

Shared religion but still a marginalised Other: Middle Eastern Christians encounters with political secularism in the UK

But I think one of the biggest shocks for many Copts coming from Egypt who are not familiar with the West, is that when they come to the West they think that they are immigrating to a Christian land. And it is a cultural shock for them to discover that it is nothing like that.

(Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

Introduction

Middle Eastern Christians have historically identified with a secular approach to politics as a means of promoting values such as freedom, equality and tolerance which would allow them to be fully accepted by Muslim majority societies and able to participate in all aspects of political and societal life.¹ In part, this attachment to parties and regimes espousing a secular narrative has been a reaction against the apparent alternative of Islamists wishing to increase the public role of Islam which would appear to restrict the rights of non-Muslims.² The use of the term minority is contested when referring to Middle Eastern Christians in the region. Although it is applicable in a numerical sense due to their religious difference from the Muslim majority Other, the term often has connotations of a group which has originated from elsewhere whereas the different communities are indigenous to the region.³ However, as a consequence of migration to the West starting since the mid-nineteenth century but

¹See Mariz Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads: The Challenges of Building Inclusive Democracy in Egypt* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2013); Ceren Belge and Ekrem Karakoc, (2015) "Minorities in the Middle East: Ethnicity, Religion and Support for Authoritarianism," *Political Research Quarterly* 68(2) (2015): 280-292 and Mark Farha and Salma Mousa, "Secular Autocracy vs Sectarian Democracy? Weighing Reasons for Christian Support for Regime Transition in Syria and Egypt," *Mediterranean Politics* 20(2) (2015): 178-197.

² See Rachel Scott, *The Challenge of Political Islam: Non-Muslims and the Egyptian State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010) and Fiona McCallum "Christian Political Participation in the Arab World," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 23(1) (2012): 3-18.

³ Lise Paulsen Galal "Coptic Christian Practices: Formations of Sameness and Difference," *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 23(1) (2012): 45-58.

primarily since the mid-twentieth century, the communities have found themselves in a minority context due to their Middle Eastern roots. Lise Paulsen Galal et al have explored how Middle Eastern Christians in Europe ethnically and nationally belong to immigrant groups and can be seen as a “minority within the minority”.⁴ While concerns regarding misrecognition as other minority groups most notably Muslims, are certainly important to Middle Eastern Christian migrants, this paper focuses upon the communal reaction to political secularism experienced in the UK.⁵ Claire Mitchell’s concept of religion as a boundary marker between an in-group and out-groups is helpful in explaining why a group may adapt different strategies depending upon the context.⁶ For Middle Eastern Christians, there was a perception that the Christian heritage of Western countries would lead to them becoming part of the majority due to shared religious identity. However, in this context, the discourse of equality and tolerance is seen as resulting in a secularism that disallows preferential treatment based upon religious identity and presents challenges to practising Christianity. Thus, political secularism as a strategy to protect the rights of the community does not seem as productive in the diaspora context as it is in the Middle East. The disillusionment on perceiving that they have retained their status as a marginalised Other if framed in different terms will be explored using the case study of the UK where there are around 30-40,000 Middle Eastern Christian communities. The paper is based on research

⁴Lise Paulsen Galal, Alistair Hunter, Fiona McCallum, Sara Lei Sparre and Marta Wozniak-Bobinska “Middle Eastern Christian Spaces in Europe: Multi-Sited and Super-diverse,” *Journal of Religion in Europe* 9(1) (2016): 1-25. In their study, Galal et al argued that in contrast to other cases, in Sweden, the Assyrian community are recognised separately by the majority community independently of the wider immigrant minority group.

⁵ This study is part of a large comparative project on Middle Eastern Christians in Europe which explored internal dynamics, interactions with wider society in the country of residence and transnational relations. The important theme of misrecognition is explored in other papers published as part of this project. For further details, see <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/>

⁶ Claire Mitchell, *Religion, Identity and Politics in Northern Ireland* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005): 59-68.

conducted with Coptic, Iraqi and Assyrian communities in London and Scotland.⁷ The study locates the Middle Eastern Christian case study in a discussion on political secularism, church-state relations and migration. The narratives of Middle Eastern Christians' encounters with political secularism are explored in three parts. The first discusses perspectives on the notion of Britain as a Christian country; the second examines the impact on societal and political interactions of subsequent disillusionment with the place of religion in general and Christianity in particular in modern British society; and the third assesses the implications of these experiences for the involvement of younger generations in British society.

