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(Un)civilized Religion: Representations of Religious 'Others' in Early Arabic Periodicals in Ottoman Syria

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Abstract

This article explores how early Arabic periodicals in Ottoman Syria represented local, "heretical" communities; namely, Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis. The article shows how these representations reflected the urban ideology of the Sunni-Christian *nahḍa* public that identified itself as part of the civilized world in opposition to the countryside, which was otherized as alien, morally deviant, and irrational. The article traces the sources of these representations in popular prejudice against rural communities, Ḫaldūnian theory of conflict, and European as well as Ottoman Orientalisms. These depictions are then contextualized within broader discussions in the *nahḍa* about civilization and religious tolerance.

Keywords

religion – heresy – periodicals – civilization/urbanity – Orientalism – public – *nahḍa*

1 Introduction

There is no doubt that religion was a central topic to the Arab *nahḍa* in Ottoman Syria[1] and consequently to scholarly research about this critical phase in the development of modern Arab thought. The focus of previous research has been on the views of *nahḍa* thinkers about their own religions —that is, (Sunni) Islam and Christianity— the relation between these two religions, and their relevance for modern society. Little attention, however, has been paid to how *nahḍa* writers addressed other religions and confessions, especially the "heretical" religious communities that have had a significant presence in rural parts of Ottoman Syria, and where these religions fit into the *nahḍa* thought.[2] Given the significance of the periodical press for the *nahḍa*, this article seeks to shed light on how such religions were represented in early Arabic periodicals and how they were incorporated into (or omitted from) discussions on topics such as the relationship between the city and the countryside, religious tolerance, and civilization. Furthermore, it strives to show what representations of religious otherness in these periodicals tell us about the self-perception of the largely urban, Sunni-Christian *nahḍa* public. In doing so, the article additionally contributes to a better understanding of the role played by periodicals in the formation of this social collectivity.

In the final third of the 19th century, Ottoman Syria witnessed the emergence of a thriving sector of private periodical print media that concentrated in the city of Beirut.[3] The stated mission of most periodicals at the time was not only to report news but also to spread "useful knowledge" —be it scientific, cultural, or social— to the general public. One area of knowledge to which these periodicals dedicated numerous articles was that of accounts of religious traditions that were unfamiliar to their urban Arab-Ottoman, Sunni-Christian readership, whether originating from faraway countries (such as East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and the Americas) or from local, obscure religious communities in greater Syria (such as Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis). Reports about unfamiliar religions in early Arabic periodicals often contained fantastical and

1 It goes without saying that the Arab *nahḍa* was not limited to Ottoman Syria or Ottoman Syrians. All references to *nahḍa* in this article, however, are to its Ottoman-Syrian manifestations.

2 There is, of course, existing research about the history of these religious communities under Ottoman rule in Syria, but much less on how their religions were represented in *nahḍa* texts.

3 The beginnings of the private Arabic press in Beirut can be traced back to the 1850s, but the sector had remained limited before it expanded significantly in the 1870s. Syrian journalists were also the first to launch private Arabic periodicals outside Ottoman Syria, *e.g.* in Egypt, Istanbul, Paris, Morocco, and the Americas. For an overview of the history of the Arabic press, see Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*.

sensational accounts that emphasized their strangeness and otherness in relation to their readership. The goal of this article, however, is not to assess the accuracy or trace the original sources of these reports, but to infer how they reflected the nature and position of religion in the worldview of the *nahḍa* public in Ottoman Syria, and which role periodicals fulfilled in creating this worldview.

In particular, the article provides an overview of the discourse of early Arabic periodicals about obscure religions in Ottoman Syria —that is, Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis— and an analysis of the ideological framework in which it was conducted. It discerns three layers in this discourse. At the most basic level, this discourse reflected prejudices and anxieties of city dwellers toward the countryside, which runs deep thousands of years into the history of Syria. At a second layer, it employed a modified, linear version of Ibn Ḫaldūn's paradigm of a cyclical conflict between the city and nomadic tribalism, which in its modification amounted to the city conquering the countryside and bringing it into the fold of civilization. At a third layer, on which I shall focus in this article, it represented a discourse of *authority* over these communities, of *representing* these communities in a manner reminiscent of European and Ottoman Orientalisms. These three layers can be summed up in the concept of the *ideology of the city* —an urban outlook whereby Syrian urban elites perceived themselves as part of the modern, civilized world (European as well as Ottoman-imperial) as opposed to the countryside, which was perceived as backward and threatening, as the uncivilized *other* of the civilized *we*. This ideology allowed *nahḍa* writers to project an *imagined* geography of civilized/uncivilized over the frontiers of urbanity/rurality and orthodoxy/heresy. The perceived uncivilized nature of heretical communities in rural Syria implied the need to bring them into the fold of civilization through a civilizing mission that employed education as well as the disciplinary power of the state.[4]

From the perspective of the *nahḍa* public, heretical communities in Ottoman Syria were perceived as "uncivilized" not only due to some "intrinsically rural" qualities —such as tribalism, unruliness, and vulgarity— but also due to specific elements in their religions that were perceived to be irrational and thus

4 Some of the views and the vocabulary discussed in this article are offensive, even outright bigoted and racist, especially by modern standards. To add in each instance quotation marks ("scare quotes") or a phrase such as "from the perspective of …" or "in the view of …" would considerably diminish readability and the flow of the text. In no way, however, should the repetition of this verbiage be construed as an endorsement of the described views and judgments.

incompatible with civilization, such as syncretism, secrecy, and sexual deviance. Early *nahḍa* writers considered religion an essential component of true civilization and attempted to formulate a vision of non-confessional *civilized religiosity* that appealed to a multi-confessional audience, yet this vision was shaped by their urban, Sunni-Christian, orthodox sensibilities that excluded rural, heterodox communities. Furthermore, the periodicals of the *nahḍa* were not purely instruments for the dissemination of the ideology of the city and its civilized religiosity but were a constituting element in the social body adopting this ideology, which I define as the *nahḍa public* following Michael Warner's concept of *public*.[5]

Most of the periodical articles cited in this article were drawn from two major Beirut-based periodicals: *al-Ǧinān* (The Gardens, 1870-1886) and *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* (Fruits of the Arts, 1875-1908). *Al-Ǧinān* was a bi-monthly literary-scientific magazine published by Buṭrus al-Bustānī (d. 1883) and his son Salīm (d. 1884),[6] whereas *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* was a weekly newspaper published by ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Qabbānī (d. 1935).[7] However, some articles from other prominent periodicals of the era, such as *al-Muqtaṭaf* (The Digest, Beirut and Cairo, 1876-1952), *al-Hilāl* (The Crescent, Cairo, 1892-present), *Lisān al-Ḥāl* (The Voice of the Situation, Beirut, 1877-1975), *al-Mašriq* (The Orient, Beirut, 1898-1971), and *al-Muqtabas* (The Digest, Damascus and Cairo, 1906-1918) are also cited. While the majority of these periodicals were published by Christians, contributors and readership were not necessarily of the same religious background as their publishers. In addition to these periodicals, some entries in *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif*, the first modern Arabic Encyclopedia,[8] are also included in the discussion. The reason for their inclusion is that *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif* shared the same publishers as *al-Ǧinān*, where some of its entries were re-published. In terms of the temporal framework of the present paper, the focus is on press articles published by the end of the 19th century, even though a few articles

5 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics".

