CHAPTER 10

A National Monasticism? Monastic Politics of the Syriac Orthodox Church in Syria

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The publication in 1947 of Albert Hourani’s work, *Minorities in the Arab World*, inaugurated research in the humanities and social sciences on religious and ethnic minorities (Jewish, Muslim and Christian) in the Arab world. These are now better known, both from historical, religious, political, sociological and anthropological perspectives. It is regrettable, however, that so far very few studies have been carried out on the relationships established by these minorities with the nation-building process of the Arab states in which they live, which began in the early twentieth century. The numerical inferiority of these groups was then seen as an insurmountable obstacle to any important role they might play in these matters of national definition. In the case of Christian minorities, there is the additional fact that their disappearance from the Arabian landscape has become a cliché. Although not entirely false, this view is certainly simplistic.

Today, from Lebanon to Egypt, passing through Syria and Jordan, there are millions of Christians whose dynamic national involvement leaves little doubt as to their profound anchorage in the Arab world, even if it is true that since the 1970s and the rise of radical Islamic movements, that pan-Arabist ideology, until then rather effective as a national unifying force for many countries with diverse populations (such as Syria, Iraq and Egypt), has been undermined. Despite the rise of Muslim fundamentalisms, however, Christians do not try to flee their countries at all costs and following the example of the various Islamic reform movements, the Coptic, Greek, Syrian, Maronite, Armenian, Assyrian and Chaldean churches that emerged from nearly two thousand years of theological, political and religious conflicts, prove their vitality through their religious and, more notably, monastic revival – monasticism then being presented as the oldest and most traditional institution of Eastern Christianity.

Studying the monastic revival of the Eastern Churches can highlight the Christians’ current anchoring dynamics in the Middle East. From a methodological viewpoint, it is necessary to understand this phenomenon within each particular Church and each national context because it is the patriarchs (religious leaders having an authority over a country or a particular region, learned men, often charismatic and concerned with political purposes) who
are promoting it. Finally, beyond this local level, the international level must also be taken into account given the extent to which it mobilizes the members of the diaspora who provide considerable economic and ideological support.

Since the early 1980s, there has been a major revival of monasticism in Syria. If the Christians, who represent about six percent of the Syrian population, have found in this way a space for communitarian expression through the religious marking of the country, it is undoubtedly because those in power allow them this freedom. The authoritarian power of the al-Assad family, father then son, ruling since the early 1970s and now widely questioned since the beginning of the revolution in March 2011, is in the hands of members of a heterodox minority from Shi’a Islam in search of political support among the other minorities that they thus symbolically promote. Christians, because of their very small number in the country, their internal dogmatic divisions, and their definitely exogenous character from a religious point of view in comparison with the Muslim ‘umma, are not threatening in terms of power. On the other hand, they could represent an important element for anyone wishing to exploit the religious divisions in the country. By promoting the expansion of monasticism, which passes mainly through the construction and renovation of huge buildings all topped with large blue crosses blinking at night, the government is trying if not to erase the Muslim identity of Syria, at least to introduce points of fracture symbolized by these monasteries, capable of undermining Islamic political demands.

In this context, monasticism is a means of political expression for both those in power and for the various churches that choose to revitalize it. The Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch and of the entire East is the primary church in the country and brings together about three quarters of the Christians in Syria. It is also the first church to have become involved in the monastic revival both through an organization, Orthodox Youth (founded in the 1950s), and through individual initiatives by monks and nuns whose desire was to rebuild monastic life, then presented as the genuine and authentic expression of Eastern Christendom (Poujeau 2010).

The Greek Catholic Church also embarked on the path of renewed monasticism by renovating and enlarging ancient places of worship abandoned for centuries and by giving a religious dynamic able to encourage vocations and especially new relationships with their flock. Indeed, if one can speak of monastic revival in Syria, it is not only because dozens of huge buildings have sprung up over the last thirty years but also because of the appearance of new religious practices. These monasteries are all dedicated to saints and are

1 There are eleven denominational churches in Syria.