

MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Elena M. Savieheva

Russian University of Peoples' Friendship, Moscow

In a variety of different ways, the encounter between Christianity and Islam, between the Muslim world and Christendom, has acquired increasing significance in recent years. A number of serious works, both by Russian and foreign orientalists, have enriched the pool of knowledge on interfaith relations. They focus on the study of the historical, theological, political and cultural encounter of Islam and Christianity, the Muslim world and the West, in the broader sense. They follow the interaction of ethnic, economic, political, social and cultural factors, their influence on the contemporary religious situation in the Middle East. These factors have had a profound effect on the present religious situation in the region and their interplay can help explain the present state of transition and change and assess possible developments in the future.

Christianity and Islam are, in chronological sequence, the second and third attempts to create a world religion. Since Islam is the dominant faith there, the term "Middle East" denotes the social and cultural area in which Islam meets the other faiths. Islam and Christianity share a long (almost 14 centuries) and rich theological tradition and history. It has been a history marked by coexistence, cooperation and from time to time confrontation.

The Middle East, and the Eastern Mediterranean region in particular, is the place of the birth and the intensive contacts and interaction of various confessions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam (which arose in Arabia). For centuries it has witnessed two, one would think, incompatible tendencies — mutual rapprochement, and, at the same time, mutual spurning between the Muslim and Christian cultures, between the Eastern and Western civilizations. In the 7th century, when it was first proclaimed and practised, Islam did not seek to eliminate its predecessors and rivals. Jews and Christians were recognized as *ahl al-kitāb* (the peoples of the Book), to whom earlier divine messages had been sent through God's prophets. Frank antagonism began to prevail in Muslim-Christian relations since the Crusades and the Reconquest. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the Muslim peoples were involved in broad economic, cultural and political contacts with other civilizations.

Today, in an increasingly globally interdependent world, more than ever before, we need to minimize tensions and build on those resources that reinforce mutual understanding, cooperation and interchange.

The researched issue is many-sided and extremely complicated. It can be considered as follows:

- firstly, as relations between Arab-Muslim culture and European civilization;

- secondly, as relations between Muslims and Christians in the Middle East, in Arab states in particular (it is precisely this aspect that was chosen for examination by the author of this article).

The creation of research centres which focus on the exploration of the religious, social and political dynamics of Muslim societies, and interfaith dialogue as well, is another striking illustration of the significance of the topic. I should like to mention only two such centres I collaborate with; which are the Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, established in the Selly Oak College in Birmingham (Great Britain) in 1976 and the Centre for Muslim–Christian Understanding: History and International Relations, established at Georgetown University in Washington in 1993. The main purpose of their activities is to foster the study of Muslim–Christian relations and to promote dialogue between the two great religions.

Numerous conferences, forums, symposiums, in which representatives of various confessions participate (for instance “Islam and Ethnoconfessional Mutual Understanding”, held in Moscow in May 1995 under the aegis of UNESCO), also benefit the contemporary interfaith dialogue.

So, Islam is one of the great spiritual and social forces in the world today, particularly in the Middle East. Without any doubt, its influence and significance will extend and develop in the 21st century. Islam is an extremely important component of Muslim civilization and culture. The community of religion is the basis for the identity of Islamic peoples (irrespective of their state affiliation) as a single entity “*umma*”.

For ages, the Muslim majorities have interacted with religious minorities, including Christians, in the Middle East. Christians reside in Egypt (10 % of its population), Sudan (5 % of its population), Lebanon (40 % of its population), Syria (10 % of its population), Jordan (8 % of its population), Kuwait (6 % of its population) and other Arab countries. Arab Christians, who have long lived as citizens in states with Muslim majorities, have made significant contributions to Arab culture (science, literature, journalism, etc.), identifying themselves intimately with the destinies of their countries. The Christians showed from an early date a desire to share a common cultural and political destiny with the Muslims. The most striking examples of this are the activities of Ğirgī Zaydān, Buṭrus al-Bustānī, Faraḥ Antūn, Fāris Nimr, Sālīm Nakkāš and others. The Christian Arab and the Muslim Arab has found in the Arabic heritage an object of love and pride.

