

LEBANESE CATHOLICS

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Introduction

Religion has always been a significant factor in the history of the Lebanon/Syria region. In the area now known as Lebanon, topography and theological disagreements merged to create a multi-religious yet religiously segregated society. Over a lengthy period, the mountains of Lebanon became home for a number of religious groups seeking safety from persecution.¹ In the late seventh century, the Maronites fleeing persecution by rival Christian sects found refuge in the mountains of northern Lebanon.² Later, in the eleventh century, when the Druzes, an offshoot of Shi'ism, were expelled from Cairo, Egypt, they sought sanctuary in the southern Lebanese mountains.³

For centuries, both the Christians and the Muslims in Lebanon have been divided into numerous and often hostile sects.⁴ It is 'not a simple matter of being Christian or Muslim'.⁵ The Muslims are divided into three major sects: the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Druzes, while the Christians include the Maronites, the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholics or Melkites, the Syrian Catholics, the Syrian Orthodox, the Chaldeans, the Orthodox and Catholic Armenians and the Protestants.⁶ So although the population of Lebanon is frequently described as being divided between Christians and Muslims, the reality is, and has always been, more complex.

The early Lebanese immigrants to Australia were part of a mass migration out of the Ottoman province of Syria in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Known as Greater Syria, this area 'included the Alexandretta district in present-day Turkey, all of present-day Syria, all of present-day Lebanon, all of Palestine (present-day Israel, the West Bank,

and the Gaza Strip), and part of Jordan', and was broken into three main districts, Mount Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.⁷ Most of the early immigrants came from modern Lebanon. Situated on the Mediterranean, Lebanon borders Syria to the north and east, and Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories to the south. With an area of 10,400 square kilometres, a length of 210 kilometres, and a width varying between eighty to thirty-two kilometres, Lebanon is the smallest country in the Middle East.⁸ After approximately 400 years of Ottoman rule, and then twenty-five years as a French mandate, Lebanon became an independent state in 1943.

As they were from Greater Syria, until the 1940s, immigrants who came to Australia from contemporary Lebanon were usually identified as 'Syrians', and prior to the defeat of the Turks in World War One, Syrians in Australia were categorised as Turkish subjects. Because of the location of their homeland, these immigrants were officially classified as Asian and as a result, they were subject to a wide range of anti-Asian legislation. However, my study of the settlement of Lebanese in Australia from the 1880s to 1947 shows that while racial classification was critical in determining the status of Lebanese within Australian society, religious affiliation was also important. Just as religion was central to their previous lives, for the early immigrants, it was also a vital ingredient in the Lebanese Australian story.

The Ottoman legacy: separate but unequal

The Muslim Ottomans respected Christians and Jews as *People of the Book*, and tolerated these communities 'as separate but unequal'.⁹ Under Ottoman rule, non-Muslims were organised in millets, religious minority communities with internal autonomy.¹⁰ They were also considered *dhimmis*, 'protected subjects who were required to pay a poll tax... and to submit to Muslim sovereignty'.¹¹ As Makdisi explains, the "Pact of 'Umar":

...mandated fiscal, architectural, and eventually sartorial [clothing] distinctions to differentiate communities from one another. These distinctions affirmed the precedence of Islam and Muslims in all public spaces in return for protecting Christian and Jewish communities and allowing them to preserve their own laws and customs.¹²

This system created ‘separate and distinct civil societies predicated on sect (rite) and religion’, and in effect, this organised a church into a nationality.¹³ Hence, political and social organisation and religious affiliation were inseparable. In his seminal 1924 book about Syrian immigrants in the United States of America, the historian, Philip Hitti claimed that religion was to the Syrian what nationality was to the American; therefore, for Syrians [Lebanese] Church took the place of State.¹⁴ However, as Philip and Joseph Kayal noted in a later study of Syrian/Lebanese in the United States, realising they needed ‘to have a relevant identity in western terms’, Christian, Arabic-speaking Americans became ‘Americans of Syrian and eventually, Lebanese ancestry’.¹⁵

The Australian/Queensland context

In almost every study of early Lebanese migration, it is noted that regardless of their destination, the majority of emigrants from Greater Syria before 1950 were Christian. This was certainly the case in Australia and with the exception of four people who were Druzes, the Lebanese immigrants who arrived in Queensland between the 1880s and 1947 were predominantly Maronite, Melkite and Orthodox Christians.¹⁶ In common with the United States experience, in Australia, the early Lebanese accepted the use of the term ‘Syrian’ because it was necessary as immigrants to have a collective/national identity. Similarly, although religious sect, Melkite, Maronite or Orthodox, was the primary source of their identity, in Australia, they identified simply as Christians. However, this Syrian/Christian identity, constructed in the

context of the emigration process, was merely a practical label. It was not how these people usually identified or thought of themselves, and certainly did not signify the existence of a cohesive group.

