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Christian Religioscapes in the Levant: The Question of Geo-Religious Materiality of a Minority in Decline

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Abstract: The Levant has diachronically been a highly contested region in terms of rights and entitlement, and, ultimately, in terms of sovereignty over territory. This is not a new phenomenon, particularly in a region that is laden with history. Religion has been, and still is, central in the demarcation and distinction of territorial custodianship, administration, and ownership, as it codetermines the terms and limits of boundaries by way of materiality in the public sphere. Antitheses and frictions are frequent over disputed territories and spatialities, where religioscapes overlap or intersect in a non-harmonious fashion. Especially at times of political unrest, religion, as a value system, as cultural heritage and as a collective identifier of self-perception, has a central role in the signification of (pre)dominance over territory. This holds true particularly for the Christian minorities in the Levant, with immediate consequences on their religious sites and their overall religiocultural heritage. In this light, I argue that this issue deserves extensive further study, to better understand and explain the complex georeligious landscape in the region, and specifically the place of Christianity therein by way of its materiality, given that the latter is *mutatis mutandis* under threat.

Keywords: levant; christianity; religioscapes; religious materiality; cultural heritage



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1. Introduction

The spatiality of religion is of high importance in the Levant. The latter, apart from being a contested region, is also host to a panspermia of religious communities, denominations, and key locations of sacred spaces of notable symbolic value. Intersecting and overlapping religioscapes and/or former religioscapes attest to contention, rivalry, and even conflict over land and territory in a region that has been historically at the epicentre of analogous tensions *par excellence*.

Within this context, this paper seeks to discuss the place of Christianity and the corresponding communities in the Levant. Their demographics demonstrate that Christians constitute an ever-shrinking minority in the region. Moreover, following migration, de-territorialisation, forced displacement, etc., their state of flux has had an impact on their religioscapes that demonstrate and affirm their spatiality and belonging in the public sphere. As populations shrink and move, their religiocultural heritage is subject to corresponding shifts in ownership, custodianship, and even preservation. Particularly where displacement has been the result of conflict, the threat to the preservation and further existence of their religious materiality is existential. Although analogous phenomena in post-Ottoman regions have been discussed in the relevant literature, the predicament of both the Christian minorities and their religious spatiality and materiality in the aforementioned region remains currently neglected and understudied.

2. Religioscapes

Before discussing the disparities between borders and frontiers in the Levant, it would perhaps be helpful to begin by defining some key terms and notions, and, most importantly, to clarify from the outset that the subject here is not an examination of the essence and

meaning of religion or religions per se. Rather, I wish to discuss what religion does rather than what religion is, from an interdisciplinary—drawing from Religious Studies and International Relations—functionalist perspective.

After all, to define religion is a challenging task, largely predicated upon the approach one uses. It is in the proverbial ‘eye of the beholder’, hence the fuzziness of the term. It has been described variably, as “beliefs, actions and institutions that assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of judgement and action” (Bruce 2003, pp. 9–10). Or, as “either (a) a system of beliefs and practices related to an ultimate being, beings, or to the supernatural or (b) that which is sacred in a society, that is, ultimate beliefs and practices which are inviolate” (Aquaviva in Haynes 1998, p. 4). Yet, there is a consensus that religion’s “claims and pretensions are always to some degree political; there is no such thing as religion without consequences for value systems”, and further, that “group religiosity, like politics, is a matter of collective solidarities and, frequently, of inter-group tension and conflict” (Ramet in Haynes 1998, p. 5). One could go on consulting and citing definitions of religion ad nauseam. In this context, then, it would be pertinent to examine religion in terms of given social and power structures while taking the geopolitical aspect into account.

The spatiality of religion is primarily of interest here, as well as the complexity and consequences thereof; namely, the mosaic of religioscapes in the region. McAlister defines religioscapes as “subjective religious maps—and attendant theologies—of immigrant, or diasporic, or transnational communities who are [...] in global flow and flux” (McAlister 2005, p. 251). As regards the Levant though, the formation of religioscapes clearly predates globalisation; rather, it can largely be attributed to shifts in the status quo along the lines of corresponding historical trajectories. Be that as it may, local community formation in the form of religioscapes is typically visible in the public sphere in the region, as attested by the panspermia of different places of worship, pilgrimage, bereavement, etc., in short, instances of religious materiality.

