian communities: voluntary emigration (especially to the Americas, Western Europe, and later Australia), war-related refugee movements and population transfers, and low birth rates. Historians of the region debate the importance of a fourth factor in this contraction: the impact of contacts with Western Christians of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox varieties, from what is now France, Britain, Russia, the United States, and elsewhere. Did Western contacts, in the modern period as earlier (for example, during the Crusades of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries), bolster Middle Eastern Christians or undermine them, by stoking mistrust and resentment among Muslims? Given the current situation in Iraq, where an estimated 600,000 out of some 1.3 million Christians fled the country in the five years following the US invasion of 2003, this last question appears more relevant than ever.\(^3\)

Map 1.1  Middle East and North Africa
Christian Pluralism, Early Islam, and the Terms of *Dhimmi* Life

Surveying such a long and complex history in this short space is impossible, and yet a few points are worth highlighting. By the time Islam emerged in the seventh century, Middle Eastern and North African Christians were already evincing the doctrinal and communal pluralism, or sectarianism, that became one of world Christianity’s defining features. Arising initially from debates about the divine and human nature(s) of Jesus, sectarian differences coalesced in the period stretching from the fifth through the seventh or eighth centuries. In the long run, communities reinforced sectarian distinctions by using particular languages (e.g., Greek, Armenian, Syriac, or Coptic) for their church liturgies and literatures. In some cases, church-centered cultures evolved to produce, by the modern era, what scholars have described as nationalist identities. Consider, for example, the adherents of the Church of the East (sometimes called, by outsiders, the Nestorian Church). By the early twentieth century, in what is now Northern Iraq, Southeast Turkey, and Northwest Iran, members of this community called themselves Assyrians and evinced a nationalist consciousness that drew strength, first, from a literary history rooted in the Classical Syriac literature of their Church, and second, from a budding print culture in the neo-Aramaic language (which American Presbyterian missionaries helped to promote).

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451 (where bitter theological disputes arose over the nature of Christ), Byzantine Christian authorities in Constantinople began to persecute Egyptians who belonged to what became known as the Coptic Orthodox Church. Historians point to such persecution to explain the lack of Christian solidarity that prevailed when Muslim Arabs expanded beyond Arabia into the Byzantine imperial territories of the Levant and North Africa, and into the Sassanian (Persian) imperial territories of Iraq and Iran. Thus, for example, when Muslim armies reached Egypt in 640, local Coptic Christians greeted the invaders with more of a welcome than a show of resistance and looked for relief from persecution. One scholar suggests, “The advent of Islam may have helped to establish firm doctrinal differences [among Eastern Christians] for the first time,” if only because Islamic rule “freed Christians from the pressure of Byzantine conformity.” Muslim rulers did not generally care about the sects to which Christians belonged, and this proved liberating to some Christians, even in the modern period when Catholic and Protestant missionaries were active.

In accordance with the Qur’an, which Muslims regarded as a message that Muhammad had conveyed from God to humankind, the early Muslim invaders recognized Christians and Jews as “People of the Book,” meaning monotheists having scriptural traditions. To People of the Book who surrendered, the Muslims guaranteed freedom of worship and livelihood, provided that they remained loyal to the Muslim state and paid a poll tax, called the *jizya*, to support Muslim armies. Thus, by the mid-seventh century, in the emerging Islamic empire, Christians, Jews, and also Zoroastrians became *dhimmis*, meaning people who lived under the Muslim state’s pact of protection. Meanwhile, from the mid-seventh century through the twentieth, Muslim governments appointed Christian and Jewish professionals to their bureaucracies, where they served as doctors, accountants, translators, and advisers. In this way Christians, like Jews, contributed to the making of Islamic civilization. Within a few centuries many Christians also made the Arabic language into their own, while Christian scholars produced a rich Arabic literature of Church philosophy.

Over generations, however, some provisions of the early conquest agreements calcified and thus marginalized Christians, while reinforcing their subordination to Muslims. By the terms of the “Pact of Umar” (as a form of the early Muslim compact with *dhimmis* was eventually remembered), Christians could not build or repair churches without acquiring permission from Muslim rulers; nor could they bear arms or serve in Islamic armies. (Note that these provisions inform laws in many Islamic countries even today.) Meanwhile, the obligations of *jizya*-paying gave Christians an incentive to join Islam as a way of easing taxes. In Egypt, especially, conversions to Islam gained momentum among Christian farmers, who faced a land tax as well. “As conversions proceeded,” two demographic historians observed, “the decline in the number of taxpayers liable to pay the *jizya* resulted in an increase in the amount due per capita.” Those who
remained Christian bore a heavier load. Islamic inheritance law offered further incentives for conversion: it stipulated that non-Muslims could not inherit from Muslims. Thus Christian wives of Muslim men, or Christian relatives of recent converts to Islam, lost rights of inheritance unless they, too, joined the Muslim community.

