CHRISTIAN WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST:
THE MODERN DEBATE*

1. Christians in the Arab world

Middle Eastern gender studies have to a large extent been dominated by an approach that focuses on the implications of Islam on women’s empowerment. Nevertheless, the Middle East is not solely Islamic Arabic, as it has historically been the residence of a considerable number of Christian communities that have a long tradition in the area, before the arrival of Islam and their gradual coexistence. It should be noted here that Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Asia Minor, among others, were the first areas that were massively christianized, thanks to the Pax Romana that facilitated the movement of people as well as the communication and dissemination of ideas.

The arrival of Islam in the region gradually turned Christianity and Christians into a minority, in terms both of numbers and power relations. This was preceded by the fragmentation of the Christian world in the 5th century that facilitated in its own way the spread of Islam in the region, due to its acceptance by a part of the Christian world that was religiously, politically and ethnically differentiated from the Eastern Roman Empire. A second division that occurred in the 11th century, between the Eastern and Western

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Church, also affected this region in various ways, and contributed to the transformation of the Christian map with the creation of new Christian Churches, which were related in one way or another with the western ones. The internal fragmentations as well as the external political interventions of western powers and their corresponding missions have created a variety of Churches, ranging from the most historical ones, like the Greek-orthodox, Syrian-orthodox, Coptic, Armenian, Assyrian, even the Latin one, to the contemporary ones, like the Greek-Catholics, Syrian-Catholics, Coptic Catholics, Armenian Catholics, Chaldean, as well as the Protestant Churches 2.

Nevertheless, despite their numerical downsizing and their minority status, either as dhimmis under the Muslim Arabs, or as millet, under the Ottomans, Christians participated actively in the development of the Arabic Muslim civilization and the creation of the new Arabic nations. Even in our days, despite the dramatic decrease in their population and the constant attacks they are subjected to, they continue to struggle, with their Muslim compatriots, for democratization and peace in the region.

Consequently, Christianity as well as Islam, is historically connected with the traditional patriarchal society of the Middle East. It is considered that, just like the other two monotheistic religions (Judaism and Islam), it has played a significant role in the legitimation and reproduction of patriarchal structure. All three religions are characterized by the hierarchy of gender, with women being subjected to strict social control and to the authority and power of men. Nonetheless, Christianity does not function in a uniform way as a timeless tradition, neither as a unique factor that determines the position of women and the hierarchy of gender. This issue involves many other factors such as the socio-economic status, education, class and so on of the women themselves. In addition, a significant role is played by the wider socio-political

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context, such as the political structures, democratization, socio-economic development, liberalization, modernization and the special state entity of the local middle-eastern society.

Evidently, it is difficult to talk about a homogenous position of Christian women, as this is defined by various political, social, national, ethnic and class differentiations. Also, many differences can be seen within the Christian communities, as every religious community provides a different degree of freedom, dependent on various factors such as the “orthodoxy” and traditionalism of every Church, or the secularization and modernization usually related to the extent of “dependence” on Western Churches.

This paper cannot exhaust the topic, as the big number and variety of local Christian communities, the specific socio-political status of every region and at the same time the absence of case studies concerning Christian women, make this task difficult. It can only offer images, images of life from the past and present, which indicate on the one hand the efforts of women to participate actively in society and church, despite the marginalization imposed on them by the patriarchal status, and on the other, the process that occurs within the Churches that usually reflect the general socio-economic and political context.


2. Women and Christianity

Generally speaking, the principal thesis of Christianity towards women is expressed by Saint Paul, who in the Letter to Galatians (3: 28) says that “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. Despite the fact that this thesis about gender equality has a theological – charismatic perspective, as it presupposes reference to Christ, at a time of general hierachisation and subordination of people on the basis of ethnicity, age or gender, it acquires its own significance. Based on the above thesis, women in the primitive Church have many roles that do not correspond to the generally “inferior” position of women of that time, such as teachers, prophets, deaconesses etc.

But St Paul himself, in his first letter to Corinthians, on the grounds of social order, talks about the hierarchical customs of that time and “calls women back to order”: women should be silent, not speak in public and cover themselves (a custom of a traditional society that is conserved by Muslim women up to the present)\(^5\). In this way, he foresees and justifies the attitude of deprecation and inferiority of women of later Christianity towards men. As Christianity develops and becomes part of society, it comes to accept the prevalent social conceptions and dominant social patterns that correspond to the traditional patriarchal society that gradually resulted in the invisibility of women.