Secularism, Church-State Relations and Migration

When discussing narratives of secularism, it immediately becomes apparent that there is a lack of consensus not only in the academic literature but also political and societal use of what the term actually means. This became clear when conducting interviews for this research as interviewees often questioned what was meant by "your views on secularism" with some asking if this referred to atheism. Daniel Philpott defines nine different interpretations of the term "secular" including anything outside of the monastic sphere, the transfer of what used to be religious and concept or language that does not mention religion.⁸ Thus, secularism in its most basic understanding can be understood as a "doctrine of separation".⁹ As Elizabeth Shakman Hurd writes, "Secularism identifies something called 'religion' and separate it from the 'secular' domains of the state, the economy and science.

⁷ While homogeneity of the different Christian communities should not be overplayed, the data on this particular topic would indicate convergence regarding the key themes.

⁸ Daniel Philpott, "Has the Study of Global Politics found Religion?," *The Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 185.

⁹ Tariq Modood, "Moderate Secularism, Religion as Identity and Respect for Religion," *The Political Quarterly* 81(1) (2010): 4.

The 'secular', then, is associated with the worldly or temporal".¹⁰ There are different views as to the aims of the secular project. One proposes that the objective is solely to achieve separation and that it is not inherently hostile but seeks to accommodate religion. As Scott W. Hibbard argues, seen in this frame, "secularism as a political project was intended to be non-discriminatory in matters of belief; it simply entailed the separation of religious authority from political authority".¹¹ In contrast, secularism can also be seen as an ideological challenge which competes with religion as a belief system and seeks its marginalisation. According to Hurd, "In normative terms, secularism is characterized by its universalist pretensions and its claim of superiority over non-secular alternatives".¹² Therefore Hibbard summarises that there are "two competing impulses within the concept: one seeks to eliminate religion from the public sphere, while the other seeks to accommodate a diversity of perspectives on matters of fundamental belief".¹³ It will be seen that it is the version that seeks to eliminate rather than accommodate which is reflected in the narratives presented later in this paper.

While there may not be consensus on how to define secularism, there seems to be agreement that it can take on different forms in the shape of church-state relations. While these often reflect the historical experience and heritage of specific countries e.g. presence of established churches such as UK and Nordic countries, laicism in France and mutual exclusion in the United States, there are characteristics which are shared by all of these

¹⁰ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 10(2) (2004): 235.

¹¹ Scott W Hibbard, *Religious Politics and Secular States: Egypt, India and the United States* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2010): 37.

¹² Hurd, "The Political Authority of Secularism," 236.

¹³ Hibbard, *Religious Politics and Secular States*, 37.

models.¹⁴ In his work on religion and democracy, Alfred Stepan described these as “the twin tolerations” which are the “minimal boundaries of freedom of action that must be crafted for political institutions vis-à-vis religious authorities, and for religious individuals and groups vis-à-vis political institutions”.¹⁵ Rajeev Bhargava on discussing India explores the concept of “principled distance” which ensures equality for all and works towards harmonious relations between different religions.¹⁶ Similarly, Charles Taylor argues that there should be some aspect of neutrality although this can still allow a symbolic link to a specific confession.¹⁷ Regarding the UK, the case study country for this research, the state can be categorised as having an established church (one each in England and Scotland) and religious actors receiving state support through funding of schools, bishops in the House of Lords and legislation such as hate speech laws. Following on from Stepan’s argument, Steve Bruce claims that historical splits within Christianity in the UK and the emergence of a multinational state have had an impact upon the rights of the established churches. “In England and Scotland, where the established churches remained the largest religious bodies, they retained some priority in state rituals but gradually lost the substance of their privileges”.¹⁸ Thus as Elise Banfi et al indicate, there can be a variety of institutional

¹⁴ For examples of different approaches to church-state relations, see Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013): 33-34 and ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan and Monica Duffy Toft, *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ Alfred Stepan, “Religion, Democracy, and the ‘Twin Tolerations’,” in ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan and Monica Duffy Toft, *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 55.

¹⁶ Rajeev Bhargava, “How should states deal with deep religious diversity,?” in ed. Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred Stepan and Monica Duffy Toft, *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 78-79.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, “The Meaning of Secularism,” *The Hedgehog Review* 12(3) (2010): 23.

¹⁸ Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003): 169.

arrangements but “to some extent all liberal democracies foresee some degree of autonomy of the secular powers from the religious powers”.¹⁹

