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Christians of the Orient (I): who are they?, where do they come from?, how many of them are there?

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Christians of the Orient (I): who are they?, where do they come from?, how many of them are there?

Abstract:

The situation of Christians of the Orient is very difficult today. In Iraq, Ancient Mesopotamia, land of Abraham, Christianity seems doomed to extinction. Same is happening in Syria, with a growing number of Christians moving to Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, being these two countries also very unstable. The recent killing of Coptic Christians on the beaches of Sirte, seems to indicate an uncertain future for the largest Christian community that still exists in the Orient —a region where, the rise of radical Islam, together with low birth rates and emigration, has caused a rapid decline of Christian communities that for centuries had successfully resisted invasions, empires and often bloody processes of decolonisation.

Resumen:

Es evidente que la situación de los cristianos en Oriente es hoy en día muy difícil. En Iraq, la antigua Mesopotamia, la tierra de Abraham, el cristianismo parece abocado a extinguirse; mientras que en Siria su situación se parece cada vez más a la de Iraq, con un exilio creciente de cristianos hacia Turquía, Líbano y Jordania, países estos dos últimos también muy inestables. La reciente matanza de cristianos coptos en las playas de Sirte, parece indicar igualmente un futuro incierto para la comunidad cristiana más numerosa que todavía existe en Oriente, una región en la que el auge del islamismo radical, unido a las bajas tasas de natalidad y la emigración, han provocado la disminución acelerada de unas comunidades religiosas que durante siglos habían sido capaces de resistir a las invasiones, a los imperios y a los procesos con frecuencia cruentos de descolonización.

Keywords:

Coptic, Chaldean, Melkite, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Aramaic .

Palabras clave:

Coptos, caldeos, melquitas, armenios, ortodoxos, maronitas, Éfeso, Calcedonia, arameo.

Introduction

Being one of the main religions practised in the Orient until the arrival of Islam in the 7th century, Christianity has always been a feature of the Orient society. Its presence in the region goes back to the origins of Christianity itself. Its distinct identity is a result of grievances on the definition of Christ's nature that have marked the history of the early Church. Christianity was born and developed in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, it being Antioch (current Turkey) where the term 'Christian' was coined for the first time¹. The ancient city of Edessa (current Turkey too), became at least as early as 200 AC a key to the spread of Christianity in Aramaic, Jesus' language². Christianity has been present in Iran since the middle of the 3rd century, spread by Roman prisoners who spoke Greek and Aramaic. It appeared in the Persian Gulf at the end of the 3rd century. There is even evidence of the existence of Christians in Sri Lanka in the mid-6th century and historical sources mention a bishop in Kerala, in today's India. When, at the beginning of the 4th century, the Roman Empire becomes officially Christian with Constantine, Christians of the Orient were a large, organised religious community.

Furthermore, Christianity has been present in Egypt since the 1st century, having arrived in the region, according to tradition, through Mark the Evangelist, right after Christ's death³. During the time of Constantine the Emperor, Egypt was the most Christianised area in the Empire. Ethiopia was Christianised in the mid-4th century, where the Bible was translated to the Ge'ez language, which was the majoritarian language in the country back then⁴. Ethiopia became the first Christian country in Africa. The Ethiopian Church has managed to keep these beliefs throughout history in the majority of the Ethiopian population. In spite of its affiliation to the Patriarch of Alexandria, the Ethiopian Church has a high degree of autonomy due to its

¹ The New Testament shows that Bernabas and Saul "met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch." Acts of the Apostles 11:26.

² Marrou Henri Irénée: "Desde los orígenes a San Gregorio Magno", Volumen 1, Ediciones Cristiandad, 1982, págs. 227-229.

³ Chuvieco Enrique: "Los monasterios coptos de Egipto, fruto de la predicación de san Marcos". Aleteia.org. (13.08.2014). <http://www.aleteia.org/es/arte-y-espectaculos/articulo/los-monasterios-coptos-de-egipto-fruto-de-la-predicacion-de-san-marcos-5860506883588096>.

⁴ El ge'ez is an extinct, ancient South Semitic language that originated in the northern region of Ethiopia. The translation of the Christian Bible was undertaken during the 4th century and it still is the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and others.

geographical isolation, developing its own religious rites but sticking faithfully to the Doctrine.

