

Anna Hager, *Christian-Muslim relations in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring. Beyond the Polemics over 'The Innocence of Muslims'*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 2024, 240 pp.

Christian-Muslim coexistence goes back to Islam's emergence from the Arabian Peninsula along the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, where at the time most of the population was Christian. Geographic proximity could lead to both peaceful coexistence and war; thus, while the two communities were predestined to live together, the perception of "the other" was always at the forefront. Besides the question of majority vs minority, European – and then US and Soviet – interference in the Middle East complemented the traditional Muslim perception of the Christians, part of the *dhimmis* (non-Muslims living in an Islamic state), with a secular backing. The new states delineated after the First World War were not only "left there" with Christian minorities of different sizes and belonging to different Eastern churches, but also, with the foreign support they gained, imbued with a secular or foreign meaning, too. This has been implemented through local developments in the identity of local populations, such as Arab nationalism and Nasserism in Egypt, loyalty to the monarchy in Jordan, and the sizeable Shiite community in Lebanon.

Christian-Muslim relations have been the subject of several academic books and articles. Yet, Anna Hager's book stands out because the research it presents examines these relations across three countries with varying Christian populations: Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. The selection of the countries is not accidental: Egypt, as the largest Arab state with approximately 110–120 million inhabitants, has the autocephalous Coptic church, which means approximately 10% of the population. Yet, among some ten million migrants, there are also Christians. Lebanon was established as a state separate from Syria, exactly because of the Maronite Christian community there, to ensure they would not be a minority. At the same time, Jordan, where the percentage of Christians is relatively low, approximately 2–3%, but still has relevance, if not for other reasons, then for the relationship to Christian Palestinians and the country's specific religious relationship to the West Bank.



The starting point of her examination is a highly controversial short film, 'The Innocence of the Muslims', which, while it may have gone relatively unnoticed on the global level, did evoke reactions locally and regionally in both the Muslim and the Christian communities.

Anna Hager's book is the result of both serious theoretical research (as attested by the impressive collection of notes and bibliography, pp. 140–188 and pp. 189–218, respectively) and fieldwork conducted in Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan.

In the Introduction, she raises important concepts, such as agency, violence, and ambiguity, and their connection with one another.

Anna Hager states that her research can be characterized by "micro-history" (with a time frame of two to three weeks, when the controversy was at its height) as well as a comparative approach. In the latter case, her meticulous "listing" of institutional and non-institutional Christian and Muslim actors, including state and church (with the Christians) and the official Islam, as well as leaders of the different communities, helps to understand the complexity and to explain how the countries under examination have experienced sometimes very different, even contradicting reactions in parallel.

The first chapter discusses the different actors and religious denominations involved in the so-called Arab Spring, with specific emphasis on their political maturity and their potential for cooperation with others.

The second chapter analyses the potential of inter-confessional violence and fear. Its sub-chapter 'The Hierarchization of Targets and Victims' enlist Western and/or Christian religious symbols, as well as poses the state practice of substituting sectarianism with terrorism in its terminology to avoid local violence and mobilization.

The third chapter discusses and offers a critical assessment of the basic issue of any identity-related question: in the context of the Christian-Muslim relationship, how the different actors identify themselves. In the reaction that followed the appearance of 'The Innocence of Muslims' – "was it merely the religious affiliation... or their institutional source?" As the research has found, Christian and Muslim reactions were often similar or even the same, making the thorough analysis of the Christian and Muslim identity central to the understanding of the developments. At the same time, it also presents the legal and political foundations of Christian identity and highlights the embeddedness of Christians in the modern states of the Levant.

The fourth chapter aims to redefine two basic concepts in Islam: the status of the *dhimma* and that of the *fitna* (temptation, trial, or civil strife), as well as their relevance in our times. As Anna Hager notes, "Classical Islam... is crucial when it comes to modern attitudes towards the other, as it continues to shape inter-communal relations". While the original concept of the *dhimma* offers the proximity of 'Arab Christians' to the Muslim majority, it also includes the possibility of the affirmation of their distinctive identity. The *fitna* and its historical antecedents serve to deepen the present-day understanding of the 'fear' of inter-confessional controversies mentioned in the previous chapters.

The fifth chapter, looking at the rituals of solidarity and avoidance, concludes that the controversy raised by ‘The Innocence of the Muslims’ served “as an occasion for renegotiating the terms of Christian-Muslim relations”.

The sixth chapter focuses on the potential of the Arab Spring events and processes, in which Christians and Muslims – most visibly in the Egyptian *thawra* (revolution) – participated together. The main question of the chapter is “a political system should include Christians as Christians and Muslims as Muslims”. The answer would be crucial to Egyptian national identity and the state’s security. The relevance is reflected in the formal occasions organized by the state, e.g., the 2013 inauguration speech by President Abd al-Fattah as-Sisi, during which the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar and the Coptic Pope sat together, expressing national unity.

Anna Hager’s book is a valuable resource for any reader seeking to understand the diverse patterns of Christian-Muslim relations across three closely related Middle Eastern states: Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan. The book’s conclusion – bearing a very important relevance for contemporary political development – is that “an occasion for violence turned into an occasion for cooperation”.

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