

*In partibus fidelium.*

**Missions in the Levant and understanding the Christian East (XIX-XXIth centuries)**

International Conference, École française de Rome  
27-29 november 2017



**Call for paper**

This international conference will look at the assimilation in Europe of knowledge concerning Eastern Christian cultures, especially from the last third of the XIXth century, and the role the missions played in this process. This new understanding is largely founded on research conducted in the field in the Middle East, particularly on manuscripts kept in the monasteries and patriarchates, and more generally on the literary, linguistic, archaeological, cartographic and musicological heritage of the Christian communities in place there. Knowledge circulates and is transformed on both sides of the Mediterranean: collected and developed in the great libraries and universities of Europe, it is also absorbed by the governing structures of the Churches, notably in Rome, but it also often returns to its place of origin, where it is re-appropriated and nourishes a new awareness of heritage. The Christian missions, naturally situated between the Eastern and Western worlds, are at the heart of this dynamic. In the context of a second part of the XXth century marked in the Middle East by decolonisation and by wars, as well as by Arab nationalism and political Islam, different processes – identity affirmation by the Christian communities, increased local recruitment by the missions, a revision of denominational barriers – renew the challenges and mechanisms of this circulation of knowledge of Oriental Christians.

**1 : The Christian missions in the Levant as places where knowledge of the East is generated**

We will look at the principal missionary centres and their practice of teaching through texts and the transmission of knowledge. For example: the Jesuits of the Saint-Joseph University, the Dominicans of Mosul, of Cairo and Jerusalem; the Maronites of Aleppo, or even the many establishments of the Church Missionary Society in Jerusalem and in Palestine (not forgetting the particular case of the Armenian monastery in Venice).

The conference is focussed on cultural and religious knowledge: biblical and liturgical texts, musical productions, archaeological discoveries, ethnographic literature, photography, cartography etc. A study of the printing houses will be a point of entry. Indeed, they enable a broad circulation of learned texts; they considerably help the spread of the Press in the Middle East, and they favour a whole philological and scientific study of the ancient manuscripts, that are transcribed, translated and recopied, with a

considerable apparatus of notes and commentaries. The Christian missions also played a specific role in the preservation and spread of local languages (Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, for example) as in the development and transmission of Arabic. We will also examine the way the missionaries gave information concerning the situation of local communities (moving, persecutions, social practices, etc. Finally, we shall look into the role of local agents. Who are they, and which geographical, scientific and religious fields do they occupy? What was their influence? We shall study the career and writings of local scholars, who, around the first part of the XXth century, played a fundamental role in shedding light on, and spreading new knowledge about, oriental Christianity; people such as Addai Scher, Louis Cheikho, Ephrem Rahmani or Alphonse Mingana for example, who have remained famous for their libraries, their voluminous works, the reviews and sometimes the study centres that they helped to found. We shall include the question of their involvement in the learned and the religious communities, and their relations with the local political and ecclesiastical authorities.

## **2 : Transitions, receptions and reformulation**

We need to understand how this new knowledge of oriental Christian culture spreads. Without ignoring the role and motivations of the State, we shall interest ourselves first and foremost in the religious and cultural channels : learned oriental reviews founded on either side of the Mediterranean (*al-Machriq*, *Patrologia Syriaca*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, *Oriens Christianus*), and specific areas in international conferences, in universities or in the great university libraries of Europe and North America, not forgetting the research and training organizations within the Churches, one of which is the Pontifical Oriental Institute. Thus, in Europe, as in Russia and the United States, scholars, scientists, academics, influenced by the prevailing orientalism, acquire and appropriate these new works, and study them in their turn; people such as the Assyrian specialist from Louvain, Chabot, the Germans Sachau and Baumstark, the Church historian, Duchesne and his Byzantinist colleague, Janin, as well as the future Cardinal Tisserant, whose careers we will examine. We shall look carefully at the interactions with academic circles but also with the schools of thought that have left their mark on them.

How exactly is this knowledge received, reinterpreted, reformulated? We shall examine a certain number of interactions, both strategic and politico-cultural. For example, the Western Christian vision was, even among the missionaries, permeated for a long time with suspicion and contempt when confronted with an oriental Christianity considered as decadent and which the missions felt they had a vocation to strengthen. But how does this perception assimilate racial and Darwinist theories when faced with a Christianity which language and culture were Semitic, especially between the two wars, a time of fast-growing oriental scholarship? Conversely, we shall consider how the development of this new knowledge modified the sense of otherness within the Christian world, going as far sometimes as to recognise the oriental Christians as a force for change at the time of Vatican II. In the analysis of the reception and institutional use of this knowledge, the Roman case stands out by the nearness of the sources, whether it is with regard to the constitution of specific organizations or the development of expertise within the congregations and the religious orders.

## **3 : Local re-appropriations and transformations**

Among the processes of assimilation of knowledge in the Middle East, we shall tackle the question of the development of cultural and religious traditions, in relation to the process of identity affirmation within the local Christian communities. Liturgical music, for example, was maybe a favoured field for the heritage-making of a local culture in the Coptic Church. On the other hand, how did this knowledge interfere with the perception of a progressive sanctifying of the Middle Eastern territories? We shall consider the phenomena of omission, or reinvention and also of heritage creation, which lead to the development of sacred localities. From this point of view, the case of the Holy Land is particularly revealing.

And finally, what changes over the course of time? We shall look especially at the evolution caused by the increase in local vocations within the missions and by the renewal of inter-denominational relations. We shall examine the changes that concern the very definition of Near and Middle East, of Holy Land, of Churches and of the Christian East. In the context of the second part of the twentieth century, it is the Christian mission in the world of Islam that is itself rethought.

## **Practical information**

### *Submission of proposals*

Proposals (500 words max.) are to be sent before **11 March 2017**, in French, Italian or English, to the following address: **missmo.inpartibus@gmail.com**.

Please include a brief bio-bibliographical presentation, mentioning your title and institutional affiliation.

### *Calendar*

11 March 2017: deadline for proposals

End of March: notification of the results

30 October: conference paper submission deadline (they will be given to participants to facilitate discussion and prepare the final publication)

27-29 November 2017: conference

*Financial contribution:* transport and accommodation will be provided

*Languages:* French, Italian, English

*Publication:* the acts of the conference will be published following a peer-reviewed process.

## **Organization**

This international conference is the first of a series of scientific events in the framework of the five-year research programme *Missions chrétiennes et sociétés du Moyen-Orient: organisations, identités, patrimonialisation* [MisSMO, 2017-2021]. Its aim is to study the role and place of missionaries in the cultural and social evolution of the contemporary Middle-East, from the XIXth century to today. It includes the École française de Rome (EfR), the Fondazione per le scienze religiose Giovanni XXIII (Fscire), the Institut français d'archéologie orientale (Ifao), the Institut français d'études anatoliennes (Iféa), the Institut français du Proche-Orient (Ifpo), and Leiden University.

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