

BRIEF ARTICLES

THE TEACHING OF SYRIAC IN LEBANON: AN OVERVIEW

RAY MOUAWAD

CENTRE D'ETUDES ET DE RECHERCHES ORIENTALES
ANTELIAS, LEBANON

[1] Notwithstanding the important role of the Syriac language in Lebanon's past, the teaching of Syriac up to the seventies was relatively modest. A new quest for roots and a new perception of history has led to a renewal in Syriac studies since the end of the Lebanese war.

[2] I had to conform myself to the realities of the Lebanese educational system in order to conduct this research. It is divided in two: private schools and universities for which there is a charge for admission, and the government schools and universities which are practically free of charge.

PRIVATE SCHOOLS

[3] The private schools in Lebanon are in their overwhelming majority dependent on the religious communities (17 of them—both Christian and Muslim—are officially numbered in the constitution of Lebanon).

[4] When we consider Syriac teaching at school, it is obvious that only the Christian communities—who still use Syriac as an every day means of communication—provide such programs. This includes the Syrian Orthodox community (whose Patriarchate is in Damascus, Syria) and the Assyrian community (whose Patriarchate

is in Chicago, USA). Within these communities, we have the following schools:

- *Saint George School* (Mar Jirjis). Dependent on the Assyrian community in the north-eastern suburbs of Beirut, it caters for approximately 250 students, all of them Assyrian, from the primary level to the 10th year of school (Lebanese Brevet). They learn Syriac in the form of religious courses. The bishop of the Assyrian community in Lebanon, Mgr. Debaz, who is responsible for the school, informed me that they are in dire need of financial help.
- *School of al-Taraqqi* (commonly known as 'Taw Mim Simkath, since it initially derived its support from the American-based *Taw Mim Simkath* association). The school is dependent on the Syrian Orthodox community, also in the north-eastern suburbs of Beirut. It caters for approximately 250 students as well, all of whom are Syrian Orthodox. The school offers classes for students from the primary level to the 10th year of school (Lebanese Brevet). They too learn Syriac within the context of religious courses.
- *Mar Severus School*. Located in Mussaytbeh in West Beirut (a neighbourhood with a Muslim majority), this school also belongs to the Syrian Orthodox community. Only 10% of the students are Syrian Orthodox, the others are mostly Muslim. The school has approximately 700 to 800 pupils, and has a complete academic program, up to the Lebanese Baccalaureate. The Syriac children are required to take the Syriac language courses, but Muslim students are exempt.
- *Saint George School (Mar Jirjis)*. Located in the city of Zahleh in the Bekaa Valley, this Syrian Orthodox school has about 200 pupils, but delivers a program up to the secondary level only. Here too, Syriac classes are given in the context of religious courses.

[5] As for the Maronite community, there are no schools that teach the Syriac language to children. Learning Syriac depends on private initiatives from village priests or monks to impart a better understanding of the musical liturgy of the Maronite Church. There is nothing institutionalised or organised systematically at a community level.

- [6] Public (government) schools do not teach Syriac at all, even as an optional language.

PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES

- [7] *The University of the Holy Spirit in Kaslik (USEK)* is an institution that relies on the Lebanese Maronite monastic order. It is situated in the small coastal city of Jounieh north of Beirut. A two year course in Syriac is requested from the students that are in the following departments:

- *The Faculty of Musicology*: Offers a 3-year program that includes courses about sacred music, music history, choral singing and a research seminar. The Syriac music is studied in each of these courses as one variety of music (next to the Byzantine, the Gregorian etc.). The choir of the university performs beautifully Syriac hymns in regularly held events.
- *The Institute of Sacred Arts*: Offers a 3-year program that has a special course in Syriac iconography, theory and practice. It has about 30 students. Approximately ten of them later specialise for two more years pursuing a Masters or a DEA degree in Sacred Arts. The director of the institute performs a new style of Church frescoes in Syria and in Lebanon that takes its inspiration from the Syriac tradition.
- *The Pontifical Faculty of Theology*: In the academic year 1999–2000, a new department, “Syriac and Antiochian Studies,” is being opened. The department will specialize in all aspects of the Syriac culture: language, art, history, geography. It will offer a 3-year program. The department will also have a specialised Syriac library.