Thus, Christianity in the Orient has lacked of religious, political, social and ethnic uniformity almost since the beginning of its presence in the region. In comparison to other major religions, Christianity is characterised by a wide doctrinal diversity and liturgical abundance. This leads us to ask ourselves: Who are these Christians and where do they come from, knowing that they have survived in such a turbulent region? How many of them are there and what is their impact in the predominantly Muslim societies they live in?

We will intend to give an answer to these questions throughout the first part of the work 'Christians of the Orient'. The second part will analyse Christians' current situation and the prospects they are facing to stay in the land where they were born and have lived for two thousand years.

Who are the christians of the orient?

All Coptic, Chaldean, Melkite, Armenian, Orthodox and Maronite Churches are subsumed under the term 'Christians of the Orient'. They are mainly found in the Middle East, East Africa and India. It has never been easy for Christians of the Orient to live there, yet they have never left their original place so massively before, not even during terrible events at the beginning of the 20th century, such as the 1915 Armenian massacre, the Assyrian massacre during WWI or Greek Christian deportations at the end of WWI in the Ottoman Empire.

Today, the rise of radical Islamism, together with low birth rates and emigration, has made thousands of Christians of the Orient move from their ancestors' birthplace and create a diaspora that is spreading worldwide. Almost extinct in countries like Turkey, where their presence was significant just a century ago, Christians of the Orient tend to go to places where they do not feel threatened on account of their religion, preferably Europe or the American continent.

Thus, the term Christians 'of the Orient' (cristianos «de Oriente») or 'Oriental' Christians (cristianos «orientales») is frequently ambiguous in Spanish. In general terms, it refers to non-Latin Churches that have emerged or been implemented in the Middle and Near East throughout history. However, there is no unanimity on this⁵. Some authors, especially from French speaking countries, make a distinction between 'Oriental Orthodox Churches' and 'Orthodox Churches of the Orient'. Oriental Orthodox Churches include Assyrian, Ethiopian and Western-Syrian Coptic, Southern India Malankara and Armenian Churches. In other words, all Churches who became detached from the main Church, either in the Council of Ephesus in 431 or in the Council of Chalcedon in 451. They are also called Non-Chalcedon Christians. In turn, Orthodox Churches of the Orient, or Chalcedon Churches, accepted the main claim of the Council of Chalcedon and detached from the Catholic Church in the well-known East-West Schism in 1054⁶.

Such classification is clearer in the English speaking world, since they make a distinction between Oriental Orthodox Churches and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Some Catholic authors include Orient Catholic Churches under these terms too, given that they are subdivisions of both groups who separated from the Orthodox Church to unite with the Holy See but kept their rites of the Orient (such as the Chaldean or Melkite Churches)⁷. The Latin Church, heir of the Crusades, is part of the Eastern Catholic Churches. It depends on the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Rites in the Latin Church have a Latin tradition, although they normally speak Arabic and, sometimes, Latin. The Maronite Church will also be included in the group of Eastern Catholic Churches, since they are united with Rome but keep an autonomous Patriarchy and speak Syrian and Arabic. Lastly, there are Protestant Churches, emerged in the Near and Middle East from the 19th century.

⁵ Briquel-Chatonnet Françoise : « Tout commence à Édesse », L'Histoire, n° 337 (décembre 2008), p. 43.

⁶ Cortázar de Goettmann Clara : "El Gran Cisma entre Oriente y Occidente", Revista FUENTES, ediciones N° 39 (mayo 1995) y N° 40 (septiembre 1995).

⁷ Dalmais Irénée-Henri y Legrand Hervé : « Églises chrétiennes d'Orient » [archive], en Encyclopædia Universalis. <http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/eclises-chretiennes-d-orient/>.

