

## Editors' Note

The articles that appear in this special issue of the *Journal of Levantine Studies* are the product of an international conference on “Transnationalism and the Contemporary Christian Communities in the Holy Land.” Taking place June 28–29, 2010, it was conducted under the auspices of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem (CRFJ), and the Tantur Institute for Ecumenical Studies.

The conference was inspired by the realization that virtually all the Christian communities with which we are concerned—certainly all the major communities—are transnational institutions. These communities, like churches everywhere in the world, have been shaped by global flows of labor and capital or influenced by new forms of communication. We do not simply refer to the obvious fact that Christianity is a universal faith that in its various “incarnations” is found virtually everywhere in the world. Rather, almost without exception, Christian communities in the Holy Land confront issues on a daily basis that involve the realities and challenges of national borders.

Our use of the term “Holy Land” is not merely a concession to the complex political realities of the Middle East; it is also a recognition of the fact that in many cases the churches we are studying are organized in dioceses and other units that cut across the nation-state boundaries of the region. Thus, the Patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church is styled, “Patriarch of the Holy City of Jerusalem and all Palestine, Syria, beyond the Jordan River, Cana of Galilee, and Holy Zion.” With regard to the Latin Catholics, the Archdiocese of Jerusalem has jurisdiction for all Latin Rite Catholics in Israel, Palestine, Jordan, and Cyprus. The Episcopal

Diocese of Jerusalem, a diocese of the worldwide Anglican Communion, extends over five countries, including Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Israel, and congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jerusalem and the Holy Land are located in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, and Ramallah, as well as in Amman, Jordan.

While in the past there were doubtless small congregations of Christians in the Holy Land that were solely local in their organization, leadership, and membership, it is noteworthy that despite the experience of colonial domination and the existence of largely foreign church leaderships, the Holy Land had not seen a significant development of “Independent Churches” similar to those found in Africa, China, or the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the first appearance of such churches in Israel appears to have been linked not to their spontaneous emergence in the country but to the arrival of (transnational) “guest workers” from West Africa, as is discussed by Galia Sabar in her article “Between Israel and the Holy Land, between the Global and the Local: The Role of African Initiated Churches within African Transnational Migration to Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

In the case of the Palestinians, the issue of transnationalism has yet another level of complexity. Many Arabs in Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon identify themselves as Palestinians. While only a minority of these Palestinians are Christians, those who are, are of direct relevance to the articles in this issue. Adoram Schneidleder’s article on one group of internally displaced people, the Catholic former inhabitants of the village of Iqrith, presents, through the lens of Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the Holy Land, the backstage complexities of the local/global Mass held in Nazareth in 2009.

Because of the relatively small numbers of avowedly Christian migrants who have entered the region in recent years, the studies in this issue serve as a supplement to much of the scholarship about transnationalism that has emerged in North America and Europe. While there are significant differences in the ways in which transnationalism is treated in the United States and Europe, in both regions most of the scholarly literature takes as its starting point the comparatively recent arrival of large waves of migrants to European or American host countries. In such Euro- and Americocentric writing, the focus is often on the seemingly puzzling fact that (in contrast to earlier generations of migrants) more recent arrivals—particularly from the 1960s onward—retain strong ties to their homelands. Transnational religious practices, which are not connected to migration, have been given comparatively little attention in this Americo- and Eurocentric literature.

In the Middle East, while transnationalism is in part the consequence of the movement of people (within, into, and out of the region), it has also resulted from

the redrawing of the borders of states and other governing institutions.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the papers of Steven Kaplan and Heleen Murre-van den Berg, which deal with the Ethiopian Orthodox and the Syriac Orthodox, respectively, add another, somewhat neglected layer to the existing literature of transnationalism.

Finally, in focusing on transnationalism we hope to correspond with the broader discussions concerning religion in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by looking beyond the local and the particular. This does not mean that we are discounting those aspects of Holy Land Christian communities that are distinctive, nor are we ignoring the value of long-term, in-depth ethnographic work. However, the articles in this issue seek, in the words of Peggy Levitt, “to link everyday lived experience with the larger social processes that influence it . . . how the local is historically connected to other places, levels and scales of social experience.”<sup>4</sup> It is our hope that in doing so, these articles will appeal to readers whose interests extend beyond the “uniqueness” of the Holy Land to broader geographic and methodological horizons.

