

Network Promoting the Field of Middle Eastern Christianity
First Issue of the Newsletter
April 2024

The network Promoting the Field of Middle Eastern Christianity is concerned with Middle Eastern Christianity in the field of Middle Eastern Christian Studies in the homelands and the diasporas (from approx. 1800 until the present).

It is scholarly newsletter and therefore would not feature events or publications promoted by a particular Church (unless these are scholarly).

We are a growing community of scholars who work on Middle Eastern Christianity, but we are scattered across various disciplines, departments, countries, scholarly traditions, write in different languages, and do not know much about each other's work.

Initiated by Anna Hager, University of Vienna.

To join the network please contact her at anna.hager@univie.ac.at

Next deadline: August 31st, 2024

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2023 Review

- **Publications**

Kirchner, Anna, *Arabischsprachig und evangelikal in Israel. Identität im Konflikt* (Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2022) (<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110734515>) (Universität Heidelberg)

Arabic-speaking Evangelicals in Israel face a complex identity conflict: they are Israeli but not Jewish, Arab and Palestinian but not Muslim, Christian but not traditional Christian, but Evangelical. The study examines this identity conflict by means of ethnographic data collected in Nazareth, which it questions in terms of their prehistory and global entanglements. It takes a critical look at the emergence of today's dominant understanding of religion as socio-legal community and shows how Evangelicals, who focus on faith, conversion and evangelization, both distance themselves from and approach this. The question of the national identity of Arabic-speaking population in Israel is much contested; this debate is made more difficult for Arabic-speaking Evangelicals by Christian Zionism, which is directly mediated to them through Messianic Judaism. The study points out that the Arab-speaking Evangelicals in Israel, with their emphasis on faith and intense piety, do not withdraw from the conflict and the world, but actively criticize it, especially Christian Evangelical Zionism and the politicization of religion in Israel. The study thus opens up new perspectives on religion and nation in Israel and the relationship between politics and religion.

Raheb, Mitri (ed.). *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis 2023) <https://orbisbooks.com/products/9781626985490>
-In the Eye of the Storm (Eugene: Pickwick, 2023)

Christopher Sheklian, "The Liturgical Subject of the Armenian Apostolic Church: Recent waves of migration," In Talar Chahinian, Sossie Kasbarian, and Tsolin Nalbantian (eds.=, *The Armenian Diaspora and Stateless Power: Collective Identity in the Transnational 20th Century* (London: Bloomsbury/I.B. Tauris, 2023), pp. 148-172

- **Completed Dissertations**

Roxana Maria Aras, "Orthodoxy as a Way of Living: Religion, Sect, and Crisis in Lebanon," – PhD thesis, University of Michigan

Roxana Maria Aras (<https://umich.academia.edu/ArasRoxanaMaria>) an anthropologist recently awarded a doctoral degree in the history and anthropology of the Middle East from the University of Michigan, focuses her research on Arab Christian communities in Lebanon,

Syria, and Palestine. Her dissertation, titled “Orthodoxy as a Way of Living: Religion, Sect, and Crisis in Lebanon,” investigates Rum Orthodoxy as sect, church, and community of practice in relation to the socio-political realities of crisis-ridden Lebanon. Based on ethnographic and archival research spanning from 2019 to 2021, she looks at the ethnographic activation of theological concepts to highlight local Orthodox worldviews that intersected with narratives of a civil state and the social reality of sectarianism in Lebanon.

Miles Elwell, “Existential Religiosity, Individuality, and Theosis in the Thought of Bishop George Khodr,” – PhD thesis (unpublished), Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter.

George Khodr, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Byblos and Botrys, is an important interconfessional figure, who has enjoyed respect across the religious divide in Lebanon during his long and active life. But, as well as being an inspirational voice amidst the volatility of Lebanese society, he has also curdled intra-Christian opinion within his own spiritual ranks. Using writings produced over the course of his lifetime, a series of face-to-face interviews, and his introspective autobiographical novel, this study explores the theological, philosophical, and personal contours of his character to create a profile of this controversial theologian and thinker.