The increase in global migration has added to the complexities of political secularism where it can be seen as the underlying ideology of the Western secular state. As Bhagrava asks, “Can Western secularism reinvigorate itself and deal with the new reality of the vibrant presence of multiple religions in public life and the accompanying social tensions?”²⁰ In political and public debates, secularism has often been presented as a core value under threat from migration especially from individuals and groups from Muslim-majority countries. This reflects the argument powerfully opined by Samuel P Huntington in his influential work *The Clash of Civilizations* where he presented a key contribution of Western Christianity as its historical separation of church and state which is alien to other religions, thus other “civilizations” lack the cultural capacity to support Western-style democracy.²¹ According to this approach, Hurd states that “Secularism thus helps to constitute the ‘common ground’ upon which Western democratic order comfortably rests”.²² Importantly, this interpretation ignores the fact that political secularism is seen by some adherents regardless of their particular religious identity as being intolerant to all religions including Christianity. Indeed, the theme of anti-Christianity is one which is picked up by respondents in interviews conducted for this study. However, the view that Muslims have a different understanding on the role of religion is seen as a problem because it becomes connected to difficulties in the integration process and leads some to question the compatibility of

¹⁹ Elise Banfi, Matteo Gianni and Marco Giugni, “Religious minorities and secularism: an alternative view of the impact of religion on the political values of Muslims in Europe,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(2) (2016): 292.

²⁰ Bhagrava, “How should states deal with deep religious diversity?,” 73-74.

²¹ Samuel P Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and he remaking of world order* (London: Touchstone, 1998): 70-72, 160-162, 262-265.

²² Hurd, “The Political Authority of Secularism,” 250.

religious beliefs and practices of immigrants and secular values. As Banfi et al state, “Religion – or rather a different view on the role of religion in the social and political life – is seen as the major obstacle to the integration of Muslim immigrants and the main cause of an irreconcilable cleavage between them and the host societies”.²³ This is pertinent because the literature would show that migrants tend to have a higher level of religiosity than native-born citizens often due to the link between religion and identity. This is especially true if their identity is perceived as being under threat combined with assistance provided by religious institutions and communities to new arrivals.²⁴ The assumption of a linear decrease in religiosity with the second generation as the individuals and community becomes more familiar with and established in the new society has been challenged by recent studies of Muslim in Europe, although these would indicate that this is primarily due to the perception of identity being under threat.²⁵ The increased focus on religiosity and communal institutions as a means to contend with feelings of disillusionment and alienation from aspects of culture and society is also relevant to the case study explored in this paper. Thus as will be seen, the following quotation from Corinne Torrekens and Dirk Jacobs on Muslim second generations in Europe is mostly applicable to Middle Eastern Christians. “Children of immigrants can distance themselves from the mainstream culture and society, reaffirming a distinctive religious identity in reaction to social exclusion and experiences of discrimination”.²⁶ The discussion above demonstrates that the presence of migrants can

²³ Banfi, “Religious minorities and secularism,” 293.

²⁴ Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996): 96-125.

²⁵ For example, see Corinne Torrekens and Dirk Jacobs, “Muslims religiosity and views on religion in six Western European Countries: does national context matter?,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42(3) (2016):325-240; Phillip Connor, “Contexts of immigrant receptivity and immigrant religious outcomes: the cases of Muslims in Western European countries,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33(3) (2010): 376-403 and Banfi et al, “Religious minorities and secularism,”: 292-308.

²⁶ Torrekens and Jacobs, “Muslims religiosity and views on religion,” 236.

expose the contradictions in political secularism as to whether it is merely the separation of religious and political authority or seeks to marginalise religion. The paper discusses a case study of a minority group which share a national or ethnic background with an immigrant population considered problematic in terms of accommodating secularism hence are a minority Other but in terms of religious identity could potentially be included within the majority population based upon the Christian heritage of the UK. This duality will be explored when considering the experiences and implications of the narratives presented in the rest of the paper.

Middle Eastern Christians - Context and Methodology

The reactions of Middle Eastern Christians to their encounter with political secularism in the UK is strongly influenced by both their experiences in their “homelands” and their assumptions about society in the country they are migrating to. As indicated above, individuals in this community have often favoured political parties and regimes who self-identify as “secular”. One factor for this support is that the ideologies and rhetoric espoused by groups linked to Arab nationalism tends to offer the possibility of equality and participation as full citizens although these promises have often struggled to be delivered in reality.²⁷ As Farha and Mousa assert regarding Syria, “Syrian Christians accepted the regime-imposed restrictions on their political liberties and exchanged the right to practice their religion for regime loyalty”.²⁸ Another factor is that the presumed alternative to “secular” but predominantly authoritarian regimes is Islamist movements whose primary policies of implementing sharia and Islamization raise concerns for Christians amongst others. The

²⁷ McCallum, “Christian Political Participation,” 3-18.

