

Christian Materiality between East and West:

Notes of a Capuchin among the Christians of the Ottoman Empire

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Biography

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Abstract

This essay presents the *Théâtre de la Turquie*, a work compiled by an anonymous Capuchin missionary ('Michel Febvre') based in the Ottoman Empire in the late seventeenth century. Published in French in 1682, the *Théâtre* offers an intriguing glimpse of how Catholic missionaries used religious materiality as a prism through which to make sense of the religious diversity of the Ottoman world. Moreover, writers like Febvre also drew on the evidence of Eastern Christian religious practices as a way of defending Roman Catholicism against its Protestant critics. The essay uses the *Théâtre* to reflect on the geography, chronology and afterlives of the 'paradox of Christian materiality' described in Bynum's 2011 study.

Keywords:

Ottoman Empire, Eastern Christianity, Capuchins, missionaries, Catholic Reformation, Islam

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The historian of Eastern Christianity encounters several challenges when exploring the world of religious materiality, some of which are rather different from those facing scholars of Latin Christendom. This is because the study of religious materiality relies in fundamental ways on the existence of what might be called an infrastructure of preservation, that is, a constellation of social practices, mechanisms, and institutions that favour, or at least facilitate, the survival of the material record of religious experience into the modern day.¹ Museums are a case in point. Whereas the development of a market for objects of curiosity in early modern Europe culminated in the establishment of institutions whose sole purpose was to house, study, and, above all, protect a wide array of material culture, such repositories only emerged in the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. And when they finally appeared, their collections tended to showcase ancient artefacts that spoke to the tastes of Europeans or, conversely, focused mainly on the Islamic heritage of the Middle East.²

To be sure, the study of archaeology and visual culture has gone some way towards addressing this problem: gravestones, icons, and even ecclesiastical vestments have been the subject of fruitful studies.³ In 2011, the annual Dumbarton Oaks Byzantine Symposium – which plays a key role in defining the agenda of the field of Byzantine studies – focused its entire programme on one aspect of religious materiality, namely the cult of saints. The published proceedings of the conference testify to the sophistication and promise of recent approaches to the study of Eastern Christianity, particularly for the medieval period.⁴ These developments have coincided with a parallel interest in the study of religious materiality in Islam and Judaism.⁵ Even so, the study of Christian materiality is marked by a profound asymmetry: where the late medieval or early modern historian of Europe can boldly march through Western museums, churches, and collections searching for wax hands, bleeding statues, or diamond-encrusted relics, scholars interested in Eastern Christian devotion and piety face the sad truth that the evidence they seek, or whatever of it has survived, remains scattered today across one of the more politically unstable and inaccessible regions of the world.

To this logistical problem is joined a second daunting, methodological problem that looms over scholarship on the Middle East. The text-based approach of scholars working within the field of oriental studies means that Middle Eastern historians have tended to focus almost single-mindedly on doctrine, theology, and assumptions about orthodoxy; this is as true of the study of Islam as it is for the study of Eastern Christianity.⁶ As a result, it is only in recent years that some scholars have started to take religious practice much more seriously as a subject of historical enquiry in its own right. This is a development that promises radically to transform our understanding of the religious history of the Middle East.⁷

But the reason for the elusiveness of Christian materiality in the Middle East boils down to something more intrinsic, rooted in Christianity's status as a 'ruled religion' in the Ottoman Empire.⁸ Christians and Jews living in the Ottoman Empire were subject to a host of restrictions in everyday life and these restrictions were perhaps most salient when it came to the public practice of religion. The consequence for some Eastern Christians was an almost instinctive tendency to keep 'below the radar', especially when it came to expressions of religiosity: wooden clappers instead of bells, churches that folded themselves quietly into the urban architecture, festivals carried out only after extensive negotiation with local authorities, and, most importantly perhaps, accommodation to the unpredictable hostility that risked showing its face at particular moments of worship, for example during processions, pilgrimages, and other ceremonies and rituals. To search for Christian materiality in the East, therefore, requires one to search for expressions of religiosity that were necessarily submerged beneath the surface of everyday life: hushed, private, unvoiced, barely tolerated, and, in some cases, absolutely forbidden.