Foucault describes the spatial differentiation on the basis of its—non-exclusively—sacrosanct traits as a heterotopia, an ‘othered’ place, such as a cemetery for example, which may be functionally connected with the mundane, yet, in tandem with its church or temple it takes on a different essence as spatial cultural entity. The notion of heterotopia, given that it is often ‘othered’ temporally and not just spatially, thus allows the element of heterochronism to determine its relationship with time. This can be further extended to various heterotopic configurations, museums, and libraries for instance (Foucault 1997). Places, actual places, regardless of culture or civilisation, which constitute heterotopic configurations, are essentially counter-sites where a simultaneously mythic and real contestation of the mundane space is at work.

Mutatis mutandis homogeneous religiocultural configurations as such, are characterised by the desire to claim and demarcate their space, which undergoes an aesthetic transformation in accordance with the cultural identity and heritage of the population therein. The latter seeks to modify its built environment, and this applies to religious materiality as well. Religious beliefs and practices find ways of expression through symbols, artefacts, buildings, places of worship and generally through religion’s material manifestation in the public sphere, thereby spatially demarcating the religioscape’s physical presence: “The religioscape, then, is a social space marked by physical icons, from small shrines to large complexes of them, or even sacred cities” (Hayden and Walker 2013, p. 408).

In examining the spatiality of such religiocultural formations, one observes the emergence of lieux de mémoire. Sites of memory embody memorial consciousness, typically, through the materiality of the past, which is institutionalised for the most part in western societies where there is a break between old and new, the traditional and the modern (Nora 1989)—this phenomenon, however, is not exclusively observable in the west. This form of materiality relies on symbolic constellations to draw meaning and legitimacy. Symbolisms reflect social, cultural, and political change, of which they constitute codifications. They

denote and connote sovereignty, belonging, otherness and adherence, among other things, and all in all they bestow meaning and substance (Foret 2009).

It would not be out of place to consider the memorialisation of religion a phenomenon that transpires in the Levant too. In doing so, religion is rendered part of the heritage and embedded in collective memory. What is important here is that this heritage exerts influence on collective cultural choices (Hervieu-Léger 2006). Obvious differences in the trajectories of states, their structures, political socialisation and national identities, as those evolved in the lapse of time while undergoing dissimilar fermentations in light of distinct geopolitical and cultural circumstances, have been embedded in the respective collective memories and affect both the national as well as the regional collective perception of identity; therein rest inequalities, antitheses and imbalances (Ibid.). However, memory and the memorialisation of identity elements, such as religion, are not bearers of the absolute historical truth—who/what is anyway?—and in being in a relative state of flux, or at least subject to some change, it is possible for memory to adapt, to allow room for hybridity and be of use in the construction of inclusive—or exclusive—hybrid identity models. Identity has traditionally been the connecting tissue between members of political communities such as the nation. It rests upon cultural kinship, which, in turn encompasses religion as one of the most common constitutive elements, among others. Albeit imagined, such configurations are not any less real, especially considering the tangible corresponding certainties that they entail, such as sovereignty over delimited space and peoples therein (Anderson 2006).

“Culture is public because meaning is” holds Geertz (1973, p. 12); in that sense, religious and sacred symbols represent and convey a collective ethos and a worldview—ultimately, aspects that comprise cultural physiognomy. The centrality and significance of symbols is clearly identifiable in Geertz’s definition of religion, for, they constitute the material expression of the aforementioned ethos and worldview:

(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of actuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Ibid., p. 90)

Symbols stand for meaning, irrespective of religion, hence, a cross or a crescent perform an analogous function: they link the ontological, cosmological dimension to aesthetics, morality, and values (Ibid.). By way of symbols, tradition lives on. Tradition is a transgenerational legacy that imparts legitimacy, continuity, but also present and future obligations dictated by the past, from where tradition stems. “The act of re-transmission—the passing of an eternal torch to future generations—reduces past, present, and future to the same idealised and timeless state; it erases temporal difference and, thus, agency” according to Engler (2005, p. 373). Through this temporal compression the past undergoes a process of constant reconfiguration due to the flux and ever-changing circumstances and exigencies of any given present. In the same vein, it is also worth mentioning that the timelessness of any imagined community does not only function as a means towards submerging the individual to the group identity and, ultimately, the perpetuation of the former via the latter; the convergence of the past with the present of a community germinates and imparts meaning to the present and future alike (Engler and Grieve 2005).