²⁸ Farha and Moussa, ‘Secular Autocracy vs Sectarian Democracy,’ 183.

situation of the Copts in Egypt after the overthrow of Mubarak in 2011 saw a rise in communal incidents culminating in violence against them after the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated President Morsi was ousted by the military in 2013²⁹. This painful experience was viewed by many Christians in Egypt and the wider region as demonstrating that the secular authoritarian option represented by the military was more likely to provide security which was prioritized over the long-held quest for full citizenship rights. Violence directed against Christians by Islamist militant groups in Syria and Iraq has reinforced this view. Thus, it can be seen that secularism in this context is supported in the negative sense i.e. what it provides protection from. Being the “minority” religious Other in a Muslim majority society, the secular authoritarian states offer some protection in terms of tolerance and security but at the cost of freedom and rights. In contrast, there is a tendency among Middle Eastern Christians to characterise Western societies as ones that promote freedom, tolerance and equality to all. However as will be seen, Middle Eastern Christians also often assume that their shared religious identity will allow them to be part of the majority population, thus no longer being a minority religious Other. Religious identity remains strong amongst Middle Eastern Christian communities both in the homelands and diaspora due to a combination of factors including that religious difference is the main distinguishing feature between groups in the Middle East, the social significance of religion remains strong and society is generally still organised around religion. While freedom to practice religion such as building churches and conversions as well as security issues are no longer a concern, life in the diaspora has led to different challenges relating to practising Christianity, notably due to public debates on and the societal role of religion. Thus, the narratives of Middle Eastern Christians

²⁹ Tadros, *Copts at the Crossroads*, 183-208.

encounters with political secularism in the UK is explored with reference to how their experiences in their homelands have influenced their expectations and subsequent disillusionment.³⁰

The narratives presented are from Coptic Orthodox, Assyrian and Iraqi Christians in the UK who were interviewed as part of a project entitled “Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christians in Europe”.³¹ There are around 20,000 Copts and 8-10,000 Iraqi (including Assyrian) Christians in the UK.³² Migration flows started primarily in the 1950s mainly as skilled labour and students plus in the case of Iraqi Christians, a small number of refugees since the 1980s onwards. This migration is due to multiple reasons – economic hardships, conflict situations, discrimination and in some cases, violence as a consequence of their Christian identity in a Muslim-majority environment (Armbruster 2013; Schmoller 2016).³³ Many members of the communities in the UK are found in the professions especially medical but also engineering, architecture and teaching, as well as private business. The Coptic community can be found throughout the UK but the smaller Iraqi ones are concentrated in and around London, certainly in terms of institutions. All denominations relating to these communities are found in the UK but some are much larger and therefore, more active than others.³⁴ The material presented in this paper comes from fifty semi-

³⁰ This is relevant both to migrants with direct experience of life in the Middle East and their descendants born in the UK who are informed by community members and news reports and feel affected by these events.

³¹ See <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/> for more information.

³² Due to the lack of official statistics for the size of the case study communities, figures given are estimates gathered from community representatives, especially churches.

³³ See Heidi Armbruster, *Keeping the Faith: Syriac Christian diasporas* (Canon Pyon: Sean Kingston, 2013) and Andreas Schmoller, “‘Now my life in Syria is finished’: Case studies on Religious Identity and Sectarianism in Narratives of Syrian Christian Refugees in Austria” *Islam and Christian Muslim Relations* 27(4) (2016): 419-437.

³⁴ The denominations covered in this project are: Coptic Orthodox, Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, Assyrian Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East. For details on the presence of the communities, see Lise Paulsen Galal et al, (2015) *Middle Eastern Christians in Europe: Histories, Cultures and Communities* https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/?page_id=1207

structured interviews with “active” members of the case study communities³⁵ and six focus groups in the fieldsites of London and Scotland conducted in 2014-2015. It should be noted that the denominational churches play a central role in the lives of the migrant communities. Thus, although project participants were predominantly church-going individuals, this was due to civil society actors also being church members rather than only conducting fieldwork within church settings.³⁶ The interviews were fully transcribed and coded using the NVivo software. The interviewees are anonymised and the generation term relates to their migration status with 1st generation referring to those born in the Middle East, 2nd generation those born in the West (usually the UK) and 1.5 generation those born in the Middle East but spent their formative years in the West usually the UK.³⁷ Youth refers to those aged between 18-30. The data used in this study comes from questions relating to views on religiosity in the UK, the term ‘Britishness (or Scottish-ness when relevant), first impressions of the UK and challenges faced by the community. As indicated earlier, concepts such as secularism and religiosity were not always understood. However, early on in the fieldwork stage, then Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech on the occasion of Easter 2014 which received substantial attention in the media. Excerpts from the speech include “I believe we should be more confident about our status as a Christian country” and “Easter is not just a time for Christians across our country to reflect, but a time for our

³⁵ “Active” members were categorised as those who contributed to defining and/or representing their community. These figures included clergy (bishops and priests), deacons, lay representatives, Sunday school teachers, church youth leaders, political activists, and representatives of cultural and charitable associations. While the interviews aimed to have diversity in terms of gender, age and migration generations, many in the above mentioned positions tended to be middle-aged 1st generation males. To compensate for this, some of the focus groups were targeted at groups under-represented in interviews such as youth and women.