Ongoing Projects

Anna Hager, “The Syriac Orthodox Community in Lebanon (1918–1982)” (University of Vienna)

This research project is concerned with the rebuilding of the Syriac Orthodox community in Lebanon after *Sayfo* (1918–1982). Even though the Syriac Orthodox formed a poor, up-rooted migrant community in the newly established state of Lebanon, they managed to rebuild their community over the course of the next decades, establishing churches, schools, associations, charities and contributing to the revival of the Syriac language. At the same time, they made Lebanon their new homeland, adopting Arabic and were granted Lebanese citizenship. The goal of this research project funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) is therefore to take the Syriac Orthodox out of the transnational Syriac outlook to which they have been usually confined to and highlight their belonging to the societies in which they have lived. Crucially, Arabic helped their integration into the larger Lebanese society while at the same time, paradoxically, it helped the revival of the Syriac language. The other way around, around, the situation and positioning of the Syriac Orthodox raises questions about Lebanon as a nation-state, a Christian homeland, a republic. This project uses sources drawn from both inside and outside the community such newspapers, archives, urbanism, and interviews.

Ruba Totah, “Greek Orthodox and Melkite Church Music Around Jerusalem”

The research examines the Greek Orthodox and Melkite communities around Jerusalem (GOMAJ) as two of the largest Christian groups in the region, having existed there for generations. GOMAJ are religious minorities whose religious practices have been impeded or even oppressed by changing dominant groups throughout the region’s socio-political history. GOMAJ belong to the larger group of Eastern churches, share beliefs and rituals, and have a solid structural and symbolic orientation towards Jerusalem. However, they have also developed significant differences in their complex history, resulting in unique church musical heritages shaped by various religious and secular musical influences. These church music practices are currently endangered due to the communities’ precarious situation. The project development emerged through a seed grant from the MMRC at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna in 2023 and currently looking for a fund for continuation. The project's next phase focuses on the collective and individual church music experiences of GOMAJ members. Grounded in a thorough understanding of the repertoires and processes of current Melkite and Greek Orthodox church music practices, the project seeks to investigate how practising congregation members experience the music of their churches within the complex political and socio-cultural situations they live around Jerusalem.

The project marks a significant milestone as the first ethnomusicological and anthropological study of GOMAJ church music. It adopts an ethnographic and social-scientific perspective, fostering interdisciplinary discussions between fields. The project also draws on its investigator as a cultural insider anthropologist and is the first study to focus on current and historical practices.

2024

- **Call for abstracts**

The First Athra Syriac Symposium: “Syriac as a Living Culture, despite Challenges to its Survival”

3-day conference < 5-8 September 2024 < Ankawa, Erbil (Iraq)

Abstract Submission Deadline is 15 June 2024

[...] **The theme of this Symposium is “Syriac as a Living Culture, despite Challenges to its survival.”** Syriac has often been treated as an extinct liturgical language and Early Christian religious tradition, disregarding its contemporary and living cultural context. As such, it has largely been considered as an auxiliary tool for theologians and historians of the Late Antique and Medieval periods. This conference welcomes papers on topics that treat Syriac as a living, dynamic and vibrant culture both religious and secular, not limited to scholarly investigation of the past. How, and in what form, have the Syriac language and culture managed to survive despite the many challenges to their continued existence?

Far from solely being the liturgical language of a Middle Eastern religious minority, Syriac is rather the vernacular culture of a modern-day indigenous people with hopes and dreams for a future in their *athra* (homeland). We therefore encourage papers on this theme that rise above the limitation of Syriac to the realm of yesterday's religious traditions, but go further, demonstrating **how Syriac is relevant to today's cultural reality, as well as strategies for its resilience and future survival on its native lands.**

We particularly welcome papers addressing:

- Syriac folklore, customs and traditions
- Syriac visual arts and crafts
- Syriac music and song
- Syriac theatre, dramatic arts and film
- Syriac architecture and material culture
- Syriac village life
- Syriac schools and educational programs
- Syriac journalism, press and media
- Syriac and Neo-Aramaic literature and translation activity
- Syriac manuscripts, documents, and epigraphy
- Syriac heritage preservation
- Syriac and modern technological advances
- Syriac social and economic history
- Syriac geography
- Biographies and contributions of Syriac scholars and intellectuals
- Religious and cultural practices
- Coexistence with neighbouring religions and cultures

[...] **The conference will be held in English, Syriac and Arabic, with simultaneous translation provided.**

