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Syrian Christians and Arab-Islamic Identity: Expressions of Belonging in the Ottoman Empire and America

ABSTRACT

This essay examines the ways that Arab Christian immigrants in the late-nineteenth-century United States understood religious, cultural and national belonging. Focusing on migrants from Ottoman Syria (present day Lebanon and Syria) who referred to themselves as *Syrians*, it uses publications from the Arab renaissance in Beirut and early Arab American newspapers in New York to consider how these Christians grappled with their identities as subjects of the Ottoman Sultan, as Christians from various denominations, as citizens in an Islamic society and as newcomers to America. Defying Protestant missionaries' simplistic depictions of Middle Eastern Christianity, such Syrian Christian authors expressed a sense of belonging in an interreligious environment and sought to inform American readers about the riches of Arab-Islamic heritage.

Keywords: Arab American, Syrians, migration, Islam, Middle East, Ottoman Empire, missionaries, *Nahda*, *mahjar*, New York, Arab Christians

INTRODUCTION

In August of 1892, the New York City-based periodical *Kawkab Amirka* (known in English as *Kawkab America: The American Star*) proposed that

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Muslim Arab explorers discovered the Americas long before Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean blue. The Syrian Christian immigrants who produced this English-Arabic publication thus signalled a particular understanding of their own cultural identity as they pointed readers back to the golden era of Arab-Islamic civilisation, from the ninth to twelfth centuries. With pride in this heritage, the article described a period when 'the Arabs were the masters of the seas'. According to the piece, in the year 1150 CE an Arab expedition sailed from Lisbon (then part of Islamic Iberia) and returned with tales of islands across the Atlantic. Even if these lands were not actually in the Americas, the Syrian paper contended, Columbus likely heard of this voyage centuries later and made use of the Arab explorers' report. Thus the author maintained, 'It stands to reason then that to the Arabs, who were at that time the leading people in all scientific and commercial undertakings, may be attributed the cause, if not the actual fact, of America's discovery.'¹

If this front-page story did little to change narratives about the European discovery of America, it likely caught the attention of the periodical's Syrian audience and its English-speaking American readership. Only a month earlier, President Benjamin Harrison had designated 21 October 1892 as a general holiday for the celebration of the 400th anniversary of the Italian explorer's voyage. In honour of this momentous occasion, preparations were underway in Chicago for the World's Fair: Columbian Exposition.² This event was of great interest to *Kawkab's* subscribers in America, and in nearly every issue the paper offered information for those who would join the Syrian or other Arab delegations travelling to Chicago. *Kawkab's* owners thus seized the opportunity to grow their readership by drawing in American and Middle Eastern World's Fair enthusiasts. At the same time, the paper presented the international gathering as an embodiment of the goals printed on the masthead of every English issue: 'An Oriental Weekly devoted to the development of direct helpful relations and good understanding between the East and the West'. *Kawkab America* sought to reach the American public while also serving the interests of newly arrived immigrants in the Syrian Colony of lower Manhattan.

In the late nineteenth century, Arabic-speaking Christians from Ottoman Syria (present-day Syria and Lebanon) made up the majority of Ottoman immigrants in the US. This essay examines the ways these Christians, who referred to themselves as *Syrians*, understood religious, cultural and national belonging. They travelled great lengths – geographically and metaphorically – while grappling with their

identities as subjects of the Ottoman Sultan, as Christians from a variety of denominations, as citizens in an Islamic society and as newcomers to America. I use publications from the inaugural year of *Kawkab America* (April 1892–1893) to shed light on the Syrian Colony in New York City, where the first significant Syrian-American community took root. Because Syrian Christians' initial contact with America often came in their encounter with mission institutions in their homeland, I also give attention to the American Syria Mission (the major Protestant missionary enterprise in Beirut and the surrounding region) and to the writings of Syrian Protestants.

These Syrian authors defied missionaries' simplistic depictions of Arab Christians as oppressed minorities and their overwhelmingly negative assessments of Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. Even Syrian Protestants who worshipped in mission churches challenged American notions of opposition between Arab traditions and Western modernity. Whether contributing to the currents of the Arab cultural and literary renaissance (known as the *Nahda*) in nineteenth-century Beirut or to the early Arabic literature of the *mahjar* (the Arab migrant community outside of the Middle East), the Syrian Christian writers I examine here inhabited spaces of religious multiplicity. Some may have understood themselves as spiritually hybrid. Yet their articles for audiences in Beirut and New York expressed a sense of belonging in an interreligious environment rather than a devotion to multiple theological traditions. After addressing the context of Christian life in Ottoman Syria, I attend to the ways such Syrian Christians negotiated and expressed complex Ottoman, Arab-Islamic and Syrian-American identities.

SYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the region of Ottoman Syria known today as Lebanon, the Maronite Church was prominent in the nineteenth century and remains so today. There were also sizeable Greek Orthodox and Melkite (Greek Catholic) populations, and members of the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church (West Syriac liturgy) added to the diversity of the region. Syrian Christians did not form a monolithic community, but rather held multiple loyalties. Existing ties with Western Christianity – like the Maronites' long-standing union with Rome – solidified with the arrival of Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox missionaries in the nineteenth century. The Sultan in Istanbul (a Turkish leader understood by Sunni Muslims to be the Caliph or successor of the

Prophet Muhammad) retained sovereignty over Syria until the end of World War I, but European powers extended their influence before the fall of the Ottoman Empire through missionary and commercial endeavours.