The position of women in the ecclesiastical body gradually became analogous to their social position and roles. Very soon, women were forbidden to speak and teach, as a result of a partial interpretation of the words of St Paul. This led to the hierarchical subordination of women to men, their obligatory silence in the places of public worship and the covering of their head. The roles of teacher and prophetess disappear, giving room to a passive participation that is limited to running errands. The role of deaconess changes into that of providing social care, whereas the responsibility for the function and administration of the Church becomes a

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\(^5\) 1 Cor. 11, 2-16 & 14, 33-36. See also, Eph. 5, 20-33.
masculine duty. Christianity, as well as Islam, accepts the sub-
ordination of women in the framework of a patriarchal hierarchi-
cal status that defines social roles with austerity.

These structures are reflected in the image that the Church
creates for women. The role model for women is that of Virgin
Mary, who played a significant role in the Christian history and
for this reason she is honored as “Panagia” (Holy Mary), “Theomi-
tor” and “Theotokos” (Mother of God). In some patristic texts of St
John Damascenus (7th c.) or Nikolaos Kavasilas (14th c.), she is
hailed as the mother of life and the absolutely perfect human be-
ing.

As the Church gradually identifies with society, the model of
Virgin Mary transforms into an ideal, while at the same the anti-
model of Eve, which represents all women, makes its appearance.
In the popular texts of 6th century, attributed to Gregorius Neo-
kaisareias, the typology Mary – Eve is developed. This typology
emphasizes on the role of Virgin Mary whose obedience led to the
salvation of people, contrary to that of Eve whose disobedience got
human beings into trouble. So, parallel to the special honor to-
wards Virgin Mary, these texts express the underestimation of the
rest of women that are considered to be the cause of all evil. The
different role of the “old” and “new” Eve is expressed in a cha-
acteristic way through the well-known phrase “all good things de-
rive from women, all evil things derive from women too” in a dia-
logue between Emperor Theophilos and Kassiani, the latter being a
nun and hymnographer of the Church. The first part of the phrase
refers to Holy Mary, the second to women in general.

3. Breaking the patriarchal structures: a gender perspective

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6 For more, see, Ioannis Petrou, “The feminine issue and the ecclesiasti-
cal tradition”, Scientific Annals of the Faculty of Theology (School of The-

7 See also, Ioannis Petrou, “The Orthodox Church and the feminine is-
sue”, in Holy Metropolis of Dimitrias (ed.), Gender and Religion. The posi-
tion of woman in the Church, Indiktos Publ., Athens 2004, pp. 143-162 (in
Greek).
The turn of research towards gender studies offers the opportunity to explore the life of Christian, as well as Muslim women, in a traditional society, like the one of the Middle East, and to bring to light their dynamic presence, hidden behind the “walls” of patriarchal structures. This kind of research delves into the experience of women themselves and the strategies they employ to “break” the established social structures and to overcome the limitations of their given social roles.

So, in this part, we will use these two concepts –experience and strategies- to throw light on the life and activities of Christian women on the basis of three cases. It should be mentioned here that research on this topic is very limited as research focuses –for the time being- mainly on Muslim women. Despite the long-term relation of Christianity with the patriarchal traditional structures of the Middle East, Christian women, without refusing their religious identity but many times in the name of it, found different ways to “escape” from the their traditionally given social and ecclesiastic positions, to redefine their religious and gender identity and to renegotiate their position within the framework of Christian communities and the broader society.

Case One: Visions of Mary; the Power of a Symbol

An important key symbol in Christianity (as well as in Islam) is Holy Mary that may be interpreted in a two-fold or even contradictory way. From a theological (Christian) perspective she is presented as the symbol of life and virtue, whereas from a gender perspective, as a symbol of subordination and obedience. Many have noted the numerous contradictions in the symbol of Mary, in which she was both servant and queen, virgin and mother, role model as well as an unattainable ideal. Nevertheless, for Christian women Holy Mary may be used as a symbol, on the one hand, of alternative perspectives and actions against the dominant patriarchal context and on the other, of reinforcement of women
in their effort to change identities and take on new social and economic roles.\(^8\)