6 *Al-Muʿallim* (The Teacher) Buṭrus al-Bustānī was a Maronite convert to Protestantism and one of the most active publishers and educators of the Arab *nahḍa*. His son Salīm assisted him in his various cultural projects and was for a time a member of the municipal council of Beirut.

7 Al-Qabbānī was a prominent Sunni educator and publisher in Beirut and a co-founder of *Al-Maqāṣid Islamic Benevolent Society*, the first Islamic educational charity in Ottoman Syria. Like Salīm al-Bustānī, al-Qabbānī too was for a time a member of the municipal council of Beirut.

8 Between 1876 and 1887, nine volumes of the encyclopedia were published in Beirut by Buṭrus al-Bustānī and his two sons Salīm and Naǧīb. Two other volumes appeared in Cairo in 1898 and 1900 before the project was discontinued halfway through.

published in the first decade of the 20th century were cited too.[9] While it aims for comprehensiveness, this article does not claim to represent *all* views about heretical religions in early Arabic periodicals in the 19th century.

In terms of authorship and sources, many of these articles were published without providing an author's name or with a very vague reference to the source (*e.g.* "an article translated from a European periodical"), which was more often the case than not in Arabic periodicals at the time. One can infer that some of them were of European origin, but there were also details drawn from traditional Arabic sources such as the works of Ibn Ḫaldūn (d. 1406) and al-Šahrastānī (d. 1153).[10]

2 The *Nahḍa* Public and Its Ideology of the City

Scholarly literature abounds with attempts to pin the *nahḍa* down on an *existing* social group, such as a capitalist (or pre-capitalist) bourgeoisie, city notables, religious reformists, (Christian) intellectuals, state bureaucrats, among others,[11] but none of these attempts has been in my opinion successful. Evidence shows that participants in the *nahḍa* were a heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds and involvements in various institutions and social fields, such as bureaucracy, education, the printing press, Christian missions, foreign consulates, private enterprise, landownership, communal politics, and the clergy, among others.[12] Perhaps, the only social common denominator among the vast majority of participants in the *nahḍa* was *urbanity*. The *nahḍa* was for the most part an urban phenomenon that concentrated in major urban centers in Ottoman Syria —most notably Beirut but also Damascus, Aleppo,

9 Following the Young Turk revolution of 1908, a massive expansion in the periodical press in Ottoman Syria took place. By that time, some marked shifts in *nahḍa* thought had already taken shape: for example, from the positivist, linear, pan-Ottomanist orientation of the *Tanẓīmāt* toward religious revivalism and romantic nationalism.

10 Al-Šahrastānī was the author of one of the most popular Islamic heresiographies, *al-Milal wa-al-niḥal* (Religions and Creeds), which covers Islamic and non-Islamic confessions as well as philosophical creeds.

11 For a discussion of scholarly literature in this area, see Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation*, 18-78.

12 Apart from the biographies of prominent *nahḍa* figures, evidence includes names of occasional contributors to periodicals as well as lists of subscribers and agents, which could be triangulated with biographical dictionaries and other major reference works of the *nahḍa*, such as *al-Aʿlām* by Ḫayr al-Dīn al-Ziraklī and *Tārīḫ al-Ṣiḥāfa al-ʿarabiyya* by Fīlīp dī Ṭarrāzī.

Tripoli, and Latakia.[13] By *urbanity*, it should be noted, I do not merely mean the fact of living in a particular city or identifying with it, but possessing a transregional urban identity that transcended the urbanity particular to any one city in Ottoman Syria.

Yet urbanity alone is clearly not enough to define *participants* in the *nahḍa* as a social group. There is a need for an additional criterion, namely, *participation* in the Arabic periodical press, understood broadly to include activities from professional publishing and journalism through occasional contributions by readers up to subscription and mere reading (what Michael Warner calls "attention" in his seminal essay "Publics and Counterpublics").[14] I am defining the *nahḍa* thereby following Warner as *a public*; that is, a social space that is organized solely around a discourse. In other words, a public does not exist prior to the discourse —as a community or social class with pre-determined identity or criterion of membership— but by virtue of it. In the case of *nahḍa* in Ottoman Syria, periodicals enabled the multi-directional, reflexive, and rhythmic circulation of texts —citations, reviews, debates, and readers' contributions[15]— creating thereby an ongoing social space in the same sense described by Warner.[16] It should be noted that a *public*, in Warner's definition, is not the same as *the public* (*sphere*) that has frequently been applied —albeit with reservations— in studies of the *nahḍa*,[17] even though *a* public frequently masks itself as *the* public in order to claim representation and legitimacy.[18] *The public sphere* is unitary, abstract, equal, and universal —effectively

13 Mount Lebanon might be an exception in this regard due to several reasons such as its proximity to Beirut, the extensive network of foreign missions and local monasteries, foreign influence (political as well as economic through the silk industry) and its special administrative status (*Mutaṣarrifiyya*) after the civil war of 1860. For an overview of the economy and distribution of printing and reading in Ottoman Syria, see Ayalon, "The Syrian Educated Elite and the Literary *Nahḍa*" and Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution*.

14 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 60-61.

15 In addition to articles and readers' letters, a periodical such as *al-Ǧinān* included permanent sections that were mostly filled by readers' contributions. These included jokes (*milaḥ*) and puzzles (*alġāz*) — usually in a literary or mathematical form — and their solutions.

16 The focus on periodicals over other forms of printed text, such as books, in defining the *nahḍa* public is due to their particular significance in this early stage of Arabic mass printing, as pointed out by Kendall, "Between Politics and Literature", 330, and Glaß, *Der* Muqtaṭaf *und seine Öffentlichkeit*, 4-7. In addition, books were often dependent on periodicals for their circulation, especially through the subscription model common at the time, as illustrated in Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution*, 123-153.

17 For example, Holt, "Narrative and the Reading Public", 39, and Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 5-6.

18 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 51, 84.

encompassing all (literate) people who exist in a society— whereas *a public* is plural (coexisting with other publics, including *counterpublics*), uneven, and entails some form of active participation, no matter how minimal.