Type	Name	Subdivision	Number of worshippers (2010) ⁸
Chalcedon Churches of the Two Councils	Orthodox Churches of the Orient	Assyrian Church of the Orient	230,000
		Chaldean Church (part of the Roman Catholic Church since 1553)	Aramaic language
Non-Chalcedon Churches	Oriental Orthodox Churches	Jacobite Syrian Christian Church	6.500.000 Aramaic language
		Coptic Orthodox Church	Arabic language (Egyptian)
		Ethiopian Orthodox Church	Ethiopian language
		Syro-Malabar Orthodox Church (India)	Malabar language
Chalcedon Churches of the Seven Councils	Oriental Orthodox Churches with Melkite rites	4 old Patriarchs: Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem	2,000,000 Arabic Language
		1 autonomous church: Cyprus	
Catholic Church	Eastern Catholic Churches	Iglesias greco-católicas de rito bizantino o melquitas (procedentes de las diferentes iglesias ortodoxas orientales)	8,000,000 Arabic language
		Chaldean Church	Aramaic

⁸ Anciberro Jérôme : « Les Églises d'Orient en un seul (grand) tableau », Témoignage chrétien, octobre 2010.

		(from Assyrian Church of the Orient) Syro-malabar Catholic Church (India), Coptic Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Ethiopian Catholic, etc.	language Malabar, Aramaic, Ethiopian languages
	Maronite Church	Autonomous Patriarch	Arabic language
	Latin Church	Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem	Latin language
Protestant Churches			

In short, all Christian Churches that have emerged or been implemented in the Middle and Near East throughout history are normally subsumed under the term 'Christians of the Orient'.

How has christianity in the orient developed?

Christianity in the Orient has been marked by division. The first event came with Roman Emperor Constantine, who became a Christian and considered himself patron of the Christian faith. In response to these changes, the Persian Empire regarded Christians as potential enemies, creating an independent church based on Nestorian beliefs that was considered heresy in the First Council of Nicaea in 325. In other words, the first reasons for division were not religious but rather eminently political.

The Council of Ephesus is said to be the first theological dispute that had a geopolitical impact in the region, since it established the doctrinal differences between the two main religious centres, Alexandria and Antioch. The former considered Jesus to be both man and God, whilst the latter argued that there are two

Jesus, being Virgin Mary mother of the man Jesus Christ, not of God⁹. Alexandria's thesis triumphed in the Council of Ephesus, becoming the official doctrine of the Church in the Byzantine Empire. Alexandria's thesis was then adopted by the majority of the Empire population. However, most of the Aramaic-speaking population stuck to Antioch's Nestorian premises. Being considered heretic, the Aramaic-speaking population had to look for shelter outside the Roman Empire. Nestorian theses were the base of the so-called Church of the East or Assyrian Church of the East. In 1533 there was a split in the Church of the East, emerging the Chaldean Church, who united with Catholic Doctrine as a strategy to withstand Turkish pressure¹⁰.

A second major schism developed in Council of Chalcedon (451), where the so-called Unitarians or Monophysites recognised that Jesus Christ had only a single nature, a synthesis of divine and human. Such doctrine was condemned by the mainstream community, who defended the duality of Christ, fully human and fully divine. Official theses were fully recognised in the West, yet they aroused much opposition in the East, especially among the non-Greek-speaking population. Jacobite Christian Syrian Church or Syriac Orthodox Church of Patriarch of Antioch emerged from the Monophysite heresy, spreading throughout Syria and Asia Minor and mainly settling in the countryside. Jacobite Christian Syrian Church found refuge in a number of monasteries their monks built¹¹. Urban classes stuck to the official, majoritarian current.

The Egyptian and Ethiopian population stuck to the majoritarian current too, as a way to express their opposition to the Greek-dominated Byzantine Empire. That is why, when the East-West schism occurred, the Egyptian Coptic Church was already divided in two big branches, being renamed Christian Coptic Orthodox Church and

⁹ Asimov Isaac: Historia de los Egipcios, Capítulo 13: "El Egipto cristiano", Biblioteca Temática Alianza, Ediciones del Prado. Madrid 1993.

¹⁰ In 1994 both the Pope and the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church signed a document in which they proclaimed their common faith in the mystery of the Incarnation. Naaman Raad Salam : "¿Quiénes son los cristianos caldeos? y ¿qué significa ser cristiano en Irak?", blog Religión en Libertad, (16.03.2015). <http://www.religionenlibertad.com/quienes-son-los-cristianos-caldeos-y-que-significa-ser-cristiano-en-27430.htm>.