³⁶ It should be noted that those highly active in the community are by definition likely to have less spare time to participate in wider society. However, the interview findings were corroborated through focus groups.

³⁷ The findings would suggest that there is little generational difference on this theme even although homeland experiences would appear to be important in shaping perceptions.

whole country to reflect on what Christianity brings to Britain”.³⁸ Referring to this speech and both positive and negative reaction to it proved a useful way to start discussion on this topic.

Britain as a Christian country

The first narrative when exploring Middle Eastern Christians encounters with political secularism in the UK examines their categorisation of the UK as a Christian or secular society. For those who share Cameron’s perspective that the UK is indeed a “Christian country”, the evidence given for this is the relationship between the Head of State and the established church. While these may be seen as symbolic to many British citizens, the institutional connection is deemed important to interviewees because in their view, it shows that one religion is prioritised over others and is fully connected to the state. For example, one answers:

No I believe this is a Christian country purely – I mean on Her Majesty, she’s the Queen, she is the head of the church, she married in St Paul’s or Westminster Abbey, some of her children married in the churches. (Assyrian male, 50s, 1st generation)

Similarly, another interviewee asserts,

the Queen is Head of Church, she is not the head of the secular em, em establishment, it means something again. Em if you deny all this, you’re just being arrogant and blind to be frank with you. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

Moving beyond the institution of the monarchy, another focus is to emphasise the heritage that Christianity has provided through the legal system and societal values which are accepted in the country today. As the following quotes indicate, there is an understanding

³⁸ *The Guardian*, ‘David Cameron: I am evangelical about Christian faith,’ Published 17th April 2014 Accessed 16th September 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/apr/16/david-cameron-evangelical-about-christian-faith> and *Gov.uk*, ‘Easter 2014: David Cameron’s message,’ Published 16th April 2014 Accessed 16th September 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/easter-2014-david-camerons-message>

that people might not actively be religious or openly acknowledge that these values come from Christianity but because of the influence that it has through the values of the country, the interviewees argue, the UK should still be classified a Christian country. According to one interviewee,

People in the UK they might think they are atheist and they are very proud of it some of them [...].I think what makes a person culturally it stems from years and years family inherited em, and the way an English person behaves is definitely something that comes from a Christian, Christian beliefs in a way. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

Further, another respondent explained,

Whether we like it or not, the Western world historically came from the Christian culture. A lot of our legal culture came from that and the authority of the church in previous days. (Iraqi Christian male, 60s, 1st generation)

Other respondents also shared the theme highlighted in Cameron's speech that while a country can identify with one religion – in this case Christianity, all religions and views can still be respected. As one states,

I prefer that the country, the UK, to be a Christian country by word and by action. And er, this doesn't mean that er, it should persecute or put aside any, any other religion or any other people. (Cleric)

For some, this emphasis on tolerance is contrasted with the experiences of Middle Eastern Christians in their homelands and an understanding of the treatment of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries.

Britain is a Christian country, well that's a fact. [...] but we respect all other religions and they have the freedom to practice their religion the way they like, that's the difference between Britain as a modern country and some other countries they have no human rights. And for us as Assyrians, we, we, we experienced that back in Iraq. (Assyrian male, 50s, 1st generation)

Thus, for some interviewees, there is a belief that due to its institutions, heritage and values, the UK can be categorised as a Christian country and in this sense, does indeed resemble the type of society they were envisaging when they migrated from the Middle East.

However, there is another narrative which presents a different picture of the UK and focuses on the decline of Christianity in the UK. The first indication of this is the poor attendance of churches in contrast to those belonging to the case study communities. For example, discussing UK mainstream churches, one interviewee mentions,

If you go back 50 years, churches were full. Now it's not as much, it's not as fashionable as it used to be. (Iraqi Christian male, 60s, 1st generation)

Similarly, another added,

Because I see churches empty. Until today there are hundreds of people here. And the church is very close. They go to coffee shop but they don't go to attend the mass. (Iraqi Christian male, 70s, 1st generation)

The decline in attendance has a natural result in church buildings being sold for other purposes which is perceived by interviewees as a second indication of this decline. The consequences are observed by this respondent,

The more they stay away from churches, the more they don't bring their children and daughters and sons and -- to churches, the Christianity is vanishing. That's why sadly you can see most of the churches here have been turned to flats. (Assyrian male, 50s, 1st generation)

