Sacred Rivals

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Conspiracy to Massacre

*Liberal Catholics and the Invention of Pan-Islamism*

When news of the violent events of Syria began trickling back to France in early July of 1860, the charitable and ideological machines of the Œuvre d’Orient lurched into high gear. The Œuvre’s council immediately convened an emergency meeting to discuss how best to help “the Christians of Syria so cruelly persecuted by the Druses.” The council voted to publish a note about the massacres and to make an appeal in all the “journals of Paris” to raise funds for the Maronite victims. At the close of the meeting, the members scattered to deliver the announcement to various journal editors. The Œuvre itself, having already distributed its available funds for the fiscal year, could only devote 1,000 francs to inaugurate the fundraising drive and pray that Catholic France would be generous.

In the Catholic press, early coverage of the massacres was heavily influenced by members and friends of the Œuvre d’Orient. Those among the Œuvre’s members who had traveled or cultivated contacts in the Levant, especially Melchior de Vogüé and François Lenormant, took it upon themselves to write opinion pieces or transmit firsthand accounts of the massacres to Catholic France. Given the Œuvre’s scholarly and missionary contacts in the Ottoman Empire, the association was in a privileged position to control authoritative accounts of the massacres. From the very first, it seems, the members hoped not only to convince Catholics to donate but also to influence the Second Empire’s foreign policy, pressuring Napoleon III to intervene militarily. Emmanuel Guillaume Rey—Œuvre council member and historian of the Crusades—wrote to Vogüé that he was sure that “something useful and serious” would come from the Œuvre: “But publicity, publicity is more necessary to us than ever” since there still seemed to be resistance “in the high regions” of the government against an “armed intervention.” Guillaume Rey proceeded to sketch out a publicity
campaign that Vogüé and other Œuvre members would follow. The next mail delivery from Syria was sure to contain horrifying details of the Druze sack of Christian Zahleh: “Let us take advantage of the circumstance.” Disseminating the accounts of missionaries and other contacts, “Let us unmask more and more the perfidy of the Turkish authorities and try to tear the [French] government away ... from its last scruples toward the droit des gens [customary international law]; which scarcely exists in the Orient” anyway. In other words, Guillaume Rey argued, France had every right to intervene militarily, since the Ottomans had not shown themselves worthy of sovereignty and the protections of international law. Œuvre publicists needed only to hammer away on the theme that Ottoman authorities were complicit in the massacres.

Throughout the late summer of 1860, Guillaume Rey would continue to pass on to Vogüé communications from Syria. Even after Vogüé published his first article on the Syrian events, Guillaume Rey begged Vogüé to pen more articles to encourage an “energetic” French repression of the Druze. Amid discussion of the Œuvre’s fundraiser and Lavigerie’s plans to distribute the charity, Guillaume Rey remarked, “It is indispensable for the pacification of [Mount Lebanon] that our soldiers burn some cartridges against the Druses.” Moreover, as we will see, in the Œuvre’s response to the massacres, the conflict in Mount Lebanon between the Druze and Maronite rivals was elevated as evidence of a wider Islamic conspiracy against Ottoman Christians. By September, the Œuvre council’s proceedings would refer simply to the “victims of the Muslims,” no longer distinguishing between the Druze and Muslim attackers. In their charity and publicity campaigns on behalf of the Maronites—in their desire to articulate a common, patriotic cause between mainstream Catholics and the French state—the liberal Catholics of the Œuvre were among the first in France to depict the Islamic world as a unified geopolitical enemy and to call for a civilizational clash against an allegedly conspiratorial global Islam. In their desire to demonstrate their own commitment to liberty of conscience and separation of church and state—to demonstrate their distance from theocratic Catholics like Veuillot—they were also at the forefront of those who depicted Islam as hopelessly fanatical and illiberal, as incapable of disentangling religion from politics.

The Bulletin of the Œuvre d’Orient published the eyewitness accounts of the Jesuit Père Billotet and the letters of Œuvre associate François Lenormant, both in Syria. The Père Gagarin, a representative of the Jesuits in Paris and a member of the Œuvre’s council, also passed on to Vogüé reports from Jesuit missionaries in Syria. These and other missionary sources relied heavily on classic martyrological tropes: the Catholic victim, presented with the choice of conversion to
Islam or death, who invariably held strong to her faith. But what all the missionary and other sources agreed upon was the complicity of the Turkish authorities and soldiers in the massacres. Guillaume Rey passed along the accusation that Turkish soldiers had even come from Damascus to participate in the destruction of Zahleh. And Père de Prunières, a Jesuit missionary in Beirut, engaged in some conspiracy theorizing of his own: the Ottomans must have secretly tricked the Maronites somehow into being aggressive first, intentionally entraping the Christians into their own massacre by the Druze. Prunières claimed that the Ottoman Pasha’s cannon fire—supposedly intended to disperse the Druze attackers—was in fact a prearranged signal for them to begin their bloody work. This accusation of a long-planned conspiracy at higher levels of the Ottoman administration or even in Mecca would be one of the most persistent themes in French Catholic coverage of the events.

Another missionary reported that the massacres were a predictably Islamic reaction to the liberal reforms of the Ottoman Empire. The Qur’an commands that Christians must pay for the right to live under Muslim overlords or else be killed and forfeit their property, the missionary explained. The Hatti Hmayoun (the 1856 reform that equalized the status of Christians and Muslims, and which had so excited the hopes of French Catholics) had done away with Christian subjugation and taxes. Therefore, devout Muslims believed they had every right to kill them. This explanation of local resistance to Ottoman reform was redundant and even contradictory, though, since the same missionary also agreed with the conspiracy theory that “the order to massacre the Christians was given at Constantinople.”

One other recurring theme in these letters, in addition to the conspiracy theory about Ottoman complicity and the essentially “Muslim” character of the fanaticism and violence, was the supposed special hatred these allegedly enraged Muslims had for France—their intentional targeting of French symbols and protégés. These Muslim fanatics knew about France’s support for the Maronites and associated France with Catholicism, French eyewitnesses claimed; and thus, they intentionally disrespected symbols of French authority. The fact that some Muslim notables were also among the massacred was not proof that there were nonreligious motives for the massacres; rather, supposedly, it was because these Muslims happened to be loyal to France that they were massacred. “The war of extermination,” Guillaume Rey wrote, “is addressed to our country.” One Jesuit claimed that as the missionary house of the Lazarists burned, the attackers cried out “Where then is Napoleon? May he come deliver you from our fires.” Of course, some rioters doubtless did resent the “humiliating” way French consuls
intervened in local conflicts to protect their clients and missionaries. Far from denationalizing and adapting their Christianity, missionaries under France’s “religious protectorate” in Ottoman Syria had strong political incentives to associate their Christianity with Frenchness. Yet when missionaries’ embrace of the French flag and protection became the focus of resentment and violence in 1860, this supposedly proved that it was Muslims, not Christians, who followed a politicized religion. For the liberal Catholics at the Œuvre, intent on proving the patriotism and essential Frenchness of Catholicism, a politicized and France-hating Islam was the perfect shadowboxing partner.

The notion that Muslims’ anti-Christian animus included a particular hatred for France, the patron of Eastern Christians, would permeate Catholic correspondence from the region and appear in Œuvre-affiliated coverage of the events. This was a popular theme among Catholics not only because it was hoped it might taunt France into intervening militarily but also because it reinforced—from a negative perspective—the Œuvre’s view of itself as the patriotic charity par excellence. The attackers had desecrated crosses and French flags alike. In other words, even the Muslim enemy correctly recognized that France’s true interests in the Levant were represented by Catholicism. Lenormant’s letters, published in L’Ami de la religion and later republished in the Œuvre’s Bulletin, waxed particularly eloquent on this reverse image of the identification between Christian and French interests. “The favorite joke of the Druses and Turks,” Lenormant wrote, “was to slaughter on the cross the unfortunate Christians of Deir-El-Kamar, saying to them: ‘Why does your God not save you now?’ Others were killed on the French flag with analogous insults.” In other words, the Christians of Syria were dying like Jesus himself, on a cross and to the sound of the same jeers that had filled the crucified Christ’s ears. But if they were martyrs for their love of God, they were just as much martyrs for their love of France: the flag of France their cross of suffering, Napoleon III the God who would avenge them, or so the Œuvre hoped.