The concept of a public implies strangeness: the text is addressed to and consumed by strangers, which means that it involves social imagination. However, unlike other social imaginaries —such as the nation, religion, market, or race— there is no a priori criterion of membership or an existing identity independent of the discourse itself. It is participation alone that unifies strangers in this social space and brings them into a relationship with one another. Yet the strangeness implied in the idea of a public is not arbitrary. Warner distinguishes between "familiar" and "exotic strangers".[19] The former is perceived to be part of our *familiar* world as opposed to the latter, which comes from *unknown* or mysterious places, hence perceived as "a disturbing presence that requires resolution", as Warner puts it.[20] As a result, a public involves preselection through various material and cultural factors such as language, style, economics of distribution, shared social space, mutual concerns, habitus, dispositions, interests, gender, *etc*. This preselection entails the formation of a "positive content" that comes to define the public in question.[21]

In the case of the *nahḍa* public, this "positive content" could be described as the *ideology of the city*, which excluded rural people and heretical communities in the hinterland. In the so-called "long peace" that followed the sectarian civil war of 1860 in Mount Lebanon, *nahḍa* writers were usually attentive to the topic of sectarianism, avoiding religious polemics and remaining, for the most part, respectful of religious sentiments, using a civil, courteous language when talking about other religious communities.[22] Religious insults were generally avoided, out of respect, fear of trouble with authorities, angry responses by fellow journalists and readers, or even violence from people they could encounter in the street. This courtesy, however, did not extend to heretical communities and rural people in general, as the examples shown in this article will clearly demonstrate. Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis, as well as Bedouins, were addressed in a language that is similar to the one they employed when referring to "savages" in faraway countries, *i.e*. as *exotic* strangers belonging to

19 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 55-57.

20 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 56.

21 Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics", 75-76.

22 This is not meant to deny the existence of religious or sectarian polemics in local periodicals at the time. But when comparing them with those published by foreign missionaries in Ottoman Syria, such as the Jesuit *al-Bašīr* (The Herald) and the Protestant *al-Našra al-usbūʿiyya* (The Weekly Bulletin), it would be become clear that local journalists were far less likely to use an inflammatory language against other religions.

a world that is different than the *familiar* world of urban Syria. In depicting peripheral religious communities as "other", "internal savages", periodicals contributed to the creation of the *ideology of the city* and became its primary form of expression.

Several scholars have employed terms similar to the *ideology of the city* in studies of the Middle East and North Africa, which highlights the centrality of the city in Ottoman, colonial, and early independence periods of this region.[23] Albert Hourani used this very term to describe a particular conception of independent Lebanon that descended from the idea of *fin de siècle* Beirut as a commercial hub in the Mediterranean, a center of Arab culture, and an embodiment of the modernizing project of the Ottoman *Tanẓīmāt*.[24] Other related terms are Gilbert Grandguillaume's notion of *idéologie citadine*, which he applied in North Africa,[25] and Jens Hanssen's notion of "urban narratives of modernity".[26] I am not using the term *ideology of the city*, however, in the narrow sense of Hourani as a conception of Lebanon, but more generally as the ideology from which it was derived: the conception of Beirut (and other urban centers in Ottoman Syria) as the abode of an Ottoman-Arab civilization that is surrounded by uncivilization in the countryside. For the *ideology of the city*, the periodical press was not merely a transmitter but an essential component thereof.[27]

In terms of content, the *ideology of the city* could be traced to three primary sources: popular attitudes of city dwellers in Ottoman Syria toward the countryside, a modified version of the Ḫaldūnian theory of perpetual conflict between sedentary and nomadic communities, and, finally, Orientalist notions of *otherness*. All of these three ideological layers were encapsulated in the *nahḍa* ideal of civilization (*tamaddun*),[28] which could only exist —from the perspective of the *nahḍa* public— in cities.[29] The precarious

23 In the post-independence era, as rural populations acquired education and entered state institutions, especially the army, the balance of power between the city and the countryside in several Arab countries (such as Syria, Iraq, and Egypt) shifted toward the latter.

24 Hourani, "Ideologies of the Mountain and the City".

25 As cited in Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation*, 81-82.

26 Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 213-35.

27 For the close connection between the newspaper and the city, see Hanssen, *Fin de Siècle Beirut*, 213, especially Jacques Berque's notion of the newspaper as a "'second articulation' of the city".

28 For an overview of the *nahḍa* concept of *tamaddun* and the different currents and traditions that shaped it, see Hill, *Utopia and Civilisation*, 160-75, and Abu-ʿUksa, "The Premodern History of 'Civilisation' in Arabic".

29 *Nahḍa* writers located *tamaddun* both etymologically and sociologically in the city. See, for example, the entry on *tamaddun* in *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif* (Anon., "Tamaddun"). This view

relationship between sedentary and pastoral-nomadic communities has a long history in the Middle East, extending thousands of years back. This divide is deeply embedded in the culture and even the religious traditions of the area, as seen, for example, in the Biblical account of the conflict between the nomadic Hebrews and sedentary Canaanites, or the often-negative tone of the Qurʾān towards Bedouins.[30] In a region such as Syria where agriculture and grazing grass are highly dependent on fluctuating rainfall, hostilities between these two groups are not uncommon (until today), especially during times of drought and poor harvest. Furthermore, the *nahḍa* idea of *tamaddun* was influenced by Ibn Ḫaldūn's cyclical theory, according to which historical change is shaped by perpetual conflict between sedentary and nomadic communities. *Nahḍa* writers, however, transformed the Ḫaldūnian model into a linear one, in which —instead of nomads conquering the city— the city extended its dominance to the hinterland, spreading civilization, and breaking thereby the cycle of conflict.[31]

Civilization, as it has been repeatedly pointed out, is a concept of power, which invokes Edward Said's notion of Orientalism as a discourse for *representing* and having *authority* —both in the political and epistemic sense of the word— over the Orient; that is, the *other* against which Europe defined itself.[32] Much like European Orientalism, the discourse of Ottoman-Syrian periodicals about heretical communities involved representation of those who "cannot represent themselves", setting them apart from the urban public of the *nahḍa* as the religiously and culturally *other* that needs to be disciplined and brought into the fold of the civilization. Furthermore, it overlapped with the discourse of "Ottoman Orientalism" emanating from Ottoman intellectual and bureaucratic elites —some of whom were part of the *nahḍa* public— who viewed the periphery of the empire as backward and thus in need to be subjugated by the disciplinary power of the state.[33] As in Ottoman Orientalism, the *nahḍa* public internalized the logic of European Orientalism but redrew the frontiers between civilization and backwardness by splitting the Orient

was also applied to Europe; according to renowned *nahḍa* author Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq, "while civilization is spread in European cities and towns, the bulk of the rural population is still astray in the deserts of ignorance", al-Šidyāq, *Silsilat al-aʿmāl al-maǧhūla*, 271.

30 For a discussion of the representation of Bedouins in the Qurʾān, see Pietruschka, "Bedouin".

31 On the adaptation of Ibn Ḫaldūn's theory of conflict in the *nahḍa*, see Khuri-Makdisi, "The Conceptualization of the Social", 96-98.