Abstract Submission Deadline is 15 June 2024. Please submit a title and abstract of proposed original contribution (max. 300 words) for a 20-minute presentation in **one** of the three conference languages, along with a short biography including name and current affiliation (max. 150 words), under the subject heading "Athra Syriac Symposium" to: syriacsymposium@mardutha.com. **Word and Pdf files are accepted.**

For more information: <https://mardutha.com/en/events/call-for-papers/>

- **Upcoming events**

Benedikt Römer, *The Iranian Christian Diaspora: Religion and Nationhood in Exile*
Book Launches: May 16th in Bamberg; June 4th in Bayreuth; July 9th Munich

Theology After Gaza, Istanbul, May 21-24th

Dar al-Kalima University (DAK) will convene a mini-international conference in May (21st-24th) 2024 entitled, "Theology after Gaza." Gaza is a crucial litmus test for international morality and ethical standards in the twenty-first century. The Israeli onslaught on Gaza has

exposed deep biases and blind spots in the West, as most of the Western establishment, political class, and churches has lined up to provide blanket support for Israel, politically, militarily, economically, legally, and theologically.

Some questions to be considered at this crucial juncture include the following. What responsibilities do theologians and scholars of different faith traditions have in the face of genocide and ethnic cleansing? Do theologians and scholars of religion have moral duties beyond the traditional one of speaking truth to power, especially since it is evident that the powerful know the truth but choose to ignore it? How can these external pressures be resisted, and the prophetic role of theology be asserted? How have the notions of “antisemitism” been weaponized to silence advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian people, and how can this weaponization be resisted? How can scholars and researchers in vulnerable positions, including students and precarious academics, be protected against reprisals? What kinds of theological research are scholars obliged to undertake in the face of genocidal aggression? What role can scholars from the Global South play against the weaponizing of scriptures by western theology, the State of Israel, or certain Islamic groups or countries? What are crucial steps necessary to decolonize theology and knowledge productions?

For more information: info@daralkalima.edu.ps

Religion, Culture, and the Body, Cyprus, June 6th–9th

Dar al-Kalima University (DAK) will convene a mini-international conference in June (6-9th) in Cyprus entitled: “Religion, Culture, and the body.” Contemporary discussions in the Middle East/SWANA often hinge upon notions and praxis of the body, religion, and culture, including how differences are defined, intersections are perceived, and how they inform societal behaviors, draw upon and influence culture and religion, and have an impact on (and are impacted by) various religious, political and economic structures. Although recent scholarship about Middle East/SWANA history (Ottoman history, modern period...) through the lens of the body, culture, and religion, provides valuable discourses and frameworks, much is still needed to be done when it comes to 1) deconstructing the macro-level frames of research/analysis and practice which are marked by insufficient attention to context; and 2) exploring, mapping, empowering and promoting current voices and practices in the region and in diaspora communities (for the most part Christian voices), as these voices/practices challenge assumptions of binaries, deconstruct stereotypes, and highlight the importance of gender equality (UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) towards building peaceful, [resilient], and inclusive societies (SDG 16) in the Middle East/SWANA.

For more information: info@daralkalima.edu.ps

The Remnant and the Diaspora: Vitalizing Church, and Society in the Middle East, Cyprus, June 11th–14th

Dar al-Kalima University (DAK) will convene a mini-international conference in June (11-14th) in Cyprus entitled “The Remnant and the Diaspora: Vitalizing Church, and Society in the Middle East.” The conference targets young rising theologians, scholars, and researchers who are motivated and inspired for a new vision and reality in the Middle East. Dar al-Kalima University aims through this project to create a network of theologians and scholars, from

both the local and Diasporic communities to develop a position paper and framework for future strategy that seeks to strengthen the Christian presence in the Middle East.

For more information: info@daralkalima.edu.ps

- **Open positions and funding opportunities**

Call for Applications: Doctoral and Postdoctoral Research Grants for the Study of Collections held by the Oriental Library in Beirut

With the support of the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) and the Mellon Foundation, and as part of the Bibliothèques d'Orient project, Saint Joseph University of Beirut (USJ) is launching a call for applications for doctoral and postdoctoral research scholarships for the study of the collections of the Oriental Library.

The application deadline is **May 10, 2024**.

Kindly find below the link to the call for applications:

French version: <https://www.usj.edu.lb/news.php?id=14622>

English version: <https://www.usj.edu.lb/news.php?id=14623>