3. Christianity in the Levant

As is the case with religion, the Levant is also difficult to define and circumscribe without raising some minor—perhaps even major—objections. It may be geographically fuzzy, depending, among other things, on the historical period and the particularities thereof, yet there is some relative consensus. In light of this fuzziness, I will be using the term as a convenience; but I will also intentionally do so to implicitly highlight how the weight of history and culture has a bearing on the geopolitical assessment of the region. The ‘Levant’ is a term notoriously charged with ambiguity, as it denotes and connotes a variety

of meanings that stem from equally various definitions; not to mention the, sometimes, pejorative use of the term (Steiner and Killebrew 2014).

Evidence of the use of the term, initially as a form of reference to the eastern Mediterranean, dates back to the 16th century, when it was used to denote the orientation of the aforementioned region in relation to the west, i.e., in the east where the sun rises, the soleil levant (Oppenheim 1996). Further, the term 'Levantine' was associated with European traders who frequently engaged in business in the region, as well as with local populations which, in being in close and regular contact with the west via commerce, developed corresponding language skills and got acquainted with Western customs, being thereby permeated by cosmopolitan properties (Steiner and Killebrew 2014). As regards the derogatory use of the term 'Levant', this should be attributed to the colonialist connotations whereby a presumably unethical business ethos and cultural inferiority is implied (Hochberg 2004). Likewise, a lack of consensus is identifiable in geographically circumscribing the region with accuracy (Hochberg 2004).

According to Britannica, to consult a popular non-scholarly source, the term 'Levant' has been broadly used with reference to the eastern Mediterranean shores, roughly corresponding to modern-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the adjacent geographical areas. It has also been applied to Asia Minor and Greece, Anatolia and Egypt, and as a synonym for the Middle East or Near East (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2021). Further, The Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL n.d.) claims, for instance, that it covers the breadth of social sciences and humanities in the Middle Eastern countries of Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus. In doing so, the CBRL acknowledges Levant's fuzziness and intentionally uses the term as a convenience to its own research benefit (CBRL n.d.). This geographical demarcation, then, is not definitive; indicatively, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEfIP 2022) distinguishes the Levantine region geographically within the area of Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey (CEfIP 2022).

During the French Mandate period, post-World War I, the term was often used when referring to Syria and Lebanon, which became independent in 1946. It is worth noting that there have been spectacular power shifts over territory, for example between 1916 and the Sykes–Picot Agreement, and the 1920 League of Nations Mandates, which have contributed to the overall complexity that the term 'Levant' implicitly bears. All in all, the region's particularity is underscored by the latent historical currents and the evident multiethnic, geopolitical, and geo-religious complex mosaic.

Although the region is predominantly Muslim—as it has been for centuries —, its geo-religious landscape remains diverse. Religious minorities comprise Christians, Jewish, Zoroastrians, etc., with the most prominent minorities, from a demographic perspective, being Christians of several denominations and Shiite Muslims. Christians in particular have their own distinct identities, with Egypt, Jordan, Palestine/Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq being home to such communities. Armenian Christians, Arab Orthodox, Catholics in communion with the wider Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches, Syriac Christian traditions, such as the Maronite, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian, and Chaldean churches, to name a few examples, have their own communities (Weitz 2015).

Shiite Muslims, also, comprise considerable minorities in the region, with several communities, albeit rooted in Shiite Islam, adopting diverse theological ideas and rituals, such as the Druze, the Alawites, and the Alevi. They are located among others in Israel, Lebanon, and Syria with the Alevi located mainly in Turkey. The Yezidis, in Iraq, are also worth mentioning, as well as the Zoroastrians in Iran, although India hosts much larger Zoroastrian communities nowadays. Also, it is worth mentioning the indigenous Jewish communities who lived in most states of the Middle East up until the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 (Ibid.).

I am only painting a fragmented picture of the Levant, for the sake of brevity. It is crucial to note that the political and religious landscape of the region has undergone tremendous transformations over the years, especially from the 19th century thereafter, including

the period subsequent to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the mandate period, western colonialism etc. It is also worth mentioning that at times of power shifts and vacuums, religious minorities did not shy away from seeking guarantees of autonomy from foreign actors, which in turn often triggered majoritarian discontent and sectarianism between communities and their control over territory, as the respective religioscapes overlapped and intersected.

