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George Soroka & Christopher Rhodes

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INTRODUCTION



## An introduction to conflict, politics, and the Christian East: towards a theoretical typology

George Soroka<sup>a</sup> and Christopher Rhodes<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Government Department, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA; <sup>b</sup>Department of Social Sciences, College of General Studies, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

### ABSTRACT

This introduction to a collection of five studies focusing on church-state relations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) provides a theoretical typology through which to view the complex and varied relationships that exist between Christianity and Christians and the states and political actors that comprise the MENA region. Conceptual insights are discussed in both general terms and in relation to the arguments and conclusions advanced by the contributing authors. Specific cases considered include: 1) the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and its ties to successive governments and leaders in Ethiopia, along with those of other prominent denominations; 2) lay-clerical tensions in the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, as well as the corporatist ties its hierarchs exhibit to the state; 3) the role played by the head of the Chaldean Church in post-invasion Iraq; 4) the degree to which Christians in Lebanon support democracy; and 5) the role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in relation to the domestic and international politics of the Turkish state.

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For those of us residing in the western world it is easy to forget that Christianity emerged two millennia ago as a fundamentally Middle Eastern religion. However, given its present status as a minority faith across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)<sup>1</sup> – in contrast to the numerical prevalence of Christians in many other parts of the world – we cannot help but recall the New Testament admonition that ‘a prophet has no honour in the prophet’s own country’ (John 4:44, *New Revised Standard Version*). Although Christianity was a significant and oftentimes dominant regional influence before the advent of Islam, today much of that history is forgotten or overlooked.<sup>2</sup> This is unfortunate, as Christians have continuously resided there from the first century CE down to the present.

Christianity, however, has never been a monolithic presence across this vast geographic expanse. Doctrinal as well as temporal divisions developed early on within indigenous Christian communities, eventually causing competing denominations to arise. European colonialism and the activity of western missionaries later brought about the importation of further sectarian rifts, adding to an already tangled tapestry of religious belonging and estrangement. Meanwhile, the mass out-migration of Christians from the region since the middle of the twentieth century has not only increased the salience of transnational ties for

**CONTACT** George Soroka  [soroka@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:soroka@fas.harvard.edu)  Government Department, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

those who remained, but also superimposed additional layers of complexity on their already fraught sociopolitical identities. All this makes the issue of how Christians and their ecclesial institutions participate in, or are excluded from, the power dynamics that shape the MENA's constituent states particularly fascinating.<sup>3</sup>

The political situation of Christianity in the MENA region is state-specific, the gamut running from Christians comprising a small and persecuted segment of the population to being well-represented among societal elites and wielding real influence. Consequently, if we do not adequately assess the diverse roles occupied by Christians and their institutions across this territory, we risk misunderstanding critical processes and failing to ask important questions (e.g. why did some Christian communities support dictators like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Bashar al-Assad in Syria during the Arab Spring protests?).

We must also examine the extent to which the political stances Christians adopt result from their minority status, as opposed to doctrinal or theological understandings. This is an important distinction, particularly as Christian churches in many parts of the world have in recent decades played a vital role in overthrowing dictators and facilitating democratisation.<sup>4</sup> With respect to the Roman Catholic Church, observers like Huntington (1993) regard these outcomes as deriving not just from Catholicism's societal legitimacy or status as the dominant denomination in places like Central Europe or Latin America, but also from its normative commitment to human rights.

Nonetheless, in other situations and at other times Christians and their representative institutions have acted far differently (and occasionally vehemently disagreed on what course of action to take, leading to episodes of internecine strife),<sup>5</sup> suggesting that even if religious beliefs substantively shape their political preferences, these are often tempered, or even superseded, by strategic calculations. Likewise, we would be remiss not to remark upon the competing goals and resultant tensions that sometimes manifest between Christians and their putative leaders, especially given that the relations the latter have with the state often differ markedly from those that define and regulate the lives of the former.