The strength of the British Empire afforded diplomatic protection for English representatives of the Church Missionary Society in Palestine and for American Congregationalists and Presbyterians of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), who founded the American Syria Mission in Beirut in 1823. The establishment of the Syrian Evangelical Church in 1848 added a new Christian *ta'ifa* (religious sect) to the Syrian landscape. In 1870, the Syria Mission was transferred to the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, but long before that, American Protestants came into competition with Catholic and Orthodox missionary representatives of Napoleon III's Second French Empire and the Russian Empire of Tsar Alexander II. Jesuits arrived in Syria in 1831 to work among Catholic communities, establishing primary and secondary schools that emphasised French language and culture (Verdeil 2006). The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, which the tsar approved in 1847, evolved throughout the second half of the century until Greek Orthodox schools and churches in present-day Syria and Lebanon became the focus of its activities (Womack 2013).

Christians who affiliated with these various missionary societies sometimes became entangled in the rivalries between their Russian, French and American counterparts, elevating their *ta'ifa* as a primary marker of identity. This was reflected in the intra-Christian press debates of the 1880s in Beirut between the American Mission Press (AMP) periodical *al-Nashra al-Uṣbu'iyya* (*The Weekly Bulletin*), the Catholic *al-Bashir* (*The Herald*) and the Orthodox *al-Hadiyya* (*The Gift*). Besides advocating for a particular doctrinal position, these Christian publications of the *Nahda*, or Arab literary renaissance, were strongly attuned to events in America and Europe, demonstrating a sense of community with Christians outside the Ottoman Empire. While the staged Protestant–Catholic–Orthodox debates in Beirut did not signal insurmountable rifts between Syrian Christian intellectuals, such external ties became important for Syrians who found opportunities to travel, study or emigrate to Europe or America (Womack 2015: 184–202).

Prominent Syrians like the Jesuit priest Louis Cheikho (Luwis Shaykhu, 1859–1927) and the Greek Orthodox poet Mikhail Naimy

(Mikha'il Nu'ayma, 1889–1988) were recruited by missionaries to study in France and the Russian Empire (Sadgrove 1998: 711; Nijland 1998: 588–9).³ American missionaries, on the other hand, discouraged their Protestant employees, clergy and students from studying abroad for fear they would immigrate permanently, weakening the already small Syrian Evangelical Church. Nevertheless, economic opportunities in the US drew Protestants, other Syrian Christians and a much smaller number of Syrian Jews and Muslims.⁴ The Syrian population of New York City at the turn of the century included roughly equal numbers of Maronites, Melkites and Greek Orthodox, with Protestants coming in as a distant fourth (Jacobs 2015: 117).⁵

Estimates of the overall Syrian immigrant population in the US vary, in part because it was a transient community. Many Syrians were peddlers who travelled between the east coast and the Midwest, and others worked in the US for a time and then returned home with their earnings to shape the emergent middle class of modern Lebanon (Khater 2001: 75–9, 108–14). The US census of 1910 showed nearly 47,000 under the category of 'foreign stock' of Syrian origin, while the 1920 census counted 51,900 Syrians as part of the 'foreign-born white population' (Gualtieri 2009: 45).⁶ For the purposes of this study, we can simply note that the vast majority of the early Syrian Americans were Christian and that intellectuals of the Arab renaissance were among their numbers. One of these was Naimy, who followed his brother to America after graduating from seminary in Ukraine, then earned a degree at the University of Washington and later joined the vibrant community of *mahjar* writers in New York City (Nijland 1998: 588).⁷ Among the most well-known of these emigré authors were the Maronites Khalil Gibran (1883–1931) and Amin al-Rihani (1876–1940), with whom Naimy established the first Arab-American literary society, The Pen League (*al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya*, 1920–31) (Berman 2013: 66).⁸

As such twentieth-century authors navigated the assimilationist pressures of American society, their work defied essentialist notions of Syrian or Arab identity as tied to specific religious, tribal or national allegiances but rather presented 'Arab-ness as several different things simultaneously' (Berman 2013: 66).⁹ While scholars have only occasionally acknowledged the influence of such emigré authors on twentieth-century American literature, the earliest forms of Arab American writing in newspapers like *Kawkab* have gone virtually unnoticed.¹⁰ As the first Arabic language periodical published in North America and the earliest of forty-four such papers initiated

in New York City alone by the year 1930, *Kawkab* foreshadowed the thriving Arab American press of the twentieth century (Jacobs 2015: 262).¹¹

My reading of *Kawkab America* in the sections below demonstrates the value of early *mahjar* literature for understanding wider Syrian Christian experiences in the late nineteenth century. I focus on *Kawkab*'s issues during its first year of publication when it was a bi-lingual production, another first that far predated the shift of the Arab American press to English after 1930 (Sawaie 1992: 83). Founded in April of 1892 by the Greek Orthodox brothers Ibrahim and Najib Arbeely and managed by Artin Petrakian, the paper became a mouthpiece for the wave of Syrian Christians who moved from being imperial subjects of the Sultan to living as immigrants in America. The Arbeely brothers operated their paper with at least three purposes in mind. First, it served Syrian immigrant readers in New York and across the US. Although the press owners were Orthodox, the paper aimed for a wider readership, and it printed articles by members of other sects, including Protestants. In fact, a former Protestant employee of the Syria Mission, Abraham Mitrie Rihbany, worked as an editor of *Kawkab* during its first year before moving on to pastor Congregational and Unitarian churches in the US.¹²

Second, the paper facilitated communication between Syrians at home and in the diaspora. *Kawkab* was part of a vast transnational network through which Arab residents in Ottoman Syria, in other parts of the Ottoman Empire, in Europe and in America exchanged news, ideas, goods and funds, and it boasted wide readership outside the US.