This is why the *Théâtre de la Turquie*, published in France in 1682, remains such an important work for the study of Christian materiality in the Ottoman Empire.⁹ Written by a Capuchin missionary under the pseudonym Michel Febvre, the book offered its readers a first-hand account of the diversity of religious practice among Ottoman Muslims, Christians, and Jews. As I will explain below, the account was not the work of a single person but rather the book presented a compilation of over three decades' worth of correspondence and accounts written by a generation of Capuchin missionaries. In the *Théâtre*, therefore, Febvre braided together the observations and anecdotes of over two dozen Capuchins and, in particular, their personal experiences of

working, living, and preaching to Muslims and Ottoman Christians. As such, the work offers a detailed and fascinating account of religious materiality among the Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire, as seen of course through the particular perspective of late seventeenth-century Capuchin theology. Moreover, the work is relevant in as much as it allows us here to take up several of the wider questions raised at the end of Caroline Walker Bynum's seminal study of Christian materiality in the late medieval and early modern period.¹⁰

Was the paradox of Christian materiality as salient in the East as in the West? Put another way, is Bynum's vision of *Christian Materiality* really a story about Christianity or is it a story about Latin Christianity? To what extent did Eastern theologians and writers in, say, Aleppo, Cairo, or Mosul exhibit the same tortured, anxious relationship with materiality as that described by Bynum for the Latin West? More generally, what was the experience of Christian materiality in the wider world once Roman Catholicism had been unleashed from its local contexts in Europe and dispatched to such far-flung corners of the world as China, Latin America, and the Ottoman Empire? These are important questions to consider, not least because Bynum's focus on the period of 1100 to 1550 covers a period just before the start of systematic and widespread Catholic missions to the world beyond the boundaries of Europe.

Of course, this short essay cannot even begin to answer all of these questions. Instead, I will take up here Bynum's invitation at the end of *Christian Materiality* to explore two particular questions related to chronology and geography, especially as it relates to comparative approaches to religious materiality. The *Théâtre* offers an intriguing window into one afterlife of the paradox of Christian materiality described by Bynum, that is, a view of the anxieties about religious materiality expressed by a Capuchin writer and thinker in the late seventeenth century. Alongside this chronological extension, this essay explores what a geographical decentring of the study of materiality reveals about the potential for the comparative study of Christians, Muslims, and Jews through the prism of religious materiality.¹¹ This essay argues that a focus on religious materiality offered Catholic missionaries like the pseudonymous Febvre an obvious, efficient, and intelligible way of making sense of the diversity of religious practices outside of Europe in the late seventeenth century, as well as the relation of these practices to Roman Catholicism.

Michel Febvre and his writings have received only limited attention from scholars working on Eastern Christian and Kurdish history. Although the *Théâtre* was published in 1682, it had its origins in two earlier works: an Italian version (the *Teatro della Turchia*, first published in 1681) and a much shorter, less developed version of the text that appeared in print in 1674, the *Specchio, o vero Descrizione della Turchia*.¹² The real identity of Michel Febvre, listed on the title page of all the works, has been a subject of debate among specialists for several decades.¹³ Incidental clues in the work suggest the compiler was a Capuchin based, variously, in Aleppo, Baghdad, or Mosul from around the 1660s, although there is no record of anyone by the name of Febvre serving among the Capuchins during this period. More relevant perhaps is the way in which many of the anecdotes in Febvre's work recall observations and even direct passages found in other contemporary correspondence written by Capuchins in the Ottoman Empire, which lends credence to Bernard Heyberger's suggestion that we should think of the *Théâtre* as a collective work reflecting the accumulated experiences of the Capuchin community based in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ Encyclopaedic in its ambition and presented in over 550 pages of densely-packed text, the *Théâtre* stands out from other contemporary accounts of the Ottoman Empire in its avowed interest in documenting the practices of *all* Ottoman subjects: Christians, Muslims, and Jews alike. That the work was dedicated to the marquis de Louvois, Louis XIV's war minister, is a reminder of the constant refrain lurking beneath the surface of this travelogue-cum-ethnography, that is, Febvre's attempt to persuade the French state of the ease with which the Ottoman Empire might be conquered if only an organized army were to be dispatched by Louis XIV.¹⁵

The overriding theme of Febvre's analysis is the concept of 'disorder' in the Ottoman Empire, a disorder and chaos that expressed itself perfectly in the diversity and plurality of religious practices across the empire. Faced with the variety of its languages, religions and communities—what he termed a 'Babylon of confusion'¹⁶—Febvre sought to organize Ottoman subjects into fourteen 'sects' as he called them: six Muslim (Turks, Arabs, Kurds, Turcoman, Yezidis, and the Druze), six Christian (Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, Nestorians, Maronites, and the Copts), alongside the Jews, and a final sect that he designated as 'sun-worshippers' ('solaires ou chamsi', for Arabic *shamsī*). To the modern reader, Febvre's categories seem to conflate a variety of distinct religious, ethnic, and linguistic markers. Under the category of Muslim, for example, he

joins together ethnic groups like Turks, Arabs, and Kurds alongside communities organized around particular religious beliefs such as the Yezidis and the Druze. Yet this is to misunderstand the extent to which Febvre's views evolved from a close study of everyday life and in particular religious practices, many of which actually created important connections between these groups.