¹¹ The Syro-Catholics will also emerge from this group, since they are old Jacobites that united with Rome in 1626. Today, the community is under the rule of the Syro-Catholic Patriarch of Beirut.

Greek Orthodox Church (Chalcedon). The former is majoritarian among Egyptians, Ethiopians, Eritreans and Indians who will form their own national churches. In turn, the Armenian Church rejected the doctrine of Council of Chalcedon, sticking to the Unitarian theses and forming the Armenian Apostolic Church. These three churches were considered so in Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople I and Ephesus¹².

The churches that had accepted de Council of Chalcedon were distributed across de Mediterranean. In the West, worshipers spoke Latin or Romance, whereas in the East they spoke Greek. Political and cultural division divided them progressively, being more and more different in terms of expressing their faith. As a consequence, assumptions increased insurmountably, ending up in the 1054 East-West Schism, where the Pope and Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated reciprocally. The separation between Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Church of Constantinople continues to this day, even though both the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other to oblivion in 7 December 1965. There are still discrepancies between both Churches, especially on Papal infallibility and primacy.

During the times of division, those opposing the Council of Chalcedon used to see its defendants, mainly Greek, as supporters of the Empire. That is why they were derogatorily called Melkite or 'Imperial'. They clustered in the Patriarchies of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Over the time, they became the Byzantine-rite Christians who lived out of the Patriarchy of Constantinople¹³. The Ottoman Empire strengthened such consideration, since it facilitated the Byzantine absorption of the East from the 16th century after establishing the Patriarchy of Constantinople as the only religious siege of the Empire. In the 17th century, some Melkites united with Rome, settling their Patriarchy in Damascus in 1833 and keeping Arabic as their religious language.

The Maronite Church also emerged from theological disputes and hermit Maron's followers, from the Syrian mountains area. Being expelled from Syria due to religious

¹² Gumiel Velasco Julián : «Antiguas Iglesias orientales », catholic.net. <http://es.catholic.net/op/articulos/17618/antiguas-iglesias-orientales.html>.

¹³ R. Grousset : « Histoire des Croisades et du Royaume franc de Jérusalem », 3 vol. Editions Perrin, Paris 1934-36.

prosecution, Maronites found shelter in Lebanese mountains, where they became an autonomous church. Having accepted the Council of Chalcedon, Crusades brought them back their relationship with Rome. They officially became a branch of the Roman Catholic Church in the 13th century. The largest group of Maronites is the Lebanon, a country where the population was mainly Christian until civil war in the 1970s¹⁴. They speak Arabic, yet they use the Aramaic-Syriac language in some of their rites.

How many christians live in the orient?

There probably were more Christians in the Orient at the beginning of the 21st century than a century ago. However, the percentage of representation in the total population has decreased—in the case of some countries, decline has been radical. At the beginning of the 20th century, Christians made up 12% to 15% of total population in the Orient, peaking in 1914, when they represented 26.4% of the Orient total population¹⁵. Today, they are less than 4% or 5%¹⁶. When the 2011 ‘Arab Spring’ began, there still were between 12 and 16 million Christians in the Orient, out of which 10 million were part of the Non-Chalcedon Churches.

Coptic Christians are the largest group of all Christians in the Orient. They keep the Egyptian language for their liturgy, although they have spoken Arabic since the 18th century. Out of a total population of 84 million, Coptics are around 6% (official estimation) and 20% (Church’s estimation). A reasonable estimation would establish the number of Coptics between 6 and 11 million¹⁷. The largest number lives in Egypt, even though there are other Coptic communities in neighbourhood countries.

¹⁴ “Maronites du Liban, une communauté chrétienne qui compte au Proche Orient ».

<http://www.apostolat-priere.org/moyen-orient/liban/752-maronites-du-liban-une-communaute-chretienne-qui-compte-au-proche-orient.html>.