While we are deeply aware that churches are part of a global system—indeed, the global systems of Christianity generally predate by centuries the recent scholarly interest in globalization—our main focus is not on the borderless global village but on Christian communities that are simultaneously “rooted in particular places but also transcend their borders.”<sup>5</sup> The articles in this issue utilize the concept of transnationalism as the theoretical framework, as opposed to concepts such as globalization or diaspora. In the words of Michael P. Smith, “Unlike the globalization discourse, which maintains a kind of zero-sum assumption, in which globalization and the nation-state are treated as mutually exclusive and antagonistically related conceptual categories, theorists of transnationalism tend to treat the nation-state and transnational practices as mutually *constitutive*, rather than mutually exclusive social formations.”<sup>6</sup> Smith’s study differs markedly from others, such as Peter Beyer’s *Religion and Globalization*, which argue that “if we want to understand the major features of contemporary social life, we have to go beyond local and national factors to situate our analyses in this global context. More pointedly, *we must make the primary unit of analysis the global system* and not some subunit of it, such as the nation, the state, or the region.”<sup>7</sup>

Diaspora is yet another term that appears in a number of our discussions and is often discussed hand-in-hand with transnationalism. Once again, while of clear relevance to several of our cases, we believe there are good reasons for not treating the two terms as synonymous. These articles highlight the rather obvious fact that, while in the case of migrants the distinction between transnationalism and

diaspora may be difficult to define, transnationalism can also be a characteristic of homeland populations and institutions.<sup>8</sup> For example, in the case of the Oriental national churches, the Holy Land serves both as homeland and hostland. Two essays in the volume present such cases: Murre-van den Berg's article "A Center of Transnational Syriac Orthodoxy: St. Mark's Convent in Jerusalem" and Kaplan's "The Transnationalism of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church (EOTC) in the Holy Land." While Armenians, Russians, and Ethiopians (all, significantly, members of national churches) may be considered as part of larger diaspora groups, the local population of Palestinian Christians has been depleted over recent years by the phenomenon of out-migration, which has created a Palestinian Christian diaspora that is generally agreed to outnumber the local community.<sup>9</sup>

The special status of the Holy Land in Christian history, geography, and theology is of particular importance. While the concept of diaspora generally privileges the status of the "homeland," in the case of Christian communities in the Holy Land, both new and old, peripheral and central are blurred concepts. Whatever their differences in theology and history, all Christian groups share the belief that the formative events of their religion took place in the Holy Land. However far they may be from their individual birthplaces, or even those places where their churches took root and flourished, in the Holy Land they are located in proximity to the birthplace of their faith. Whatever difficulties are posed and adjustments required because of their absence from home, their religious experience is unlike that of other diaspora populations in a crucial manner: they have the option of visiting holy sites on a regular basis and participating directly in the central religious holidays of their faith.<sup>10</sup>

The complexity that the Christian presence in the Holy Land creates for traditional definitions of diaspora is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in a review of two comparatively recent attempts to suggest that the differences between diaspora and transnationalism are based on distinctions between the material and the ideational, the present and the past. "Whereas diaspora denotes a largely mental state of belonging which may be grounded in physical movements that took place many generations back, transnationalism is shaped by present-day movements between at least two nation-states and the resulting cross-border relations."<sup>11</sup> In a similar vein Manuel Vásquez writes of "time-space management" and suggests that "transnationalism stresses simultaneity in everyday life, while diaspora often involves intense ritualized and momentary fusions of past and future and connections with the homeland."<sup>12</sup> Using these definitions, one is hard pressed to say with any confidence where the line between transnationalism and diaspora lies in any number of the cases presented. Certainly the "intense ritualized and momentary fusions of

past and future” mentioned above would seem to be an appropriate characterization of many present-day rituals in the Holy Land. Similarly it would appear likely that many contemporary Christian communities are simultaneously concerned with physical movements that took place many generations ago and present-day movement between at least two nation-states. In keeping with our belief in the continuing importance of the lived experience of local communities, each of the articles in this issue takes as its starting point a particular group of Christians and works “outward” toward the larger regional and global contexts that shape its life.