Indeed, it becomes possible to appreciate just how important is religious materiality in Febvre's understanding of religion if we consider his analysis of Muslim religious practices. As he told it, Muslims suffered from a profound sense of doubt and confusion in their hearts, the result being that they 'make vows to our own [Christian] saints as well as their pretended ones'.¹⁷ In Cyprus, for example, Febvre writes that the Capuchin church of Saint John of Persia was frequented daily by as many Turks as Christians. They came to request oil from the lamps that shine in front of the image of the martyr in hopes that they will be cured of their ailments. During his own visit to Nicosia, Febvre insists that he had 'seen other Turks who when passing by the church, bow their heads or touch the doors with two hands and their face as if they were asking for a blessing'.¹⁸ But beyond attendance at Christian devotional sites, Febvre also acknowledges a certain commensurability between Christian and Muslim practices. Among the Turks, for example, he describes that children, at the age of four or five, are taken to the tomb of a saint where they have their hair cut for the first time by their parents. This is carried out in hopes that the saint will protect the child. On this day, Febvre continues, 'they also sacrifice a lamb, or at the least they celebrate with feasts with their friends, just as we do on the day of Baptism'.¹⁹

Of course, Febvre was not the first writer to make such comparisons between Christianity and Islam, although it is striking nonetheless just how imbued his observations are with personal sentiment and emotion. Consider, for example, his description of being moved to tears by the devotion shown to the Virgin Mary by some Muslim women.

Here, they revere and honour the Virgin Mary most among all the saints, addressing their prayers to her and making vows to her in several churches dedicated to her name. In doing so, they are more pious than the heretical Calvinists, who do not honour or practise or acknowledge any cult for her even though they believe that she was the Mother of God. The Muslims punish as a blasphemer anyone who denigrates her, and I have seen several times how they

throw stones at Jewish children and attack them violently on an account given to them by the Christians that the Jews have spoken badly about the Virgin Mary [...] Even though they regard her as being in the Skies, and as distant from us as Heaven is from earth, nevertheless they do not insist, as do the Huguenots, that she cannot hear our prayers or that God does not hear those prayers that we address to her on earth. How many times have I watched with astonishment as Turkish women have cried, groaned, and beat their chests in front of the Capuchin chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary in Baghdad saying these words with their hands raised in front of her image: 'O Mary, the purest of all creatures, the mother of the great prophet Jesus, [...] I invoke you by the life of that sweet child you hold in your arms, who is the crown of your head and the light of your eyes, have pity on me and the sins of which I am guilty. That the glory that you enjoy in Heaven will not make you forgot my miseries'. They cry such things out loud with such devotion and feeling, as they beat their chests, that they awaken my compassion and bring tears to my eye.²⁰

Febvre's references to Calvinists and Huguenots are a recurring theme throughout the *Théâtre*, which highlights the extent to which he used religious materiality as a prism through which to compare not only Muslims and Christians but, perhaps more importantly, Muslims and different expressions of Christianity in his time. Observations about the religious materiality of Islam, therefore, could act as a useful polemical tool against critics of Catholicism, a theme to which we will return at the end of this essay.

If devotional practices connected Muslims and Christians to each other, Febvre's study of the various Churches within Eastern Christianity also seeks to use religious materiality as a way of drawing distinctions and boundaries between different types of Eastern Christians. One third of the *Théâtre* is dedicated to the task of sketching out a relational account of the religious practices of Eastern Christianity, one that emphasizes the differences between each of the Eastern Churches while linking these differences more generally to the question of their conformity with Roman practices. In separate chapters on each of the Churches, Febvre adopts a consistent method that begins with a short statement of the doctrinal position of the community, usually through an explicit link to a particular Christology (or heresy) dating back to the Early Church. The Copts, for example, supported the Monophysite doctrines of Jacob Bardaeus, Bishop of Edessa

from 541 to 578. Similarly, the Nestorians of Mesopotamia supported the belief in two natures of Christ propounded by Nestorius and condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431. This initial emphasis on doctrine and theology, however, gives way to a detailed and extensive account of the religious practices he observed among each of the communities. Among the practices that elicited most of Febvre's interest we find a regular discussion of the Eucharist (including the method of preparing it), patterns of fasting, belief in purgatory, pilgrimage, the marital status of the clergy, styles of ecclesiastical vestments, as well as an array of other observations that functioned in a sort of ethnographic mode, for example long digressions on the seclusion of sexes, the incidence of cousin marriage, and even sexual habits among the clergy in different communities.