Intersecting religioscapes, as described by Hayden and Walker, emerge as spatial differentiations, demarcated by symbolic constellations in the public sphere. Frontiers emerge and shift as they are primarily determined by the clearly distinguishable presence of religious communities and their more or less homogeneous self-perception. Notably, being demarcated by physical structures, territorial spaces become porous as they are not necessarily coterminous with existing physical or political borders, since complex, multilayered configurations of religious demarcations infuse places or territories with corresponding meaning anew (Hayden and Walker 2013).

Particularly as regards the intersecting religioscapes in post-Ottoman spaces such as the Levant, Hayden challenges the position that borders between distinct religious communities become 'blurred' when members identifying themselves as belonging to different religions interact. His rationale is that the sharing of sites does not mean sharing of identity. In his Antagonistic Tolerance model, in situations of religiouscape intersection, the observable 'tolerance' is conditional and predicated upon dialectic of control, power and supremacy. In that sense, the presence of any given 'other' is endured, not embraced or celebrated; and it is endured, provided that there is a clear distinction of roles between dominant and subordinate groups. Typically, this kind of dominance is manifested by the control of the primary identity of major religious sites. If that were to be challenged or the status quo threatened, the eruption of violence is rendered possible, and this is often followed by transformation of religiouscape markers by way of conversion of religious materiality, which indicates a paradigm shift in dominance and status quo (Hayden 2016).

Religion cannot be regarded as impervious to politics, and in that respect, specifically when communities are involved, religion has a bearing on contestations of dominance: over space and over 'others' in that space. When spatiality is marked by key religious sites of high symbolic importance, the dominant faction, group and/or religion, it follows that to highlight that dominance, key sites are subject to transformation. Typically, this entails religious conversion as a manifestation of ownership. However, this does not necessarily mean that the subordinate community shall not have access to the converted sacred space; even religious rites and rituals, depending on the permissiveness of the dominant group, government or regime, might be performed. Thereby, syncretistic traces are possible, although the hierarchy of dominant and subordinate groups would typically be evident and obvious (Hayden 2016).

The antagonistic tolerance model is not without its critics, yet the latter do not make a convincing case. They end up being eclectic by focusing on specific historical periods while disregarding intertemporality and the corresponding historical trajectories that have an effect on community relations. In addition, they eclectically essentialise objects of analysis, such as religious sites that constitute exceptions rather than the rule or generalise outcomes that apply to specific delimited spatialities and the communities therein.

The regional antagonisms over religious territory are deeply rooted in history. Conflict and bloodshed, albeit initially ethnic and localised, was soon internationalised as it brought forth broader implications on the international geopolitical stage. For example, in 1852, the interdenominational dispute between Christian churches over their jurisdictional rights in the Holy Land escalated and triggered French and Russian involvement, in support of the Catholic and Orthodox communities in Jerusalem, respectively. Eventually, the further escalation of this dispute gave rise to the Crimean War (Hassner 2009). To be sure, disputes over ownership of religious sites take place the world over—this is not an exclusively regional phenomenon. The Levant, however, has been diachronically at the epicentre of such frictions and conflicts, with the causes often being deeper than religious and spiritual:

tribal, ethnic, and nationalist sentiments that lead to violence are often inflamed by the absolutisation of religion. Conflict is largely owed, among others, to the indivisibility of religious space. Sacred spaces simply cannot be shared, for, absolute and exclusive control is a prerequisite, for fear of blasphemy, desecration, etc. (Ibid.).

Antagonisms are identifiable in aesthetics, religious art, architectural features, relics, artefacts, and they reflect on the control over spatiality and locality where places of worship, pilgrimage and bereavement are located. The religious materiality therein functions as a host, an ark of narratives, namely of the communities that had and have control over sacred space, whether it constitutes a religioscape or not. The latter, “refers to the distribution in spaces through time of the physical manifestations of specific religious traditions and of the populations that build them” (Hayden 2016, p. 71). Hence, it should be noted here that the essential elements that constitute a religioscape are the religious materiality within a given spatiality as well as the corresponding group of people that adhere to the predominant religion. Otherwise, when religious materiality attests to the bygone presence of a religion that is no longer either dominant or practiced, it does not constitute a religioscape.