Third and finally, the paper allowed Syrians to engage with a Euro-American audience in a way that had not been possible for writers in the literary renaissance of Beirut. *Kawkab*'s English issues often addressed the ways missionaries and other Western travellers to the Middle East had misrepresented the region. For example, in a recurring column, Syrian readers – including Protestants – wrote letters to the editor critiquing the work of American missionaries in their homeland.¹³ The move to the US, then, offered Syrians a platform for telling their own narrative to American mission supporters. In contrast, although the freedom of the American press allowed for Arab writers to critique Ottoman rule, in the paper's early years the authors of *Kawkab* echoed expressions of loyalty for the Sultan that were published in the periodicals of Beirut.

CHRISTIAN OTTOMANISM IN SYRIA AND AMERICA

When Syrians migrated to the United States in the late nineteenth century, they moved from a multi-ethnic, multireligious empire that once spanned three continents to a defined nation state with an English-speaking Protestant majority anchored in particular Western cultural practices and thought forms. Although views of Islam varied from irenic to antagonistic, American scholars and public figures nearly always presented inhabitants of the Islamic world according to set, classifiable categories. Similarly, Protestant missionaries who understood themselves as America's ambassadors to the world divided the non-Western peoples they encountered into religious groups and subgroups. Their reports to mission supporters at home also assessed each community's beliefs and practices, often finding them morally and theologically lacking. In his 1901 text on *Presbyterian Foreign Missions*, for example, Robert Speer quoted extensively from unpublished reports of the Syria Mission veteran Henry Harris Jessup, who had recorded the size and 'oriental character' of each Muslim and Christian sect in Ottoman Syria. While deeming Islam to be 'fanatically intolerant', Jessup also critiqued the 'medieval tyranny of the ecclesiastics of the oriental churches' (Speer 1901: 190).

In the view of Jessup and his missionary colleagues, Syrians who converted from Islam moved from one strictly defined category to another. Likewise, Catholic or Orthodox Syrians who became Protestant were described as making a firm break with their family tradition.¹⁴ This view was so rigid in the early nineteenth century that the prominent ABCFM secretary Rufus Anderson favoured firing a Syrian pastor who suggested that Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Christians in Syria might experience saving knowledge of Jesus Christ even while remaining outside of the Protestant church (Tibawi 1966: 142). Despite their emphasis on doctrinal purity, Anderson and the missionaries he supervised failed to recognise the distinctive influences of *American* Protestantism in their own proclamations of gospel truth.

In making doctrinal belief the defining point of individual identity, missionary leaders like Anderson rejected Syrian expressions of belonging across Christian traditions while also reducing the social, cultural and theological diversity of American Protestantism to a singularity that might be duplicated in non-Western contexts. For Syrians, however, such lines could not be so neatly drawn. Along with the Christian traditions I have already mentioned, Ottoman Syria was home to Sunni, Shi'a, Jewish and Druze communities. For administrative

purposes, the Ottoman government categorised the non-Muslim sects into *millets* (religio-political bodies) which operated their own courts of law and had a designated political representative (Masters 2001: 11).¹⁵ Daily life in Syria was divided between the ruling elite and the masses rather than between members of different sects who commonly intermingled within their own social classes (Makdisi 2000). Nevertheless, as Ussama Makdisi has shown, missionaries and Western travellers who documented their encounters in the Middle East described static sectarian identities that they 'conceptualized in terms (tribal, free, stagnant, separate) that did not correspond to the way the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon perceived themselves' (Makdisi 2000: 23).

Referring to the 1860 war between Druzes and Maronites in Mount Lebanon, Makdisi argued that such influences of Western modernity and the reforms in Ottoman administrative structures prompted a shift in the traditional Syrian social order (Makdisi 2000). Yet even when identities became mobilised for specific political and social purposes, not all of the Syrian population turned toward communal segregation. Syrian Christians were among those who responded to the sectarian violence by embracing Ottomanism (patriotic loyalty to the Sultan in Istanbul) and affirming that the Sultan's modernising projects benefitted all residents of the Empire regardless of ethnicity or religious affiliation. Even Protestants became vocal Ottomanists, a reality that would have surprised the American readers who consumed mission reports about tyrannical Turkish rule as a barrier to the spread of the gospel.¹⁶

Protestant Ottomanism in the nineteenth century demonstrated what scholars of world Christianity and mission history already know: religious conversion is never a simplistic break with the past and converts always adapted missionary religion and made it their own. This could be seen in the work of the renowned Protestant Butrus al-Bustani, a former Maronite and pioneer of the Arab renaissance. In response to the violence of 1860, Bustani issued a series of broadsheets under the title *Nafir Suriyya* (*The Clarion of Syria*, 1860–1861) that presented Ottoman identity as a uniting force for all Syrian people, who shared the same land, language and common cultural heritage (Bustani 1860/1990).