These were the sources and themes Vogüé and his colleagues worked with in their campaign to raise funds and to incite a military expedition. The royalist-turned-liberal Catholic journal, L’Ami de la religion, was the primary outlet where the Œuvre publicized its special fundraising drive, including lists of donations received, and it was where Vogüé and Lenormant published their editorials and the correspondence from their missionary contacts. What L’Ami de la religion’s own correspondents and the Œuvre’s contributors sought to demonstrate, above all, was that the “Muslims” of the Ottoman Empire, from local Druzes and Arabs all the way up to Turkish authorities, were driven by their
“Muslim fanaticism” to conspire at the “extermination of the entire Christian race in Syria.”\textsuperscript{14} One of the more prominent aspects of this reductivism was to lump the Druze-Maronite civil war in Mount Lebanon (which had raged since May 1860) together with the “Damascus incident” of early July, even though the two events followed distinct logics.\textsuperscript{15} In a similar vein, \textit{L’Ami de la religion} quoted reports from the Jesuit missionary Père Rousseau posted at Saida (Sidon), who insisted that the “Muslims” of his town had been incited by their muftis. Reflecting the paranoia among on-site observers and setting the tone for Catholic France’s subsequent views of the events, the père insisted that this was “not a war between the Druses and the Maronites, it is a conspiracy hatched by the Turkish authorities and the Druses to exterminate the Christians,” a conspiracy that “reaches everywhere in the Turk Empire.”\textsuperscript{16} Rousseau reported that in some villages the Christian populations had resisted valiantly up until the Ottoman garrison disarmed them, promising them official protection and then allowing them to be massacred.

The Œuvre’s first director, Abbé Charles Lavigerie, did his part to promote the thesis of the essentially Muslim, religious character of the massacres and, by extension, of Ottoman complicity. In one of his appeals for funds, Lavigerie claimed that a Druze chief had “sworn” not to stop hunting down Maronites until he had “cut off the head of the last man who makes the sign of the cross.” The Maronites, on the other hand, were “martyrs . . . persecuted for their faith.”\textsuperscript{17} Likewise, the archbishop of Bordeaux, a supporter of the Œuvre, published a mandement to the faithful of his diocese (and reproduced in \textit{L’Ami de la religion}) that accused the Ottomans of having concocted a “general extermination plan” against the Maronites, the “French of the Orient, an inoffensive, modest, agricultural people.”\textsuperscript{18}

Melchior de Vogüé was quick to bring his expertise and missionary contacts to bear on the events, authoring a piece on “The Events of Syria” in the July 14 edition of \textit{L’Ami de la religion}, as well as a series of subsequent articles. Vogüé’s firsthand knowledge of the region and air of foreign policy savvy lent his contributions authority and sophistication; but the themes he developed were identical to those of the missionaries: “Muslim fanaticism,” Ottoman complicity and conspiracy, and the perpetrators’ targeting of French protégés and symbols. Vogüé’s first intent was to contradict anyone still naïve enough to believe in the “good faith” of Ottoman reforms and to justify French military occupation. The Ottomans and the Druze were motivated in their hatred for the Maronites because of the latter’s cultural and commercial contacts with Europe. Muslims resented the Maronites’ new ascendance brought on by
missionary education and the growth of silk production and especially their pretenses to equality after the Treaty of Paris and Hatti Hamayoun reforms. Vogüé, echoing the views of his missionary correspondents, accused the “Turkish authorities” of entrapping the Maronites, by allegedly tricking them into quarreling among themselves, and then provoking them into a fight against the Druze.¹⁹ Throughout L’Ami de la religion’s and the Œuvre’s publicizing of the events, this theme of general Ottoman complicity and centralized plotting coexisted somehow with the contradictory theme that the massacres were due to Ottoman weakness and inability to impose security in the distant Mount Lebanon. What these contradictory themes had in common, though, was the impulse to justify a French military intervention. In effect, French Catholic readers could pick their preferred pretext: either the Ottomans had wanted to murder their Christian subjects and had effectively orchestrated the massacres, or the Ottomans were spread too thin to do anything about the murders. Less than a week after publishing the accusation that the “conspiracy extends everywhere in the Turkish empire,” for example, the same writer at L’Ami de la religion claimed that French troops were necessary in Syria because of the “irremediable, original, absolute powerlessness of the Ottoman government.”²⁰

Vogüé wrote another article for L’Ami de la religion on July 8, arguing the case for a forceful military intervention with the aim of establishing an independent, sovereign state for the Christians of Syria. For Vogüé, as for many Catholic observers of the Tanzimat reforms, the Ottoman Empire’s right to sovereignty and territorial integrity was absolutely conditional on its following Europe “in the way of civilization” and on keeping its promise to improve the status of its Christian subjects. The massacres in Mount Lebanon proved that these conditions were impossible for the Ottomans to fulfill. Here Vogüé’s rhetoric hardened markedly from the reformist optimism of 1856: “There is a radical incompatibility between the Turk and civilization: between Muslims and Christians there is an abyss which . . . the good intentions of the Sultan . . . cannot fill up.”²¹ The sultan quickly dispatched a special commissioner, Fuad Pasha, to mete out punishment and restore calm, but how could the French trust the same Turks who had allegedly been complicit in the massacres? In fact, Vogüé perfectly understood the stakes of Fuad Pasha’s mission—his purpose was to enact vengeance in as exemplary a manner as possible, precisely in order to preempt European intervention and to render French troops superfluous. Ironically, then, Vogüé hoped Fuad Pasha would not be successful in restoring legitimacy and the veneer of justice and that French-dispensed violence would still be necessary.²²
In his criticism of the Ottoman special commissioner, Vogüé, like other commentators on the Ottoman question, could not help mixing together contradictory justifications for intervention, arguing both that Fuad Pasha and his troops would only amount to “new enemies for the Christians,” but also that the Ottoman government lacked “the strength or even the time” to save the last of the threatened Christians. Vogüé agreed with Saint-Marc Girardin, who had argued in the pages of the liberal Catholic *Le Correspondant* that France’s policy in the Ottoman Empire should be to replace Turkish sovereignty with independent, Christian sovereignties. This was the only way to settle the Ottoman question, since “Ottoman integrity” was beyond saving and since partition between European powers would disproportionately advantage Russia. Vogüé’s justification of a French occupation relied on the same redemptive logic that had motivated the Œuvre’s founding in the first place. France needed to ensure that the sacrifices of the Crimean War might be “crowned by the emancipation of the Orient.”

Not all Œuvre-affiliated observers began with such an essentialized, monolithic view of Syrian Druzes, Arabs, and Ottoman Turks as Vogüé. François Lenormant was excavating a site in Greece when the massacres first began. Quickly raising some money among sympathetic Christians there, he set off for Syria to bring what help he could to the refugees gathering in the coastal towns. Lenormant sent long accounts of his stay in Beirut to *L’Ami de la religion*, accounts then republished in the Œuvre’s own *Bulletin*. In his first letter, he distinguished between the religions of the Druze and the Muslims—the Muslims were inspired by their usual “fanaticism,” but the Druze were motivated merely by a “pagan rage.” Lenormant also admitted that both the Maronite Christians and the Druze were to blame, at least initially, for the conflict in Lebanon; that the Maronites had been the main source of trouble the year before, when some refused allegiance to the new Ottoman kaimakam; and that even in the present civil war, Maronites had made the first move (in an attempt to prevent their massacre, Lenormant claimed). Lenormant even insisted that—in contrast to the more sadistic Muslims—the Druze possessed a kind of tribal chivalry and rarely raped or killed innocents. It was the bachi-bouzouks, or Ottoman irregulars, who committed the worst atrocities.

It is also worth noting that in the early years of the Jesuit mission in Lebanon (before the increasing sectarian tensions of the 1840s) missionaries had distinguished clearly between Muslims and the non-Muslim Druze. In fact, French missionaries in the 1830s believed that the Druze were simple idolaters, having no particular affiliation with Islam, and that they were ripe for conversion to Christianity. In 1834, the editor of the missionary journal *Annales de la
Propagation de la Foi even paid them the bizarre cultural compliment of theorizing that they were the descendants of French Crusaders.25 In 1839, just before European intervention against Muhammad Ali’s occupation, Jesuit missionaries reported that they were baptizing Druzes left and right and that the Druze were on the verge of a widespread movement toward Christianity.26 It was only in the mid-1840s, after Egyptian, British, and French interventions to divide and rule Lebanon on the basis of sectarian identity, that the Druze clashed openly with the Maronites and earned the suspicion of Catholic France. Following the even more violent events of 1860, in the short space of twenty years, the Druze would be rhetorically transformed from pagans ripe for conversion into fanatical Muslims. Distinctions between the Druze and the Muslims faded, and the sectarian clashes between the “Muslim” Druze and Christian Maronites were transformed into one more evidence of pan-Islamic fanaticism.