When populations move, willingly or not, they tend to modify their built environment and apply their own taste, aesthetics, ekistics, functional arrangements and of course, manifest their religious identity via religious materiality. Therefore, population movement, in conjunction with interreligious and interdenominational relations, leaves an imprint on the public sphere. The latter is the context and the environment where the performative aspect of religion—and the statement that this form of action entails—is realised par excellence. The obvious ways through which the transformation of sacred space takes place would be via: Indications of abandonment, disrepair and disuse; hybridity and syncretism in aesthetics and architecture, which indicates coexistence and tolerance, possibly antagonistic; desacralisation and conversion to mundane/profane usage; conversion, whereby the space remains sacred but the dominant group gets replaced, hence a shift in the status quo is noted; desecration, indicative of direct hostility and violence that is evidently demonstrable in the public sphere; and destruction and eradication, intended to entirely eliminate any reference or hint of a pre-existing religious ‘other’.

Community does not exist in an identity and spatiality vacuum. As Davutoğlu puts it, the sense of belonging requires an existential cultural and historical in-depth self-awareness; while, the territorial sense of belonging requires that the aforementioned awareness, and strategic consciousness, is spatially reflected in the greater scheme of things and at a macro level. The Middle Eastern question for example, cannot be described and explained, let alone analysed, without taking into account the high symbolic meaning that Jerusalem bears for Muslims and Jews, without fathoming the historical and psychological elements that pervade those peoples and the motivational dynamics that guide those societies. In short, insightfulness, stemming from the perception of time and the perception of space, is essential (Davutoğlu 2001).

As soon as the nation-state as political unit became the standard in the international system, it became coterminous with geopolitical sovereignty, delimited, and circumscribed by corresponding borders. By definition, the fault lines where conflicts are frequent, are geographically located where borders and frontiers do not coincide, and hence cultural—in our case religiocultural—geography contradicts national borders and by extension sovereignty. Largely, international, intercommunal, and sectarian conflicts are more likely to break out due to disparities between legal borders and geopolitical zones (Ibid.). This tension largely characterizes the Levant, and it does not necessarily apply to nation-states alone, it applies by definition to communities within them as well; particularly so, as they may be susceptible to the influence of external soft power. The fact that different communities and societies might be at odds on the aforementioned basis, can be attributed to their disparate worldviews and self-perception, shaped and formed by their different collective spatial and temporal appreciation.

State-building processes have not helped in mitigating religiopolitical tensions; in fact, they have exacerbated disjunctures between state and the religious domain: “By

eliminating, subordinating, or co-opting religious institutions and suppressing religious movements in a highly religious society, democratisation has different implications for differently situated minorities" (Belge and Karakoç 2015, p. 283). Democratisation could in fact pose a threat to religious minorities; decision-making on the basis of majoritarianism has immediate consequences as it favours, or entails the possibility of-, the public sphere and demos being dominated by Islamisation (Ibid.). In that sense, it would not be amiss to question the qualitative characteristics of a form of democratisation that does not necessarily take the sensitivities of religious minorities into account, including limitations in their representation.

No doubt, religious visibility in the public sphere constitutes a significant statement and an indication of agency. The possibility of agency, in turn, suggests the capacity of the entity that is visible in the public sphere to act as actor and partake in the co-shaping of public life. This interruption in the normative landscape challenges power structures and the relations thereof, and this includes religious visibility, even if those represented adhere to a minority or their value systems differ from the predominant group. Ultimately, public visibility is a performative rather than discursive mode of political and/or civic action, and along these lines, any given religious community uses imagery, aesthetics, and abstractions as a means to exercise agency and communicate its message (Göle 2017).

Chapman, already in 2012, emphasised the precarious state of Christians in the Middle East. Although their continuous presence in the region spun approximately two millennia, the situation they were facing at the time was one of crisis or rather, crises. Further complexity is owed to "the indissoluble link between religion and politics" (Chapman 2012, p. 99), which draws from a political theology that recognises Muhammad both as a prophet and statesman, not unlike the Byzantine Constantinian model in Orthodox Christianity (Ibid.). This bears implications as regards polity and the legitimacy thereof in relation to group religiosity.

Christian communities have evidently fallen victim to those tensions. Between 1900 and 2010, i.e., before the extensive conflicts that gave rise to mass forced displacement took place, their population in the region, according to some sources, shrunk from 10% to 5%, of which 65% were Orthodox, 27% Catholics and 7% Protestant. Unfortunately, subsequent to hostilities, up-to-date reliable data is lacking (Connor and Hackett 2014). To be sure, Christians in the Levant do not constitute a unitary entity. There are outstanding differences between communities, denominations, as well as between the states' governments in the region and the way that they treat religious minorities in general and Christians in particular, not to mention the factor of denominational and jurisdictional adherence, which has a bearing on the standing of distinct Christian communities.