All the contributors featured in this collection make an effort to address and rectify various aspects of the above-noted lacunae. However, they deploy disparate conceptual and methodological approaches to examine these themes, making it worthwhile to provide a basic theoretical grounding for the overall project. To this end, drawing on our own work in this realm, we propose a tripartite typology through which to begin evaluating Christianity's political role, one that disaggregates and analytically differentiates between the following elements:

- (1) Christianity as an institution vs. individuals who identify as Christians
- (2) Christianity as a faith/belief system vs. a sociocultural identity
- (3) Christianity as a private vs. public identity

Expanding on the first point, the interactions lay Christians, either individually or collectively, have with bureaucrats and government representatives naturally vary from those experienced by Christian institutions and their hierarchs, who not only relate to the state in a different (i.e. 'official') capacity, but frequently harbour policy aims that are specific to them rather than to the community at large (see for example Tadros 2017). The reverse holds as well, though it is much more difficult for ordinary Christians to present themselves as a coherent interest group

outside of traditional corporatist channels of communication controlled by church institutions.

Second, even allowing that there is considerable overlap between the two categories, it is imperative to differentiate between Christian *believers* and those whose primary identification with Christianity stems from sociocultural embeddedness. This is a critical difference if we are interested in teasing apart the factors that motivate political behaviour, as the actions of a convinced Christian are presumably more likely to reflect the moral injunctions of their faith than those of someone who 'belongs without believing'.<sup>6</sup>

Historical experience in the MENA region also strongly argues for the centrality of this division. Islam has traditionally encouraged the political reification of non-majoritarian identities by allowing fellow monotheists ('people of the book') to retain their distinctiveness provided they paid an annual tax (*jizya*), after which they were accorded a protected, albeit second-class, legal status (*dhimmah*). The phenomenon only strengthened after the Ottoman Empire imposed the millet system, which permitted minority confessional groups to enjoy a relatively high degree of internal administrative autonomy but also blurred the boundaries between sacred and secular leaders and reinforced proto-corporatist relations with those who wield worldly power.

Finally, the bifurcation between public and private expressions of Christianity is important to consider. To employ the terminology of Casanova (1994), Christianity remains a largely 'privatized' faith system across this region. This observation, coupled with the generally ascriptive rather than freely chosen character of Christian identity in this context, constrains its members' societal status and visibility. Nonetheless, Christians have periodically succeeded in assuming public personas *qua* Christians, necessitating an examination of the boundaries governing individuals' activities, as well as the circumstances under which these might be transcended.<sup>7</sup> We should likewise not be oblivious to the differential that exists between how Christians in their capacity as citizens are able to accomplish this versus their representative institutions.

These three meta-categories and their respective internal bifurcations comprise the main conceptual divides that regulate Christianity's outward-facing role in the MENA region. Below we examine how the case studies featured in this collection map unto these theoretical foundations relative to several processes that feature prominently in the assembled contributions: a) nation/state-building; b) democratisation/democratic consolidation; and c) social-service provisioning. Our review also touches upon a number of important sub-themes, including: how societally enfranchised or disenfranchised Christians are in a given country; their support for (or reliance on) incumbent authoritarian regimes; the transnational ties that Christian communities have and how these affect domestic realities; and the extent to which Christian leaders promote principled, as opposed to instrumental, political positions.

While tensions are typically most pronounced between competing belief systems with unaligned ontological commitments, intra-religious rivalries (usually, but not exclusively, based on differing denominational adherences) may also lead to feuding within traditions. Moreover, all these issues have the potential to be exacerbated by the cross-border connections that Christian groups maintain. Western-based diasporas, in particular, have less to lose compared to their co-religionists in the MENA states, and can therefore afford to be more vocal in stoking inter- as well as intra-religious tensions 'back home'. While none of the studies featured here compare explicitly across states, they do examine

endogenous competition among Christians within a given political unit, along with the nature and impact of exogenous influences.

What emerges is a complicated picture of Christian engagement and disengagement when it comes to politics, mediated through the norms, goals, and expectations of various community stakeholders as well as those of the wider society, the latter including representatives of the state and its coercive apparatus.

Rhodes' contribution focuses on Ethiopia, which is included in this collection because it exists in a liminal status between the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa, not fully belonging to either but sharing attributes of both. (Simultaneously, Ethiopia is distinguished by dint of having been one of the earliest nations on earth to Christianise.)