¹⁵ Fargues Philippe: “Los cristianos árabes de oriente medio: una perspectiva demográfica” (extracto). Oxford University Press, 1988. [http://www.libreria-](http://www.libreria-mundoarabe.com/Boletines/n%BA100%20Ene.12/CristianosArabesOrienteMedio.htm#libreria1)

[mundoarabe.com/Boletines/n%BA100%20Ene.12/CristianosArabesOrienteMedio.htm#libreria1](http://www.libreria-mundoarabe.com/Boletines/n%BA100%20Ene.12/CristianosArabesOrienteMedio.htm#libreria1).

¹⁶ Sbarbi Osuna Maximiliano: “Ser cristiano en Oriente Medio”, Minuto Digital.

<http://www.minutodigital.com/2010/12/12/ser-cristiano-en-oriente-medio/>.

¹⁷ BBC: “Coptic Orthodox Church”, Actualizada el 2009-06-25. Disponible en http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/coptic_1.shtml.

Maronites are the second largest group of Christians in the Orient. Speaking Arabic, they represent 35% to 40% out a population of 3.8 million (being 20 to 25% of them Maronites, 7% Greek Orthodox, 5% Greek Catholic and 4% Armenian, Orthodox and Catholic¹⁸.) Until the 1970s, almost 57% of the population was Christian in the Lebanon, but there was an exodus due to war of religion, being left 25 to 30%, that is, between 800,000 and 1.1 million¹⁹. There is also a vast diaspora of Lebanese - mostly Christian- which amounts to 6 million people. A third of them live in the US and the rest are divided between Europe, Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa and Australia. Most of them deny being Arabs and refer to themselves as Phoenician-Chaldean, which was prior to the Arab Conquest. In Israel they are called Aramaic, a term that includes both Syriac Orthodox Church and Greek Catholic Church.

There are around 400,000 Christians of the Orient who are part of the Greek Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. With Arabic-speaking Melkites, the number would increase up to a million worshippers.

In the Persian Gulf, in turn, the majority of Christians are foreign workers, being very small the number of Christians who have citizenship in those countries²⁰.

The Aramaic-speaking Christian population living in Iraq, south-east Turkey, north-east Iran and north-east Syria were around 2 million people before the Arab Spring. Christian population in Iraq before USA's invasion in 2003 was approximately 1 million, having decreased to 250,000 afterwards. The number of Christians in Iraq is insignificant since Daesh seizure of power.

¹⁸ Boëdec François : « *Chrétiens d'Orient*, Études », n° 405, novembre 2006, p. 496-506.

¹⁹ « Maronites du Liban, une communauté chrétienne qui compte au Proche Orient ». <http://www.apostolat-priere.org/moyen-orient/liban/752-maronites-du-liban-une-communaute-chretienne-qui-compte-au-proche-orient.html>.

²⁰ Data from US State Department of State: "International Religious Freedom Report for 2012. 2012". <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2012religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208398#wrapper>.

Country	1948			1983			2010		
	Populati on	Christia ns	%	Populati on	Christia ns	%	Populatio n	Christia ns	%
Egypt	20	5	25	46	8.3	18	80,5	8	10
Sudan	8	2	25	21	5.5	26	43,6	7,5	17
Lebanon	1.5	0.85	55	2.65	0.95	36	4,2	1,4	34
Syria	4	1.36	34	10.5	1	9	21,6	1	4,6
Iraq	7	0.7	10	16	1	6	32,3	0,25	0,5
Jordan	1.2	0.12	10	3.4	0.17	5	6,2	0,25	4
West Bank & Gaza	0.6	0.14	23	2	0.2	10	3	0,05	1,6
Israel	0.6	0.03	5	4.2	0.1	2.2	7,2	0,33	4,6
Saudi Arabia	5			11	-	-	27,6	-	-
Yemen	4			10	-	-	23,6	-	-
5 Emirates	2.1			4.9	0.2	4.2	10	0,3	3
Total	54	10.2	18.9	132	17.42	13.2	256,8	18,9	7,3

(Table built on data from *Evolution de la population chrétienne au Moyen Orient arabe en 62 ans*.
Nuitdorient. <http://www.nuitdorient.com/n1818.htm>.)

Numbers would be substantially higher if we were to consider diaspora. It is estimated that there are around two hundred million Christians of the Orient, being Orthodox sixty million and Catholic most of the others. Less than twenty million of these Catholics of the Orient still live in their places of origin.

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