Indeed, the image of helplessness, second-class citizenship, and victimhood in light of Islamisation, stems from a stereotypical perception of the region as an anarchic domain where radicalisation breeds. Apart from being counterproductive and unfair, it would also be inaccurate to essentialise this perception as a diachronic condition and therefore perpetuate the aforementioned stereotype (Melcangi and Maggiolini 2020). Not that the harassment or even persecution of Christians, directly or indirectly, cannot be substantiated; but their demographic decline is not new, rather, it dates back to the turn of the 20th century, when Christians amounted to 7 million and hence, represented 14% of the general population. Low birth rates, compared to the regional average, combined with emigration, impacted their demographic decline significantly. The phenomenon was further accelerated in the 1970s with their numbers being reduced to 12 million in 1975, representing 7% percent of the total population in the Middle East. Nowadays, according to an estimate of 2015, their demographic presence is as low as 5%. In addition, violence and conflict has had a dramatic effect on the Christian population, such that "their decline is almost turning into annihilation" (Ibid., p. 176). Indicatively, in Iraq alone, not only did their population shrink from more than a million to no more than 300.000, but on top of that, an estimated "80% of their religious establishments" has been "destroyed or damaged and abandoned" (Ibid.)

No doubt, following the rise in extremism in the region, violence, alongside religious persecution, discrimination, and lack of economic opportunities, is closely related to the exodus of Christians. The various forms of persecution and discrimination comprise attacks on persons and property, educational exclusion, arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, impunity of perpetrators and institutional weakness, lack of legal protection, expulsions, restrictions and suppression of religious freedoms, targeting of religious leaders, larceny, and destruction of religious property and cultural heritage (Haider 2017).

Indicatively, the Monastery of St Elijah—also known as Deir Mar Elia—near Mosul, Iraq, which dated back to the late 6th century, was destroyed by the Islamic State (IS) (Maher 2016). The historic Mar Korkis Church, again in Mosul, was desecrated and vandalised by the same perpetrators (IS) (Al Arabiya News 2020). The same applies to Kessab, Syria, where Christian sites of worship and bereavement were destroyed and desecrated (Sherlock 2015). Likewise, all shrines of Ma'loula, Syria were either desecrated or destroyed by IS (Orthodox Christianity 2014).

One could go on citing individual cases ad nauseam. There is panspermia of similar reports as the ones above, but by no means is there a concise, reliable catalogue of what has been destroyed, when, where and by whom. A detailed account would actually help to better understand and explain the conditions and particulars on the basis of conclusive data. However, the state of Christian religious-cultural heritage in the Levant is largely understudied and a systematic study on the state of Christian religious-scapes is lacking. Clearly, the Christian minority religious-scapes in the Levant are in a precarious state. This is identifiable in their religious materiality. Given that places of worship, pilgrimage and bereavement reflect the history, memory, sense of belonging, and the overall narrative of the respective Christian communities in the Levant, a study that would capture how social and political developments are implicitly and explicitly detectable in the materiality of the Christian religious-cultural landscape, ultimately, a study that deals with the status of Christian minorities in the region, would be timely and useful.

4. The Need for an Updated Research Agenda

The need for protection of cultural heritage has given rise to securitisation to match the contemporary conditions and challenges. “The Second Protocol to the Hague Convention of 1954 for the Protection of Cultural Property [...] the ICTY Statute and the ICC Statute all posit that attacks against cultural heritage can be considered international crimes” (Russo and Giusti 2019, p. 847). The significance of the above is underlined by the joint appeal of March 2014 by “the UN Secretary-General, the UNESCO Director-General and UN-League of Arab States Joint Special Representative for Syria” (Ibid., p. 851), and further, by the address of the Security Council by the UNESCO Director-General in March 2015, and not least, by the series of resolutions issued by the UN Security Council upon the matter (Ibid.).