While much has been written about Bustani, less attention has been paid to his fellow Protestants in Syria whose expressions of Ottoman loyalty contradicted the missionary narrative about Ottoman authority.

Praise and prayer for Sultan Abdul Hamid II (r. 1876–1909) were prominent occurrences, for example, in publications by Syrian Protestant women. These authors included Hannah Kurani, the journalist and public speaker who dedicated her book *Manners and Customs* to Abdul Hamid, and the school teachers Rujina Shukri and Maryam Zakka, who both concluded articles for the AMP's *al-Nashra al-Ushbu'iyya* by extolling the Sultan's accomplishments (Kurani 1891: 47; Shukri 1888: 123; Zakka 1887: 373–4). Their example contradicts impressions that Middle Eastern women – and particularly Christian women – would feel oppressed by Ottoman Islamic rule. Their writings demonstrate further that expressions of Ottoman patriotism and pride were pervasive not only in the literary-scientific journals of intellectuals like Bustani, but also in religious publications such as those produced at the AMP.

The realities of press censorship in nineteenth-century Syria make it impossible to determine how genuine or widespread such expressions of Ottomanism were, but similar pro-Ottoman sentiments of Syrian Protestant and Greek Orthodox immigrants in the US appeared in periodicals like *Kawkab America*.¹⁷ *Kawkab*'s owners printed the star and crescent of the Ottoman Empire on every Arabic issue and declared their loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan in their first English-language issue, saying:

KAWKAB AMERICA, by its unswerving fidelity and loyalty to these interests hopes to merit the approbation and encouragement of His Imperial Majesty, Sultan Abdul Hamid, whose beneficent rule ... [has] marked an era in Ottoman history unequaled in its far-reaching results, and most remarkable in its progressive spirit and future possibilities ... [and] who has proven himself a friend of education, progress and of everything that tends to bring material prosperity and happiness to his people.¹⁸

A later example demonstrated how the editors used their English-language issues to counter what they viewed as missionaries' mischaracterisations of the Ottoman government. Defending the words of praise for Abdul Hamid printed in the first issue, a piece titled 'A Meddlesome M.D.' explained:

We noticed in one of the N.Y. evening papers an article by Ira Haris [sic], M.D. of Tripoli, Syria, in which he disparaged and misinterpreted the just and well deserved praises bestowed upon His Imperial

Majesty Abdul Hamid, in one of *Kawkab America's* editorials. The friendly attitude and loyal policy voluntarily taken at the outset and maintained till the present time by this paper towards the Turkish Government and its interests, seem to have been a great disappointment to this Esculapian commentator and others of his stamp.¹⁹

The article went on to describe the missionary's comments as 'absurd and silly' and insisted that the criticisms Harris and his colleagues frequently levelled against the Ottoman government were 'unjust and unreasonable'. It continued:

It seems unbecoming for one occupying the position and enjoying the privileges and consideration that this Doctor does under Turkish rule, and from Turkish citizens who delight in their admiration and loyalty towards their beloved Sultan, to intrude upon the Ottoman public, such a bigoted protest and foolish objection as insinuated in his above referred to article.²⁰

Such pieces printed during the inaugural year of *Kawkab America* indicated that when freed from Ottoman imperial oversight, many Syrian Christians retained their loyalty to the Ottoman Sultan and sought to be ambassadors of Ottoman culture to their new American neighbours. These authors believed that they could become part of US society without rejecting their roots. American Protestants' perceptions of religious, cultural and national identity markers, therefore, were stretched by Syrian Christian expressions of authentic belonging within Ottoman society. In the section below, I turn to the ways that these writers also challenged Euro-American presumptions by claiming Arab-Islamic identity.

EMBRACING ARAB-ISLAMIC IDENTITY

Syrian Christians in the Ottoman Empire were religious minorities, according to today's terminology, but they did not typically identify themselves as such in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the terms 'minority' and 'majority' only came into common usage to describe the political status of Middle Eastern communities after the end of World War I, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment in the region of modern nation states in the twentieth century (White 2011: 2–3). In the Ottoman period, Christians were the numerical majority in some parts of Syria. In relation to the Muslim

population in the wider region, Christians were numerical minorities. Yet Arab Christians and Arab Muslims together might also be considered part of the same ethnic majority with respect to Armenian or Turkish inhabitants of Syria or as a peripheral group in relation to the Turkish administration that ruled from Istanbul.