Despite Lenormant’s initial moderation in describing the Druze, his description of the sectarian tensions in Damascus shows that even before the massacres in July 1860, French Catholic observers were already ideologically preparing to merge any Muslim-Christian violence there together with the earlier Druze-Maronite conflicts in Mount Lebanon, effectively erasing the distinction between Druzes and Muslims. Both conflicts were animated by the same Muslim fanaticism, the same mania for “holy war.”27 Defining someone as “Muslim” served a completely static and negative function: as long as the Druze had seemed like prospective converts in the 1830s, they were not considered Muslims, but killing Christians was enough to make them Muslims again.

When the tense atmosphere in Damascus eventually boiled over into a general massacre of Christians, French Catholics needed no further convincing: this was no tribal conflict between the Druze and Maronites in Mount Lebanon but an all-out, pan-Islamic religious war. (This claim was made despite the fact that even the Damascus events were almost certainly motivated by social resentment, since “Muslim craftsmen and shopkeepers” targeted rich Christians with European connections, leaving poorer Christian districts alone.28) In the wake of the Damascus massacres in July, Vogüé’s rhetoric grew more agitated, demanding that French policy take the form of an explicitly Christian holy war in response to this Islamic jihad. The exterminatory “plot” that the Turks had set in motion (for which the Druze-Maronite conflict was “only a pretext”) would soon “encompass all the Muslim countries,” Vogüé feverishly claimed, including France’s subjects in Algeria, with their mysterious connections to Muslims in the Ottoman Empire. But, Vogüé threatened, if it was a crusade the Muslims wanted—if
religious identity was to be the primary marker of difference in the coming battle—then it was a crusade France should give them.

The violence, Vogüé claimed, had been inspired by Islam’s resistance to Christianity and civilization, and the Muslims falsely believed themselves ascendant and crowned with success. Against such arrogance, France’s military intervention would need to “humiliate [Islam]” intentionally and explicitly, “to prove... its powerlessness.” Not only must Muslims be punished in an exemplary and demeaning way, but they must know that it was precisely as Muslims that they were receiving their punishment from Christian Europe: “We must fight in the name of the cross.” And what better site than Damascus, with its famous Umayyad Mosque, for France’s forces to perform a desecration that would radiate throughout the Muslim world? As a respected archaeologist and lover of religious edifices, Vogüé affected to plead for “mercy” for the physical structure of the mosque, but he nevertheless demanded that it be “humiliated [in its capacity] as a sanctuary... our soldiers must penetrate within it, take up residence there, and bear witness to all of Christendom’s contempt for Islam.” If, during the anti-European riots at Jeddah two years earlier, France and England had simply sent some troops to occupy Mecca and “insult the Kaaba,” Vogüé argued, this public demonstration of Islam’s weakness and subjection “on the very tomb of its founder” [sic] might have singlehandedly prevented the more recent massacres in Syria.29

Here was a surfeit of anti-Islamic rage that stands out in its extremism even among similar outpourings of that summer of 1860. But the good liberal Vogüé was no reactionary Catholic, he insisted. He was not yielding to “religious fanaticism,” nor was he contradicting his position as a “strong supporter of the liberty of conscience.” Tellingly, Vogüé even contrasted France’s supposedly prudent, antimissionaly policies in Algeria with the aggressively anti-Islamic intervention he was recommending for Syria. “[R]eligious toleration... was perhaps necessary” in the Algerian colony, since it was subject to France. In Syria, however, where France had no intention of assimilating or secularizing the Muslim populations, Vogüé claimed that this kind of religious neutrality would be unintelligible to the Muslims and taken as a “sign of weakness.”30

Vogüé’s energetic campaign in the French Catholic press culminated with a longer piece on the “Events of Syria” published in Le Correspondant—the high-brow, monthly organ of liberal Catholicism—and reproduced in a pamphlet. Here, even perfunctory distinctions between Druze, Turk, or “Muslim” had been erased. Whereas Lenormant had spoken in his articles of a kind of primitive chivalry among many of the Druze, distinct from the cruelty of the
Ottoman irregulars, Vogüé claimed that “Druses and bachi-bouzouks competed [in their] cruelty and barbarity.” Moreover, Vogüé reported, once the massacres had been set in motion, the “Druse sheiks” began calling for “holy war,” uniting against the Christians “everyone who was not Christian, without distinction of race or sect.” The implication was that everyone who claimed the name of Christian should in turn unite against these fanatics. The attack on the Christian quarter in Damascus proved that the “quarrel between the Druses and the Maronites” was only “a local incident in the great struggle of Islamism against Christian civilization.”

In his efforts to pin the massacres not on local political or social conditions but on global “Islamism” (and in order to justify a unified Christian response), Vogüé described at length the supposed existence of a pan-Islamic conspiracy that threatened not only Eastern Christians but even the French Empire in Algeria: “Those who know the Muslim countries know the influence of these hidden networks, whose offshoots extend everywhere there is a sectarian of Mahomet. . . . How many times have we observed the coordination of Algerian insurrections with certain sermons from Mecca and some unrest in the Ottoman Empire!” This grasping for proof of a universal Muslim plot directed from Mecca shows Vogüé at his most paranoid and anti-Islamic, but there was a method to his madness. For him, if it could be shown that the events were the result of an essential, inescapable Muslim antagonism toward Christians, then an intervention and a Lebanese settlement that was explicitly motivated by Christian and civilizational unity would be justified: “The cross has been outraged, may it be the crescent’s turn [to be outraged].”

As in his L’Ami de la religion coverage, Vogüé recognized that his rhetoric might come across as fanatically religious; thus, to combat this impression he once again explicitly appealed to his liberal credentials. The “cover of this volume” of the Correspondant, he insisted, should be sufficient to prove that his reflections were not “inspired by the fanaticism of another age.” Like Montalembert and Falloux and other elite liberal Catholics, he professed his faith in “liberty of conscience” for all, because liberty for all was the most effective way to preserve it for Catholics. But, he argued, it was impossible to extend this liberal understanding of religious pluralism to the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire. The reason for Vogüé’s double standard was simple: “People must be spoken to in the language they understand.” Because of the fanaticism of the Ottomans themselves, France could pursue more explicitly religious policies there than in her own metropole and empire. In France, supposedly, even devout Catholics understood the liberty of conscience—understood that the proper site of
religion was the interior—but in Muslim spaces, because of the Muslims’ backward religiosity, Catholicism could still be externalized and politicized. “Religious tolerance” was faring badly enough among the Muslims of France’s colony in Algeria, who “leave empty the mosques we have built them,” Vogüé claimed. But in Algeria, for better or worse, France was duty-bound to impose its tolerance. In Syria, by contrast, where the French had not gone “as conquerors, but as avengers,” they owed no such lip-service to religious liberty. The Muslims in Syria had brought Catholic fanaticism on themselves.

Of course, as Oissila Saaïdia, Judith Surkis, and other scholars have shown, the religious terrain of colonial Algeria was, in reality, anything but secular or neutral. The French state, from the moment of invasion in 1830, had indeed promised to respect Algerians’ religion. But France’s reasons for officially sponsoring and financing certain mosques and madrasas were more pragmatic: to compensate Algerians for the Islamic charitable endowments the French had seized and, more importantly, to encourage the creation of a loyal and easily surveilled cadre of Muslim functionaries. This was not religious freedom, but “financial control”; predictably, these official mosques and schools were unpopular among most Muslims. Moreover, even the discourse of “tolerance” toward Islam in French Algeria was far from benevolent, since it functioned primarily as a pretext to exclude Muslims from social and political equality. To the extent that Muslim civil law (polygamy, divorce) was “tolerated,” Muslims were thereby unworthy of citizenship. Since France had left Algerians the sop of their religious and family law, the ideology effectively went, they could justly deprive them of their land and the rights of citizenship. Meanwhile, the colonial regime also financed Catholic churches and schools in an attempt to encourage unity among the diverse settler population. Still, Vogüé contrasted these seeming “liberties” of secular tolerance that France so generously offered to its ungrateful Algerian subjects with the holy war that France must unleash upon its enemies in Syria.