But still, Arab Christians are facing a number of serious problems in non-secular Arab societies, in particular:

- overcoming confessional isolation in the Arab world and confirming themselves as a part of society on equal grounds with Muslims;
- overcoming religious estrangement, including psychological aspects;
- the problem of mass migrations of Middle Eastern Christians, especially of the intelligentsia.

The status of Arab Christians in the Middle East is part and parcel of a huge and complicated issue, namely — the status of religious and ethnic minorities in the region. One can speak about minorities in power (the Maronites in Lebanon or the Alawites in Syria), minorities in isolation (the Druze of Lebanon and Syria), minorities in partition (the Christians of Lebanon), etc.

In this paper I will pay special attention to Muslim-Christian relations in Lebanon. To explore this topic, the author tried to use a multidisciplinary approach and a breadth of rich theoretical work from the fields of historical demography, cultural and religious studies, social psychology and political science. In other words, I have tried to introduce cross-scientific approaches in my research work.

The National Pact (1943) established a confessional political system in Lebanon. By its terms, the Lebanese president was to be a Maronite, the Prime-Minister — a Sunnī, and the Chairman of Parliament — a Šī'ī. Seats in the Chamber of deputies (parliament) were based on a six-to-five ration of Christians to Muslims. Such a situation has remained hitherto. But at the beginning of the 90-s, the confessional system was a little bit modernized by the amendments to the constitution and the electoral law (see the table below). The Maronites have still maintained their dominant political and economic position in Lebanese politics.

Today, Lebanon is one of the world's most divided countries. A land of diverse creeds and a meeting place for East and West, it has been a refuge for persecuted minority groups and a scene of virtually constant struggle among those same communities. With an area of only 4000 square miles and a population of 3.2 million, Lebanon today constitutes a mosaic of religious communities. Muslims comprise about 60 percent of its population. 40 percent are Christians (see the table).

Lebanon's Christian communities are by no means of one mind in their actions or perceptions. However, the convergence of their interests and attitudes often outweighs the divergences.

Each religious sect of the country has its own role in Lebanese history; each of them has produced individuals who have made a pronounced impact on Lebanese society. It is important to mention that Christian Arabs, Christian Lebanese as well, have always felt to be far more closely integrated with Islamic society than other Christian peoples of the Islamic world.

So, the Lebanese adherents of those religions have passed through many periods of conflict and cooperation. Although the issues among them have sometimes been purely religious, more often they have involved a combination of economic and political considerations, which have ignited Lebanon's internal conflict.

The years of civil war since 1975 have torn Lebanon internally to shreds, reduced large parts of the country to rubble, and caused massive movements of population between different regions. The Maronites maintained a virtually uncompromising stand in the protracted conflict with a coalition of mostly Muslim forces seeking a

different distribution of social, economic and political benefits and a shift in Lebanon's foreign policy orientation in the Arab world.

The religious conflict has threatened the dismantling of Lebanon as an independent state. The example of Lebanon showed how a struggle for power could easily express itself in religious terms.

The bitter experience of the civil war has amply demonstrated that neither side in Lebanon can easily force its opinion on the others. The problem can only be resolved by rational give-and-take among the Lebanese peoples in the light of the relevant realities.

So, the emergence of a religiously plural world, with greatly increased possibilities of interfaith and multifaith encounters, makes dialogue between peoples of different faiths extremely important. This is so not only for religious reasons, although these are very important, but also for the development of a genuinely free and just society, which fosters mutual tolerance and respect between groups and individuals with different beliefs.

Lebanon
Population Data and Representation of Religious Communities
at the Parliament (1995)

Group	Population (thousand)	Percent of population	Representation at the Parliament
<i>Christian communities:</i>			
Maronite	639	20,4	34
Greek Orthodox	188	6	14
Catholic	282	9	9
Gregorian	94	3	5
Protestant	25	0,8	1
Others	25	0,8	1
			Total Christians — 64
<i>Islamic communities:</i>			
Sunnī	592	21	27
Šī'ī	967	31	27
Druze	312	7,7	8
Others	10	0,3	2
			Total Muslims — 64