Syrian Christian expressions of Arab-Islamic identity emerged from this Ottoman matrix of religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic multiplicity. The following examples come from Syrian Protestants who broke with their missionary colleagues' harsh judgements of Islam. In the broadsheet *Nafir Suriyya*, Butrus al-Bustani adopted teachings from the Islamic tradition as he advocated for patriotic, pan-Syrian love binding his people across religious lines, saying, 'It is mentioned in the Hadith "Love of the homeland is an article of faith."' This saying was also printed on the cover of Bustani's literary-scientific journal, *al-Jinan* (*The Garden*) (Bustani 1861/1990). Reflecting a similar familiarity with Hadith sayings Abraham Rihbany, the Protestant editor of *Kawkab America*, noted that as he faced the difficulties of newspaper work, he often quoted to himself the words of the Prophet Muhammad, 'Heaven is under the shadow of swords!' (Rihbany 1914: 235). In articles and public speeches, others from the Syrian Protestant community indicated that their identities were rooted in the Islamic world even though their theological beliefs were not founded on Islamic doctrine. Rujina Shukri praised the libraries of the eighth-century 'Abbasid Caliph Harun Rashid, and the journalist and novelist Farida 'Atiya referred her Christian readers to a wise saying of an 'Abbasid general and used his words in her interpretation of a biblical text ('Atiya 1888: 42).

As Stephen Sheehi has explained, Syrian Protestants who located their identities within the context of Islamic culture did not identify as *religiously* Muslim. Rather, their claim to an ancient Arab heritage that transcended religious boundaries was part of a wider move of *Nahda* intellectuals to secularise the Arabic language 'as the primary marker of ethnic identity and of a nascent Arab nationalism that deemphasized Islam as a religious signifier and recoded it as a cultural and historical signifier shared by Jewish and Christian Arabs alike' (Sheehi 2012: 295–6). Such aims motivated the work of Ibrahim Hurani, a leading Syrian Evangelical Church member in Beirut who edited *al-Nashra al-Ushbu'iyya* and used this Protestant periodical to introduce his own compositions of Islamic-style rhymed prose-poetry (known as *shi'r manthur*).²¹ While Syrian Christians in Beirut made Islam a reference point for their cultural heritage, authors in the

Syrian American diaspora went one step further. When writing for an English-speaking American audience, they also sought to explain Muslim spiritual practices and doctrinal beliefs.

At the end of Ramadan in 1892 (1309 in the Islamic calendar), the Arabic version of *Kawkab* noted that Muslims around the world (*al-umma al-Islamiyya*) had just celebrated 'Id al-Fitr, and the authors congratulated Sultan Abdul Hamid and all of their Muslim readers on that auspicious occasion. The English version of the paper added an explanation that the fast during the month of Ramadan 'is one of two important duties devolving upon every good Moslem to perform, a pilgrimage to the sacred city of Mecca during one's life-time, being the other'.²² The paper's quest to inform Euro-Americans about Islam also led the editors to publish the translated work of Muslim scholars.

One such article by an Indian author known as Ibn Ishaq emphasised the missionary power of Islam and the contrasting futility of Christian missionary efforts that had yielded few converts in Turkey, Egypt and India. Identifying Westerners as generally ignorant about Islam, Ibn Ishaq argued that the Prophet Muhammad's teachings could be 'adapted to the conditions of civilized life' and that Islam was the religion 'best suited to the social and national development of the world'. He underlined the need for Islam in the West where the Christian masses possessed little knowledge of God and Englishmen, in particular, wore religion awkwardly on their shoulders as 'a loose-fitting mantel'. The article concluded:

The Moslem of to-day believes that as the sound of the Azan, 'Come to Salvation,' has been heard for centuries from the gilded minarets of Summarkund, Cairo, and Stambool [Istanbul], so, at no distant date, the sweet cry of the Muezzin will call the Faithful to the worship of Allah in the great cities of the West. For there 'Is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his Prophet.'²³

Thus, the article concluded with the *shahada* (the Muslim testimony of faith), and the editors left readers to ponder Ibn Ishaq's message without providing their own interpretation. Unlike *The Arena*, a progressive Boston-based journal that published a response article along with the full English text of Ibn Ishaq's work, *Kawkab* included only brief commentary at the beginning of the reprinted article. The editors introduced it simply as an excerpt from the writings of 'a talented and scholarly' Muslim on the future of 'the great religion of Islam'.²⁴ The Syrian Christian paper published the piece not to support

a theological position but to offer an interpretation of modern Islam that might counter presumptions of Western superiority. Like other Middle Eastern Christians in the US and Europe who took offence at the absolute claims of evangelical Protestants that bound Christian belief to Western culture, the editors of *Kawkab* felt compelled to defend Islam.

Joseph Hekekyan (b. 1807), an Armenian Catholic administrator for the Ottoman governor in Egypt, described another such experience in England in the 1820s. Hekekyan visited a Protestant pastor who mistakenly identified him as Muslim and therefore sought to correct his guest's doctrinal deviance. As recorded by Paul Sedra, rather than informing the Englishman of his identity, Hekekyan took on the role of a Muslim apologist, challenging his host to prove 'that there are three Gods and yet but one God – and that God is one person, and yet three also – and that God the Father was from all Eternity – and that God the Son proceeded from God the Father – yet is God the Son also from all Eternity' (Sedra 2011: 73). The irony of a Christian voicing Muslim objections to Trinitarianism and upholding the Islamic concept of *tawhid* (the unity of God) was lost on the pastor who continued to call Hekekyan 'a young barbarous Musselman' (Sedra 2011: 73).