The goal of Vogüé’s “exclusively Christian” expedition—meeting jihad with holy war—would be to establish an independent Maronite nation. Vogüé’s arguments for the necessity of Lebanese independence show that many of the myths that would nourish Lebanese nationalism and exceptionalism in the twentieth century were already current among pro-Maronite French Catholics. In a metaphor that would only become more common among French Catholic observers of Muslim-Christian relations, Vogüé compared the Maronites to the Kabyles of Algeria, since both were allegedly descended from pre-Islamic Christian populations who had retreated to a “mountain refuge” to resist Islamization; “but, happier than the Kabyles,” the Maronites had succeeded in “[conserving] the
integrity of their faith.” It was the refuge of Mount Lebanon that enabled the Maronites to remain distinct from the Arabs and the Ottomans who allegedly would have persecuted and assimilated them if they could have. According to the “mountain refuge” idea, Lebanon was a place to which pre-Muslim Christian populations had escaped in order to retain their primitive purity and exceptionalism from an illegitimate Muslim interlude. The myth thus falsely implied that the Maronites had been subject to Muslim persecution rather than to the Greek Orthodox persecutions that had actually played a much more significant role in their migrations.

Vogüé called the Maronites a “happier” version of the Kabyles of Algeria, who had similarly sought mountain refuge from Muslim invaders. This myth of Maronite exceptionalism may well have functioned as a sort of mental rehearsal for Catholics who would later latch on to the Kabyles and invest them with the same civilizing hopes for colonial Algeria. French Catholics and missionaries—Abbé Lavigerie, the Œuvre’s director and future bishop of Algiers, chief among them—would become some of the loudest and most persistent disseminators of the “Kabyle myth” in Algeria. For Lavigerie, later on, the Kabyles in Algeria were the “Lebanon of Africa... Exempt of [Islamic] fanaticism,” and retaining vestiges of Christian law and custom. The Kabyles in Algeria, like the Maronites in Syria, were thus “destined” to ally themselves with the civilizing French.

Some Catholic observers even suggested importing Maronite populations into Algeria, where they would not only be safe from persecution but also form the nucleus of a civilized, Christian indigenous population, supplanting the more refractory Muslims and serving the interests of French colonization. This utopian project of forming Maronite refugees into “a vast network of Arabic-speaking Christians devoted to [French] interests” in Algeria would never come to fruition, but it demonstrates that the search for an indigenous population that was non-Arab, non-fanatic, and crypto-Catholic coexisted with and possibly reinforced France’s obsession with the Kabyles.

Vogüé’s plans for Lebanese independence show the long-standing role played by French Catholics in producing knowledge and historical narratives that made an independent Lebanon—the “mountain refuge” from Islam—thinkable in the twentieth century. Vogüé had even mapped out the boundaries of his proposed state. Despite his sectarian and nationalistic justifications for Lebanese independence, he recognized that an independent Lebanon, in order to be a viable state, would need to lay claim to coastland far beyond the Maronites’ historic mountain refuge—“all the coast from Latakia [in present-day Syria] to Tyre”—comprising Tripoli, Beirut, and other territory that was not homogenously
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Christian. An independent Lebanon, continuing its advantageous commercial and agricultural contacts with Europe—especially in the domain of silk production—as well as its political and civilizational apprenticeship under France, would soon be powerful enough to emancipate itself from any subordination to the Ottomans. In sum, the Ottoman Empire’s Christian minority populations would be secure only when they had independent nation-states of their own.

Liberal Catholics like Vogüé and Lenormant were far from the only journalists to call for an armed expedition to Syria. Observers from across the political spectrum—including the anticlerical newspaper *Le Siècle*—clamored for a “holy war” against the “fanaticism” and “intolerance” of the Ottoman Empire. Fundraising for the victims of the massacres was also an ecumenical endeavor. The Alliance israélite universelle, led by Adolphe Crémieux, even announced its charitable campaign a few days before the Œuvre d’Orient did. Given this wide-ranging consensus, undertaking a Syrian expedition made political sense for Napoleon III, perhaps even offering him the chance to win back the support of Catholics at the precise moment when many were angry at his abandonment of the Pope to the forces of Italian nationalism. Beyond these domestic political considerations, economic and foreign policy pressures also called for a humanitarian intervention: to shore up the Lebanese silk industry, which supplied much of the raw material to Lyon workshops; to insulate Egypt from Ottoman influence, as Ferdinand de Lesseps had broken ground on the Suez Canal only the year before; even to secure access to cavalry horses from Syria and Iraq. As David Todd has argued, in the 1850s and 1860s Napoleon III largely turned away from formal imperial conquests, instead following Britain’s example of the “free trade imperialism” of commerce, financial investment, and gunboats. France justified this “informal empire” by linking it to “the global promotion of Catholicism.”

In short—unlike the divisive issue of the papal states, championed by ultramontane Catholics—an intervention in Syria enjoyed consensus support, a chance for liberal Catholics to unproblematically demonstrate France’s traditional ties to Catholicism.

Patriotism and Paternalism in Liberal Catholic Fundraising

Parallel to the journalistic efforts of Vogüé and Lenormant, the Œuvre d’Orient’s fundraising drive was a wild success. Whereas its annual budget in its first several years of existence had hovered in the tens of thousands, the charity appeal quickly raised over 2 million francs. In this success the Œuvre was aided by its existing diocesan and parish committees, by prominent bishops (at Bordeaux...
and Paris, for example) who channeled their dioceses’ collections to the Œuvre, and by the national network of the conferences of Saint Vincent de Paul, whose leaders were close to the milieu of the Œuvre. Well-placed members of the Jesuit order, such as Père de Damas, toured the salons of France and even visited Belgium, England, and Ireland to give speeches in favor of the poor Maronites and the fundraising subscription. The lists of the subscription’s donors, published several a week in the pages of L’Ami de la religion throughout the late summer and early fall of 1860 read like a “who’s who” of Catholic notability. Certainly, the lists included people from various social classes, numerous anonymous donors, parish curés, and the occasional widow’s mite, but nobles were also common especially among the larger gifts. The Comte de Chambord, the legitimist pretender, made a sizable donation, perhaps hoping to encourage the impression that a restored Bourbon King would be more qualified than anyone to enforce France’s traditional religious protectorate of Ottoman Christians.

With so much money suddenly passing through its hands, the Œuvre council continued to meet more frequently than was customary to debate “the most equitable” ways to distribute the aid. The council also elected a special commission to supplement the regular treasurers in this task. Initially, after sending some aid to assist refugees and the religious establishments that were caring for them, the council followed the advice of its clerical members—especially Père Gagarin, the Jesuit procurer—and agreed to retain the majority of the funds for rebuilding the (primarily French) Catholic missionary and charitable establishments that had been destroyed. In subsequent meetings throughout September—under pressure from bishops who had supported the fundraising drive—the council modified this view somewhat, deciding that “the sums gathered must be distributed partly to provide clothing and food to the victims of the Muslims; partly to help the poorest [victims] reconstruct their residences; [and] finally, partly to found orphanages.” Some mention was also made of getting Maronite silk production back up and running as soon as possible and of encouraging surviving families to adopt the orphans of their martyred compatriots.

Lavigerie himself traveled to Syria to supervise the aid distribution firsthand, and for this purpose the Œuvre’s council entrusted him with one million francs to be distributed at his discretion, keeping broadly within the guidelines laid out. But even Lavigerie’s decision to supervise the distribution of funds on-site could not silence all critics of the Œuvre. The Maronite delegate at Rome wrote to the French Foreign Ministry to accuse the Œuvre of neglecting the material needs of the Maronite victims and of instead wanting only to “pay the incomes for the maisons of the Jesuits, Lazarists, [and] Sisters of Charity Houses” and to use
these institutions to “Latinize the country.” Vogüé, in a private letter attempting to block any threat to the Œuvre’s reputation, fumed that anyone would dare impugn a charitable effort “so eminently French and Catholic.” Lavigerie, for his part, wrote to the Foreign Ministry protesting against this or some similar critique. It was only the anti-French elements of the Syrian population that resented him, Lavigerie claimed, because of how loyally he had sought the advice of French Consuls and authorities there. Parroting the Œuvre’s usual civilizing patriotism, Lavigerie insisted that despite the criticisms, his “charitable mission” would be sure to have a “happy influence . . . even on our political action” in Syria. In other words, Vogüé and Lavigerie defended the Œuvre against the accusation that they were favoring French and “Latin” establishments by bragging about how patriotic and politically useful their efforts were to France, essentially conceding the point.