32 Said, *Orientalism*, 1-28.

33 Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism". See also Deringil's related concept of "borrowed colonialism"; Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery'".

into two parts: one that was closer to Europe on the civilizational scale and another that conformed to the European idea of an Orient still lurking in dark ages. This deep-rooted historical animosity between city and countryside in Ottoman Syria, along with Ḫaldūnian sociology and modern ideas of civilizational progress, ultimately shaped the urbanity of the *nahḍa* public, which stood in contrast to both sedentary rurality and nomadism.[34]

As stated above, the *nahḍa* public existed by virtue of its participation in the discourse of the periodical press, not prior to it. The same can be said about the *ideology of the city*. This ideology, arguably, was formed *on the pages* of the periodical press, where the above three ideological frameworks interacted and combined with one another, thanks, in part, to the heterogeneous nature of periodical texts and their sources. News and articles translated from the European as well as the Ottoman-Turkish press, contributions by obscure writers along with renowned intellectuals from all major (urban) parts of Ottoman Syria and its diaspora, sermons by clergy members (Christian as well as Muslim), book announcements, commercial advertisements, classical Arabic texts as well as new literary genres (such as the novel) could all be found within the same issue of any Arabic periodicals from that era. This heterogeneity notwithstanding, urbanity remained a common denominator due to various factors such as the materiality of production and distribution, which effectively reduced the circulation of the periodical Arabic press to major cities in Ottoman Syria, or wide disparities in literacy rates between cities and the countryside. Thus, as periodicals were produced and consumed by urban dwellers, they *reflected* their interests, concerns, and views, or to put it differently, the periodicals allowed for their interests, concerns, and views to *interact* and *interweave* with one another, forming thereby their urban ideology.

3 Heretical Communities in Ottoman Syria and Their Representation in Early Arabic Periodicals

How did religion fit in the *ideology of the city* and its civilizing mission? As explained above, it is in urban centers in Ottoman Syria that "recognized" or "legitimate" religious communities lived; that is, (Sunni) Muslims, Christians,

34 As far as the concept of civilization was concerned, the *nahḍa* public perceived both sedentary agricultural communities and their nomadic counterparts as remote from their ideal of urban civilization.

and Jews.[35] Sunni Islam —being the religion of the ruling dynasty and the political and military elite of the empire— enjoyed full legitimacy and the highest privileges. Christians, for their part, despite being inferior to Muslims in status, had better access to education and economic opportunities as the Ottoman Empire became more open to European political, economic, and cultural influence over the course of the 19th century.[36] While Christians in Ottoman Syria belonged to a variety of churches and denominations (Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox,[37] Catholic, and Protestant), between which sectarian polemics —even physical violence— were not uncommon, both the *nahḍa* public and Ottoman authorities generally accepted these varieties as legitimate. As ethno-religious nationalism was spreading throughout the Balkans and Anatolia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resulting frequently in episodes of extreme communal violence, Ottoman Syria remained relatively calm, with the cultural elite adopting what Ussama Makdisi describes as an "ecumenical frame" that reconciled religious diversity with loyalty to the Ottoman Empire and aspirations for equal citizenship.[38] This ecumenical frame, however, remained for the most part limited to the three urban, legitimate religions mentioned above.[39]

What set Druze, Ismailis, Alawites (Nuṣayrīs),[40] and Yazidis apart from other religious communities in Ottoman Syria was that they all shared the

35 The legitimacy of a religious community other than (Sunni) Islam in the Ottoman Empire was validated through recognition as a so-called *millet* (nation), a status which was granted to Jews and various Christian churches, but not to Islamic communities deemed heretical by the Sunni establishment. For an overview of the management of religious diversity in the Ottoman Empire, see Makdisi, *The Age of Coexistence*, 27-43.

36 Access to better economic and educational opportunities was not by any means even among Christian denominations in Ottoman Syria. Generally speaking, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Maronite, and Protestant Christians were more visible in the *nahḍa* circles than followers of other denominations.

37 The Eastern Orthodox Church was the official church of the (Eastern) Roman Empire, of which the Greek Orthodox patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria are autocephalous jurisdictions. "Oriental Orthodoxy", on the other hand, denotes a different set of churches, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church, which do not recognize the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD).

38 Makdisi, *The Age of Coexistence*, 75-110.

39 It is worth noting that when anti-Jewish polemics were circulated, many in the early Arabic press confronted them, unlike polemics against Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis. See, for example, Salīm al-Bustānī's scathing criticism of an Antisemitic pamphlet that was distributed in Beirut in 1870. al-Bustānī, "al-Ṣaḥīfa al-waḍiyya fī inhidām al-diyāna al-ʿibriyya".

40 The Alawites in modern Syria were known historically, until the early 20th century, as Nuṣayrīs.

following characteristics: obscurity, rurality, and to be perceived as heretical by the Sunni Orthodoxy and, in turn, by Ottoman authorities. Heterodox[41] and heretical communities in Ottoman Syria existed almost exclusively in remote rural areas, where for centuries they found refuge from authorities that protected and maintained orthodoxy.[42] They remained, as a result, mysterious for the urban Sunni-Christian population, arousing mixed feelings of curiosity (much like religions from exotic countries) as well as fear and suspicion. This applies, with varying degrees, to accounts in the Ottoman-Arabic press about Druze, Ismailis, Alawites, and Yazidis. All these communities are Islamic in their origins (regardless whether they or some of their members considered their religion to be distinct from Islam), emerging out of what is known in Islamic history as *ġulāt al-Šīʿa* ("extreme" or "radical Shiʿis"), who were —more often than not— considered to be heretical by mainstream Muslims (both Sunnis and Twelver Shiʿis). The only exception is Yazidism, which emerged out of a Sunni-Sufi religious tradition while incorporating pre-Islamic elements,[43] but its beliefs would be considered just as "extreme" from the perspective of mainstream Muslims. Twelver Shiʿis existed in rural areas of Ottoman Syria, primarily in Mount Lebanon, but they were generally regarded as Muslims by Ottoman authorities and most Sunni *ʿulamāʾ*.[44] Furthermore, their beliefs and practices were not totally unfamiliar to educated people in Syria. This perhaps explains why there were, as far as my own research goes, no articles explaining their beliefs in the Arabic press at the time. I am using the term "heretical" to refer to these communities while acknowledging its Christian origins as well as the normativity inherent in it, which implies that Sunnism is "correct" or "original Islam", whereas other forms are "corrupt" versions of it. It has been pointed out, however, that while there is no official ecclesiastical authority that defines orthodoxy in Islam, an ideological assertion of orthodoxy is pursued discursively and politically through "networks of power".[45] Since in the

41 Heterodox beliefs and rituals, needless to say, existed within Ottoman Sunni Islam and Christianity as well, but this is outside the scope of this article. The reader may refer to Grehan's *Twilight of the Saints* for a discussion of what he calls "agrarian religion" and its relationship to orthodoxy and the urban/rural divide in Ottoman Syria.

42 For a discussion on the applicability of terms such as orthodoxy and heresy in Islamic studies, see Langer and Simon, "The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy".

43 Kreyenbroek, "Yazīdī".

44 In a letter sent to *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn*, a reader named Niʿmatullāh Isḥāq al-Daḥdāḥ (likely Christian) referred to Shiʿis in Mount Lebanon as non-Muslims, an observation that the editor of the Sunni periodical was careful to correct. al-Daḥdāḥ, "Murāsalāt: Bayrūt fī 26 šubāṭ".