Over a period of ten years, Sabar studied the African labor migrants in Israel. She followed the “full cycle of migration” of this exceptional community from the first migration wave to Israel until its mass deportation from the country and return home to Africa. Sabar’s discussion of these Christian groups challenges “the notion that Christianity is transnational just because it is a universal faith.” Many of her interviewees experienced cultural alienation and estrangement from the indigenous churches, including racial discrimination: “For many Africans the local churches in the Holy Land were not transnational or global; rather, they were very local.” Nevertheless, she is able to determine that while the Africans established their own churches, “these churches, although physically in Israel and with a membership that was well aware of the local politics, were at the same time beyond the nation of Israel, and therefore transnational.”

In “The Imagined Christian Ecumene and the Quest for Return: Christian IDPs in Israel and the 2009 Visit of Benedict XVI,” Schneidleder reflects on the role of “an imagined transnational Christian ecumene” in the struggle of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the village of Iqrith to return to their homes. On the occasion of the pilgrimage of Pope Benedict XVI to Israel in 2009, members of the Greek Catholic community of Iqrith sought the intervention of the Holy See in their cause, hoping that the personal input of the head of “the Universal Church of all Catholic faithful” would grant them special leverage and help achieve what they had been unable to attain on their own. Schneidleder’s ethnographic work follows the unfolding disillusion of the community when faced with the reality of the limits of the imagined power of the Vatican. It also looks into the moment of a religious ritual, the Pontifical Mass held in Nazareth, that managed to create for a few hours an enclave of de-nationalized territory or, as he calls it, a “transnational space-time pocket.”

The Syriac community in Jerusalem is a community that Murre-van den Berg views as an integral part of the “story of a nation born of its losses.” The homeland of the Syriac community, which was originally in Turkey, is nowadays wholly virtual, “one that can be imagined and even seen . . . but that has not been realized.” Despite

the small size of the community, Jerusalem is an important diasporic center for the Syrians because of its antiquity and its religious significance. The strong affiliation of the Jerusalemite community with the transnational community can be seen in its inner struggle to define itself as a national or ethnic community. This identity conflict is manifested, for example, in recent modifications of the community's self-designation (Syrian or Syriac, Assyrians or Arameans) or indeed in the spoken languages preferred by community members (Arabic versus Classical Syriac/ Aramaic). Both examples are paradigmatic to the local national and transnational reconstructions of the community.

In "E-Transnationalism: The Case of the Christian Zionist Community in Israel," Michelle Syen explores the ways in which Christian Zionist individuals and groups have capitalized on the new tools offered by the Internet. The virtual world of cyberspace has provided "new, transnational forums for the community's public avowal of faith, for its participation in public acts of ritual communication, and for the redefinition of religious communities." While it allows for new interactions and transactions across national boundaries, Syen demonstrates that it is not free from competition and conflicts, arguing that "although some are unique to cyberspace, on occasion they do in fact correspond with those of the non-virtual world."

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tawahedo Church (EOTC) in the Holy Land is a transnational organization in a number of ways. Kaplan unveils the essential transnational elements in the management of the community, such as the flow of clergy, music, and literature from Ethiopia. Because Jerusalem is not only a historical and sacred site but also an apolitical and safe alternative to visiting politically divided Ethiopia, it is also a major transnational hub for the members of the EOTC who are not only from Ethiopia (and Eritrea) but also other parts of the world. The role of religious tourism highlights the importance of seasonality in religious transnationalism, which impacts the community's functionality in Jerusalem as a hub in the transnational network of the EOTC.

The authors of the papers in this issue seek to shed new light on specific Christian communities in the Holy Land and at the same time contribute to an academic discourse that transcends borders of faith, nation, and state. In doing so, we hope our contributions will stimulate further discussions both on the part of scholars who study the "Levant" and those who engage in other regions of the world.

Several of the books reviewed in this issue also touch upon subjects raised in the articles. In his review essay Kivanç Ulusoy compares two studies on the Alevi of Turkey. Ulusoy points out that while Elise Massicard's study shows the political implications of Alevi transnational networks in Europe, Necdet Subaşı's book examines the Alevi of

Turkey in nationalistic terms. Similarly, Palmira Brummett considers Julia A. Clancy-Smith's analysis of the movement of households, missionaries, and elite individuals in the Mediterranean basin during the nineteenth century, which serves as a vivid reminder that migration and transnationalism were not "invented" in the last decades of the twentieth century. Arietta Papaconstantinou surveys Milka Levy-Rubin's study of the origin, development, and socio-political relevance of the "Covenant of Umar," which contains valuable background reading for an understanding of the historical status of non-Muslims (including Christians) in the Early Islamic Empire. Although Ali M. Ansari's book on the complexity of modern Iranian nationalism, which is reviewed by Şaziye Burcu Giray, does not directly touch on the theme of transnationalism, the many Iranians dispersed around the globe during the period of the shah and the Iranian revolution would probably contend that this diaspora has been a direct product of conflicting definitions of national and religious identity.