Islamic laws of conversion posed the steepest obstacles to Christian societies. Islamic law held that anyone could join Islam, but that no one could leave it once converted or born to the faith. Leaving Islam amounted to apostasy, a crime punishable by death. While Christians and Jews could join Islam, dhimmis could not convert to other religions; thus Jews could not become Christians, just as Christians could not become Jews. Furthermore, Islamic law deemed children of Muslim fathers to be Muslim, regardless of their mothers’ religions. As specified in the Qur’an, Muslim men could marry Christian or Jewish women (on the grounds that such women were believers in God); Christian and Jewish men, however, could not marry Muslim women. Islamic law recognized slavery and concubinage, and regarded it as licit for Muslim men to have sexual relations with slaves whom they owned; the children of female slaves and free Muslim fathers were born into Islam (and freedom) as well. In the early Islamic period of imperial expansion through conquest, when “intermarriage” with Christians was common (to use the euphemistic term favored by scholars when describing Muslim men’s relationships with females who may have been technically wives, slaves, or war captives), paternity offered an important route to Islamization.

Islamic laws about conversion and Muslim status are not historical abstractions; they inform the legal systems of many states even today, and determine such things as who can marry whom, who can inherit, even who can gain child custody after divorces. In the modern era, slavery or the slave trade was officially abolished in all Muslim states, even though the Qur’an recognizes slavery, and even though residual forms of the practice sometimes persisted. (For example, Egypt abolished the slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century, while Saudi Arabia abolished slavery in 1962.) But laws barring Muslims from leaving or renouncing Islam (whether for Christianity or otherwise) remain in force today in nearly all Muslim-majority states.

In practice, since the late nineteenth century, many Islamic states have merely made it impossible for converts from Islam to register their changed faith, or have subjected converts to sustained harassment, often including assault or imprisonment. Other states, such as Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, retain laws declaring apostasy from Islam a capital crime.6

Historically, Christian communities under Islamic rule could only grow in two ways: through natural increase, or at each other’s expense. Missionary-sponsored Catholic and Protestant churches eventually did the latter, by drawing members from Eastern Orthodox communities. Christians could not evangelize among Muslims, for whom apostasy, in any case, offered grounds for a death sentence. Nor could Christians easily assert themselves by building churches, for indeed, church permits were hard to secure.7 These challenges to Christians have persisted, sometimes taking new forms. Consider, for example, how in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the Gulf States (which lack indigenous Christian minorities) have kept church building and even church staffing to a minimum, despite the presence of large Christian expatriate or guest worker populations, including Filipinos, South Indians, and others. Thus two writers noted in 2003, “In Dubai, one of the seven United Arab Emirates, eighty thousand Catholics are associated with a single parish where only a few priests are allowed work permits.” The situation in the Emirates was, at least, better than in Saudi Arabia, where non-Muslims were prohibited from organizing worship.8

Christian Attrition in the World of Islam: Rates and Reasons

Christian communities hemorrhaged members to Islam after the early Islamic conquests of the seventh century, and yet the losses were neither automatic nor total. In some regions substantial rates of Islamization occurred in a generation or two; in other places, the diminution occurred over several centuries. Studying these patterns of Islamization is worthwhile because it helps to make sense of modern Christian demography, by showing where in the Middle East and North Africa Christianity withered, and where it stayed rooted.
In Egypt, judging by the evidence of jizya revenues from non-Muslims, more than half the Coptic Christian population appear to have converted to Islam within 40 years of the Muslim conquest; in Iraq, more than two thirds of the population appear to have converted within 50 years of the conquest. By contrast, conversion to Islam was much slower in Syria: there, it seems, a Christian majority persisted for nearly three centuries. In Iran, another scholar suggests, only 10 percent of the population had become Muslim by 743 (the year 125 in the Islamic calendar (AH)), though by 888 (275 AH), some 90 percent of the Iranian population were Muslim.