In the nineteenth-century US where Syrian Christians were often mistakenly identified as Muslims, *Kawkab* offered a means to educate the American public. Rather than insisting on the distinction between Syrian Christians and Muslims, the paper took Hekekyan's approach of defending Islam against the doctrinal rigidity of Western Protestantism. As inhabitants of interreligious spaces, *Kawkab's* writers and other Arab emigré authors commonly supported a less doctrinaire understanding of Middle Eastern spirituality. The mysticism of Khalil Gibran's now classic volume *The Prophet*, for example, has attracted Christian, Jewish and Muslim readers (Gibran 1923/2001).²⁵ As Jacob Berman has argued, Gibran's universalism was not typical of all *mahjar* literature because he assimilated the particulars, appealing to romantic Orientalist notions of Eastern spirituality (Berman 2013: 72–4). Yet for Syrian Christian elite at the turn of the century, a recognition of universal bonds between practitioners of different faiths did not imply a rejection of religious, cultural, linguistic or national distinctions. This was evidenced in the practice of committed Christians like Bustani, who joined Freemason lodges in Syria where religious affiliation was not a barrier to membership and the bible and the Qur'an were both used (Sommers 2015: 55–6).²⁶

Perhaps because of their own connections with Syrian Freemasonry, *Kawkab's* editors looked favourably upon Euro-American organisations in New York like the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine for North America, a masonic body that traced its roots to the Caliph 'Ali in Mecca (Root 1903: 11, 23–4). The Arabic edition of the paper printed names of the group's North American and New York officers under the crescent and star symbol,²⁷ and in an English piece about the group's Mecca Temple in New York, *Kawkab* described the organisation appreciatively as 'deriving its origine [sic], principles and traditions from our native East'.²⁸ This coverage of American Shriners' activities served the same purpose as most of *Kawkab's* English issues. It indicated that if correctly understood, Euro-Americans would find much of value in Syrian culture and religion.

THE CHALLENGE OF AMERICA

In the eyes of many *majhar* authors, and particularly those who wrote in the early Arab American diaspora, to be Syrian was to be part of a society in which multiple religious sects belonged. Such themes emerged in Gibran's work as the universal thread uniting the Abrahamic faiths. Gibran's colleague Amin Rihani engaged these themes in a different way. For him, Arab identity was fuelled by contradictions, which he fully embraced as he drew equally from the voices of pan-Arab modernists and the medieval Muslim philosopher-theologian al-Ghazali (Berman 2013: 77). According to Berman, 'Rihani does not synthesize Arab and American, Islamic and Christian, traditional and modern. He presents them as unreconciled constituent pieces of his contradictory identity' (Berman 2013: 75). While the articles in *Kawkab America* do not contain the same depth of thought as Rihani's reflections on simultaneous cultural, religious, ideological and national belongings, I propose viewing this Arab American newspaper as a precursor of such *majhar* literature.

The English edition of *Kawkab* produced between 1892 and 1893 was the first attempt by Arab immigrants to use print media to make space for themselves in the US without Americanising their particularities. Their articles endeavoured to introduce American readers to a Syrian way of life, one in which the crossing of religious boundaries was central to the community's identity. In a column on 'Syrian Etiquette', for example, the paper explained, 'The usual way of saluting ones [sic] friends in Syria consists in throwing the hand forward, kissing it, and placing it on the forehead. It is distasteful to the members of certain

religious sects to shake hands with people not of their own religion.²⁹ Reflecting the author's multiple aims, this statement informed American readers of the proper manner of respectful engagement with Syrian immigrants; it suggested that the practice of such greetings allowed Syrians to maintain friendships across religious lines; and it affirmed that such beneficial social customs ought to be retained within American society. Finally, the statement implied that Euro-Americans in New York had treated Syrian immigrants in offensive ways, thus prompting the column in the first place.

Other articles, like one entitled 'The Outrages on the Syrian Colony', confirmed that Syrians did not always feel welcome in American society. The piece focused on a certain group of 'thugs' that had persisted in verbally and physically attacking Syrians and people of other nationalities in the neighbourhoods of lower Manhattan. Characterising Syrians as peaceful, law-abiding and industrious citizens, it alleged that such assaults were reported to the authorities and were sometimes committed under the watching eyes of the police, without any action being taken against the offenders. The author's words directed specifically toward the perpetrators denounced the narrowly defined conceptions of belonging that prompted such acts of xenophobia:

Young men of Greenwich and Washington Sts.! Do you know that it is not manly or brave to insult helpless women and maltreat poor inoffensive people? Nor is it fair for five or six people, to assault, like you have often done, one single person, and a stranger that does not bother you, whose only fault is his difference from you in language and mode of dress.³⁰

With references to the traditions, customs and laws of their homeland that taught Syrians to 'show special consideration and kindness to the stranger', including to American visitors, the author sought to shame those holding anti-Syrian sentiments. At the same time, this article and the pieces on Syrian etiquette also insisted that Syrians could live productively and well in the US without relinquishing the defining aspects of their heritage. Like Rihani's works, then, the articles in *Kawkab* bridged religious, ethnic and national boundaries while also resisting neat, synthesised definitions of Syrian-American identity. The paper's editors and authors might be described in Berman's words as positing an 'identity built in constellations, where constituent pieces orbit around one another rather than eclipsing one another' (Berman 2013: 75). *Kawkab's* stated aim of fostering good relations between East

and West was intent on mutuality. The authors resisted the sort of cultural imperialism that some Syrians encountered in American mission institutions and continued to experience when they arrived in the US until WWI and the nativist legislation of the 1920s halted the flow of Syrian immigration.