The dock-ument section offers a selection of works from Shy Abady's *Augusta Victoria* series, which takes as its starting point the historic meeting between Theodor Herzl and Kaiser Wilhelm II. Both the real and the imagined significance of this meeting serve to inspire a series of striking images.

We would like to take this opportunity to express our thanks to the many people who supported the conference on contemporary Christian communities and participated in our discussions, including Prof. Gabriel Motzkin, Director of the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute; Dr. David Satran and Dr. Brouria Biton Ashkelony from the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; the late Dr. Sophie Kessler-Mesguich and Olivier Tourney, from the Centre de recherche français de Jérusalem (CRFJ); Rev. Michael McGarry, CSP, former director of the Tantur Institute for Ecumenical Studies; the Very Rev. Timothy Lowe, current director of Tantur; Rev. Jamal Khader, Dean of the Faculty of the Humanities, Bethlehem University; and Prof. Salim Munayer, director of Bethlehem Bible College. We also thank the *Journal of Levantine Studies* for providing a most befitting home for this body of work. We particularly appreciate the Editor and Assistant Editor of the journal, Dr. Anat Lapidot-Firilla and Nathalie Alyon, and the journal's linguistic editor, Deborah Schwartz. Without their support and expertise, this issue would not have come about.

**Steven Kaplan and Merav Mack**

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## Notes

- 1 Compare with Peter Beyer, "De-Centring Religious Singularity: The Globalization of Christianity as a Case in Point," *Numen* 50, no. 4 (2003): 357–386.
- 2 See also, Galia Sabar, "African Christianity in the Jewish State: Adaptation, Accommodation and Legitimization of Migrant Workers' Churches, 1990–2003," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34, no. 4 (2004): 407–437; Tovi Fenster and Ilan Vigel, "Globalization, Sense of Belonging, and the African Community in Tel Aviv-Jaffa," *Hagar* 7, no. 1 (2007): 8–24; Claudia Liebalt, "On Sentimental Orientalists, Christian Zionists, and Working Class Cosmopolitans: Filipina Domestic Workers' Journeys to Israel and Beyond," *Critical Asian Studies* 40, no. 4 (December 2008): 567–585.
- 3 In this context the years 1948, 1967, and 1991 are of special significance. We shall return to this point below, in our discussion of the concept "diaspora" and in our comments on historical forces.
- 4 Peggy Levitt, *God Needs No Passport: Immigrants and the Changing American Religious Landscape* (New York: New Press, 2007), 22.
- 5 Ibid. However, see also Wuthnow and Offutt, where the terms transnationalism and globalization seem to be used interchangeably. Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offutt, "Transnational Religious Connections," *Sociology of Religion* 69, no. 2 (2008): 209–232.
- 6 Michael Peter Smith, *Transnational Urbanism: Locating Globalization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 3; compare with Levitt, *God Needs No Passport*, 202.
- 7 Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage, 1994), 1–2. Emphasis added.
- 8 It is noteworthy that the leading journal in the field is called *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*.
- 9 Helena Lindholm Schulz and Juliane Hammer, *The Palestinian Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2003), 42–43.
- 10 To cite only one example, while Ethiopian Christians have little choice but to celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration (on Mt. Tabor) on a Saturday, regardless of what day it falls on the calendar because most congregants have to work Sunday through Thursday, they are able (unlike those living in their homeland) to celebrate it at the "actual" site, rather than at a replica.
- 11 Karen Fog Olwig, "Place, Movement and Identity: Processes of Inclusion and Exclusion in a 'Caribbean' Family," in *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, ed. Carolin Alfonso, Waltraud Kokot, and Khachig Tölölyan (London: Routledge, 2004), 55.
- 12 Manuel A. Vásquez, "Studying Religion in Motion: A Networks Approach," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 20, no. 2 (2008): 163.