This process is similarly described by another,

And there is at least three churches in the last four or five years [in local town] that have unfortunately ceased to exist as churches – they have been sold off. One of them became a restaurant, one became a gym, I think, and one became a bar. [...] most of these churches that still exist, exist purely because of the older generations, you know, the older people in the church. And once these people unfortunately pass

on, pass away, the churches don't have enough youth, to sort of sustain that church.
(Coptic Orthodox male, 30s, 1.5 generation)

However, beneficiaries of the increasing supply of church buildings are the Middle Eastern Christian communities (and indeed other migrant churches) who usually share worship space in other churches when they are initially established and then if funds allow, seek to purchase their own building. Few if any Middle Eastern Christian communities in the UK have purpose-built churches but instead buy disused premises from the traditional churches and renovate according to their own traditional designs. In this way, it can be argued that these new migrant communities contribute to maintaining or indeed reviving the public visibility of Christianity in the UK.

A third indication of the decline of Christianity is the idea that while a country may be perceived as linked to a religion due to its heritage and institutions, it should only be categorised as this if the religious traditions are practised in society on a regular basis. This reflects an understanding of the impact of secularism on British society which tends to be an unwelcome surprise to Middle Eastern Christian migrants on arrival to the UK as this quote illustrates.

Because I thought England is a Christian country and they should have a little bit of reflection of that faith in their life, but most of the majority don't. (Coptic Orthodox male, 50s, 1st generation)

Similarly, the disconnect between being Christian in name and practice is highlighted here.

'Because Christian belief that in their heart and in their mind it is a Christian country. It is not, it is by name a Christian country because they don't practice it, they don't practice Christianity.' (Iraqi Christian male, 60s, 1st generation)

Thus, it is clear that for some interviewees, the decline in the traditional churches challenges the notion that Britain can still be termed a Christian country. While there is a

debate within the communities regarding this issue, it is clear that their experience of secular society is different from the one that was imagined in the Middle East where secularism was presumed to be a model that allowed religious plurality, tolerance and equality. Instead, as will now be explored, encounters with secularism at the societal and political level have led to negative views on political secularism due to preconceived ideas about its relationship with Christianity and that shared religious identity would lead to commonalities with the host society rather than retaining a minority Other status.

Impact on Societal and Political Interactions

Encounters with political secularism have an impact on interactions with the host society at both the societal and political level. Regarding everyday interactions, examples were given of misunderstandings often over traditions and symbols relating to Christianity and the ways that they either have different or no meaning in a modern British secular society. Two examples are given below. The first relates to the fact that in 2014, the date of the London Marathon coincided with Palm Sunday which was being celebrated on the same day in the Western and Orthodox churches that year. The public transport and traffic restrictions put in place meant that difficulties in attending services was a topic of conversation for many worshippers. This incredulity is summed up by one interviewee,

I think they're a bit aghast at the fact that people are less religious than they are. Like yesterday when we were driving to church because there was no Overground yesterday. You know if this was any other country, they would not have held the marathon on Palm Sunday. There's a total lack of respect for religion in this country – that's the way they view things, definitely. (Convert to case study Iraqi Christian denomination)

The second example involves the wearing of a cross. One respondent recounts,

I regularly wear crosses and uh I once complimented a colleague on the beauty of the cross that she was wearing and she said to me - her immediate response was 'it's a great fashion accessory isn't it' - I just thought, I've completely missed the purpose there - I won't do that again. (Coptic Orthodox female, 40s, 1.5 generation)

The categorisation of the cross illustrates this apparent binary where a secularised majority sees a Christian symbol as a fashion item whereas a minority group self-identifying through religious belief and practice see only the religious aspect. This different perspective then leads to some in the case study communities deciding that they wish to limit their associations with those who do not have like-minded views. This obviously has potential repercussions on interactions and integration in the long-term and is a concern which is often raised towards migrants from other faith backgrounds. One interviewee explains why her friends are predominantly from her community church.

So I feel the reason that my close friends are -- the majority of them are from church is because, because I just feel people here are not open so I really can't really have a normal conversation [...] like people are just not all-rounded like especially here I feel like people are just you know thinking about their weekend or going out like drinking or whatever. (Coptic Orthodox female, youth, 1.5 generation)

