CONFERENCE REPORTS

Recovering the Role of Christians in the History of the Middle East: A Workshop at Princeton University May 6-7, 2016

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On May 6-7, 2016, the Near East and the World Seminar welcomed fourteen distinguished scholars to Princeton University to discuss the place of Christians in Middle Eastern history and historiography. At the outset, speakers were invited to reflect on how the field of Middle Eastern history generally and their work specifically changes when they consider perspectives provided by Christian sources, institutions, and individuals. A working premise of the conference was that although Christians have formed a significant portion of the population of the Middle East since the Arab conquests, the stubborn but understandable tendency of historians to conceive of the Middle East as a Muslim region has had the effect of marginalizing Christian experiences. The result has been to consign Middle Eastern Christianity to a niche specialty alongside larger fields, such as Islamic studies, Byzantine studies, church history, Jewish studies, and Ottoman history.

The workshop participants answered the question of how to integrate Christians into Middle Eastern history in different ways. Robert Hoyland and Bruce Masters stressed how scholars must be open to evidence produced by Muslims and non-Muslims when writing the social and political history of the region: a source is a source, no matter its confessional origins. John-Paul Ghobrial and Bernard Heyberger underlined the importance and payoff of integrating Christians into bigger narratives about early modernity, especially how Eastern Christians served as cultural brokers between the Middle East, Europe, and the New World. Scholars sometimes struggle to find Christians in historical sources written primarily by and for Muslims. But Petra Sijpesteijn and George Kiraz discussed two sets of overlooked archival evidence that can help provide a more balanced picture of Muslim-ruled societies,

including the papyri of early Islamic Egypt and the Syriac archives from late-Ottoman Tur Abdin. Thomas Carlson explored the theme of Islamization in medieval Middle Eastern history. Specifically, he questioned the need to identify tipping points and conversion curves, since Islamization can be measured in subtler, more meaningful ways than simply the number of Muslims who lived at a given time.

The religious diversity of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Middle East was a theme in the presentations of Febe Armanios, Bedross Der Matossian, and Tom Papademetriou, who discussed the experiences of Copts, Armenians, and Greeks, respectively. In their own way, each speaker challenged the idea of center and periphery in Ottoman Studies, specifically why the history of Muslims was often given precedence over that of non-Muslims, and the history of cosmopolitan elites over that of sub-elites in the provinces. Lev Weitz and Luke Yarbrough asked how distinctive Christians really were in medieval Islamic societies, especially when it came to issues such as marriage and state service. Along the way, they discussed the importance of seeing Christians as representative of their broader societies, while at the same time, acknowledging the traditions, practices, and mentalities that made them distinct. Finally, Stephen Davis and Samir Khalil Samir emphasized the significance of the Arabic Christian patrimony for the study of Middle Eastern History. Davis did so by discussing his work with the uncatalogued Copto-Arabic manuscripts of Dayr al-Suryan in Egypt, and Samir by discussing the urgency of updating and disseminating one of the major *instrumenta studiorum* of the field, Georg Graf's monumental *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (1944-53).

These presentations led to discussion and debate about a number of bigger historiographic issues. Much of the conversation revolved around how to make the research of specialists in Middle Eastern Christians accessible to scholars in adjacent fields. The general opinion was that historians of Middle Eastern Christianity must resist the impulse toward ghettoization and do a better job of inserting themselves in wider debates. This can be done by tackling themes that transcend the study of Christians in the region – including global history, microhistory, the history of the body, etc. It can also be done by inviting scholars from these fields to collaborate and comment on our work, even when they study very

different geographies and time periods. Another way of accomplishing this would be to promote an "integrated" or "connected" history of the Middle East, one that does not privilege any one ethnic or religious group over another, but studies them side by side. At the same time, as we should strive to collapse distinctions among the "Islamic," "Christian," and "Jewish" layers in the history of the region, we should also take stock of what makes each of these communities unique. Thus, there was discussion about how specialists of Middle Eastern Christians must create a shared scholarly agenda based on comparison of Christian practices, institutions, and ideas over time. These might include the study of distinctive Christian languages (Syriac, Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Greek, etc.), literary genres (theology, poetry, hagiography), and social phenomena (pilgrimage, monasticism, sectarianism).

Along with this, the workshop touched on practical matters related to the study and teaching of Middle Eastern Christians. Several participants noted the difficulty of gaining access to archival materials in the Middle East, especially from ecclesiastical institutions. Others noted the need to eliminate barriers for entry by making basic scholarly resources – such as manuscript catalogs, reference works, and dictionaries – freely accessible online. Still others bemoaned the fact that because the history of Middle Eastern Christians remains an academic niche, it can be difficult to find gainful academic employment, even if a candidate has the ability to teach and research across more "mainstream" fields, such as Islamic, Byzantine, Ottoman, or early modern studies.

The speakers proposed a number of concrete steps to help open the field and make it more attractive for prospective students. One would be to organize a second conference as a follow-up to the Princeton meeting, which might lead to the publication of an edited volume. Another would be to organize intensive workshops for graduate students aimed at introducing them to the history of Christians in the Middle East. This would also serve to promote an "integrated" approach to the history of the region more generally and create connections and collaborations among early-career scholars. Finally, the participants agreed that the present tumult in the Middle East provides a unique opportunity – indeed, an obligation – to disseminate our research about Christians to the broader public. This might take the form of books aimed at undergraduates and lay readers, including a new textbook on

Middle Eastern history that deals extensively with underrepresented ethnic and religious groups; lectures for the general public; podcasts, etc.