

IVOC | Instituut voor Oosters Christendom

IECS | Institute of Eastern Christian Studies

Redefining Syriac Christianity in a Globalized 21st Century

January 31st and February 1st, 2019
Radboud University Nijmegen



Radboud University



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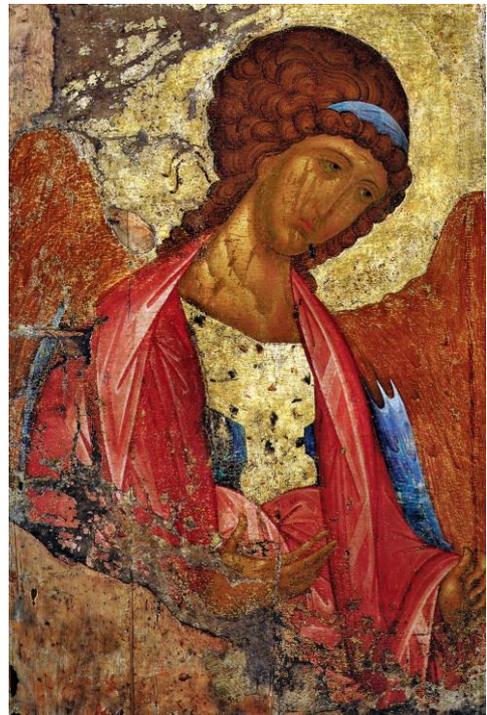
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About IVOC

The Institute of Eastern Christian Studies (IVOC) was founded in 1991 as an independent interdisciplinary research institute in order to continue the work of the Institute of Byzantine and Ecumenical Studies in the Netherlands. This institute had been led by the Congregation of the Fathers Assumptionists for forty years. The Institute of Eastern Christian Studies is unique in Dutch-speaking countries. It is closely linked to the Radboud University of Nijmegen.

The Institute of Eastern Christian Studies' focus is on the scholarly study of the historic and contemporary role of Orthodox Christianity in the Middle East, North and Northeast Africa, and Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe (including the Russian Federation), as well as in the countries where Orthodox Christians found new homes after migration, especially in Western Europe.

The Institute's staff participate in the programs of university students and Ph.D. candidates, carries out research, organizes conferences and public lectures, collects printed and digital resources for our library, publishes the peer-reviewed scholarly *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* (and *Eastern Christian Studies* supplement series) and Research Reports on current issues, and advises governmental and other organizations. The Institute of Eastern Christian Studies is a non-profit foundation.



This workshop is part of a larger research project of the Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, '**Rewriting Global Orthodoxy: Oriental Christianity in Europe between 1970 and 2020**'. The project focusses on the Oriental Orthodox Christians (Armenians, Copts, Syriacs/ Arameans, Ethiopians and Eritreans) from the Middle East and Africa, which in the last fifty years have settled in Europe, fleeing war-related violence and societal pressures. One of the prominent aspects of religious practice of these transnational Oriental communities is their strong emphasis on the writing and publishing of texts. These include traditional religious texts (from liturgy to history), re-translated and re-contextualized texts, and completely new texts. From simple leaflets and books to sophisticated internet productions where text is persuasively embedded in sound and image, these textual practices aim to transmit the religious heritage to a new generation in an increasingly globalized context.

Scholarship has largely ignored these texts, being too popular or too modern for scholars of the written religious traditions and too textual for social scientists working on these transnational communities, even though they make up a crucial source for the study of these communities' European integration, especially as to the hybrid character of many of these traditions, among Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Christianities, and among European and global Christianity.

The project takes these textual practices as its main source to understand how these Oriental Christians inscribe themselves in European societies and so contribute not only to the transformation of their own transnational churches but also to that of Orthodoxy worldwide. It hypothesizes that diachronic and synchronic comparison among Oriental and Eastern Orthodox churches will show that this rewriting includes the actualization of their religious heritage vis-à-vis ethnic and national self-definitions, vis-à-vis European society, and vis-à-vis other churches, particularly Orthodox ones.