As such, we may interpret the apparition of Holy Mother in a Coptic church of Cairo, in the end of 60's, in the middle of a period of general agitation and insecurity in the Egyptian society.\(^9\) According to reports, “On April 2, 1968, an hour and a half after sunset, Muslim workmen at the bus garage of the Public Transport Authority in Tumanbay Street in El-Zeitoun, a suburb of Cairo, heard a disturbance in the street and came out to see what was happening. They saw a moving light on the dome of the Coptic Church, opposite the garage, and thought it was a woman who had climbed on the roof in order to commit suicide. They cried out to her to be careful. Someone in the crowd cried, “Settana Maryam, Settana Maryam”, and soon a big crowd of people gathered in the street to watch the luminous body that moved on the dome and to discuss whether or not they saw Our Lady Mary. The apparitions continued to occur until September 1970. The observers saw a glittering white cloud, which could take on the form of a bust or even one of a full body moving between and on the domes. She was always luminous, at times accompanied or preceded by celestial beings in the form of doves.”\(^10\)


\(^9\) This case is based on the article of Willy Jansen, “Visions of Mary in the Middle East: Gender and the Power of a Symbol”, in Inger Mari Okkenhaug & Ingvild Flaskerud (eds.), Gender, Religion and Change in the Middle East. Two Hundred Years of History, Berg, New York 2005, pp. 137-154.

The apparitions of Holy Mary were seen as a miracle by the official Coptic Church with many addresses: the atheists who generally refuse the existence of God, the non Orthodox -especially the Roman Catholics- who have “changed” the orthodox faith with the adoption of the dogma of Immaculate Conception of Holy Mother, the Copts themselves who need empowerment as they are a Christian minority under pressure, the Muslim compatriots who also respect Holy Mary as a model of faith mentioned in the Koran, and finally all Egyptians (Christians and Muslims) who experienced a national humiliation by Israelis after the War of Seven Days (1967) and needed unity and support.

But, for the Copt women the apparitions of Holy Mary functioned as a symbol of empowerment of their religious and feminine identity. They found there the support they needed to “break” the dominant rules that defined their gender and to fulfill their new social roles in a constantly transforming socio-political context. The apparitions of Holy Mary in Cairo functioned as a starting point for the creation of an active feminine group, called the “Daughters of Mariam”. This is an organization of unmarried women, who were not nuns but devoted their whole life to the benefit of society by offering their services and support in a variety of sectors: schooling, health care, drug addicts, unmarried mothers, individuals with learning difficulties, disabilities and elderly people.11

This organization became a “home” for young women who started studying, working and showing interest in political and international affairs and therefore wanted to manage their new feminine roles. “By taking the name of Daughters of Maryam they chose to emulate Holy Mary, but especially in certain characteristics... the active nuns select not just her holiness as mother of God, but also her active work for the community... Mary is a symbol that provides both meaning to the work of the active sisters and


11 See, Willy Jansen, “Visions of Mary in the Middle East.....”, Ibid., p. 152.
well as a profound sense of belief and belonging.” In this way, Mary was not only a symbol to express religious identity for Copts and national identity for Egyptians but also a feminine identity for women.

Case Two: Organizing the Social Welfare; “Work for Egypt Society”

Social welfare activities have been acknowledged in works about Middle Eastern women’s rights movements as well as gender and nationalism, due to the fact that feminists often had strong social agendas and female nationalists nearly always coupled their work for the nation with social reform. The involvement of women in voluntary organizations in Egypt, in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, was a way to participate in the national political scene, to fight against British occupation and to struggle for women’s rights. These social welfare organizations of Christian and Muslim women were often organized along with religious and communal lines, although their lay leadership often challenged traditional religious leaders.

Such a case is the organization “Work for Egypt Society” organized by Esther Fahmi Wisa. Coming from a notable Coptic family she got involved in a constellation of philanthropic organizations (New Women Society, Young Women’s Christian Associations (YWCA), Women’s Committee of the Egyptian Red Crescent, Coptic Ladies’ Society), dedicated the bulk of her energy to the Work for Egypt Society and was actually the driving force behind the founding of the organization in 1924. The Society established a formal structure, published by-laws and established multiple

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12 Ibid., p. 151.
13 See also, Efi Kaner, Gendered social assertions in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey. The world of a Greek Christian female teacher, Papazisis Publ., Athens 2012 (in Greek).
14 This case is based on Beth Baron, “Women’s voluntary social welfare organizations in Egypt”, in Inger Mari Okkenhaug & Ingvild Flaskerud (eds), Gender, Religion and Change in the Middle East. Two Hundred Years of History, Berg, New York 2005, pp. 85-102.
branches, promoting the ideal that privileged members of society should give financial and moral support to poor families. In Alexandria, the branch built and maintained an outpatient clinic where patients were treated free of charge and provided with medicines. The society also had an educational branch, which gave mothers lessons in hygiene and provided childcare for working mothers.\footnote{Ibid., p. 96.}