Indeed, the Œuvre d’Orient’s commitment to a politically pragmatic civilizing mission on behalf of French influence was never in question. In advance of his journey to Syria, Lavigerie sought and received official approval of his plans from the ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Cults. The minister of Foreign Affairs remarked that Lavigerie “offer[ed] all the guarantees” that his comportment would be politically correct and useful to France—“his character, his moderation, [and] his sincere devotion to the government of the Emperor” were well known. And when Lavigerie, once in Syria, appealed to France for further donations to replace liturgical ornaments and vessels that had been plundered from churches, Edouard Thouvenel, the minister of Foreign Affairs, himself paid for three hundred new communion chalices. The following year the Quai d’Orsay hosted a fête de charité for the Œuvre’s subscription, complete with a charity sale, lottery, “children’s amusements,” and a puppet show. Upon Lavigerie’s return, the emperor would honor him with the rank of chevalier in the Legion of Honor. Clearly, the defense of “Christian civilization” against Muslim fanaticism inspired patriotic unity.

In Lebanon, Lavigerie founded two orphanages for survivors of the massacres (one directed by the Jesuits, and one by the Sœurs de la Charité), and he set up four local commissions to supervise the distribution of funds and the rebuilding of homes in their respective areas. The Œuvre approved the allocation of considerable sums to each of these commissions to provide Maronite peasants with new silkworms and to support the founding of new scholarships at the Jesuit seminary and Lazarist college.

Viewing the budgetary deliberations of the Œuvre’s council provides a window onto the civilizing paternalism of this elite milieu, the same paternalism that informed the domestic charitable work of the Social Catholics among them.
For example, perhaps to incentivize industriousness, the council members were careful to stipulate that the silkworms were only a loan that the peasants would have to repay once their businesses were profitable again. The councillors also wanted to ensure that the education dispensed in the new orphanages would not be too advanced or alienating. Only the “simplest notions of education” were necessary, the council maintained, since anything beyond “professional or agricultural” training might harm “the future and the morality of our children.”

Lavigerie shared this worry that civilization might go too far and deprovincialize the indigenous Christians. Many supporters of the Œuvre had suggested bringing orphans of the massacres to France to be educated or adopted, but Lavigerie worried that if uprooted from their traditional family networks, “especially in the large cities,” they would allow themselves to be corrupted. If the orphans were sent back to Syria after such an education, “these children will have acquired habits of well-being which will render them unhappy for the rest of their lives,” dissatisfied with the Levantine level of civilization, food, and lifestyle. At most the occasional gifted seminarian or a “few daughters of a prince or sheikh” might be permitted to study in France.

**Liberal Catholicism and the Invention of Pan-Islamism**

Upon Lavigerie’s return to France in the spring of 1861, he authored a lengthy report detailing his activities in Syria. The main purpose of the report was to give a detailed budget and narrative account of how he had distributed the subscription’s funds and to respond to criticisms of his actions by some of the “bad journals.” But, after reporting the mundane financial details and defending the Œuvre’s charitable reputation, Lavigerie turned to describing the threat of global Islam. Lavigerie’s rhetorical goal was to encourage the continued contributions of French Catholic charity, but in the process, he made his own “liberal Catholic” contribution to the invention of pan-Islamism. Echoing Vogüé’s pronouncements about a Muslim plot that stretched even beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire, Lavigerie wrote that the Syrian massacres, far from being an “isolated event,” were caused by a “general disposition of minds within Mohammedanism” toward hating and exterminating Christians. In defense of this conspiracy theory, Lavigerie cited a “learned” and “prophetic” article published in the liberal Catholic Correspondant some ten years previous on “Muslim Propaganda [Missions] in Africa and the Indies.” This article described Muslim designs on Africa and proved that the global Muslim conspiracy against “Christian civilization” had been a long time in coming. The article was published by none other than Prosper
Faugère—the same foreign ministry official who had joined the council of the Œuvre d’Orient from almost the beginning and who assisted Lavigerie in editing the very 1861 report in which this “prophetic” article was cited.70

First published back in 1851, Faugère’s article shows that the liberal Catholic ideological network played a pioneering role in manufacturing fears about a global pan-Islamism.71 The Correspondant article, though presented by Faugère and including his commentary, was published anonymously; it was probably the work of one of Faugère’s missionary contacts in Ethiopia. Faugère’s commentary on this report was indeed “prophetic”—but not because it had somehow predicted pan-Islamic violence or the Syrian massacres, as Lavigerie implied. It was self-fulfilling in its articulation of a Catholic civilizing mission that Faugère’s future colleagues at the Œuvre d’Orient would transform into a hegemonic cliché. Faugère wrote in his introduction to the article that it would be “useful for European civilization” to recognize the specter of Islamic expansion, a phenomenon “little known” back in France, and he reminded readers that when it came to “Africa and especially the Orient,” “the interests of religion and... of French influence... are in fact inseparable.”72 Wherever the Islamic enemy was present, France’s unity with a traditional Catholic foreign policy was clear.

This 1851 article on “Muslim Propaganda” endeavored to remind Europeans that global Islam involved much more than the Ottoman Empire and that by concentrating on Ottoman decadence, Europe was being given a misleading view of the threat Islam still posed. The Ottoman Empire may claim to be the political head of global Islam, but the true spiritual and intellectual center of Muslim politics was at Mecca.73 Mecca was the “center of the world” for Muslims, the channel of all true spiritual and political power, the direction of their prayers, and the destination of their obligatory pilgrimage.74 The prominence of Mecca was such that the “elite of fanaticism” had congregated there, supported by the “considerable riches” of the holy sites and their commerce. According to Faugère’s anonymous correspondent, this Meccan aristocracy of fanaticism had observed with dismay the decline and attempted reforms of the Ottoman Empire and had devised an alternative plan to “prepare a new outburst for Islam in Africa and in the Indies.”75 The engine in this conspiratorial machine was the pilgrimage to Mecca, where the “sectarians of Mohammed” received their marching orders. Those returning from the pilgrimage were to preach against Egyptian and Ottoman reforms and civilization; those in India against European colonization; and those in Africa—already “a country almost entirely Muslim”—were to “prepare the great empire to come.” In the Ottoman Empire this Meccan influence was unmistakable, given the “numerous plots uncovered at
Constantinople” and the recurring “revolts” in Syria. Once Mecca emancipated itself from the tottering Ottoman Empire and declared itself not just the spiritual but also the political center of Islam, the Correspondant warned, Muslims all over the world, regardless of race, would unite in a global jihad.  

It was in the supposedly blank, virgin territories of Africa that Islamic expansion was most daunting and dominant, where Islam had “the monopoly of education and . . . of commerce.” Islam was propagated by thousands of “missionary-merchants,” bringing the benefits of commerce and easy adherence to a religion that preached few doctrines and no moral demands. No intrigue was too dastardly for these Muslim missionary-merchants; “they understood better than the Europeans” how much was at stake for the future of Africa, how significant the battle over Christian Abyssinia was, and how important it was to pursue a religious policy in such regions. The report’s author called for a European colonial intervention in East Africa to put an end to the machinations of Muslim leaders in the African kingdoms there and to encourage the civiliztion of the Copts, Abyssinians, and other Christian nations. A colonial intervention that was openly supportive of Catholic missions would regenerate the poor savages of Africa, win for itself the commercial rights that came with that paternal responsibility, and stamp out the barbaric and degrading influence of Islam while the “gigantic monster” was still weakened and “under [Europe’s] feet.”  

If Christendom did not seize this opportunity to crush Islam in Africa—if it allowed itself to be duped into thinking that it could be “friends and allies” with Muslims—subsequent generations would be punished for this indifference. Even France’s Muslim subjects in Algeria would never want peace, and here again the pilgrimage to Mecca and attendant radicalization was a primary cause: “The Muslim will not be able to call himself civilized and friend as long as he has not abandoned his faith, source of every barbarity and of every cruelty.” The Muslim Africa of the future, united in Qur’anic depravity, would “take up arms to make war against the ‘filthy’ children of Christ,” and “what will unfortunate Europe say then,” especially if its current secularizing trajectory were to leave it even “more divided and less powerful?”  