Programme

Thursday, January 31st, Erasmus building, room 02.12

09:30-10:00 Registration & welcome

First session

10:00-10:10 Opening: Anna Hager and Heleen Murre-van den Berg

10:10-10:50 Anna Hager (Radboud University / IVOC, the Netherlands): 'The Emergence of Syriac Maya Christianity in Guatemala'

10:50-11:10 Break

Second session

11:10-11:50 Lise Paulsen Galal (Roskilde University, Denmark): 'Navigating Faith and Ethnicity. The Syriac Orthodox in Denmark'

11:50-12:30 Tala Jarjour (King's College London, United Kingdom): 'Diasporic Life and Religiosity for 21st Century Syriac Communities'

12:30-13:30 Lunch break

Third session

- 13:30-14:10 Aho Shemunkasho (Salzburg University / Syriac Theology programme, Austria): ‘Aligning Syriac Religious Education and Theological Training to Western Concepts: Examples from Nordrhein Westfalen in Germany and Salzburg in Austria’
- 14:10-14:50 Naures Atto (Cambridge University, United Kingdom): ‘Challenges for the Syriac Orthodox Church: Encounters with Secularism’
- 14:50-15:00 Break

Fourth session

- 15:00-16:00 Keynote 1: Maria Hämmerli (University of Fribourg, Switzerland): ‘Orthodoxy in a Global Context’
- 16:00-17:00 Keynote 2: Mor Polycarpus Augin Aydin, Syriac Archbishop of the Netherlands: ‘The Dispersion of the Syriac Orthodox throughout the World: Challenges and Opportunities’
- 17:15 Conclusion & drinks
- 19:00 Dinner

Friday, February 1st, Erasmus building, room 15.39

Fifth session (closed to public)

- 10:00-10:40 Heleen Murre-van den Berg (Radboud University / IVOC, the Netherlands): 'Rewriting Global Orthodoxy: The Syriac Orthodox Church in the Netherlands'
- 10:40-12:10 Roundtable & concluding notes
- 12:10 Lunch

Abstracts

The Emergence of Syriac Maya Christianity in Guatemala

Anna Hager, Radboud University Nijmegen / Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, the Netherlands

The establishment of a Syriac Orthodox archdiocese in Guatemala and Central America in 2013 raises the question of Syriac Christianity in a context that is linguistically, historically, and ethnically radically different from the Middle East and Western diasporas. These “Guatemalan Syriac Orthodox” are predominantly Maya and former Roman Catholics issued from mostly poor and rural areas, displaying Pentecostal-type practices. Using both philological and ethnographical methods, this presentation is concerned with the gradual emergence of a “Syriac Maya” Church, that is, the understanding and adaptation of Syriac theology in connection with its translation into visual elements and practices in Guatemala. This phenomenon of “glocalization,” however, is approached in a decisively multi-dimensional way that highlights the role played by individuals (bishops, priests, active members) and the linguistic and material carriers of Syriac theology in shaping this Syriac Orthodox archdiocese in Central America.

Navigating Faith and Ethnicity. The Syriac Orthodox in Denmark

Lise Paulsen Galal, Roskilde University, Denmark

In Denmark, Syriac Orthodox Christianity does not have a strong position neither compared to other Aramean communities such as Chaldean and Eastern Assyrian Churches, nor compared to its strong position in Sweden. Only having one established congregation in

Denmark, many Syriac Orthodox Christians will visit other churches or create links to the church in Sweden. In this paper, I will discuss how the development of ecumenical relations and individualism is strengthened by the particular Danish context. I will explore how the Syriac Orthodox Christians, who in Denmark mainly have an Iraqi background, navigate between different communities, where not only faith but also ethnic background influence the choices of church and hence theology. The research is based on findings from ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2014 as part of a larger interdisciplinary project comparing migrant experiences of Middle Eastern Christian communities in the UK, Denmark and Sweden.

Aligning Syriac Religious Education and Theological Training to Western Concepts: Examples from Nordrhein Westfalen in Germany and Salzburg in Austria

Aho Shemunkasho, Salzburg University / Syriac Theology programme, Austria

Syriac Theology is in the process of being enculturated into the European context. This is the case on various levels. This paper refers to the aspect of religious education and theological training regarding the practice in Germany and Austria. Syriac Orthodox religious education was introduced in public state schools in Nordrhein Westfalen, Germany in 2000. Consequently, a new curriculum and syllabus had to be created according to local state regulations. In this way, Syriac Orthodox religious education did not remain under church authority alone, but was also subject to the authority of the state. This led to an alignment and adjustment in content, as well as in methodology and didactics. In 2015 the study programme Master of Arts in Syriac Theology started at the University of Salzburg, Austria. Also here classical theological teaching, traditionally linked to the

monastic oriental education system, had to be adjusted and structured according to the Bologna process of European higher education. A few examples from both systems will be presented.