Evaluating church-state relations during the Haile Selassie, Mengistu, and Meles governments, this study covers a roughly eight-decade span, with qualitative analysis centring on the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (the historically dominant confession in the country) along with several of the largest Protestant groups. Motivating the research are two questions: What factors influenced government decisions to politically mobilise or demobilise these churches? And how has the government used laws and policies to affect their ability to participate in political activities?

Given the considerable power disparities between these religious bodies and the state, this piece emphasises the top-down role of politicians in allowing Christian institutions and their leaders to play (or not play) a role in public life as the incentive structures of government leaders changed over time. Specifically, Rhodes postulates that successive governments chose to mobilise or demobilise churches for purposes of political legitimisation and state-building, the utility of this strategy impacted by a potential trade-off between churches' welfare provisioning and their ability to buttress the state's rulers. When governments are not worried about churches threatening their legitimacy, either because they perceive their own legitimacy to be very high, or because their legitimacy is so low that there is nothing left to lose, they are more likely to mobilise churches in order to take advantage of their social welfare functions.

Ethiopian governments have controlled Christian groups by limiting their ability to speak on political matters (e.g. via not allowing them to have a media presence or by removing non-compliant clerics), curtailing their ability to access domestic resources, and hampering their ties to transnational actors and institutions, especially in the West. Nonetheless, generating support for authoritarianism in Ethiopia has frequently required the co-optation of religious institutions and leaders. As a result, Rhodes, like Rowe and Monier in their respective contributions, argues that churches in this part of the world often interact with the state in a corporatist manner that is not readily distinguishable from that of other interest groups. However, unlike in Rowe's focus on the Copts in Egypt and Monier's examination of Chaldeans in Iraq, Rhodes' analysis (which in this respect shares similarities to that of Koldaş, Çıraklı, and Dayioğlu) focuses less on the agency of churches and church leaders and more on the calculations of government officials.

Rowe, in studying the Coptic Orthodox Church and its relations with the Egyptian state from the period of Hosni Mubarak's rule to that of the current government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, interrogates why Christian hierarchs back autocrats. The obvious answer concerns anxieties over Islamist majoritarianism. However, as Rowe observes regarding the behaviour of Coptic leaders, they are also fearful of permitting divisiveness to be sown among Copts, which could threaten the ability of the Church to speak on behalf of the

community and serve as the arbiter of its interests and values. This tension was on full display during the Arab Spring, when a 'parallel revolution' (corresponding to the years 2011–2013) pitted the laity against official Church organs, with activists challenging the hegemonic claims of the clerical class.

A seminal point of contention was the support Coptic leaders evinced for Mubarak, and which they later reiterated towards the new regime of el-Sisi as the Church reconsolidated power. This highlights what Rowe refers to as the 'neo-millet partnership' that has come to define relations between church and state in Egypt (see also Rowe 2007). These relations have only been strengthened since 2013, when Egypt's first democratically elected leader, Mohammed Morsi, was deposed in a military coup.<sup>8</sup>

But while the institutional origins of this friction may be traced to the Ottoman period, the Church's corporatist ties to the state have increased since the 1960s, reified by the expansion of political Islam and its own policies. 'Under the contemporary papacies of Kyrillos VI, Shenouda III, and Tawadros II', as Rowe notes, 'the Coptic Orthodox Church has increasingly tied hierarchical control over Coptic interests to its partnership with the state'.

This has provided the Coptic Church with some measure of security, as it now possesses a 'semi-establishment' minority status. Yet the Church's instrumental behaviour has created tensions with Egyptian society as well as among its members, a trend that has only been exacerbated by the involvement of the Coptic diaspora in these matters. Consequently, Rowe does not dismiss the possibility that, impelled by the experiences of the Arab Spring, a strong Coptic civil society may again arise and claim an independent voice for itself relative to both Egypt's government and the officialdom of the Church.

Along similar lines, Monier examines the political and historical resources that the Chaldean Church in Iraq (its largest Christian community) draws upon and how these contribute to restructuring contemporary relations between Christians and the Iraqi state, where corporatist resonances from the Ottoman era are still palpably present. In particular, she assesses the role played by Chaldean Patriarch Raphael I Sako (elected in 2013) in shaping political participation.

