Recovering the Role of Christians in the History of the Middle East

A Workshop at Princeton University, May 6-7, 2016
East Pyne 245

Sponsored by
Near East and the World Seminar, Department of Near Eastern Studies, Princeton University
with The Aradin Charitable Trust, Cambridge, England

Organized by
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Overview

Although we often think of the Middle East as being the center of a “Muslim World,” Christians constituted the majority of the population throughout much of the pre-modern period. In fact, scholars speculate that it was only during the Crusades – a full six hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad – that the region may have finally crossed the threshold of a Muslim demographic majority. Even after this, Christians existed in large numbers throughout Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Iraq, playing important roles in the economic, political, and cultural life of the region.

Despite this, scholars often treat Christians as marginal actors in the history of the Middle East. The impression often derives from the assumption that they were merely *dhimmis* – protected and subordinate members of Muslim-ruled societies – as if this legal category had a direct bearing on social history. But seeing Middle Eastern Christians in this way not only strips them of historical agency; it also leads scholars to sometimes equate the history of the region with the history of the Muslim community that governed it, rather than of the diverse society that flourished alongside it.

This workshop convenes a distinguished group of historians – with expertise ranging from the early Islamic to the late Ottoman periods – to reconsider Middle Eastern history through the lens of Christian sources, experiences, institutions, and individuals. In what manner can recovering the neglected or ignored Christian layers of the region’s past either enrich or alter established narratives in the field?

Workshop Schedule

Friday, May 6

9:00-9:15: Welcome

9:15-10:30: Session 1

Petra Sijpesteijn, University of Leiden

*Christians and Muslims, Egyptians and Arabs: Who is Who in the Administration of Early Islamic Egypt?*
Lev Weitz, Catholic University of America
*Islamic Thought, Islamic Culture, Islamic Society: Scholarly Categories and Medieval Middle Eastern Historiography*

10:30-10:45: Coffee

10:45-12:00: Session 2

Robert Hoyland, New York University – Institute for the Study of the Ancient World
*Christian and Muslim History Writing in the Early Islamic Period*

Luke Yarbrough, Saint Louis University
*Ishaq ibn Nusayr and the Importance of Being Christian*

12:00-1:00: Lunch

1:00-2:15: Session 3

George Kiraz, Princeton University/ Beth Mardutho – The Syriac Institute
*"The Crown of Our Head": Petitioning the Syriac Patriarch in the Late Ottoman Empire; and How Syriac Studies Can Help Rewrite the History of the Middle East*

Febe Armanios, Middlebury College
*From Marginalia: Writing Coptic History for the Ottoman Period*

2:30-3:30: Visit to Rare Books and Special Collections (space limited)

Don Skemer, Curator of Manuscripts, Princeton University

3:45-5:00: Reflections on the study of Middle Eastern Christians

Sidney Griffith, Catholic University of America

Samir Khalil Samir, Pontificio Istituto Orientale, Rome/ Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut

*Saturday, May 6*

9:30-10:45: Session 4

Thomas Carlson, Oklahoma State University
*More than Conversion: Multi-Faceted Islamization and the Unity of Medieval Middle Eastern History*

Stephen Davis, Yale University
*Toward a History of Christian Arabic Scribal Practice: Cataloguing the Collection at Dayr al-Suryan*

10:45-11:00: Coffee

11:00-12:15: Session 5

John-Paul Ghobrial, University of Oxford
*Recovering the Connected Histories of Eastern Christianity in the Early Modern World*

Bernard Heyberger, L’Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
*Christians in the Ottoman Empire as Local and Global Subjects*
12:15-1:15: Lunch

1:15-3:15: Session 6

   Bruce Masters, Wesleyan University
   Christian Sources for the Political and Social History of Aleppo in the 18th and 19th Centuries

   Bedross Der Matossian, University of Nebraska – Lincoln
   Neglected Armenian Sources and Institutions in Late Ottoman Historiography

   Tom Papademetriou – Stockton University
   Memory and History: Oral History Accounts of Asia Minor Refugees as a Source for the History of Greek Orthodox Christians in Late Ottoman Society

3:15-3:30: Coffee

3:30-5:00: Where to go from here? Group discussion led by Jack Tannous and John-Paul Ghobrial

Princeton University Campus Map
https://m.princeton.edu/map/campus