CONCLUSION

Studies of multiple religious belonging in this issue and elsewhere challenge the pervasive and often Eurocentric insistence on strict singularity rather than hybridity or liminality in religious identification. This presents a problem, in the words of Peniel Rajkumar and Joseph Prabhakar Dayam, for Christians ‘who, out of necessity, upbringing or choice, find (spi)ritual sustenance in other religious traditions alongside Christianity and openly acknowledge that they have been “faithed” by drinking deeply from the wells of different religious and spiritual traditions’ (Rajkumar and Dayam 2016: 2). The Syrian Christians featured in this study faced a similar – but not identical – problem as they settled into American society in the late nineteenth century.

It is possible that some Greek Orthodox and Protestant writers of *Kawkab America* found spiritual sustenance in Islam, but the paper recorded their self-identification with a different sort of multiplicity – a sense of belonging to the Islamic world. This claim challenged the same religious and cultural binaries that may make notions of spiritual hybridity suspect today. Rather than describing nineteenth-century Syrian Christians as belonging to multiple religious traditions at once, it would be more fitting to emphasise that Christian identity in the Ottoman Empire and in America was *contrapuntal*, as defined by Edward Said (Said 2001: 99). Said, who devoted much thought to the physical and psychological dimensions of Arab migration, considered the musical concept of counterpoint as analogous to the way interdependent (or harmonic) voices retain their individuality. While this interpretive lens allowed Said to identify resistance to dominant tunes (of colonial oppression), as a humanist he also promoted contrapuntal methods of reading as ‘a commitment to listen to and think through experiences outside of one’s own’ (Telmissany and Schwartz 2010: xix).

The editors of *Kawkab* encouraged their English-speaking readers to take a similar approach to the newcomers in their midst, with publications that resisted homophony and retained the plurality of melodies that accompanied Syrian American life. The paper’s English articles demonstrated that when freed from Ottoman imperial oversight,

some Syrian Christians retained their loyalty to the Sultan and sought to be ambassadors of Ottoman, Arab and Islamic culture to their new American neighbours. Defining themselves as culturally, but not religiously, Islamic, they endeavoured to explain and defend Muslims' beliefs and practices to a misinformed American audience. While echoing the expressions of pride in Arab-Islamic heritage that appeared in the Arabic periodicals of Beirut, the authors of *Kawkab* also took advantage of their access to the American reading public to critique American missionaries' negative discourses on Arab, Islamic and Ottoman societies.

This does not mean that Syrian Christians were immune to the temptations of cultural imperialism or that their claims should be accepted uncritically. While comparing Syrian hospitality to the hostility some Americans enacted toward the Syrian Colony, the editors of *Kawkab* employed the same sort of racial tropes that often defined missionary writings. They accused the perpetrators of violence in New York's lower West Side as engaging in the sort of 'molestations and persecutions, that could hardly be expected from Barbarians in the Wilds of Africa'.³¹ Likewise, the assertion that Columbus' voyage was guided by information from the Arabs' earlier discovery of America may not accurately reflect historical realities. Nevertheless, such statements revealed how Syrian Christians in the late nineteenth century conceived of themselves, their cultural traditions, their homeland and their lives in America. In the period leading up to the World's Fair of 1893, the claim that Arabs discovered America before Columbus demonstrated the newspaper editors' engagement with American popular culture, their pride in Arab-Islamic civilization and their intention to make a home for themselves in the US. For Syrian Christians who belonged at the intersection of multiple diverging identities, the early Arab American press offered a new way to bridge apparent boundaries.

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NOTES

1 'Did the Arabs Discover America?' *Kawkab America* 1:19 (19 August 1892). On early-twentieth-century Syrian arguments that their Phoenician ancestors discovered America, see Gualtieri 2009: 23. Theories about pre-Columbian contact with the

Americas continue today, including the Saudi filmmaker Khalid Abualkair's documentary *We Discovered America Before Columbus* (2015) and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's claim at a 2014 summit of Latin American Muslim leaders that Muslims discovered and established mosques in America in the twelfth century. Ishaan Tharoor, 'Muslims discovered America before Columbus, claims Turkey's Erdogan', *Washington Post* (15 November 2014): https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/11/15/muslims-discovered-america-before-columbus-claims-turkeys-erdogan/?utm_term=.9fac8eac3c9 (accessed 29 June 2018).

2 'Four Hundredth Anniversary Made a General Holiday: Proclamation Issued by President Harrison', *The Record-Union* 83:131 (22 July 1892): 1; 'The Triumph of America: What the Columbus Pageant Is To Be', *New York Times* (28 August 1892): 11. The fair's opening was eventually delayed until May of 1893.

3 Naimy studied at Russian Orthodox schools in Syria and the Ukraine and later lived in the United States. Cheikho was born in a Chaldean Catholic community in Mardin (present-day Turkey), completed his early education in Damascus and Mount Lebanon, and visited England and Austria during his period of theological training. After living abroad, both Cheikho and Naimy returned to Beirut.

4 An estimated 5–10 per cent of Syrian migrants in the early-twentieth-century US were Muslim, with most of them living outside of New York City: Naff 1985: 2.