Central is Sako's emphasis on the need for inclusive citizenship (*al-Mowatana*). Monier argues that this reflects a pragmatic approach predicated on the realities of modern church-state relations and communal dynamics, which include a sizeable diaspora influence, the latter having grown dramatically as Iraqi Christians fled in droves in the wake of the US-led coalition against Saddam Hussein and the brutal advance of the Islamic State.

As such, Sako's approach features both normative and pragmatic appeals; on the one hand, as Monier writes, Sako's appeal for unity 'builds on the role carved out by the Chaldean Church since the establishment of the Kingdom of Iraq in 1921'. On the other, the institutional Church is not just representing Chaldean concerns – including the fear of further violence and displacement – before the political elite, but actively 'working to engage Chaldeans with the state and the state with Chaldeans, thereby reinforcing a sense of shared political destiny and mutual interdependence that links the survival of each with the other'.

Additionally, Monier examines the transnational influence of the Vatican, as well as the post-2003 power struggles among Christians in Iraq, where the most salient divide is between Assyrians and Chaldeans. Of particular interest is the discussion of how unequal representation in the Coalition Provisional Authority has highlighted other divides

between these two communities (e.g. the push for recognition of Chaldean as an ethno-national identity as well as a religious one).

Unlike the other studies, Hoffman and Bagdanov utilise two original survey experiments (conducted in 2014 and 2018, respectively) to assess the role of Christians in Lebanon, shifting analytical focus away from clerical elites to the masses. This is a timely contribution to the literature, especially given the country's ossified consociational system and the role Christians occupy as potential veto players therein.

Of all the contributions in this collection, this one is most directly concerned with the level of Christians' support for democracy. Hoffman and Bagdanov find that, when respondents are primed with frames describing democracy in explicitly majoritarian as opposed to liberal terms, their support for it is markedly weaker, a not unexpected finding in a context where recent history and continuing sectarian strife predisposes Christians to fear losing their institutionalised political prerogatives, which disproportionately favour them relative to their current numbers.<sup>9</sup> This, coupled with the demographic shifts unfavourable to Christianity that have occurred over the course of the last century, helps explain why the Christian community has come to embrace what Hoffman and Bagdanov refer to as 'defensive minoritarianism'.

Finally, Koldaş, Çıraklı, and Dayıoğlu focus on the role of the Patriarchate of Constantinople in Turkey, where the domestic status of this institution remains hotly contested.<sup>10</sup> As they point out, Ankara continues to reject the honorific title of 'ecumenical' for Patriarch Bartholomew, which would overtly acknowledge his de facto transnational position as *primus inter pares* among Orthodox Christians residing beyond Turkey's borders.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Turkish government continues to restrict the Phanar's property rights and refuses to accord it full legal recognition.

Unsurprisingly, wider geopolitical tensions are at work here, with issues like the unresolved situation in Cyprus leading to charges that the Patriarchate constitutes a fifth column. Given this, the authors undertake to assess not just the Patriarchate's role in Turkey's domestic debates, but also in its foreign relations. They primarily focus on developments in the last two decades, examining them through three case studies: the 2004 Synod elections, which added six non-Turkish nationals to this body, the 2005 pan-Orthodox Synod convened to consider an irregular situation in Jerusalem, and Patriarch Bartholomew's decision to grant autocephaly to the Ukrainian church in 2018, realised in early 2019.<sup>12</sup>

In particular, this contribution argues that Turkey's bid to join the EU initially represented an important source of leverage over Ankara, incentivising the pursuit of more inclusive policies. 'The process of Europeanisation initiated in Turkey following the 1999 Helsinki summit', the authors observe, 'witnessed a loosening of state control over the Patriarchate of Constantinople under the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP)'. The AKP's accommodating stance, however, eventually faltered in the wake of protracted and inconclusive accession talks and Turkey's 2011 legislative election. Nonetheless, the authors contend that the Turkish government's position relative to the Patriarchate consistently invoked the principles of 'non-interference and ambiguity'. Koldaş, Çıraklı, and Dayıoğlu, however, not only focus on governmental rhetoric concerning the Phanar, but likewise assess discourses taking place among Turkish intellectuals, where there exist a variety of competing views.