Cultural heritage, instead of being confined within its initial narrow perception of history and art, nowadays encompasses values, identity, and memory (Vecco 2010, p. 324). Either tangible—artefacts, objects, architecture, landscapes—or intangible—performance, ritual, memory, language—, cultural heritage is constitutive of collective identity and intertwined with territory (Silverman and Ruggles 2007). And when territory is contested, emerge disputes over the stewardship of the cultural heritage therein, which by and large applies to national heritage (Ibid.). Cultural heritage may also be under threat, directly or indirectly, either because of neglect, hence natural wear and tear damages it, or because of intentional damages, meant to erase it (Ibid.). It ought to be clarified though that heritage is much more likely to convey meaning when remembered and utilised as patrimony (Ibid.).

Further, the significance of cultural heritage to the EU is attested by several activities and initiatives; suffice it only to highlight one or two examples of noteworthy importance. For instance, the Faro Convention of the Council of Europe focused precisely on the value of cultural heritage. In the document produced thereafter, the right of every person was recognised to engage freely with one’s cultural heritage and participate in corresponding activities, stressing that such provisions are “enshrined in the United Nations Universal

Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and guaranteed by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966)" (Council of Europe 2005, p. 1); likewise, such provisions are to be found in the "European Cultural Convention (1954), the Convention for the Protection of the Architectural Heritage of Europe (1985), the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (1992, revised) and the European Landscape Convention (2000)" (Ibid.). In fact, the Faro Convention produced a definition according to which,

cultural heritage is a group of resources inherited from the past which people identify, independently of ownership, as a reflection and expression of their constantly evolving values, beliefs, knowledge, and traditions. It includes all aspects of the environment resulting from the interaction between people and places through time. (Ibid., p. 2)

Thereby it follows that the Council of Europe wished to promote the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage to future generations, considering Article 3 and Article 4 of the Faro Convention (Ibid.). In the same spirit the Namur Declaration of the Ministers who partook in the cultural convention meeting of 23–24 April 2015, reiterated and consolidated the aforementioned definition of cultural heritage, while stressing that it is "a key component of the European identity" (The Namur Declaration 2015, p. 1). It is crucial here to stress that this does not apply exclusively to the collective European identity. Most importantly, the Council of Europe acknowledges the linkage between human rights and cultural heritage, which is quite pertinent in the present case of interest: namely, "Culture is an essential component and a key factor for the effective delivery of the core mission of the Council of Europe to promote human rights, the practice of democracy and the rule of law" (Council of Europe 2018). I am placing emphasis on the EU because the Levant constitutes its near abroad and developments there have an effect on Europe in general and the EU in particular. Therefore, the particulars of interreligious relations in the Levant are transferrable to the EU, directly or indirectly. Hence, the EU has a vested interest in gaining relevant insights, but it is not the only actor that does; it is, rather, an indicative example.

5. Concluding Remarks

Contested sovereignty over territory is not uncommon in the Levant, no less over key religious sites of high symbolic importance. Borders do not necessarily coincide with frontiers, and this relativises ownership, custodianship, and dominance over land. This does not only apply to states in the region, but also to communities therein. Particularly in the Levant, where the weight of history may often seem unbearable, it follows that religioscapes, often centuries old, are rife with significations. They contain symbolic constellations that connote and denote meaning, identity and belonging. They often predate the status quo, and the one before that. They compress time within delimited space and in the final analysis they constitute rally points diachronically. And as such, they often stand defiant, demanding vindication, or declaring dominance, giving thus rise to disparities and tensions.

Tensions, in various forms, have had an impact on the presence of Christian minority communities. The latter have been withering demographically, while their living conditions deteriorated as of the eruption of violence and conflict, which saw the rise of religious extremism, among others. Their communities shrunk accordingly as their persecution and forced displacement resulted in an exodus, particularly from countries like Syria and Iraq. This bears consequences for the state of their religiocultural heritage as several of their religioscapes are no more. Where their spatial belonging is contested, it is highly likely that the ownership and custodianship of their places of worship, pilgrimage, bereavement, including their religious materiality therein, will be challenged.

Such challenges come in various forms, some less harmful than others and some irreversible. There is a broad spectrum of types of contestation, ranging from antagonistic tolerance to outright hostility and eradication. Ultimately, this is indicative of the urgency of

intervention on behalf of actors that have a legitimate interest, duty, and a moral obligation to act towards the preservation of this rich religiocultural heritage, regardless of ownership and what the dominant group might be. To that end, a study that records, catalogues, and produces a concise and reliable dataset would be pertinent to shed light onto this neglected issue.

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