Challenges for the Syriac Orthodox Church: Encounters with Secularism

Naures Atto, University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

In the twentieth century Assyrians became both physically and culturally uprooted from their ancestral homeland. Mass migration has changed their demographic landscape, it has transformed them into a worldwide dispersed diaspora and it has increased the transnational character of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Within the context of migration in the last five decades, Syriac Orthodox clergymen and lay people have been discussing the survival of their people and their distinct culture, including their church and religious traditions. This paper discusses how Assyrian elites negotiate their survival in relation to encounters with secularism. While discourses of Syriac Orthodox clergymen clearly promote religious survival and aim at restoring the weakened power of the church in secular societies, the discourses of lay people promote cultural survival, put the cultural identity of members of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the centre of their survival strategies and do not position secularism and secular modernity as the main threat for the future of their people. Rather, they see more opportunities to develop and build a sustainable future as a minority group in a transnational context. This paper is based on selected texts and speeches of clergy and fieldwork conducted among the Assyrian lay people.

Orthodoxy in a Global Context

Maria Hämmerli, University of Fribourg, Switzerland

The syntagm “global Orthodoxy” is increasingly used to illustrate the world-wide geographical spread of Orthodoxy beyond its historical territories. This paper discusses critically the association of Orthodoxy with “global religion” and analyses three aspects of globalization affecting Orthodox identity currently. First, the main factors that impact the reconstruction of Orthodox identity in a global context: minority status, secularization and the recent transformations of religion in the West, and religious pluralism. Second, I will discuss two local instantiations of the global spread of Orthodoxy (glocalizations), as described by V. Roudometof, namely *vernacularization* (the blend of Orthodoxy’s universalism with local languages, such as French and English) and *indigenization* (the blend of Orthodox universalism with a specific ethnicity). Third, I will try to briefly show how religious identity issues in a global context generates also new theological insight and has therefore consequences for the whole system of belief and practice.

Rewriting Global Orthodoxy: The Syriac Orthodox Church in the Netherlands

Heleen Murre-van den Berg, Radboud University Nijmegen / Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, the Netherlands

Over the last thirty years, the Orthodox world has seen major changes. These include the fall of communism which allowed Eastern Orthodox churches to reemerge as important factors in many post-communist countries, and included the migration movement that brought Eastern and Oriental Christians to the United States, Australia and Europe – with also Western Europe and the Netherlands now hosting

considerable Orthodox communities. While the kernel of these communities date to the 1970s and 1980s, their growth has continued until today, with contemporary wars and unrest in the Middle East and North(east) Africa contributing to increasing numbers of migrants. These include migrants from practically all Eastern and Oriental Orthodox churches – Russians, Serbs, Armenians, Assyrians, Syriac Orthodox, Copts and Ethiopians and Eritreans. The current contribution seeks to understand recent developments in the global and transnational Syriac Orthodox communities as part of a wider resurgence and increasing visibility of Orthodox churches worldwide but especially in Europe. It will take its starting point in the Dutch Syriac community, and show how this community and its leaders attempt to square the demands of the local Dutch context with those of the wider transnational community – in the homeland(s) in the Middle East and in other diasporic communities in Europe, the US and Australia, taking their many publications as a starting point to understand current concerns and contemporary solutions.

Notes

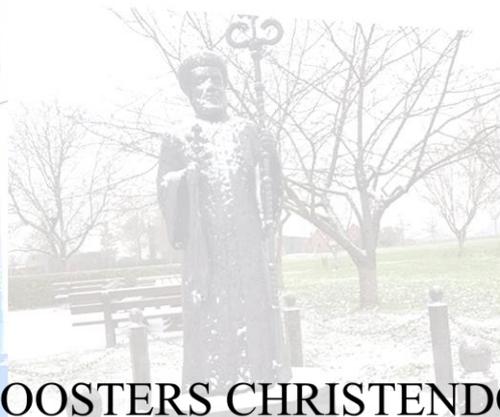
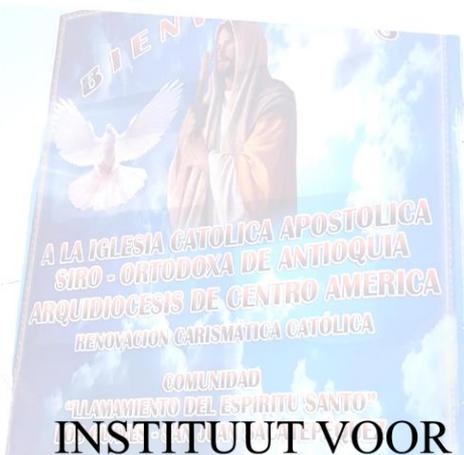
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