45 Langer and Simon, "The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy", 279.

Ottoman Syrian context, there is little question where discursive and political power lay, I think it is justifiable to speak of a Sunni orthodoxy versus a variety of Islamic communities that it defined as heretical. This will also correspond to the usage of the term *ġulāt al-Šīʿa* in classical Islamic heresiographies —frequently drawn on by *nahḍa* writers— toward groups such as Ismailis, Druze, and Alawites. Applying an orthodoxy-heresy dichotomy is not an acknowledgement that one version of Islam is *correct* and all others are not; rather, that one version had the *power* to maintain claims to orthodoxy and cast others as heretical. This heretical status implies —from an official standpoint— illegitimacy. Jews and Christians may have been perceived from a Sunni-theological viewpoint as "infidels", but they were accorded a legitimate status in Islamic law as "people of the book". Islamic heretical communities, on the other hand, did not enjoy such official legitimacy. While Ottoman authorities tolerated them and did not actively seek their eradication or forced conversion, they sometimes invoked their theological status as heretical in order to justify repressive measures against them in situations of rebellion or civil unrest. In other words, the persecution of heresy under Ottoman rule was usually not an end in itself, but a tool to enforce state authority.

Finally, one may question the value of applying the term "heretical" in an inter-religious (as opposed to intra-religious) context, as in articles written by Christian authors on Islamic sects, since from a Christian-theological perspective both Sunni orthodoxy and *ġulāt al-Šīʿa* could be considered equally "false". However, as shall be seen later, Christian writers were as prone to be prejudiced and hostile toward these communities as their Sunni counterparts. This is in part because Christians saw these communities through Sunni lenses as they used Islamic heresiographies and medieval histories —most of which had a Sunni perspective— to learn about these communities. Furthermore, heresy and religious non-conformism in general could be seen suspiciously, even by "neutral" (*i.e.* external) observers, since they may be associated with negative attributes such as rebellion, violence, fanaticism, secrecy, and uncertain loyalties, among others.[46]

46 This explains perhaps why the communist regimes of the Soviet Union and China, for example, often persecuted heretical or new religious groups (such as Jehovah Witnesses and Falun Gong) even more harshly than established religions. For the Soviet context, see Antic, "The Spread of Modern Cults in the USSR".

4 The Druze

Among these four heretical communities, the Druze perhaps received the most coverage in early Arabic periodicals and were generally portrayed the least negatively and the least heretical. This is partly due to their high political status in Mount Lebanon and their proximity to Beirut-based journalists. Furthermore, the Druze themselves contributed to early Arabic periodicals,[47] and they established a periodical of their own: *al-Ṣafāʾ* (Purity, 1886-ca. 1913).[48] One of the most extensive accounts of the Druze religion in the early Arabic press was published in *al-Ǧinān* in 1883, which was a version of the entry on Druze in *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif*. The article praised the Druze for separating religion from politics and for "keeping their denominational matters to themselves", which is conducive to social harmony with their neighbors, according to the article.[49] The article downplayed the heterodoxy of Druze, maintaining that there was nothing strange or unfamiliar about the beliefs and the practices of the Druze, which were for the most part similar to Islam (except for polygamy), even though it denied that the Druze had any connection to Islam in general or any *ġulāt al-Šīʿa* group, including the Ismailis. Furthermore, it added that the Druze believe in Christ except for the crucifixion and his divinity, abhor idolatry, and believe in reincarnation. The article attributed some of its sections to unnamed "Druze clerical leaders" and "one of their learned men".

Ṯamarāt al-Funūn, on its part, published a series of articles and letters related to the religion of Druze in 1890, which emphasized their Islamic credentials. This series was triggered by an article titled "Islamic Union", translated from the Turkish Izmir-based periodical *Ḫidmet* (Service) that argued that the solution to the problem of religious and ethnic divisions in the Ottoman Empire was not Ottomanism but religion (*i.e.* Islam) because there is no social bond that is stronger than religion.[50] The priority for the Ottoman state, according to the article, was not to strengthen relations with Muslims outside the Ottoman Empire nor to spread Islam among its non-Muslim subjects but to unify Islamic

47 Of the religious communities discussed in this article, I am not aware of any contributions by their members to the Arabic press in the 19th century except for the Druze.

48 At the time of writing this article, I did not have access to *al-Ṣafāʾ*. Otherwise, it would be illuminating to include this periodical in any future studies about this topic.

49 Anon., "al-Durūz".

50 Anon., "al-Ittiḥād al-islāmī".

denominations and sects within the empire itself. Hence, the unnamed writer commended the step taken by Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II to establish schools for Islamic education and dispatch preachers to teach "60,000 Nuṣayrīs" Sunni Islam.[51] Finally, he called to use education to unify "the tribes of Syria and the clans of Anatolia" — something that *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* praised, while highlighting the role to be played by non-governmental educational societies in this regard.

Two weeks later, another article with the same title, signed by "An Honest Ottoman" (ʿUṯmānī Ṣādiq) was published in *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn*, in which the author agreed with the *Ḫidmet* article, asserting that "the only nationality (*ǧinsiyya*) in Islam [...] is religion". He called to generalize this effort to spread the "true religion" to Islamic sects in Syria, especially the Druze, who were known for their strength and loyalty to the Ottoman state and who, according to the author, desired to send their children to Ottoman schools instead of Christian missionary schools.[52] Three weeks later, *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* published a letter signed by Muḥammad Zayn al-Dīn from al-Šūf,[53] who commended these calls, asserting the Muslimness of the Druze and their need for schools to learn the Qurʾān and receive proper Islamic education.[54] In the following issue, the editor of *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* reported that during the Islamic festival of *ʿĪd al-Aḍḥā*, he made a visit to Mount Lebanon, during which he stopped at the residence of Nasīb Ǧunblāṭ, the *qāʾimmaqām* (governor) of al-Šūf, where he heard speeches by senior Druze leaders and notables affirming their belonging to Islam and the Ottoman Empire, and their desire to receive proper Islamic education in Ottoman schools.[55] In none of the above articles were the Druze (at least in Mount Lebanon) described as barbaric, unruly clans in need of civilization as they were characterized by Ottoman officials following the civil war of 1860 in Mount Lebanon.[56] All that they needed was support in education to bring them closer to the Islamic *umma*.

51 For an overview of Ottoman "civilizing mission" to "sunnify" Alawites in Syria during the reign of Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd II (1876-1909) and relevant debates in the Ottoman-Turkish press, see Alkan, "The Ottoman Policy of 'Correction of Belief(s)'".

52 ʿUṯmānī Ṣādiq, "al-Ittiḥād al-islāmī".

53 His surname and that he was writing from al-Šūf —historically the stronghold of the Druze in Mount Lebanon— suggest that the writer of the letter was Druze himself, but this was not stated explicitly.

54 Zayn al-Dīn, "al-Ittiḥād al-islāmī".

55 Anon., "Ṭāʾifat al-Durūz fī Lubnān wa-al-ittiḥād al-islāmī".

56 Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*, 72.