Written decades before French commentators and Muslim reformers alike would invoke “pan-Islamism” or the geopolitical unity of Muslims, the article could hardly have been more prescient in its explication of the theme that would come to dominate the Œuvre d’Orient’s publicity efforts and French Catholic views of Islam. Faced with the supposedly monolithic, global expansion of Islam, the interests of “civilization” and of Christianity were one and the same. Islamic expansion had to be met with an even more powerful expansion of Christendom.
This anti-Islamic vitriol is what passed for serious foreign policy discussion in the flagship publication of elite liberal Catholics. This was the “learned” and “prophetic” study cited ten years later by Lavigerie in his 1861 fundraising report. The article was “prophetic” in Lavigerie’s mind because, given the alleged expansion of fanatical Islam—its diabolical networks stretching out from Mecca and its plots to resist Ottoman reform—the Syrian massacres of 1860 had been almost inevitable. In the paranoid style of Faugère’s 1851 article and of other Catholic coverage of the 1860 events, Lavigerie went so far as to claim that the Syrian massacres had been plotted, beginning with meetings at Mecca, for a full two years beforehand, and that the anti-British riots at Jeddah in 1858 had likewise been a planned phase of the larger anti-European movement. At least, Lavigerie crowed, thanks to the publicity work of the Œuvre d’Orient, French public opinion was unanimously in favor of the Maronites. “Every rank of society” sympathized with the poor Maronites, and this fact “[gave] everything we have done . . . for Syria a truly national character.”

One prominent exception that gave the lie to the Œuvre’s theory of a pan-Islamic plot in 1860 was the widely publicized comportment of the Algerian emir Abd el-Kader (‘Abd al-Qâdir), then living in Damascus. The most tenacious leader of Algerian resistance to French occupation in the 1830s and 1840s, Abd el-Kader was renowned in France for his chivalry, honor, and Sufi wisdom—manifested during prisoner exchanges and negotiations, and then in the “salon” of friends and seekers that gathered around him once he was finally defeated and placed under house arrest in France. Released from France by Napoleon III, Abd el-Kader and his entourage settled in Damascus and were living there during the events of 1860. Abd el-Kader tried not only to appease Druze notables and warn France of the coming storm but, when the violence reached Damascus, he also personally led his men through the city gathering European consuls and other Christian refugees and taking them to his home for protection. These actions earned the emir “hagiographic” treatment in the French press.

Catholic writers similarly lionized Abd el-Kader. Lavigerie, on his tour of Syria, even paid the emir a visit and listened “with admiration and joy” as Abd-el-Kader recounted his role in the events at Damascus in “language that Christianity would not have rejected.” But for Lavigerie, as for other French admirers, Abd el-Kader was simply an exception, distinct from the fanatical Muslims he had led. Lavigerie went so far as to characterize the emir’s heroic behavior in Damascus not as flowing from an Islamic ethic but rather as an unwittingly Christian act. “Emir, the God that I serve can also be yours,” Lavigerie told him, since “all righteous men must be his children.” The emir’s “natural justice,”
Lavigerie told his readers, might make of him a Christian yet. Here was a kind of discursive imperialism: whatever was good in other religions was de facto Christian. The emir’s virtuous actions belonged more properly to Christianity than to the Islamic beliefs in whose name he had acted.\textsuperscript{85}

In the end, to resolve the question of Mount Lebanon’s political future, the Great Powers sent delegates to a diplomatic commission at Beirut. Despite the presence of France’s expeditionary force and the efforts of its delegate, France’s most extreme demands for a predominant Maronite role in Lebanon were outmaneuvered by Fuad Pasha and the British delegate, Lord Dufferin. Against the bloodthirsty rhetoric of Vogüé and other French Catholics, French diplomats were committed to working within the “Concert” of European diplomacy and preserving the “integrity of the Ottoman Empire.” Against the idea of a Muslim conspiracy throughout Syria and the Ottoman Empire, the commissioners concentrated more realistically on stabilizing Maronite-Druze relations in Mount Lebanon.\textsuperscript{86} The \textit{règlement} hammered out by the International Commission was sent to a council of European diplomats at Constantinople for further debate and ratification, just as the French Expeditionary Force was withdrawing from Syria in the summer of 1861. Though each power sought to counter the influence of the other, all parties wanted a more modernized, centralized, and equitable administration of the Mountain. Accordingly, the 1861 \textit{Règlement} did away with the system of dual Druze and Maronite kaimakams, instead uniting Mount Lebanon under a single, semiautonomous administration. Despite French hopes, the first governor was not to be Maronite—or any native of the area, for that matter—but at least the Ottomans agreed to appoint a Christian. The first governor, the Armenian Catholic Daud Effendi, was assisted by twelve councillors, but—again to the disappointment of the Maronites—positions on the council were not apportioned on the basis of population; rather, there were simply two members “from each of the six major sects inhabiting the Mountain.” This règlement proved surprisingly stable, managing to survive all the way until the First World War, despite the profound social and religious changes that continued to mark the Empire in these years.\textsuperscript{87}

Many Maronites (and their most ardent supporters back in Catholic France) resented the terms of the settlement, since they were not given a role commensurate with their perceived demographic and social dominance.\textsuperscript{88} Nevertheless, interested \OEuvre members like Vogüé and the Jesuit père de Damas encouraged their Maronite contacts to accept Daud Effendi’s administration. When the Maronite notable Joseph Karam, a friend of Vogüé’s and one of the heroes of Maronite resistance to the Druze, refused to submit to the new administration,
Vogüé and Damas quickly became frustrated with what they saw as Karam’s counterproductive ambition. To French Catholics, the important thing was to maintain the independence of the (Christian) Mountain from (Muslim) Ottoman interference. A Maronite rebellion led by Karam would force Daud Effendi to call on Ottoman troops. In Vogüé’s view, trying to unseat the governor whom the Powers had agreed on in 1861 would only jeopardize the chance that a Maronite would ever be permitted to succeed to the post. French Catholics had spent years inflating the ambitions of their Maronite clients. The men of the Œuvre belatedly realized that it had become important to convince French opinion that Karam should not be allowed to conflate himself with Christian interests. Still, such second thoughts about the motives and behavior of their Maronite protégés does not seem to have prompted members of the Œuvre to reconsider their one-sided narration of the events of 1860 in the first place.

Sincerity, Politics, and the Lives of Muhammad after 1860

Just how far Vogüé was prepared to go in generalizing the events of 1860 into an essentialized and global view of pan-Islamic conspiracy and violence would become clear some five years later, in the context not of fundraising and humanitarian intervention but of scholarly disputes over Islam’s place in the history of religions. In 1865, as part of a series meant to popularize the history of the great world religions, Barthélemy Saint-Hilaire, a scholar and moderate Republican free thinker, published a book entitled *Mahomet et le Coran*. In the vein of earlier nineteenth-century treatments of the Prophet by Thomas Carlyle and Edgar Quinet, Saint-Hilaire’s Muhammad was no longer the arch-heretic or impostor but the Romantic “Great Man”—sincere in his religious vocation and in his belief in the oneness of God and gifted as a leader of men. For Catholic apologists, for whom the comparative approach to religion already seemed to be an attack on the singularity of Christianity, this apparent attempt to “rehabilitate” Muhammad was more than they could stand. In a review for the Jesuit journal *Études*, the Jesuit educator Eugène Marquigny complained that “the doctors of free thought” were lining up to write glowing reviews of Saint-Hilaire’s book. This was only natural, Marquigny claimed, since freethinkers had so much in common with Muslims. “Be good Muslims, since you are such bad Christians,” the Jesuit spat; “Praise the Arab prophet as you like; he, like you, was a deist, a rationalist, an eclectic, a partisan of independent morality.”

Vogüé took it upon himself to represent a more tempered, scholarly Catholic response to Saint-Hilaire’s Muhammad in a review for the *Correspondant*. On
the question of Muhammad’s sincerity, and in his review as a whole, Vogüé’s Catholic “liberalism” and apparent moderation were front and center. Vogüé began by acknowledging that the increasing “exercise of the liberty of conscience” had made scholars more sensitive to the “private meaning of beliefs” and more willing to grant the sincerity of other faiths. Vogüé was prepared to accept, at least for the sake of argument, Saint-Hilaire’s distinction between “the beginning of [Muhammad’s] career” and his later career after Medina. Initially, the prophet’s sincere desire had been to replace the “religious anarchy” and idolatry of Mecca with “the religion ... of the one God,” an “entirely spiritual” message; later, at Medina, he was corrupted by political success and self-interest, by his role as a “military and political chief.”