Table 1:

RELIGION OF FAMILY IN LEBANON

| | |
|--------------------|------------|
| Maronite | 22 |
| Melkite | 38 |
| Orthodox | 28 |
| Maronite & Melkite | 6 |
| Don't know | 2 |
| No Answer | 6 |
| Total | 102 |

Source: 2nd/3rd Generation Questionnaires, Anne Monsour, Private Collection. ¹⁷

Lebanese Christians

The early Lebanese immigrants to Australia came from a region which was culturally unified but had ‘traditionally been fragmented by religion’ which was ‘at the root of each individual’s social identity’.¹⁸ Although Islam was the dominant religion of the Arab East, the area that is now Lebanon was exceptional as more than fifty per cent of its population was Christian.¹⁹ With the exception of the modern converts to Protestantism, a result of the activities of Western missionaries in the nineteenth century, Lebanese Christians belong to congregations that have had ‘a continuity in faith dating from apostolic times’.²⁰ While initially there was a universal Christian Church encompassing the East and the West, ‘heretical’ groups such as the Monophysites and Nestorians, separated from this Church in the fifth and sixth centuries and then the remaining Church split in 1054.²¹

As a result of the Great Schism, the Church in the West became the Roman Catholic Church and in the East, the Eastern or Greek Orthodox Church.²² Currently, Eastern Christians are divided into four major groupings: the Nestorians, the Monophysites, the Eastern Orthodox and the Uniates.²³

Orthodox

The modern Eastern Orthodox Church is made up of several ‘independent patriarchates that follow the Byzantine rite and are in communion with each other and with the Patriarch of Constantinople’ who is their nominal head.²⁴ Since the fourteenth century, the Patriarch of Antioch has resided in Damascus and currently, the Patriarchate of Antioch has jurisdiction over five million Orthodox Christians, mainly in the Middle East (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, and the Emirates).²⁵ The early Orthodox Lebanese immigrants to Australia were generally members of the Antiochian Orthodox Church.²⁶

Melkites

Initially the term Melkite, which comes from the Syriac word for king (Melko), referred to Middle Eastern Christians who accepted the official position of the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 which aimed to settle the dispute about the nature of Christ.²⁷ The conquest of the Byzantine Empire by the Turks in 1453 consolidated the position of the Melkites ‘within the Orthodox Byzantine orbit’; however, in 1724, after the death of Patriarch Athanasius, the patriarchate of Antioch split in two, one Orthodox and one Catholic.²⁸ Subsequently, the followers of the Catholic Patriarch were referred to as Melkites.²⁹

Throughout the following century, the Melkites or Greek Catholics were persecuted by the Greek Orthodox, who were in the majority, and as a consequence, many sought refuge in Mount Lebanon.³⁰ The Melkite Lebanese who came to Australia belonged to this Uniat church which has its own Patriarch and retains a Byzantine rite but uses the Arabic language in its liturgy.

Maronites

The Maronites trace their origins to the Syrian monk, Marun, (350-433 A.D.) whose followers established the monastery of Dayr Marun on the banks of the Orontos River in Syria.³¹ In the fifth century, the fundamentals of the Maronite rite were more firmly developed by the Syrian priest, St. Maron.³² Isolated and stigmatized by both Latin and Orthodox Christianity as a result of disagreements about the nature of Christ, in the late seventh century the Maronites left Syria and sought sanctuary in the rugged mountains and deep valleys of Mount Lebanon.³³ They formally united with Rome at the time of the Crusades in 1182 and as a Uniat body, they have their own liturgy (mostly Syriac) and their own hierarchy of Patriarch and bishops.³⁴ The development of the Maronite church was mainly limited to Lebanon and the Maronites became Lebanon's largest Christian community.³⁵ In contrast to the Syrian Orthodox and the Melkites who 'have a common and broad heritage' and are both international and universal churches, because of its isolated development, the Maronite church can be described as a Lebanese Catholic church.³⁶