In North Africa west of Egypt, “dechristianization” was more dramatic. Consider Carthage, now in Tunisia, which had once been a vital center for Christian philosophy. Muslims seized Carthage in 698. Some Christian presence persisted for nearly four centuries, judging from a letter written by the Roman Pope to a Carthaginian bishop in 1076. But by the time the crusading Louis IX of France (St Louis) died near Tunis in 1270, indigenous Christianity was long gone. Christianity also disappeared in Nubia, now Northern Sudan, where Christian kings had been ruling since the sixth century. In 1315, a Muslim claimed the throne of Nubia; two years later, Muslims converted the “cathedral” of Dongola into a mosque. Nubian Christianity soon became extinct.

Viewing history over a long duration, one can identify four other developments that affected the diminution of Christian populations. Together these “deepen[ed] the introversion of Christian communities under dhimmi status,” and strengthened bonds between churches and communal identities.

First, there was the continued erosion of the Byzantine Empire, which survived in what is now Greece and Turkey after the Muslim Arab conquests of the seventh century. In the eleventh century, Turkish Muslim horse nomads moved into Anatolia, where they raided Greek- and Armenian-speaking Christian communities, displacing them, absorbing them through “intermarriage,” or subjecting them to Muslim rule. In 1071, Seljuk Turks defeated Byzantine imperial armies at the Battle of Manzikert; thenceforth Turkish immigration into Anatolia occurred unhindered, allowing for the long-term ethnic and religious transformation of the Anatolian plateau. The final collapse of the Byzantine Empire occurred when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. The Ottoman sultan, Mehmet II (“Mehmet the Conqueror”), signaled the change of imperial religion from Orthodox Christianity to Sunni Islam by immediately ordering the conversion of the church of Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Meanwhile, Islam continued to spread, especially in places such as Cyprus and Crete, where Ottomans kept garrisons and where conversion to Islam offered new opportunities in the military.

Second, there came the Crusades, which were disastrous by many counts. The Roman Pope, Urban II, started these wars in 1096 when he answered the Byzantine emperor’s plea for help against Turkish incursions by sending armies. Crusaders slaughtered indiscriminately, and undermined the already fragile Byzantine Empire by laying waste to Byzantine territories. Their actions soured Orthodox–Catholic relations for almost a millennium. The Crusades also stoked anti-Christian violence among Muslims, who suspected local Christians of sympathizing with the Crusaders. This was particularly true in Egypt, where the Mamluk dynasty rose to power in 1250 and, within 25 years, uprooted the last Crusader kingdom from Jerusalem. Coptic chroniclers described the Mamluk period as an age of persecution and martyrs, when Muslim mobs destroyed churches, killed Copts, and created an atmosphere of fear in which many Christians converted to Islam. By the time the Mamluk era ended in 1517, Christians accounted for perhaps 7 percent of Egypt’s population – about the same proportion as in the late twentieth century.

The third development, which affected the region corresponding to Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, came from the thirteenth-century Mongol conquests, which devastated urban and rural areas and felled the Abbasid Empire, centered in Baghdad, in 1258. In the fourteenth century, the conqueror Tamerlane (1336–1405) ravaged many of the same lands. Tamerlane was technically a Muslim, but like the Crusaders, slaughtered people and waged wars without regard to religious identities. Consider that at the height of the Abbasid era (c.1000) the Church of the East had sent missionaries from Baghdad to China and India and had developed a “supra-ethnic and multi-lingual identity.” After the Mongols, Tamerlane, and
some waves of forced conversions, this Church was so shrunken, and so geographically curtailed within Iran and Iraq, that it was becoming less of a “World Church” than an (ethnic) Aramaic-speaking entity, with adherents taking refuge in isolated mountainous regions. The fourth development consisted of a series of plague outbreaks that ravaged the Middle East and North Africa and left Christian monasteries, important centers of Church scholarship, as “conspicuous casualties.” The worst of these outbreaks was the Black Death, which killed a quarter to a third of the region’s population in the 1340s; another bad outbreak occurred less than a century later, in 1429. Whereas in the desert of Wadi al-Natrun in Egypt there had been about a hundred monasteries before the Black Death struck in 1347–48, there were only seven left by the early 1400s. Monasteries in Palestine, including ones in Nazareth and Hebron, also vanished.

Once consolidated, the Ottoman Empire (which stretched at its peak in the sixteenth century from Algeria to Iraq) brought stability to its domains. The Ottomans recognized Christians and Jews as belonging to millets, meaning religious communities. Ottoman authorities mediated civil administration (e.g., tax collection) through the religious leaders of these millets, and allowed communities to manage their internal affairs. The chief Christian liaison in this system was the Orthodox patriarch in Istanbul, whose relationship with Ottoman authorities enhanced the prestige of the Greek-speaking Orthodox community relative to other Christians. By dividing society into religious segments, the Ottoman millet system may have helped Christians to retain communal coherence. Division aided survival, since when “populations tended to live in greater separation from one another, even within the same town . . . there was less occasion for meeting and thus much less intermarriage [with Muslims].”