The view that the UK is a hostile environment for people who openly identify as Christian is one that seems shared by Middle Eastern Christians when discussing their narratives of political secularism at the political level. Steven Kettell has examined what he terms a growing anti-secular discourse in the UK which talks about a “militant, aggressive and intolerant form of secularism” which aims “to create the impression of a competing hierarchy of rights, in which those of Christians are said to have become subordinate to those of other social groups, such as ethnic minorities and homosexuals, who are thought to have utilised campaigns rooted in identity politics to advance their own sectional

interests".³⁹ Sarah Carol also argues that religious groups may support members of other faiths in an attempt to strengthen the overall position of religion in society.⁴⁰ While Middle Eastern Christians certainly share narratives about the hostility of political secularism, they are rarely whether as individuals or a group actively part of campaigns articulating concerns raised by lobby groups such as Christian Institute, Christian Concern, Christian Voice.⁴¹ One exception was the Nadia Eweida case when a Coptic Christian female employee challenged British Airways when they changed their uniform policy on jewellery in 2006 and refused to allow her to continue to wear a discreet cross. After numerous legal challenges, she won a final judgement from the European Court of Human Rights in 2013 that she has a right to display religious belief in a way that maintains corporate image.⁴² Commenting on this case, an interviewee states,

it's a hostile environment for, not just people of faith -- people who believe in God -- but, specifically for Christians. [...] Nadia Eweida I think was working on a check in desk surround by Sikhs and women wearing the hijab and I think that the first instance judge when, when speaking about Nadia Eweida's particular situation said the wearing of a cross is not fundamental to her faith. (Coptic Orthodox female, 40s, 1.5 generation)

Linked to expressing your faith, is the concept of political correctness which is also often criticised by members of faith communities in the UK. The narratives encountered in the interviews indicate disappointment that the religious majority are not (in their eyes)

³⁹ Steven Kettell, "The Militant Strain: An Analysis of Anti-secular Discourse in Britain," *Political Studies* 63 (2015): 513, 518.

⁴⁰ Sarah Carol, "A Struggle over Religious Rights? How Muslim Immigrants and Christian Natives view the Accommodation of Religion in Six European Countries" *Social Forces* 94(2) (2015): 648-651.

⁴¹ This would appear to be due to the lack of interest on both sides. Middle Eastern Christians tend not to be politically organised and focus primarily on family, church and work life. Simultaneously, Christian organisations in the UK tend to have limited knowledge and awareness of Middle Eastern Christians in the UK. While there is a possibility that interaction could increase if the second generations become more dominant in the communities, this approach does not seem to be central to discussions at present.

⁴² *BBC News*, 'British Airways Christian employee Nadia Eweida wins case,' Published 15th January 2013 Accessed 16th September 2016 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21025332>

accorded privileges due to their position. Instead, they suggest that political secularism appears to protect other groups but not Christians. This leads to resentment and frustration with this environment. The idea of being ridiculed is a strong theme. One interviewee asks,

Don't you realise that Christianity is ridiculed in this country? [...] But when Denmark a few years ago made a caricature about Muhammad, okay, the Muslims threatened to put bombs and kill and stuff like this. I'm not saying that Christians would ever do something like that, but at least there would have to be like a red line that shouldn't be crossed. (Coptic Orthodox female, 40s, 1st generation)

Another also compares the situation between making apparent insults about different religions.

England for me is not a secular society: Switzerland is a secular society. Britain is an anti-Christian culture. It's a -- you cannot make a joke about Islam, at all. It's dangerous, you can lose your life for that. But you can make any joke you like about Christianity. You cannot make a joke about a Sikh, or the Sikh religion, or Buddhism -- you can't -- or about Jews. But you can very easily make a joke about a Christian figure, or about their religion. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

This frustration at what is seen as double standards again relates back to the understanding of the objectives of political secularism – to provide freedom, equality and tolerance. In the Middle East, secularism is championed by these communities as a way to safeguard themselves as a religious minority due to the pluralism it offers. However, in the UK context where they expect to find themselves as part of the religious majority and benefiting from the privileges this entails, they are disillusioned on discovering that religious majority status appears to come with minimum protections at the everyday level regardless of the institutional status and heritage of Christianity in the UK.

Implications of Responses to Political Secularism on involvement of youth in British society

Middle Eastern Christian communities in the UK are struggling with the dilemmas faced by all migrant communities: how to retain the identity and culture of the group while ensuring that the younger generation are successful in the new society. Similar to studies on second generation Muslims in Europe, recent research shows that Middle Eastern Christian youth generally affiliate with their religious identity first before ethnic/national identity.⁴³ They are also often active in religious and social events organised by the community which due to school/university/work and family commitments, can limit the amount of time available to engage with wider society. It is clear that the first generation feel that while their personal experiences as Christian youth growing up in a Muslim majority society was certainly difficult due to the pressures of being the religious Other, the challenges of growing up in the UK which they characterise as a secular society are different but just as difficult and require the same answers – focusing life around church and family. It is evident that there is awareness among the community of the challenges faced by the second generation youth. This is noted by the youth themselves as one explains,

I think we do live in an increasingly secular society which certainly makes it more challenging for em, people particularly of second generation who happen to practice their faith. I think it requires greater courage. (Iraqi Christian male, youth, 2nd generation)

Similarly, another discusses the difficulties in navigating the two impulses, again giving the impression of a binary division.