Religion in Australia

In their homeland, religious worship and ritual were an integral part of everyday life, so it is no surprise that religious worship was obviously important to the early Lebanese immigrants. This is well illustrated by the advice given to Julia Mellick in 1892 when she was leaving Bterram, a village in the mountains of Lebanon, for Australia. Her father, who was a priest in the Antiochian Orthodox Church, gave her the following counsel:

My daughter you are going to a far country. There you may not find one of our churches, but remember you can worship God in any church; and if there be no church then you can worship God in your heart.³⁷

Indeed, in the absence of their own churches, the early immigrants attended other Christian churches. As the Maronite and Melkite Churches were affiliated with the Roman Church, they, predictably, attended local Roman Catholic churches. For Orthodox Lebanese, the decision was more open and consequently, they worshipped in both Catholic and Protestant churches. The fact that eighty-six of 102 respondents in a sample of 2nd and 3rd generation Lebanese/Australians indicated a Roman Catholic affiliation in Australia, suggests that, in addition to the Melkites and Maronites, about half of the families from Orthodox backgrounds joined the Roman Catholic Church.

Table 2:

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION IN AUSTRALIA

| | |
|------------------|----|
| Roman Catholics | 86 |
| Anglican | 12 |
| Uniting Church | 1 |
| Church of Christ | 1 |
| None | 2 |

Source: 2nd/3rd Generation Questionnaires

Active parishioners

The segregation of Lebanese in Queensland in occupations such as hawking and shopkeeping and Queensland's particular geography and decentralized development led to a dispersed settlement throughout the State. The only two identifiable settlements of Lebanese were South Brisbane and Toowoomba. Isolated from family, friends and other Lebanese, involvement in a church community provided not only a way to maintain the practice of their faith but also a way to interact with others and to move into the wider society, and Lebanese immigrants were often actively involved in their local parishes.

According to their former parish priest, two brothers who had settled in a small Queensland town in the 1930s ‘were the backbone of the Parish in many ways and were liked and respected by everyone in the town - Catholic or not’.³⁸ Involvement included giving financial support, supporting church activities, providing meals for travelling priests, cleaning the church and so on. The son of Lebanese immigrants, who settled in Childers and whose family were active members of their Catholic community, recalled that his mother ‘was very generous and often made a cake for the nuns and contributed to stalls and any other functions, especially at the school’ and that she encouraged her children ‘to join activities of the school or community’.³

In Toowoomba, the Lebanese have had a close connection with the Catholic Church and the first Australian Lebanese priests were from St Patrick’s Parish.⁴⁰ John Isaac was ordained in 1927 and John Nusfer Michael was ordained in 1929.⁴¹ John Isaac’s younger brother, Tom, also became a priest. The Isaac family belonged to the Maronite Rite and as their sister explained: ‘the two boys...had to change their rite before they got ordained; they had to change from the Maronite to the Latin’.⁴² In an interview with Antonia Simpson in 1982, Father John Isaac confirmed that ‘when he was ordained he had had to change from the Maronite Rite to the Latin rite because he ‘wanted to work with the priests in Toowoomba’.⁴³

Although they belonged to the Orthodox rite, the children of Peter and Nefley Mellick were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁴ In Ayr, the family attended the local Catholic Church, the children went to the Parish school and Peter, a successful businessman, was one of the guarantors for the Parish debt.⁴⁵ Raschid Arida, who with his brother Dominique established an extremely successful retail business in Charters Towers with branches in north-west Queensland

towns including Winton, Cloncurry and Hughenden, was ‘an ardent and tireless worker for the Catholic Church and its educational establishments’, and after his death in 1944, the R.D. Arida Trust administered annual prizes and scholarships to students in Charters Towers and a bursary for students accepted at The University of Queensland but unable to afford the cost.⁴⁶