Figure 1.1 Martyrology of Coptic Saints (Arabic, n.d. [circa 14th century]). Courtesy of the Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.
Meanwhile, for Arabic-speaking Christians who lived along the Eastern Mediterranean coast, Ottoman stability, together with new economic opportunities for coastal trade with Europeans, translated into greater prosperity. Prosperity, in turn, led to greater education and better health among Christians. The result, some scholars argue, was that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, Christian Arabic-speaking communities rebounded in the Eastern Mediterranean, reaching perhaps 20 percent of the population in some areas.18

The Modern Period: New Opportunities, New Strains

The very conditions that enabled Christians to prosper in the Ottoman era made them, by the nineteenth century, more vulnerable vis-à-vis Muslim society. By some accounts, in nineteenth-century Syria and Palestine, local Muslim–Christian relations grew strained as some Christian merchants flaunted wealth and behaved without the discretion expected of dhimmi. In this period, when the Ottoman state’s power was waning relative to the rest of Europe, “Local Christians [began to] serve for some Muslims . . . as convenient surrogates for the anger that could only rarely be expressed directly against the Europeans.”19

Muslim anger was mounting for three reasons. First, European Christians, and increasingly their local Christian protégés, were benefiting from the Capitulations, a series of fiscal and legal privileges granted by treaty. Second, European powers were asserting special relations with local Christians in ways that challenged the jurisdiction of Ottoman Muslim authorities. (Thus, in 1740, France secured the right by treaty to protect Catholics in the Ottoman Empire, and above all, the Maronites of Lebanon who had recognized Vatican authority during the Crusades; in 1774, Russia claimed kindred rights vis-à-vis Orthodox Christians.20) Third, European powers were encroaching on Ottoman territories and were also whitening away at other parts of the Muslim world, such as Iran (under the Qajar dynasty) and the Mughal Empire of India. For example, in 1804, 30 years after seizing the Ottoman Crimea (now in Ukraine), Russia expropriated Georgia and part of Azerbaijan from Iran. In 1830, France conquered Algeria and developed it as a settler colony; in 1881, France also occupied Tunisia. In 1839, Britain annexed Aden, in Yemen, which held a strategic position on maritime routes to India. In 1878, Britain persuaded the Ottomans to grant Cyprus as a naval base. In 1882, Britain invaded and occupied Egypt. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, European speculators also secured monopolies over Middle Eastern commodities and services, ranging from Caspian Sea caviar to toll-paying traffic through the Suez Canal. These conditions left many Muslims feeling beleaguered, and prompted some intellectuals to articulate ideologies of pan-Islamic solidarity that inspired modern Islamist movements while hardening back to the era of Muhammad (c.570–632) and his early successors.

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was also losing ground to nationalist secession movements. In the 1820s, Greek nationalists waged a successful war for independence that drew British, French, and Russian support. Fearing that nationalism would “infect” other large Christian communities (who accounted for approximately 24 percent of the Ottoman Empire’s population in 187621) and eager to maintain British support against Russian expansion, the Ottoman sultan issued an edict called the Hatt-i Humayun in 1856. This edict declared equality between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the empire, abolished dhimmi status and the millet system, and promised that Christians in the Ottoman Empire could serve in the military and freely secure church-building permits in proportion to their numbers. In practice, however, popular assumptions about the place of Christians relative to Muslims persisted, while the edict, to the extent that it was advertised, may have only aggravated tensions between the religious communities.

In the long run, Ottoman attempts to generate a sense of empire-wide identity failed to win the hearts of the Armenians, who claimed a Christian history going back to the conversion of King Trdat around the year 300, and who, in an age of growing nationalism, recalled a history of independent Armenian Christian statehood. From 1894 to 1896, Ottoman authorities responded to a series of Armenian revolts in Eastern Anatolia by massacring untold thousands. Armenians faced more violence after 1908, when a group of
Turkish nationalist military men called the “Young Turks” seized power in Istanbul. In 1915, amidst World War I, Ottoman soldiers and Kurdish mercenaries perpetrated massacres that were so severe that Armenians today call them genocide, meaning a concerted attempt at annihilation. The massacres of 1915 killed an estimated 1–1.5 million Armenians (or one third to one half of all Armenian people), while survivors dispersed widely, to Syria and the Nile Valley, and further afield to North America.22 Debates over what happened persist. The government of Turkey, which succeeded the Ottoman state in Anatolia and Thrace, has continued to deny that mass killings or a genocide occurred and has described the massacres as a response to Armenian disloyalty and complicity with Russia during the war. Turkey has tried to stifle citizens who question this official version of history. In 2005, for example, it prosecuted the Turkish novelist (and later Nobel laureate), Orhan Pamuk, for “insulting the nation” by mentioning the deaths of a million Armenians.