Things that may be branded under secular society such as drinking or clubbing or other things, Copts obviously, well we're [second generation] from this country so we're influenced by that. So there's always, well you have the clergy saying no, this is wrong, but obviously you are teenagers, you're going to go out and club and drink,

⁴³ See <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/> for further information and research papers. In the case of the Assyrian community, religious and ethnic identity are seen as intertwined by community members.

so em it is a difficulty to still be part of society but not let go of your Christian identity. (Coptic Orthodox female, youth, 2nd generation)

This apparent dilemma is clearly felt by parents especially regarding schooling. On this issue, it is remarked that in the Middle East, the dispute was over what religion was correct, not questioning religion itself. However, the education system is one area where the impact of political secularism is clearly felt as for many, there is a view that the system not only challenges religion but is hostile to it.⁴⁴ For example,

I think the kids here, when they are educated here in the education system, they start to think of how they are taught. For example, if it doesn't agree with my mind, I don't accept it. If there is no reasoning behind it, it is not true. And this is affecting the children of a lot, and I think the Coptic Church loses lot of children through that door. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation).

Another interviewee adds,

To convince them that what they were taught in schools is not Biblical and is not right, based on what God says - it is not easy. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

The difficulties for the migrant generation to grasp how religion is understood and taught in the education system is highlighted by this youth respondent when discussing his school days.

Like I had to do compulsory RE [Religious Education] in my high school but when you say to people who have come sort of like from a deeply built religious society then they come here, so my mum was like ok, well what are you reading, what are you studying in the bible? And I was like well we're not. (Iraqi Christian male, youth, 1.5 generation)

While a few see wider ties with Christian associations such as Christian student societies at university or Catholic organisations in the case of the Middle Eastern Catholic communities

⁴⁴ Unlike the state sector in Scotland, there is not a national curriculum for religious education in England and Wales and instead, local authorities determine the content of this subject.

as being a bulwark against the threats posed by secular society, the main communal response has been to see the denominational church as providing an alternative space. According to one interviewee, the church plays an educational role filling the gap in religious knowledge which is not provided in the school education system.

For me this [Sunday School] is the most important role because the first ten, twenty years of your life, these define your character for the rest of your life. [...]. the main role of the church is actually education of the kids. (Coptic Orthodox male, 40s, 1st generation)

However, the social function is also significant as demonstrated by another respondent,

the church is, is, is involved from the social aspect as well. So they'll be together in Sunday school, they'll be together on trips and so on. (Coptic Orthodox female, 40s, 1.5 generation)

One cleric clearly indicates the logic behind the numerous activities organised for the youth.

The church can offer them many variety of activities: it will be a good replacement of any activities, [...] I'm not saying to cut the relationship with the society but I am saying it can protect them from any bad influence from outside. (Cleric)

Thus, it is clear that the communities have taken an internal focus on strengthening the community by meeting the needs of their youth through communal primarily church auspices, thus aiming to not only maintain their traditions and practices but also counteract any contradictory ideas and values associated with the British secular society whether discovered through the education system, politics or everyday society. By incorporating the youth into these communal structures, the possibility of interaction with others would appear to be limited, even those who may share similar concerns at the impact of political secularism on UK society.

Conclusion

The above discussion demonstrates that Middle Eastern Christians migrating to the UK generally held the expectation that the move would change their status from being a religious minority Other living in a country reflecting the values of another religion to becoming part of the religious majority due to shared faith. While political secularism was valued in the Middle East as a way to secure rights, equality and freedom although often at the cost of supporting authoritarian regimes, the UK experience has been more mixed with the view that while institutions and the heritage may indicate a connection between church and state, the reality is that religious values are not protected to the extent that they envisaged. There is also a sense that minority rights are safeguarded in a way that was not possible in the Middle East but the rights of the majority religion are not upheld. Thus, the community finds their Christian values still place them outside of the majority in society. Their migrant background including its religiosity means through religious difference as well as other factors, they remain a minority Other. The subsequent disillusionment while not necessarily adversely affecting their general experience in the UK has certainly affected approaches to interactions with wider society. While the respondents would present themselves as open, integrated and not separate from British society, often suggesting subtly that this is in contrast to other migrant and religious communities, this self-assessment is based on communicating with others at school, university, in the workplace or with neighbours. Few report having close friends or participating in social activities outside of their community and this is partly due to the limited time available after family, work and church/community activities. Thus, it would seem in a society whose values are perceived as threatening to the future of the community, the focus is on ensuring the survival of their own identity through communal activities rather than interacting with wider society to achieve this aim. In conclusion, the “homeland” experiences of Middle Eastern Christians

would appear to strongly influence their views on political secularism in the UK and consequently affect their responses to political secularism and interaction with wider British society.