The first Melkite, Maronite and Orthodox churches

Despite the small number of immigrants from Syria/Lebanon, they quickly established their own churches in Australia demonstrating a strong attachment to their separate religious rites. In 1891, Father Sylwanus Mansour (1854-1929) secured the permission of Cardinal Moran to build a Byzantium Rite church.⁴⁷ He travelled throughout New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria gathering funds and support for the church and in 1893 purchased a block of land in Wellington Street, Waterloo for the site of St Michael’s Church.⁴⁸ It was completed in 1895 and consecrated by Cardinal Moran.⁴⁹ Two Maronite priests arrived in Sydney in 1893 to minister to Maronites in Australia.⁵⁰ While they initially carried out their ministry from the Mt Carmel Church in Waterloo, by 1894 they had a Maronite chapel in a house in Raglan Street, Waterloo which they used until a Maronite church was completed in Elizabeth Street, Redfern and dedicated by Cardinal Moran in January 1897.⁵¹ In 1898, work began on the construction of a Greek Orthodox church to minister to the approximately two hundred Greek families living in Sydney, and also to the Syrian (Antiochian) Orthodox community.⁵² However, from 1920 the Lebanese Orthodox worshipped in their own church, St George Antiochian Church, which was situated on the corner of Walker and Redfern Streets, Redfern.

So, from the mid-1890s, Lebanese immigrants who settled in Sydney had the option of attending their own church or at least a Lebanese church. This was not the case for those in Brisbane until 1936 when Queensland's first Lebanese church, Saint Clement's, South Brisbane, was opened for public worship.⁵⁴ St Clement's was unique because although its establishment was initiated and overseen by Monsignor Sophronus Khoury, a Melkite priest, his objective was not simply to serve the Melkite community but to unite the approximately 'two hundred Lebanese of different Rites in order to build a church of their Eastern Rite and Customs'.⁵⁵

This uniting of the three Rites, Melkite, Orthodox and Maronite, was unusual and was a source of pride for many of the Lebanese. Minnie Jacobson, whose brother, Michael Calile Malouf, was president of the Church committee for many years, remembered how, when St Clement's was finished, 'every Lebanese went there regardless of what church they went to'.⁵⁶ Fared Tooma, who was a young boy when the church was being built and later served as its secretary and treasurer recalled that:

The Maronites, the Melkites and the Orthodox used to get together. As far as they were concerned they were all Christians and they all stayed together and it was wonderful. I remember that building. I helped carry the bricks as a little boy. My dad used to work every Saturday there helping the builders. A lot of the others did too.⁵⁷

Similarly, Mick Sardie recalled how Monsignor Khoury and the 'handful' of Lebanese in Queensland, whether they were Maronite, Melkite or Orthodox, worked together to build 'one' church, a 'Lebanese' church:⁵⁸

According to Sardie:

That church is the only church in Australia was paid cash for. Didn't owe a penny when it was opened up.... Lebanese in different country towns all helped.... People from the north would come and go to the church... Charlie [Remanous] ... wanted to built the church all in together...one lot, one Christian... no Melkite, no Latin...what a good idea. Even Orthodox came to the church...it was a Lebanese church....⁵⁹

However as Sardie noted in 1990, since the 1980s, this is no longer the case and the community is now separated with churches for each Rite:

Now all...separated. Not one community anymore. Separate churches.... We weren't bought up like that: a Lebanese not Melkite Church. People mostly socialise with their own families now...⁶⁰

Like Sardie, Nick Dyer, whose father, Sam, was president of the Church committee for many years, expressed disappointment that Lebanese Christians in Brisbane were no longer happy to worship together and that religious worship no longer united the community:

...I can assure you that until...about 1981, I was not aware of the division between the Melkites, the Orthodox and the Maronites.⁶¹

Roman Catholics

By the time St Clement's was built many families had been absorbed into other churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church. For example, in a sample of 102 descendants of Lebanese immigrants, sixty-one had attended a Lebanese church, but only five attended one on a weekly or fortnightly basis.⁶² Three had only been to a Lebanese church once or twice, while most of the sixty-one went infrequently or on special occasions. Eighty-four of the 102 attended other churches and almost seventy per cent did so weekly. Clearly, for a significant percentage of this sample, religious worship was still important.