The University of the Holy Spirit has a quarterly publication, *Parole de l'Orient*, devoted to Syriac studies. It also publishes a collection of books on Syriac authors.

- [8] *The Patriarchal Maronite Seminary of Ghazir* (North of Beirut): It caters for approximately 150 students. They are requested to study five years of Syriac at the Seminary, where they also take courses on the Syriac fathers in Ghazir. Theology, however, is taught to students at University of the Holy Spirit in Kaslik.

- [9] Saint Joseph University (Jesuits) in Beirut and the American University of Beirut do not provide courses of Syriac at all. It is

particularly regrettable for the former since from its foundation in the 19th century up to the fifties, it produced numerous Jesuit teachers and scholars who were well versed in the Syriac language. These scholars contributed to a better knowledge of Syriac liturgy, language, grammar, manuscripts and inscriptions (published mainly in their prestigious review in Arabic, *al-Mashriq*). The Syriac-French dictionary of Louis Costaz S.J. and his Syriac grammar are still invaluable tools for all French-speaking students who desire to learn the Syriac language.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

[10] *The Lebanese University* is a public (government) university with five campuses around Lebanon.

- In the Beirut area, the *Faculty of Letters* located in Fanar, includes in its *Department of Arabic Literature* an intensive course of Syriac for students who reach their fourth year of education. The same applies for the other campuses in Tripoli, Zahle, Sidon, and West Beirut. Syriac is offered as an optional language in addition to Hebrew, Greek, and Persian and is met positively by the students because of its similarity to Arabic and its easy access for the Arabic speaking students. In Tripoli alone, in June 1999, 110 students took the Syriac intensive course.
- *The Philosophy Department* of the Faculty also offers a 3-year course in Syriac, available on all the different campuses in the country.
- Finally, the *Department of Archaeology* of the University has a complete cycle of courses on the Syriac language in a 3-year program. After completion, the student can follow a course on *The Reading of Syriac Manuscripts*.

PRIVATE ASSOCIATIONS FOR THE SYRIAC LANGUAGE

[11] In addition to the official institutions, there are private associations that promote the learning of the Syriac language. The oldest and most active is *The Friends of the Syriac Language* based in Beirut. They provide private courses for those who desire to learn Syriac. Most of its members are Syriac teachers who created their original

method of teaching. One of their last initiatives was the dubbing in Syriac of a 2-hour video film on the life of Jesus.

[12] Many other associations attempt to promote Syriac studies in the context of encouraging theological studies for the laity. Their access is free. The major ones include:

- *Lo tedbal* “do not be afraid” in Fanar (Beirut hills), directed by Fr. Mansour Labaki.
- *The Centre for Theological Culture for the Laity*, in the College of the Apostles in Jounieh (ca. 35 students)
- *The Antonine Maronite Monastic Order* which provides night courses in theology and Syriac for the laity in its different institutions (located in Antelias, Baabda, and Hasroun).

[13] To conclude this survey of Syriac studies in Lebanon, it is worth stressing the increasing interest in Syriac among local scholars. That interest is manifest among those who are interested in Arabic literature and who are eager to find in the Syriac language a rich field of research, as well as those who are interested in Syriac for religious and historical reasons.

[14] What appears to be missing in the actual situation is a link between the knowledge of the language and the possibilities of reading, researching and using Syriac. Many of the Lebanese who study Syriac for various reasons do not have the opportunity for a proper access to the culture related to it: the publications, the manuscripts, the history, the legends and the liturgy. However, as there is a progressive awareness of the richness of the Syriac patrimony, a certain number of institutions are planning to develop their Syriac departments further.