During World War I, the Assyrian Christians of Southeastern Turkey faced a similar trauma at the hands of Ottoman Turkish and Kurdish soldiers, leading some to describe these killings as genocide too. In the long run, the institutional dislocation of Assyrian Christian culture was dramatic, insofar as the high leadership of the Church of the East eventually packed up and left. “The Church of the East,” notes one historian, “is the only church whose patriarchal see is no longer in the Middle East but in the diaspora. After years of exile in Cyprus and Great Britain, Mar Shim‘un XXIII Eshay (1920–75) settled in the United States, around 1961.” Claiming a venerable history in the Tigris-Euphrates basin that stretches back to the dawning years of Christianity, the Church of the East now has its patriarchal headquarters in Chicago.23

At its best, the Ottoman Empire was a multicultural empire in which Sunni Muslim authorities maintained an atmosphere of stability and relative tolerance vis-à-vis Christians and Jews. However, the Turkish Republic that succeeded the Ottoman Empire was not – and did not want to be –multicultural. The Armenians of the future Turkish republic were either destroyed or dispersed, while a population exchange in 1922 – according to which Greece and Turkey swapped Christian “Greeks” in Turkey for Muslim “Turks” in Greece – eliminated Turkey’s Greek-speaking Orthodox Christians almost entirely, while also ensuring greater cultural homogeneity for Greece. In 2008, Turkey’s population was 99.8 percent Muslim. Proportionally speaking, neighboring Syria had a much larger Christian population (estimated at 16 percent of the total population), as did Egypt (10 percent) and Jordan (6 percent). Iran’s Christian population was less than 2 percent.24

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some Lebanese Christians were also uprooted. In 1860, civil war broke out in Mount Lebanon, dividing people not only by religion but also, and perhaps more importantly, by class (landowners versus peasants).25 This war sharpened sectarian lines and in the long run helped to shape what analysts have called Lebanon’s “confessional politics.” After 1860, sectarian and social tensions in Lebanese society propelled both Christians and Muslims to seek opportunities abroad, particularly in the Americas. More than a century later, in 1975, another civil war broke out in Lebanon, prompting further dispersions of Christians. Although reliable population data is lacking, analysts now assume that Christians are no longer the largest religious cluster within Lebanese society. That distinction goes to Shi’a Muslims, who are believed to outnumber Lebanon’s Sunni Muslim and Druze populations too.

No discussion of Middle Eastern diasporas is complete without reference to Palestinian Arabs. In 1900, Christians accounted for some 16 percent of the population of Palestine.26 Following the declaration of Israel as a Jewish state in 1948, Christians were among the Arabs who fled amid war or were pushed out by Jewish armies. Their numbers also shrank as a result of voluntary emigration. Today, minute Christian populations (less than 2 percent) are found in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza.

In the twentieth century, another factor appears to have led to the diminution of Christian communities, relative to Muslim majorities: Christians had smaller families. This situation may have correlated to Christians’ higher rates of education, later marriage ages among females, and wider access to contraception. In Egypt, for example, a local Protestant organization known as the Coptic Evangelical Organization of Social Services (CEOSS) began in 1957 to educate villagers about family planning; later, CEOSS
cooperated with the Egyptian government in sponsoring family planning clinics and distributing contraception among married Christian and Muslim women. For Christians, smaller families may have functioned as another strategy for survival: parents could spend more on their children’s education or on helping to establish their livelihoods when there were fewer mouths to feed.