Table 3:

CHURCH ATTENDANCE

| | YES | NO | NO ANSWER | TOTAL |
|---|-----|----|--------------|-------|
| Do you ever attend a Lebanese church | 61 | 39 | 2 | 102 |
| Do you ever attend another church | 84 | 16 | 2 | 102 |

Source: 2nd/3rd Generation Questionnaires

However, although not completely severed, for the descendants of the early Lebanese immigrants, ties with the Lebanese churches were extremely weak. Furthermore, knowledge of the particular rites had not been passed on. Only forty-four per cent of the 102 respondents said their parents or grandparents had talked to them about the Church they belonged to in Lebanon, and just over half said they had never or only rarely talked about their Lebanese Church. According to Mick Sardie, whether they were baptized in the Maronite or Latin Rite was not an issue for his parents:

...[it] wasn't considered important...so long as you were Catholic...no such thing as a Roman Catholic just Catholic.⁶³

Even though Nick Dyer's father was actively involved in the building of St Clement's, his family continued to attend their local Roman Catholic church rather than the Lebanese church. On Sundays, his mother attended Mass at the Catholic church at Kangaroo Point, while his father went to St Clement's.⁶⁴ So, despite his father's central role in establishing St Clement's, for the family, the Lebanese church's role was relatively minor:

Now we had nothing, and I mean a big zero, to do with the church, the Lebanese church. Now some of my cousins might be married there. Somebody might die and be buried from there. So in those terms that was our contact with the Lebanese church...of course... Dad was buried from there; Mum was buried from there, all those things....⁶⁵

Although Minnie Jacobson's parents were Orthodox, the children:

...were all christened Catholics. We were born in Brisbane and we were all christened in St Mary's Church in Peel Street — Catholics. Mum came to the Catholic Church and we...all became Catholics.... We only knew the Catholic religion.⁶⁶

Jacobson believed her parents were not concerned they could not worship in an Orthodox church:

No. It didn't make any difference to them. No, not at all. Mum loved the Catholic Church. She loved it. Well, it's just the same. Not much difference. But when we'd go to Sydney, we'd go to the Lebanese church there.⁶⁷

According to Jacobson her mother was:

...very broad minded. Long as she went to church, she went to St Mary's Church, she went to the Lebanese church. But I used to say to her, 'Do you want to go to the Greek Orthodox Church?' And she said, 'no'.⁶⁸

When asked what her religion was, Jacobson answered without hesitation:

Roman Catholic...because we were all christened in the Roman Catholic Church and we had our communion and our confirmation, right through.⁶⁹

Despite being Orthodox, Minnie's family appears to have wholeheartedly adopted the Roman Catholic Church; however, this was certainly not the case for all Orthodox Lebanese in Queensland.

A fusion of religious affiliation was relatively common in families from an Orthodox background. Anne Mellick and her siblings, for example, were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church apparently because of the influence of their uncle's wife, Agneas, who was an Irish Catholic.⁷⁰ As a result, the family attended the local Catholic church, the children went to the Parish school and Mellick's father was one of the guarantors for the Parish debt.⁷¹ However, after a falling out with the Parish priest, the children were sent to the State school and the family attended the Church of England. Later, Mellick attended a Presbyterian school in Charters Towers where the students alternated between the Presbyterian and Methodist churches. Further illustrating an eclectic religious affiliation, Mellick married in the Anglican Church because her husband, a Lebanese immigrant, was Orthodox.⁷²

Although they were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church, and despite the existence of a Greek Orthodox Church in Innisfail, Hazel Francis and her siblings were raised as Anglicans:

We were actually baptised in the Roman Catholic Church. . . .
We all went to Sunday school, Church of England's little
St Auburn's Church...and we were all confirmed there. And
we've all remained Anglican.⁷³

Apparently, attending the Greek Orthodox church was not an option because it would have emphasized difference. To avoid being viewed as 'foreign', Hazel and her siblings 'were all sent to Sunday school at the Church of England'.⁷⁴

In contrast to these examples, some parents were quite rigid about religious affiliation.

We were brought up very strict Protestants. My parents, they despised the Catholics. We were supposed to be called Orthodox. We were sent to Protestant schools...and Protestant church, although I was sent to All Hallows, but I was never allowed, they told me to tell the teacher...I must not learn anything to do with the Catholic religion.⁷⁵

While, in general, an Orthodox background allowed some flexibility regarding choice of religious affiliation, as the following example illustrates, the Orthodox who joined the Roman Catholic Church always faced the possibility of rejection. Obviously determined to maintain their connections with the Orthodox Church, Isaac and Footeen Nasser took their first three children on the long train journey from Clermont in western Queensland to Sydney so they could be christened in the Holy Trinity, Greek Orthodox church which had been established in 1898.⁷⁶ As Malcolm Nasser recalled:

Granddad was a great man...in the ways of his religion.... He used to sing and recite the psalms in Arabic all day. He never had a meal without saying grace before and after meals. He was a very spiritual fellow.... So religion was very important to them, but in Clermont you had to make the next best choice, you see, and he always thought the Catholics were second rate compared with the Orthodox.⁷⁷

However, in 1902, when their fourth child was obviously dying, the Roman Catholic priest agreed to christen him so that a Christian burial would be possible.⁷⁸ The subsequent eight children were christened Roman Catholics, and all the children attended the Roman Catholic school in Clermont.⁷⁹ The family was active in the parish and appeared to have developed an ongoing and positive relationship with the Roman Catholic Church. When Footeen Nasser died in 1951, she had worshipped in the Roman Catholic Church for fifty-five years. Despite this, because she had not converted to Catholicism, the Irish priest initially refused to allow her funeral to be held in the Catholic church:

Well, the Irish priest there - who I served on the altar for six years...and who we all had our first communion with, he refused to bury Granny from the church...because she wasn't Catholic, she was Orthodox. Well, this was only 1950, he was a good man in a way but he was pretty arrogant and Irish...he refused to bury Granny from the church. Well, my father who was reasonably educated - he had a stand-up discussion with the priest - he put the cards on the table and said, 'We've been Catholic in name'. Well, my father in fact was a Catholic, and he said 'if you don't do it —', well, I don't know what he would have threatened him with, but whatever happened the priest agreed to it. He gave her a fairly perfunctory service. In those days...people were black and white [in their thinking] weren't they? ⁸⁰

While active involvement in their parish communities provided a means of belonging, acceptance was not something to be taken for granted even by Maronites and Melkites who were in union with Rome. In a more personal example, almost thirty years after the Irish priest in Clermont initially refused to hold Footeen Nasser's funeral service in the Catholic church, at my father's funeral in 1979, at which several priests concelebrated, the parish priest refused to permit Father Alexios Malouf, the Melkite priest, to join the other priests on the altar.

Asian but Christian

As non-Europeans, the early Lebanese were 'undesirable' immigrants; however, over time they were granted exemptions from some of the disabilities imposed on Asians. For example, despite the official policy to exclude non-Europeans, after 1907, Lebanese were allowed limited entry to Australia as dependent relatives; and those who had settled permanently, many of them before Federation, were eventually given access to basic rights.⁸¹ After 1920, for instance, they were able to gain citizenship. Lebanese were

granted these exemptions because they were like southern Europeans in appearance, had migrated in family groups and were Christian.⁸² For the early Lebanese immigrants, being Christian was vital because acceptability hinged on being white, and the archival records support the view that being Christian was an indispensable component of whiteness.⁸³

In the Australian context, it was politically expedient for Lebanese to de-emphasize their Eastern rites and to describe themselves simply as Christians. The early Lebanese immigrants knew their physical appearance and Christian affiliations were favourable attributes in their bid for citizenship. In archival records, race and religion were repeatedly referred to by the immigrants and others advocating on their behalf. In 1903, for example, Joseph Abdullah was refused naturalization because he was a single, Asiatic male.⁸⁴ Subsequently, in a letter to the Home Secretary, Abdullah disputed the correctness of this classification on the basis of his religion:

Although I am termed an Asiatic Alien, I would respectfully point out that I am of the Christian Religion, the same as the rest of the people of Australia.⁸⁵

Similarly, another Lebanese immigrant excluded from naturalization because of his birthplace, responded with the following:

Sir, the External Department says that I am not eligible to become a subject of the King in the 'Commonwealth' of Australia on account of being born in Syria. I am a Christian and I think I am eligible to become a subject of the King....⁸⁶

Advocating on behalf of a Lebanese client, solicitors described him as 'a sober steady man', who like his father before him was a Roman Catholic.⁸⁷ Some Lebanese claimed they were descendants of European crusaders.⁸⁸ Whether valid or not, the professed links with European crusaders

were clearly intended to imply Christian Lebanese were more European than Asian. In his decade long bid for citizenship (1910-1920), Michael Malouf made deliberate reference to the depth and authenticity of his Christian roots.⁸⁹ He persistently described his country of origin as ‘Lebanon, Palestine’, not Lebanon, Syria; and the assertion that his parents fled from ‘Lebanon, Palestine’, when he was a ‘child in arms’ was clearly intended to invoke biblical overtones.