The image of Druze as an Islamic community seeking rapprochement with the Sunni majority was not unchallenged. Not only were their Islamic credentials questioned in some articles,[57] but also their civility, especially when there were reports of clashes between the Druze and their Christian or Sunni neighbors in Ḥawrān.[58] Some reports included accusations of wild savagery as in one letter sent to *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* from Damascus that criticized two "esteemed" Druze sheikhs for showing excessive *ʿaṣabiyya* (tribalism) by defending their fellow Druze in Ḥawrān, even though they engaged in aggression and treachery toward their neighbors, according to the anonymous writer of the letter.[59] Such critical articles, however, frequently prompted responses and refutations by Druze readers who asserted their Islamic identity.[60] Some responses acknowledged the rough nature of some Druze but insisted that this did not justify the wild, fantastical rumors being spread about them.[61] As a result, sometimes a distinction was made between the Druze of Mount Lebanon and the Druze of Ḥawrān.[62] The former were characterized as obedient and active in the Ottoman administration and keen to send their children to schools, whereas the Druze of Ḥawrān were described as rebellious, rough, and war-like, which resulted in frequent clashes with their neighbors.[63]

5 Ismailis

In contrast to the Druze, the perceptions of other heretical communities in Syria were almost exclusively negative. In the case of Ismailis, their representations in early Arabic press contained traces of their image in medieval Islamic and European sources as a radical, underground, revolutionary sect, which brought up comparisons with contemporary radical or secretive movements

57 For example, Anon., "Ǧabal al-Durūz wa fitnatuhum" and Anon., "Aṣl al-Durūz".

58 For example, Anon., "'Udwān al-Durūz fi Ḥawrān" [The Aggression of the Druze in Ḥawrān]. Ḥawrān is a region in southern contemporary Syria and northern Jordan.

59 Anon., "al-Waṭan wa-ašqiyāʾ al-Durūz" [The Country and the Druze Ruffians].

60 See, for example, a letter from a "Druze notable", Anon., "al-Masāǧid wa-al-Durūz".

61 See a letter signed by Ḥusayn Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn in *Lisān al-Ḥāl*, responding to accusations published in *al-Ǧanna* (a sister periodical of *al-Ǧinān*) that the Druze planted explosives in women's genitalia during clashes in Ḥawrān. Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn, "Murāsalāt: Lubnān fī 11 šubāṭ".

62 For the history of the Druze in Ḥawrān under Ottoman rule, see Schäbler, "State(s) Power and the Druzes".

63 Anon., "al-Durūz", 602.

in Europe, such as Nihilists,[64] Freemasons,[65] and Anarchists.[66] In the article comparing Ismailism to Nihilism, which was published in *al-Ǧinān*, Ismailism was portrayed as an atheist movement disguised as a religious sect in order to undermine all religions. Supposedly, Ismailis sought to shake the faith of followers of other religions, initiating them into a hierarchical system of belief that ultimately led to pure atheism, which is a common accusation in anti-Ismaili polemics. Furthermore, the article recounted the historical legend of a secret garden used by Nizari-Ismaili leaders in Syria and Iran to lure potential assassins into thinking that they possessed the keys to paradise.[67] The article, in addition, reported a common local sectarian legend in the region against Ismailis (among others), accusing them of performing religious rituals venerating the female genitalia, which included praying before a naked woman seated on an altar and performing group sexual acts.[68] These salacious, fantastical legends notwithstanding, *al-Maʿārif*'s version acknowledged that contemporary Ismailis were not engaged in subversive violent acts, comparing them favorably with their Alawite neighbors in terms of education, ethics, and physical appearance.[69] In fact, the above image of Ismailis as a fearsome, revolutionary sect was largely based on their medieval legacy (real or imagined), given that Ismailis in the second half of the 19th century were a small, marginal

64 Anon., "al-Nihīlīst wa-al-ismāʿīliyya". This is a shortened version of the entry "Ismāʿīliyya" in *Dāʾirat al-Maʿārif* with comparisons to Nihilists added on.

65 Šuqayr, "Qabīlat al-ʿAsīriyyīn". The author of the article, however, rejected this comparison, which had been made in a French newspaper according to him, arguing that Freemasonry is a society of moral norms and high culture, and thus it could not be compared with assassins such as the Ismailis, to whom he incorrectly attributed the assassination of Jean-Baptiste Kléber, the deputy of Napoleon Bonaparte during the French campaign in Egypt, in 1800.

66 Abū Ǧamra, "al-Fawḍawiyyūn fī al-islām: Ṭāʾifat al-Ḥaššāšīn" ["The Anarchists of Islam: The Sect of the Assassins"].

67 For a discussion of historical legends about the Assassins, see Daftary, *The Assassin Legends*.

68 The myth of a religious festivity involving group sexual practices (often called *ʿīd al-baqbīšeh* in colloquial dialect) survives until today in Syria and is not only applied by members of the Sunni majority against heretical minorities but also by members of these minorities against one another.

69 Anon., "Ismāʿīliyya", 635-636.

community[70] with far less political and demographic significance than Druze, Alawites, or even Yazidis.[71]

The representation of Ismailis as a malicious yet sophisticated, hyper-rational sect placed them in an ambiguous position in terms of civilization. They were not perceived as savages who exercise violence randomly out of animalistic, primordial instincts. Their violence, even though immoral and contrary to the true spirit of civilization, was seen as calculated and directed toward achieving political and ideological goals, as an expression of a corrupt form of civilization rather than savagery, thereby invoking comparisons with contemporary radical movements in Europe.

6 Alawites and Yazidis

In early Arabic periodicals in Ottoman Syria, Alawites and Yazidis[72] were portrayed in the most negative terms as followers of bizarre religions who were morally depraved and prone to outbursts of irrational, barbaric violence. The repeated revolts of Alawites against political authorities and their frequent clashes with their neighbors[73] often brought comparisons with Bedouin tribes, who were Sunni Muslims, which explains why subduing Alawites and Bedouins were sometimes mentioned in tandem, for example, when listing the achievements of a local governor.[74]

70 For an overview of the history of Ismailism under Ottoman rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries, see Merali, "Isma'ili-Ottoman Petitioners".

71 In my readings in *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn*, I have come across only one reference to Ismailis in a letter sent by Yaḥyā Sa'īd al-Atāsī from Homs, in which he warned against sending Sunni Bedouin children to an Ismaili school in the town of Salamiyya (east of Hama), lest their "Islamic *fiṭra*" (innate nature) be corrupted by the heretical beliefs of Ismailis. al-Atāsī, "Ḥimṣ li-ġanāb mukātibinā al-fāḍil".

72 For the history of Alawites under Ottoman rule, see Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis*, especially chapters five and six; for Yazidis, see Gölbaşı, "Turning the 'Heretics' into Loyal Muslim Subjects".

73 A common phrase used in reports in *Ṯamarāt al-Funūn* about clashes involving Alawites (usually described as aggressions instigated by Alawites) is *ašqiyā' al-Nuṣayrīyya* meaning "the Nuṣayrī ruffians". See, for example, Anon., "Ṭarāblus fī 9 rabī' al-ṯānī".

74 In one editorial, Salīm al-Bustānī wrote that "the frontiers of the vilayet [of Syria] were relieved from Bedouin raids, and the fires of the transgressions of the Nuṣayrīs died out after they had been disciplined by his excellency our governor Rāšid Pāšā". al-Bustānī, "al-Difā'".