In the midst of social changes and political upheavals, and in spite of their small numbers relative to Muslims, Christians remained active members of Arab societies. Just as Arabic-speaking Christians developed a thriving intellectual life in the early and middle centuries of the Islamic era, so did many contribute to the nahda, meaning the modern Arabic cultural revival. In the twentieth century, Arab Christians also distinguished themselves in film (such as the Egyptian director Youssef Chahine) and popular music (such as the Lebanese singer Fairouz). Christians also played active roles in secular Arab nationalist movements in which Muslim identity was not a prerequisite, while a few played controversial roles in Arab politics. Consider Michel Aflaq (1910–89), who was born into a Greek Orthodox family. Aflaq was the ideological founder of the secular pan-Arab Ba’th Party, which drew men like Hafiz al-Asad (ruled Syria 1971–2000) and Saddam Hussein (ruled Iraq 1979–2003) as party members. Consider, too, George Habash (1926–2008), who came from a Palestinian Christian family: after the Six-Day Arab–Israeli War of 1967, he founded the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Believing that violence was a legitimate tactic in the Palestinian national struggle, Habash in 1970 orchestrated a series of airplane hijackings that added a new tool to the kit of modern terrorism.
Missionary Legacies, Ecumenism, and Social Activism

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Middle Eastern Christianity became even more diverse than it had historically been. This was largely the result of foreign Catholic and Protestant missions that fostered new churches, while inspiring local Christians to undertake missionary work at the grass roots. Two points are worth noting here. First, studies of the modern missionary movement must reckon with the controversial history of Western imperialism, since Catholic and Protestant missionaries were only able to expand in the Middle East and North Africa to the extent that they did because the British and French empires offered protection. Second, histories of local or “native” Christian missionaries – including pastors, priests, nuns, and lay evangelists, as well as catechists, Bible Women, and colporteurs – are still largely unwritten. Until more research is done, historical accounts of modern missionary activities in the Middle East and North Africa will invariably center on foreigners.

Catholic missions in the Middle East can be traced to the Crusader era, and even included, in 1219, the visit to Egypt of St Francis, who made peaceful overtures to Muslim rulers. In the centuries ahead, Catholic missionaries reached out to Eastern ecclesiastical leaders, prompting some, like the Maronites of Greater Syria, to recognize Vatican authority. Later, some Armenians, Assyrians, Arabic-speaking Greek Orthodox, and Copts identified with Catholicism as well. Catholic missionary activities among Orthodox Christians gained new momentum during the late nineteenth century and resulted in the continued growth of Catholicism in places like Upper Egypt, where some adherents of Coptic Orthodoxy joined Coptic Catholic communities. Today, the Middle Eastern Catholic churches, which preserve non-Latin liturgies and some distinct customs, are known as “Eastern rite” Catholic churches. In the early twenty-first century, Eastern rite Catholic churches were also flourishing in the diaspora, while some – such as the Melkite Greek Catholic Church in the US – were successfully attracting members who were not of Middle Eastern heritage.

In Egypt and Western Asia, as missionary activities burgeoned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Catholics concentrated almost completely on Eastern Christians, among whom they established modern schools. The legacy of Catholic education endures today, for example, in the prestigious, Jesuit-founded Université Saint-Joseph of Beirut. By contrast, in Northwest Africa, and especially in the French settler colony of Algeria, some Catholic missionaries initiated missions to Muslims, thereby challenging the traditional Islamic ban on Christian evangelization among non-Christians. For example, in 1868, Cardinal Charles Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, founded a mission popularly called the White Fathers (after the color of the missionaries’ robes), which later expanded into sub-Saharan Africa. The White Fathers attracted few Muslim converts, although they did have a substantial cultural impact on some Berber-speaking communities in Algeria’s Northern Kabyle region. Likewise, Charles de Foucauld (d. 1916), a former Trappist monk and hermit who inspired the foundation of the Order now known as the Little Brothers of Jesus, undertook a mission to Muslims in the Algerian Sahara. Like many other Catholic and Protestant missionaries of this period, Foucauld made pathbreaking contributions to linguistic analysis – in his case by compiling a Tuareg dictionary and grammar, along with studies of the Tuareg Tifinagh writing system.

The Moravian Brethren, who arrived in Egypt in the mid-eighteenth century and worked there for 40 years, were among the first Protestant missionaries to approach the Middle East. Yet sustained Protestant missionary activities only took off in the early nineteenth century, when organizations like the British Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS), the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) (a joint Congregationalist-Presbyterian enterprise), and the German Missionary Society (Basel Mission) began work in the Eastern Mediterranean lands of the Ottoman Empire. CMS and American Presbyterian missionaries eventually expanded eastward to Iran, and (together with Italian Catholics) southward into Sudan. Protestants of many other denominations and nationalities arrived too, including Scottish and English Presbyterians (some of whom focused exclusively on missions to Jews), as well as German, Dutch, Swedish, and Danish organizations.