This approach to dealing with the question of Muhammad’s sincerity or imposture (his mission was initially religious and sincere, but was corrupted by the post-hegira stage of political power and success) has since become familiar. In the mid-nineteenth-century context, though, this narrative strategy addressed precisely the problem Vogüé posed: How, after centuries of Christian apologetics that cast Muhammad as the quintessential impostor, to account for the new Romantic view of Muhammad’s genius and sincerity, all while retaining the apologetic defense of Christianity’s superiority? In this sense, the simple solution—posing Muhammad’s “early” sincerity but still judging the history of post-hegira Islam as hopelessly violent and political—might seem nothing more than a crude attempt at a more scholarly and respectable dismissal of Islam, a falling between the two stools of the old apologetics and the newer, more pluralistic history of religions. And it was. But this way of breaking Muhammad’s career in two can also be seen as a final product of the liberal Catholicism of Vogüé’s milieu. The divorce between Muhammad’s “moral” mission and his “political” one and the conclusion that political power was corrosive of a religious mission had as its premise liberalism’s distinction between public and private spheres, with religion properly belonging to the private sphere.

For Vogüé the liberal Catholic, the post-hegira stage necessarily signified a loss of the primitive simplicity and sincerity of Muhammad’s religion. Dividing Muhammad’s career and moral life this way, between Mecca and Medina, presumed that private morality and sanctity were incompatible with a politicized, established religion. At the very moment when Vogüé’s friend and academic colleague Ernest Renan was inventing “a Jesus for the nineteenth century”—libertarian, politically quiescent, and emphasizing individual and internal spirituality rather than a will to social change—Vogüé seems to have accepted this liberal-individualistic view of Christianity and found Muhammad wanting. Vogüé had begun
his review by acknowledging that the “exercise of the liberty of conscience” had newly highlighted the importance of religion’s “private meaning.” Yet by beginning with the assumption that this interiorized mode of religious belonging was normative (superior to public or political expressions of religion), Vogüé begged the question of Muhammad’s sincerity and religiosity. For Vogüé and other liberal Catholics, a political religion was necessarily an insincere religion. It is perhaps no coincidence that, given Vogüé’s own liberal commitments and the readership of the *Correspondant*, he closed with a quote from Tocqueville (a man whose anti-Islamic liberalism is well known).

Islam, Vogüé wrote, quoting his former mentor, was nothing but a “skillful compromise between materialism and spiritualism,” vice and virtue, demanding absolute obedience, and pervaded by “violent and sensual tendencies.”

Far from encouraging a more nuanced view of Islam, Vogüé’s bifurcation of Muhammad’s life resulted in an even more monolithic perspective. For it was precisely because Muhammad’s career (and Islam itself) was shot through with this fatal contradiction between the spiritual and the political—sincere interior and corrupted, politicized exterior—that scholars of Islam had no choice but to make an essentializing, transhistorical move: “Mohammed, without the saber, is no longer Mohammed. . . . The man cannot be separated from his acts, nor the system from twelve centuries of application and of experience.”

For Vogüé, because Islam was a religion that externalized itself in an illegitimate and politicized way, all that mattered about Islam was that externalization. (Because Christianity was a religion of the interior, Vogüé implied, its outward historical manifestations and failings could be dismissed as not essential to it.) And here the events of 1860 made their reappearance in Vogüé’s book review, as the coup de grâce to Saint-Hilaire’s argument. For history’s verdict on Islamic morality, one only had to look “at Jeddah, at Damascus, at Delhi,” where “true believers still commit holy war!” Elsewhere in the review, Vogüé appealed to his own encounters with Islam as a traveler in Syria and among the Druze for evidence: “We have seen too closely the evils caused by Islam . . . to delude ourselves about its merits. Christianity and Islam, cross and crescent, are . . . inevitably hostile. . . . We know by experience that [attempts at conciliation] are useless.”

**Afterlives of Liberal Catholic Orientalism**

Liberal Catholic inventions of a conspiratorial, monolithic Islam in the 1860s had less to do with shoring up support for any particular colonial project, or with fear of any actual threat of pan-Islamism, and more to do with convincing
fellow Frenchmen of the need for Catholic unity at home and an explicitly Catholic foreign policy abroad. In an early, French Catholic version of the “Clash of Civilizations,” the notables of the Œuvre d’Orient used enmity with global Islam to signal their patriotic unity with France’s civilizational superiority and religious liberty. In the process, they concocted a virulent new blend of liberal Catholic orientalism, which constructed Islam both as the theocratic, politicized, and fanatical opposite of the new liberalism yet still as the heretical, religiously fraudulent opposite of traditional Catholicism. Liberal Catholicism is often narrated as having been increasingly marginalized in the course of the nineteenth century, first theologically defeated by the intransigent ultramontanes at the First Vatican Council, and then politically discredited by the failure of liberal Catholic leadership in the early, conservative phase of the Third Republic. But the liberal Catholic hybrid of orientalism—the Œuvre’s strategy of claiming unity with France’s liberal civilizing mission against fanatical Islam—would live on, along with the influence of the men of the Œuvre.

Vogüé, for his part, would continue to exercise his influence on French religious and cultural policies in the Orient as treasurer and eventual president of the Œuvre d’Orient, as a council member of the larger missionary Œuvre de la Propagation de la Foi (Association for the Propagation of the Faith), and as an ambassador under the conservative republic of the 1870s, first at Constantinople and then at Vienna. Vogüé’s work at Constantinople echoed in interesting ways the Œuvre d’Orient’s Ottoman anxieties of ten years earlier. As ambassador, one of Vogüé’s main tasks was to defend France’s traditional role as civilizational tutor of the Ottomans and as principal European defender of Christians in the Empire. With France’s prestige weakened by the Franco-Prussian War, this was a difficult battle on two fronts: against other European powers, who were looking for more influence in the Ottoman Empire, and against the Ottomans, who hoped to escape all European tutelage.

At the same time, the papacy was attempting to centralize its control over the Eastern churches by appointing their patriarchs rather than allowing these churches to elect their own, as they had traditionally done. One effect of this new policy was that the Ottoman authorities would no longer view these patriarchs as civil functionaries in charge of dispensing justice within their own ethnoreligious communities; instead, they would become merely spiritual authorities. Rome claimed to be fine with this spiritualization of the patriarchs’ role (this separation of the religious from the political) as it went hand-in-hand with the increased power of the pope. For Vogüé, however, if the Ottoman churches—whether Armenian, Chaldean, Melkite, or Maronite—lost their
“theocratic” character, if they became purely spiritual modes of belonging within a legally homogenous empire of equal civil rights, France would lose any pretext for intervening on these communities’ behalf. Once again, Vogüé’s liberalism did not extend to the Ottoman Empire. However “liberal” his own Catholicism, the rights of the religious protectorate—the ability to cultivate an “ecclesiastical clientele”—were too important to allow the Ottomans to truly emancipate or secularize their different minority communities. Of course, Vogüé protested, he wanted nothing more than for the Ottomans to become civilized enough to dispense with minority communities (and thus with France’s protective interventions), but the liberal Catholic ideal of a “Free Church in a Free State” would long be a “chimera” in the Ottoman context. Thus Vogüé opposed the very liberal reforms he claimed were the end goal of France’s tutelage, because successful reforms would remove the need for that tutelage. Like colonial administrators elsewhere in France’s empire, Vogüé pursued a strategy of “indefinitely deferring” the promised rights of civilization.

Of course, France’s interest in promoting religious coexistence or secularism in the Ottoman Empire was primarily a pretext for intervention. Indeed, some Syrians believed in religious coexistence more genuinely than these European soft imperialists who claimed to promote “religious protection.” In the aftermath of the 1860 massacres, Butrus al-Bustani, the Maronite convert to Protestantism and father of Arab nationalism and reform, thanked Europe and America for their charity and support. But he then called on his fellow Syrians not to rely on “foreign political intervention” or to seek sectarian advantage over each other, but rather to separate religion from politics and unite around their common Arabic language and Syrian “homeland.” Shortly after 1860, Bustani founded a school to put his reformist ideas into practice: students came “from all sects, millets, and races without discriminating against their personal beliefs” and without “any attempt at proselytizing.” But Protestant missionaries, Bustani’s former supporters, reacted with hostility to the school and deemed it insufficiently religious. One imagines that French Catholic missionaries would have responded with similar hostility if any of their client-converts had tried to take the promise of religious liberalism literally.