In one scathing, lengthy essay about Alawites and their customs signed by Yaʿqūb al-Ǧuraydīnī and published in *al-Ǧinān* in 1875,[75] they were described as uncivilized due to, among other things, the status of women in their communities, which was described in the article as nothing short of slavery,[76] as the following passage illustrates:

> Womankind is equal to that of men in terms of number, progress, or backwardness, and the world has realized the advantages and disadvantages for the social body (*al-hayʾa al-iǧtimāʿiyya*) that result from their condition. It is generally known that a nation does not achieve true civilization (*al-tamaddun al-ḥaqīqī*) without its womankind achieving civilization […]. A Nuṣayrī woman is not respected by her husband, and her children humiliate her by insulting and beating her without anyone defending, sheltering, or supporting her […]. She spends her whole life without knowing anything about her religion, and she is prohibited from practicing its rituals or attending a religious ceremony. She does not know where she came from or where she is going to. This is the condition of the mother of the sheikh, of the notable, and of the peasant, because women for them are the same, regardless of social rank. If this is the condition of womankind among Nuṣayrīs, who would think they could ever achieve rectitude (*al-ṣalāḥ*)?[77]

Al-Ǧuraydīnī, moreover, described their religion as a mixture of belief in the divinity of ʿAlī and the worship of celestial bodies and ancestors, which he traced to Canaanite religion. He used strong pejorative language to describe their customs, morals, and beliefs, comparing them to "wild animals" and "poisonous snakes" and their leaders to (witch) doctors in central regions of Africa. Yet he maintained that the aim of his extremely negative account of Alawites

75 al-Ǧuraydīnī, "al-Nuṣayrīyya". Al-Ǧuraydīnī signed his article from the village of Bḥamrā (or Baḥamrā) near Ǧabla (currently in the Syrian governorate of Latakia). He was in all likelihood the same "Yacob Jerridini" mentioned by James McKinnis Balph in his account of the Presbyterian mission in Latakia. According to Balph (*Fifty Years of Mission Work in Syria*, 47), Jerridini was of Lebanese origin and served as a preacher and superintendent of the Presbyterian boarding school that operated in Bḥamrā between 1870 and 1876. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to the presence of the Presbyterian mission in Bḥamrā.

76 This is reminiscent of European colonial officials using the liberation of women as a justification for colonialism, most infamously Lord Cromer, the British governor of Egypt (1883-1907).

77 al-Ǧuraydīnī, "al-Nuṣayrīyya", 700-701.

was to invite "conscientious people" (*ahl al-nāmūs*) to take initiatives to "civilize those people and take them out of ignorance, dumbness, and the darkness of superstitions, so that society can benefit from them".[78] Even as he justified harsh measures against Alawites, al-Ǧuraydīnī believed that the state could be more effective in controlling them and reducing their harm by "educating them and taming their minds", "teaching their children from a young age", and "exposing their true condition to them".[79]

Yazidis were often described along similar lines to Alawites as rowdy, uncontrollable tribes with deviant and bizarre beliefs (an eclectic mixture of beliefs and rituals from different religions) with the added trope of devil worship.[80] However, one article that was published in *al-Ǧinān* in 1876 and signed by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Afandī Badrān,[81] stands out for praising Yazidis for their renunciation of consumerism and material (European) civilization.[82] While the article repeats some legends and misconceptions about Yazidis and their religion along with salacious allegations of sexual deviance in a religious setting, the author praised them for the simplicity of their lifestyle, especially refraining from consuming luxurious European products, which the author described as "our civilization that is leading us to destruction". This was one of the few instances in early Arabic periodicals in which one of the above these four religious communities was admired as an example of savages unspoiled by material civilization (the stereotype of the "noble savage"). Another writer, the famed scholar and Carmelite Friar Father Anastās al-Karmalī (Anastase-Marie de Saint-Élie),[83] published a series of article on Yazidis in *al-Mašriq* in 1899, in which he described Yazidism as the most syncretic of any religion he had ever encountered, likening it to Noah's Ark, which contained from each species a pair.[84] Moreover, he described Yazidis as honest people who refrained from dishonesty and fraud in their dealings, but this honesty, in his view, did not have a rational moral motivation. Rather, it resulted from their irrational fear

78 al-Ǧuraydīnī, "al-Nuṣayrīyya", 706.

79 al-Ǧuraydīnī, "al-Nuṣayrīyya", 701.

80 For example, Anon., "al-Yazīdiyya aw-ʿabadat Iblīs", where their religion was described "as one of the oddest religions of humankind".

81 According to *al-Ǧinān*, he served as a *qāʾimmaqām* in a Yazidi region. I could not find information on ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Badrān, but there was a prominent Beiruti Sunni personality named ʿAbd al-Raḥīm Badrān with a distinguished career in Ottoman bureaucracy, including serving as *qāʾimmaqām* in Diyarbakir in the early 1870s. It is probable that he was the actual writer of the article, but his name was misspelled in *al-Ǧinān*.

82 Badrān, "al-Yazīd fi Kurdistān".

83 An Iraqi-Lebanese Catholic priest and prolific linguist.

84 al-Karmalī, "al-Yazīdiyya", *al-Mašriq*, 1, 32-33.

that someone who was lied to by a Yazidi person would curse their god, which was widely understood to be the Devil. Al-Karmalī goes as far as claiming that Yazidis killed any person who cursed the Devil in their presence.[85]

The alleged bizarreness of the religious beliefs and practices of Alawites and Yazidis raised for Salīm al-Bustānī the question of their compatibility with the regulations of the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 regarding religious liberties and the prohibition of insulting religious sentiments. In a series of articles published in 1877 on the newly issued the Ottoman Constitution,[86] al-Bustānī argued that no matter how bizarre they were, their practices should be protected since they were *maʿrūf* ("recognized" or "native") religions within the Empire, unlike, say, Buddhism. It remains an open question whether al-Bustānī was in the first place concerned for the application of the Ottoman Constitution to Yazidis and Alawites or was merely using them as convenient examples as opposed to bringing potentially controversial examples from Sunni Islam or Christianity.

7 Uncivilized Heresy, Cross-confessional Orthodoxy

As the aforementioned press articles clearly demonstrate, the *nahḍa* public generally characterized rural heretical communities in Ottoman Syria as uncivilized. Some of the perceived uncivilized characteristics of these communities —such as tribalism, barbaric violence, and coarse manners— were not specifically attributed to their religions. In fact, such characteristics overlapped with representations of other rural or nomadic communities, especially Bedouins. On the other hand, characteristics such as syncretism, irrationality, bizarreness, secrecy, ignorance, and moral deviance were attributed to the nature of their religions. For example, combining elements from different religious traditions, such as Islam, Christianity, Judaism, paganism, and Zoroastrianism into one and the same religion was perceived as a lack of self-consistency and thus rationality in the eyes of these urban Sunni/Christian elites, for whom the boundaries between major religious traditions were clear-cut in terms of beliefs, rituals, and membership.

Another element that was specifically related to their religious traditions was their secrecy; that is, not allowing outsiders to know the details of their beliefs and rituals, which was motivated by the historical practice of *taqiyya*

85 al-Karmalī, "al-Yazīdiyya", *al-Mašriq*, 16, 731.

86 al-Bustānī, "Tawḍīḥ al-Niẓāmāt al-asāsiyya", 237-242. Sections of this article were translated into English in Magout, "Salīm al-Bustānī: On the Constitution (1877)".