Such organizations came to cover the gap of official policies and functioned as forerunners of the social policy of the new Egyptian state (after the 60's). While these women activists did not seem to have much impact on the social policies of the state, they did influence social welfare practices and their work encouraged women to enter the profession of social work.\footnote{Ibid., p. 100.}

Case Three: A voice from the Palestinian Land

As both the autobiographical and narrative style remain valuable and legitimate in modern scholarship,\footnote{I. Fawaz, “Swimming against the Tide: Personal Passions and Academic Fashions“, \textit{Middle East Studies Bulletin} 32/1 (1998) 2-10.} the third case refers to a personal story: Maria Khoury, a Greek Orthodox, born a Greek, American citizen, married to a Palestinian, “adopted” Palestine as her mother land.\footnote{This case is based on personal witnesses of Maria Khoury, “Journey to the promised land”, in Eleni Kasselouri-Hatzivassiliadi, Fulata Mbono-Moyo, Aikaterin Pekridou (eds.), \textit{Many Women Were Also There... The Participation of Orthodox Women in the Ecumenical Movement}, Indiktos Publ., Athens 2010, pp. 223-230. See also, the same, “Spirituality, justice and occupation”, unpublished paper in the Conference, \textit{Healing the Wounds... Orthodox Women Facing the Challenges and Ambivalences of the Post-modern Societies}, organized by WCC, Saint Vlash, Albania 8-12 July 2010.} She left her well-organized life in Boston to follow her husband in his Palestinian village, Taybeh, as he wanted to contribute to the reconstruction of his country after the historical Oslo Agreement, in the early 1990’s.
This decision, nevertheless, proved very painful, due to the new Intifada of 2000, which according to her narration, turned upside down the promising life of her family and Maria herself.

“I found myself, a Greek-American mother, unable to take my three children to school because of the hundreds of military checkpoints set up all around us to protect the illegal Israeli settlers who have been living on confiscated Taybeh land since the invasion of the West Bank in 1967. I found myself driving on roads created for Jews in order to bypass the Arab villages, where at night Palestinians would kill settlers and in the daytime settlers would shoot Palestinians. I could be a target for either, since I was neither Palestinian nor Israeli. I spent several months of physical shaking, like a drug addict, as I drove to school and back again. For several years I would leave my home at 6:45 a.m. never knowing if I would return in the afternoon. There is no other way to feel when people all around you kill each other daily and you could simply die by being in the wrong place at the wrong time”\(^\text{19}\).

Caught in the middle of a situation full of blood, violence and death, Maria and her family did not give in to the “darkness” and insecurity and did not go back to Boston, as they could have done and as many Palestinians actually did. On the contrary, Maria decided to stay there, in the village of Taybeh and in an atmosphere of pain, suffering and fear, having lost her job as a teacher, she started searching for the meaning of life and the track of divine plan for her, trying to reaffirm her religious identity and appropriate the tragedy of the Palestinian people, and looking for alternatives for survival.

Expressing her own anguish for keeping the Palestinian land a Christian land, she works as a volunteer in the parish of St George, where they carry out a project that helps young couples to buy their own houses so as to settle in the area, in the village of Taybeh. This project is financed by many organizations but Maria herself travels the world and presents it through her participation

\(^{19}\) See, Maria Khoury, “Journey to the promised land”, \textit{ibid.}, p. 225.
in many international and ecumenical fora; they are actually very proud, as they have already provided houses for 12 families.

Getting involved in this project, this young woman took over multiple roles that relate to: the orthodox faith, the local community, the Palestinian nation. She functions as a dynamic factor related to the struggle of Palestinian people for survival and freedom in their own land. The fact that Maria is a woman never deterred her from becoming all the more active in a very traditional society and male-dominated world that left little room for female interventions; but her persistence and dedication to her goal were the basis of her success even in the most adverse conditions.

In conclusion, the issue of Christian women in the Middle Eastern societies is a field open to scientific research. The above mentioned cases show that in these traditional but constantly changing societies, women negotiate new roles in the religious, communal but mainly in the social field. Despite the fact that the challenges come from the “outside”, i.e. the pressure of social milieu, and not from the “inside”, i.e. the religious communities, Christian women seek to reinforce their religious identity and affirm their new social roles. At the dawn of the second millennium women seem to be ready to play an active, creative role within their own communities as well as the broader society they live in.