Though varied in their geographical, temporal, and substantive foci, a central finding that emerges from this collection is that Christians' political behaviour in the MENA region can be understood through secular analysis. Returning to the typological meta-categories proposed above, it appears Christians and their representative churches interact with states and governments primarily in an institutional capacity. Moreover, although Christianity in this region is largely a private affair, when it does assume a public role its political involvement is usually based on a sociocultural conception of identity and expressed in corporatist terms. Indeed, a striking commonality of the contributions collected herein is the extent to which belief, ideology, and theology are absent from the analyses presented.

Christian actors, therefore, engage in strategic interactions vis-à-vis politics that closely resemble the activities of other interest groups whose behaviours are well understood. Moreover, while we might intuitively expect Christians – given their minority status in all the countries considered except for Ethiopia – to make common cause with one another, Christian politics are, on the contrary, significantly shaped by internal divides within the overarching tradition. These include divisions between denominations, splits between clerics and lay Christians within denominations, and differences in political motivations and constraints between domestic Christians and those in the diaspora.

Together, these observations suggest that while localised specificities are important to consider, many of the dynamics governing church-state relations in the MENA region are not unique to it, lending credence to studying them through a political economy of religion approach that seeks to understand religious organisations and their adherents as analogous to political and economic actors such as firms, trade unions, and similar bodies.<sup>13</sup> More generally, the findings presented here, while not questioning the unique characteristics of faith, belonging, and community that characterise religion, attest that religious groups represent important and intelligible political entities deserving of further research within the paradigm of minoritarian corporatism and its critics.

## Notes

1. We define this region broadly for the purposes of this special issue.
2. Today even many inhabitants of the MENA region regard Christianity as a 'foreign' faith or colonial vestige. This is not surprising; of all the countries the authors participating in this collection survey, only in Ethiopia, whose claim to belonging to this geo-cultural space is tenuous and disputed, do Christians make up a majority of the population. Even there, however, no one Christian group can claim anything more than a plurality, according to the *World Factbook* ([https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print\\_et.html](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/print_et.html)). Ethiopia aside, if we exclude Cyprus (which has a Christian majority) from our definition of the MENA region, the percentage of native-born Christians living in these states varies from a sizeable minority (as is the case in Lebanon) to virtually non-existent (e.g. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states).
3. The modern conception of sovereign statehood itself represents a European imposition.
4. This was the case, for example, in Kenya, Malawi, the Philippines, Poland, and several Latin American countries.
5. Consider the diverse ways in which competing branches of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine interacted with anti-government activists during the 2013–2014 Maidan protests (Soroka 2018a).
6. For a discussion of this concept, see Hayes and McKinnon (2018).

7. This applies to both mass-level engagement, such as the Copts who participated in protests against the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt on 30 June 2013, as well as the ability of individual Christians to join the ranks of the political elites.
8. Though it should be noted that, as the candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood, Morsi was not much of a democrat.
9. Lebanon's consociational system was set up on the basis of the 1932 census, which showed roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims living in the country. Since then, Christians have emigrated from Lebanon en masse. This, coupled with differences in fecundity and socioeconomic status, has ensured that Christians are today a minority.
10. The topic is especially timely given that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan seems to be pivoting more and more towards his nationalist base, as reflected in the re-opening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque in the summer of 2020.
11. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne not only defined the modern borders of Turkey, but also recognised the Patriarchate as a specifically Turkish institution.
12. On the latter see Soroka (2018b).
13. Some seminal works in this literature include Gill (2008), Kalyvas (1996) and Warner (2000).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**George Soroka** is Lecturer on Government and Assistant Director of Undergraduate Studies in the Government Department at Harvard University, from where he received his PhD in 2014. His research focuses mainly on identity politics and regime transition, primarily but not exclusively in the context of postcommunist Europe. Specific areas of interest include the politics of religion, the politics of history, and nationalism. His work has recently appeared in *Foreign Affairs*, the *Journal of Democracy*, and *Problems of Postcommunism*, among other outlets.

**Christopher Rhodes** is a Lecturer in Social Sciences at Boston University. His areas of research are the political economy of religion, identity and politics, and the politics of sub-Saharan Africa. Dr Rhodes received his PhD in Government from Harvard University and has previously taught at the College of the Holy Cross, Massachusetts, and American University, Washington DC. His work has recently appeared in *Third World Quarterly* and in an edited volume published by Routledge Press.

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