During World War One, religious affiliation increased in importance for Lebanese because religion was used to distinguish between the predominately Christian Lebanese and Turks, who were more likely to be Muslim.⁹⁰ As enemy aliens, Syrians [Lebanese] were required to register at their local police station, and then to report at designated intervals during the war.⁹¹ However, Turkish subjects who were Christian and ‘well-known to be opposed to the Turkish regime’ could be exempted from certain requirements applying to enemy aliens.⁹² In 1918, for example, Michael Khyat, a Lebanese resident of Melbourne, was not required to report weekly to the police because they were satisfied that ‘although a subject of Turkey’, he was ‘a Syrian opposed to Turkish rule’ and was a Christian.⁹³ In the aftermath of World War One, religion was clearly still an important indicator of acceptability. After 1920, the police consistently reported the religion of an applicant for naturalization. In 1921, for example, when Michael Khyat applied for naturalization, it was requested that in addition to their routine enquiries, the police also ascertain whether he was ‘of the Christian or Mohammedan faith’.⁹⁴ When Habib Assaf applied for citizenship a similar request was made:

Confirmation as to place of birth is specifically desired. As this man is a Syrian, his religion, Mohamedan or otherwise, should be shown on the report.⁹⁵

In his application, John Nader was described as being ‘of the Roman Catholic Faith’.⁹⁶ Similarly, it was noted that Solomon Ganim was a Roman Catholic and that all his family had been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁷

The official point of view

It is quite evident from government sources that Lebanese were eventually accepted as suitable candidates for citizenship because, based on their physical appearance and religion, it was believed that in contrast to other Asians, they were more likely to assimilate.⁹⁸ By 1909, for example, the Minister for External Affairs, Egerton Batchelor, had decided Syrians [Lebanese] should be permitted naturalization.⁹⁹ Batchelor isolated race and religion as the key factors in favour of Lebanese being accepted as citizens. He believed there was nothing to fear ‘from the inclusion in the ranks of citizens of the Commonwealth of Syrians — men of a race not far removed from our stock, and whose religion is often the same as ours’.¹⁰⁰ In deliberations regarding the status of Syrians, both appearance and religion were consistently raised as positive attributes.¹⁰¹ In 1914, for example, the Chief Clerk of the Department of External Affairs noted that in addition to being similar in appearance to southern Europeans, ‘all’ of these Syrians were Christian.¹⁰² Similarly, Atlee Hunt also argued that Syrians were more European than Asiatic in appearance, and were ‘practically all Christians’ belonging to the Greek Church or a Church affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁰³

Conclusion

Through the process of applying for naturalization, it was made clear to Lebanese immigrants that access to equal status within Australian society was based on being considered European; therefore, it is not surprising that identification with a particular religious sect was discarded. This was clearly not an environment in which to flaunt one’s ties to

an Eastern Church. That this was able to happen, when, for Lebanese, religious affiliation was the primary source of identity, demonstrates the intensity of the pressure to hide their Eastern roots and to highlight their qualification as white, European and Christian. The challenges they faced and the tenuous nature of their acceptance in Australian society is well illustrated by the experiences of Father John Isaac, the first Lebanese Australian priest. His sister recounted how as a curate in his first position:

...he came down to hear confessions one Saturday and somebody had written 'dago priest' on his confessional.... Then he got his first parish and he got an anonymous letter...to say they didn't want black priests...he never told us. I only heard that after he retired. His housekeeper told me.¹⁰⁴

The pressure to assimilate was magnified by the effectiveness of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, which ensured the number of Lebanese in Australia was always very small, and also by the impact of scattered settlement. However, having come from an area where being Christian was a handicap, perhaps it was enough for these early Lebanese immigrants that in Australia it had become an advantage.

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Her thesis is a study of Lebanese settlement in Australia from the 1880s to 1947 with particular reference to Queensland. For almost two decades, Anne has been researching, speaking and writing about the history of Lebanese settlement in Australia.

She is a board member of the Australian Lebanese Historical Society and the convener of its Queensland branch.

Her book, 'Not Quite White: Lebanese and the White Australia Policy, 1880 to 1947', has recently been published by Post Pressed (www.postpressed.com.au).

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