5 Citing one study from the turn of the century, which accounted for about half of the Syrian Christian population in New York, Jacobs reported 600 Maronites, 500 Melkites, 300 Orthodox and 60 Protestants living in New York City. Other studies placed Greek Orthodox in the majority. In still another survey, used by Gualtieri, Melkites were the largest Syrian group in New York, followed by Maronites, Orthodox and a smaller number of Protestants (Gualtieri 2009: 47). Out of the 2,482 persons in this 1904 survey, seven were Muslim and approximately one hundred were Jewish.

6 Gualtieri reported around 144,000 Syrians in the 1920s–1930s, although the Syrian scholar Philip Hitti at Princeton University argued that the number had reached 200,000 in 1924.

7 On the wider *mahjar* community (the Arab or particularly Syro-Lebanese diaspora) in New York during this period, see the 'Mapping the Mahjar' project at North Carolina State University's Moise A. Khayrallah Center for Lebanese Diaspora Studies: <https://arccg.is/TTGP1>

8 See also Imangulieva 2009: 23.

9 This is especially true of Rihani, whose work will be discussed further below.

10 The existence of *Kawkab* as the first Arab American periodical is well documented, but Linda Jacobs' is one of the few studies that offer more than a cursory discussion. See, for example, Gualtieri 2009: 7; Boosahda 2003: 85–6; Naff 1985: 320–1; Jacobs 2015: 263–70. On the neglect of *mahjar* writers in the study of American literature, including other immigrant literature, see Berman 2013: 68, 71–4.

11 Other influential papers which are beyond the scope of this study included the Maronite publication *al-Huda* (established in Philadelphia in 1898), the Greek Orthodox *Mira'at al-Gharb* (established 1899, New York) and the Protestant Salim Sarkis's *al-Mushir* (relocated from Egypt to New York in 1899). See Jacobs 2015: 271–80; Sawaie 1992: 83–6; Berman 2013: 66–7.

12 'Kawkab America's Oriental House Warming', *Kawkab America* 1:2 (22 April 1892). Rihbany offered remarks at the celebration marking the birth of the paper. See also Rihbany 1914: 227–35; Jacobs 2015: 265.

13 Salim Sarkis, 'Mukatibat' [Correspondence], *Kawkab Amirka* 1:19 (19 August 1892); Sarkis, 'The Missionary Controversy', *Kawkab America: The Star of America*, English edition, 1:24 (23 September 1892); Y. S., 'The Missionary Controversy', *Kawkab America* 1:26 (7 October 1892).

14 This can be seen in Jessup's references to the Greek Orthodox convert Yusuf 'Atiya in published material and personal correspondence and his description of Muslim convert Kamil 'Aytani. Henry Harris Jessup to Sir William Muir, 12 September 1890: YDS [Yale Divinity School] 117-4-11; Jessup to Muir, 4 February 1891: YDS 117-4-11; Jessup 1910: 2.567-8.

15 The three millets were Greek Orthodox, Armenian and Jewish, with the Greek patriarch representing all Christians outside of the Armenian community.

16 See, for example, Jessup 1910: 1. 4, 41.

17 Anti-Ottoman periodicals were produced by Syrian press owners in America, like Salim Sarkis' *al-Mushir*, yet most of these coincided with the early-twentieth-century rise in proto-Turkish nationalism in Istanbul, which excluded Ottoman Arabs. At this time the fervent pro-Ottomanism of *Kawkab's* authors and editors gradually shifted as well: Jacobs 2015.

18 'Introduction', *Kawkab America* 1:1 (15 April 1892).

19 'A Meddlesome M.D.', *Kawkab America* 1:15 (22 July 1892). Ira Harris was a missionary doctor of the American Syria Mission who operated a medical dispensary in Tripoli.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Hurani's first publication of *shi'r manthur* appeared in *al-Nashra al-Usbu'iyya* in 1902, a year before Khalil Gibran published his first prose poem. Moreh 1976: 294–5; Moreh 1988: 8, 14–17; Hurani 1902; Hurani 1936.

22 'The Month of Ramadan', *Kawkab America* 1:3 (29 April 1892).

23 'Ibn Ishaq's Article on the Future of Islam', *Kawkab America* 1:26 (7 October 1892).

24 *Ibid.* The full text of this English article was published as Ibn Ishaq, 'The Future of Islam', *The Arena* 34 (September 1892): 389–400. The response came in Thomas P. Hughes, 'Has Islam a Future?', *The Arena* 35 (October 1892): 532–9.

25 The 2001 edition was the 136th printing of Gibran's classic.

26 European Freemasons working in the region established their own lodges as early as the eighteenth century. Lodges with Syrian members emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and gained popularity among intellectuals of all sects during the Arab renaissance. The first of these in Ottoman Syria was established in Beirut, in 1861. By that time, local lodges also existed in Cairo, Alexandria and Constantinople: Sommers 2015: 9–10.

27 See, for example, 'Imperial Council, Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine for North America', *Kawkab Amirka* 1:24 (23 September 1893). The members of this order were all Euro-Americans.

28 'The Potentate of N.Y. Mecca Temple', *Kawkab America* 1:51 (31 March 1893).

29 'Some Points in Syrian Etiquette', *Kawkab America* 1:2 (22 April 1892).

30 'The Outrages on the Syrian Colony', *Kawkab America* 1:1 (15 April 1892).

31 *Ibid.*

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