("dissimulation") among Shi'is in order to protect themselves from persecution. The difficulty in knowing the beliefs of one of these communities by questioning its members could also be the result of ignorance. Several of the articles cited above indicated —correctly or incorrectly— that these communities were divided into two categories: those who had access to literacy and religious knowledge and those barred from such knowledge because of age, clan,[87] or sex.[88] As a result, ignorance in religion and lack of literacy were considered religiously dictated in these communities. The inaccessibility of these religions to the urban public of the *nahḍa* no doubt facilitated their otherization and subjugation to an epistemic regime that was dictated by hostile and prejudiced sources. It is as if these communities did not or could not speak for themselves and thus had to be presented by those with the means and the supposed authority to do so.[89] Finally, moral deviance in relation to sex was a common trope in the articles cited above, especially against Ismailis and Yazidis. This form of moral deviance, it should be emphasized, was not attributed to lax morality, which was a common stereotype among urban dwellers in Syria toward people in the countryside. It was rather portrayed as religiously prescribed, as part of religious rituals.

Reports and discussions about heretical communities in Ottoman Syria may say little about these communities in terms of facts and information, but they arguably say a lot, albeit in negative terms, about the *nahḍa* public's idea of religion, specifically religion that is compatible with their ideal of civilization. In other words, one may derive their idea of a civilized religion as the opposite of what they characterized as the *uncivilized* religions of rural heretical communities in their vicinity. This civilized religion is tolerant (non-sectarian or non-tribal), non-violent, refined (according to the people of the city's standards), public (not secretive), rational, self-consistent, and moral (especially with regard to sex, as in the conservative morality of middle- and upper-class city dwellers). This civilized religion was reflected in the Arabic

87 Badrān, in his article about Yazidis cited above, wrote that Yazidis were forbidden from learning to read except for members of a particular clan that had monopoly over priesthood. Badrān, "al-Yazīd fī Kurdistān", 527-529.

88 Al-Ǧuraydīnī claimed that an Alawite woman was barred from learning to read, because if she "learned religion", she would become "the sister of her husband in religion", and, consequently, she would have to be divorced from him. Another justification he gave for barring Alawite women from literacy was that they were considered descendants of Satan. al-Ǧuraydīnī, "al-Nuṣayrīyya", 702.

89 The idea of representing those who could not speak for themselves is a central theme of Orientalism. In fact, Said opened his famous book on this subject with the following quotation of Karl Marx: "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented".

press in articles written —sometimes by members of the clergy— in a religious but ecumenical language in order to appeal to both Sunni and Christian members of the *nahḍa* public.[90] This participation in cross-confessional discourse was not possible without the periodical printing press, before which knowledge production and consumption in Ottoman Syria and the Ottoman Empire in general tended to be segregated by religious communities.[91] The printing press provided the communication infrastructure, and its logic of print capitalism entailed broadening the appeal of periodicals to all urban centers across sectarian boundaries.

The cross-confessional appeal and self-proclaimed tolerance of the religion of the *nahḍa* public, however, were implicitly Sunni-Christian, and rural communities were excluded, especially in the early phases of the *nahḍa*.[92] The hostile tone of the bulk of articles toward rural communities in early Arabic periodicals strongly suggests that their authors did not expect members of these religious communities to read them, not to mention to respond to them. This situation is different from articles about Sunni Islam and Christianity, where contributors —except in missionary newspapers— avoided for the most part violating the sensibilities of members of these communities, who were their readers, subscribers, neighbors, and perhaps in positions of authority over them. This stark contrast in tone contributed to the preselection of an urban Sunni-Christian audience for participation in the *nahḍa* public and the exclusion of rural heretical communities.

8 Conclusion

Accounts of unfamiliar religions in early Arabic press in Ottoman Syria were not merely curiosities or sensational, tabloid-like stories intended to attract

90 For example, a writer from Aleppo named Aḥmad Wahbī used in one article both Christian and Muslim names when referring to generic individuals, Wahbī, "Nūr al-maʿrifa". In another article, he made sure to cite both Islamic and Christian scriptures, Wahbī, "al-Ṣabr". Another example of an article written in a religious language that could appeal to both Christians and Muslims is al-Qummuṣ Fīlūṭāwus, "Bāqat Maʿānī min rawḍat al-Bustānī" (in two parts).

91 See Holt, "Narrative and the Reading Public in 1870s Beirut", 46-47; on the emergence of a cross-confessional public sphere in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanẓīmāt era, see Şiviloğlu, *The Emergence of Public Opinion*, 1-21.

92 With the romantic turn in the *nahḍa* toward the end of the 19th century, rural communities, such as the Maronites of Mount Lebanon and Arab Bedouins, became representatives of a bygone "Golden Age" to be revived. See Schäbler, "Civilizing Others", 25-28.

readership through shock value. They were probably the first attempts in the modern age to inform urban Arab readership about obscure religions in their hinterland, even though they borrowed considerably from earlier sources such as theological polemics and folk legends. These reports went beyond informing and educating to constitute a discourse of *authority* over these communities, which existed at the margins of the *nahḍa* public and, thus, could not represent themselves. The *nahḍa* public was formed through participation in the discursive space constituted by the periodical press, which enabled the development of a transregional and cross-confessional ideology of the city that unified urban, educated elites across Ottoman Syria and combined popular, classical Arabic, Ottoman-Turkish, and European elements in their culture.

The urban ideology of the Sunni-Christian *nahḍa* public reflected their prejudices and anxieties toward rural and nomadic communities in the countryside, many of which were perceived to be "heretical". At the center of this ideology was the concept of civilization, through which an imagined geography of the civilized and the uncivilized was projected on the frontiers between urbanity and rurality as well as between orthodoxy (or legitimacy) and heresy in Ottoman Syria. As a result, these communities —to varying degrees— were otherized as backward, deviant, antisocial, irrational, alien, and disobedient in contradistinction to the rationality, morality, and openness of urban religiosity. Religious and sectarian polemics were incorporated into the concept of civilization, which effectively allowed for an urban, cross-confessional religious normativity (a "cross-confessional orthodoxy" so to speak) to become almost synonymous with civilization, and for a collection of rural deviant religiosities ("heresies") to become synonymous with uncivilization, or at least a major part of it. Overall, these accounts were implicitly or explicitly linked to the idea of a civilizing mission to bring these communities into the fold of civilization through the application of the disciplinary power of the state and the spread of education and urban culture.

The *nahḍa* public believed that religion was an indispensable element of civilization, playing an important role as a moral and social force. Their idea of a civilized religion was, in principle, pluralistic, pleading for the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities next to each other and even for their equality at many levels. However, it effectively reflected their urban, mainstream, Sunni-Christian sensibilities and prejudices, leaving thereby little space in their discourse of religious tolerance and non-sectarianism toward rural, heretical communities outside the walls of their cities. The "civilized religion" of the *nahḍa* may have been —in the words of Ussama Makdisi— *ecumenical*, but its *ecumene* (inhabited world) did not extend beyond the city and its religions.

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