Another one of Vogüé’s diplomatic tasks that reprised the themes of 1860 was that of keeping an eye on the rise of “Islamic Unity,” a term that predates “pan-Islamism” but that stood for some of the same European anxieties. For example, the Dutch, in the middle of “pacifying” anticolonial resistance in Sumatra, asked that Vogüé refuse recognition to the Atchinese [Acehnese] Sultan, who was visiting Istanbul to seek out the help of the Ottoman Caliph. Vogüé
agreed, “It is in the common interest [of governments with Muslim subjects] to discourage all attempts . . . to reconstitute at Constantinople . . . a center of Muslim action.” But far from stoking fears of pan-Islamism, as he had in 1860, Vogüé wrote that he considered these attempts at “Islamic Unity” to be illusory and confined to the “domain of abstractions.” It seems that the serious work of Vogüé the ambassador was not conducive to the flights of conspiracy theorizing permitted to Vogüé the Catholic journalist.

Finally, in his capacity as a board member of the massive missionary Association for the Propagation of the Faith, Vogüé was seen as an influential expert on the Ottoman Empire, and he used his position there to continue to advocate a missionary strategy identical to that of the Œuvre d’Orient: regeneration and reunification of Eastern Christians and continual postponing of any attempt to proselytize Muslims. “The purpose that we are pursuing in the Orient,” he told the Association for the Propagation of the Faith in 1888, “is much less the conversion of the Infidels than that of the Schismatics.” After all, Muslims were nearly impossible to convert and still very far from the “paths of grace”; “the conversion of the schismatics, on the contrary, is possible.”

Another figure who forged his view of the Islamic world out of the crucible of the Œuvre d’Orient’s response to the events of 1860 was the charity’s director, Abbé Charles Lavigerie. Lavigerie would become the archbishop of Algiers in 1866 and would establish a new missionary congregation there for the evangelization of Africa: the White Fathers. In this capacity, he would exert a more powerful influence on French Catholic ideas about Islam than any other alumnus of the Œuvre milieu. Lavigerie and his White Fathers congregation would attack Islam not only for traditional, religious reasons but also for its alleged illiberality, lack of civilization, fanaticism, and inordinate religiosity: precisely the qualities Veuillot and earlier missionaries in Algeria had claimed to admire about Islam. Lavigerie and his hagiographers would later claim that it was his time spent directing the Œuvre that first inspired him with a vocation for Muslim lands. One admirer recalled the effect of the events of 1860 this way: “The massacres of Lebanon . . . [which] laid bare the incurable barbarity of the Muslim world,” had prompted Lavigerie to turn toward the Orient, thus setting him on “the glorious path wherein he would become archbishop of Algiers, Cardinal-Archbishop of Carthage, [and] Primate of Africa.”

Algerian Anxieties: Ismaïl Urbain and the Massacres of Syria

Though they were few, there were critics of Catholic France’s virulently anti-Islamic response to the events in Syria. One perceptive and incensed critic
was Ismaïl Urbain, the French Guyanese, Saint-Simonian social thinker, officer of the Arab Bureaus in Algeria, convert to Islam, and adviser to Napoleon III. Urbain’s *L’Algérie pour les Algériens* (1860) can be read as the founding document of Napoleon III’s so-called *Royaume arabe* policies, by means of which the emperor intended to prove his care and protection for Algeria’s indigenous populations. Surprisingly, though, this document does not begin with any reference to Algeria. Rather, Urbain opened with a description of the “Massacres of Syria” that very year, and with a stinging condemnation of Europe’s anti-Muslim reactions to those events. His criticism of these reactions was discerning. In the wake of the Syrian “events,” he wrote, the European public had not been content to feel compassion for the Maronites, nor had they sought out and punished the actual perpetrators. To the contrary, self-proclaimed experts had proliferated, ready to stand in judgment over “kings, peoples, and the gods themselves. The sultan and his government, the Turks, the Druze, Mohammed, his Koran and his God, have been summoned to appear” before these writers’ tribunals. Nothing was too extreme to be “printed about the fanaticism of the Muslims, about their fatalism, which dooms them to immobility, about the bloody excitations of the Koran, about the immense conspiracy hatched throughout all Islam against the Christians! The great aggregation of diverse races and peoples who follow Islam as [their] religious law has been disdainfully, scornfully, hatefully denounced, declared rebellious to progress and destined to be driven back into Asia, far from the *foyer* of civilization.”

Urbain did not believe that this European “holy war of the pen” against Islam would be especially harmful to Muslim-Christian relations in Syria or elsewhere in the Ottoman Empire: Muslims there did not read European newspapers, and the Ottoman government, supervised by France and the other European powers, would find a way to successfully administer justice to the blameworthy. For Urbain, the real danger was in Algeria, France’s overwhelmingly Muslim colony. The outpouring of anti-Islamic sentiment in France provoked by the events in Syria would endanger the chances for reconciliation and reform there. Some observers would doubtless “want to apply to our Algerian Muslims what is being said about those of Syria. . . . [A]ready brochures are linking the religious *confréries* (khouans) of Algeria to the immense conspiracy of Muslim fanaticism centered at Mecca; already the French government is being reproached for having treated the *indigènes* too gently, and are proposing to replace this perverse population with Maronites imported from Lebanon.” Urbain, it seems, had been reading Vogüé, Lavigerie, and other liberal Catholics. For these anti-Islamic writers, Urbain presciently worried, the events in Syria were proof that Muslims would always be backward and would always hate the French. Indeed,
Vogüé condemned all Muslims to just such an inability to reconcile with civilization. If subsequent wars and revolts broke out in French Algeria, Urbain angrily predicted, it would not be because of Islam and its backwardness; instead, all blame should be laid at the door of those “misguided sermonizers” in France who had stoked the fires of mutual hatred.116

But there was another observer who was also deeply worried about French Catholics’ reactions to the massacres, someone whose motives were diametrically opposed to Urbain’s. This was the Père Ducat, the Jesuit most involved in the Algerian mission arabe and most optimistic about the possibility of Muslim conversion to Christianity. Of course, Ducat did not share Urbain’s desire to exonerate Islam. But he was concerned that the events in Syria would discourage Catholics from supporting the mission in Algeria. In light of the “horrible excesses” of the Muslims in Syria, according to Ducat, some members of his own Algeria-based “Association of Prayers...for the Conversion of the Muslims” were tempted to abandon the cause of Muslim conversion, saying, “This people is cursed forever...no conversion [is] possible. We will only be done with them when they are exterminated.”117 Ducat hastened to send out a circular to his association’s members, wherein he recounted the horrors of the Syrian massacres but tried to frame them as the last death rattle of a toppling faith, not the conspiracy of a powerful enemy. He urged his associates not only to pray for the “Victory and Peace” of the Chrétiens d’Orient, but also to continue praying for the “conversion of their persecutors,” so that, in the words of the prayer association’s motto, there would one day be only “one flock and one shepherd” on earth.118

Like the majority of Ducat’s publicity efforts on behalf of the mission arabe, this circular was barred from any official publication in Ducat’s own home diocese of Besançon by an archbishop jealous of his diocese’s charitable resources.119 That archbishop was none other than the Cardinal Mathieu, the liberal Gallican and brother of the Œuvre d’Orient’s lay president, Admiral Mathieu. Even as Mathieu was blocking Ducat’s efforts to publicize the mission to Muslims on the grounds that his own charities needed the funds instead, he was supporting the Œuvre’s appeal in favor of the persecuted Christians of Syria, allowing over 30,000 francs to be collected in his diocese.120 It seems the cause of rallying Christian civilization against its ultimate enemy, Islam, was more popular than the cause of Muslim conversion and reconciliation. The profile of the Œuvre d’Orient would only continue to rise and to be supported throughout France, while Ducat’s Muslim-focused prayer association would find no such lasting support. This contrast is one testament to the growing hegemony of anti-Islamic (rather than philo-Islamic) sentiment among French Catholics and to the role the “events of Syria” played in solidifying that sentiment.