A few examples will suffice to give a sense here of how Febvre used religious materiality to render intelligible the 'disorder' of Eastern Christianity that surrounded him. In his account of the Syrian Orthodox,²¹ he described how they followed in the tradition of Dioscorus of Alexandria (d. 454) in believing in one nature in Christ. When they made the sign of the cross, therefore, they used only an index finger extended with the other fingers folded inwards. Although they claimed not to believe in purgatory, they prayed for their dead. They practised more religious festivals than any other of the Eastern Christian churches, and, unlike the Armenians, they expressed a strong worship of the Virgin Mary. Like the Greeks, they used leavened bread for the Eucharist, which was larger, in any case, than the size of that used in Rome. Febvre wondered too whether they did not include too much salt and oil in the bread. Not surprisingly, Febvre was much more favourable when it came to his account of the Maronites, a community of some 55,000 Christians focused mainly around Mount Lebanon but also present in Tripoli, Cyprus, Sidon, Damascus, and Aleppo.²² Unique among the Eastern Churches, the Maronites were perceived in the early modern period as having been in conformity with Rome for centuries, at least since the seventh century but certainly since they welcomed the conquering Franks of the First Crusade.²³ Febvre describes the practices of the Maronites as 'pure, holy and orthodox'.²⁴ Their churches are decorated in the same style as the Latins and when Febvre does admit a deviation – for example they celebrate more fasts than in Rome—he dismisses such details as unimportant. Indeed, the fact that the Maronites alone among the Eastern Christians accepted the Gregorian calendar reform was enough to satisfy him of their complete conformity with Rome.

Febvre expresses particular scorn for the 'Nestorians' whom he refers to as the 'most odious' of all Eastern Christians, undoubtedly because of the community's historic association with Nestorius (d. 451).²⁵ According to Febvre, Nestorians believed that Christ had two persons and this was clear from their insistence that Mary was only the 'mother of Christ' and not the 'mother of God'.²⁶ In addition, Febvre's attack on the Nestorians reveals his real anxieties about certain elements of religious materiality in the Christian East. Unlike in any other chapter, Febvre's arguments here are consumed by a focus on the body, the senses, and on objects. For example, he rejects the authority of the Nestorian patriarchate, which is passed down in a hereditary line from uncle to nephew with the occasional consequence that patriarchs are appointed sometimes as young as six or seven years old. Moreover, Febvre suggests that the only qualifications needed to become patriarch are to be celibate and vegetarian. As far as images are concerned, Febvre criticizes the ambivalence of Nestorian practices: on the one hand, images are not banned as they are in some other Eastern Churches, yet despite this images still remain mostly absent from churches. This is part of a larger concern Febvre has about the lack of ornamentation in Nestorian churches. Indeed, the use of curtains around the altar contributes to the general darkness of most of their churches, which Febvre believes also reflects the plainness of their celebrations. Confession is rarely practised among the Nestorians, so much so that even priests do not believe that they themselves have to take confession. Uniquely, the Eucharist is placed directly into the hands of communicants, and the wine is taken from a great vessel as if they were drinking water. Priests are allowed to remarry if their wives have died, and the marriage of cousins is also permitted, which Febvre insists is only practised by the Nestorians and not any other Eastern Christians.²⁷

Perhaps the most interesting use of materiality as a means of comparing religious difference occurs when Febvre is faced with practices that do not easily conform to either Christianity or Islam. This is especially the case in the long account he gives of the Yezidis.²⁸ The Yezidis were mostly unknown to Europeans in the early modern period, although the Capuchins were reported to have spent three months living with them in the mountains of Sinjar.²⁹ In Febvre's account, the Yezidis occupy an ambiguous space between Muslims and Christians, and this ambiguity is reflected for him in their religious practices. The consequence is that the 'Turks hate them more than any other sect in the Ottoman Empire', and the Yezidis 'love the Christians as much as

they hate the Turks' out of a belief that Jesus Christ and Yezide, the head of their faith, are the same person.³⁰ Febvre speculates that they have actually descended from within some heretical sect of Christianity, perhaps the Arians. They have a great love for wine, which they drink not only for their own amusement but also to insult the Muslims. At one of their festivals, Febvre reports that when one person offers wine to another, he says 'take the chalice of the blood of Christ', and the chalice is then accepted by the other with a bow and great ceremony.³¹ In general, his description of their practices reads like a contemporary ethnography: they drink wine and eat pork; they do not practise circumcision; they have no sacred books to regulate their faith, which Febvre thinks explains why they adopt any practices very easily. They have no fasts, no periods of abstinence, no specific hours appointed for prayer, and no religious festivals. They say their prayers facing the sunrise like the Christians and unlike the Turks who face the east. In 'imitation' of the Christians and Turks, they make vows and pilgrimages. They have no temples in which they pray to God and they never enter into mosques except out of curiosity to see how they are constructed. They believe in several miracles of Jesus Christ, many of which are not referred to anywhere in the Gospels: Febvre cites one such story that claims that on the day of his birth Christ resurrected a man who had been dead for 1,000 years. In terms of their burial practices, Febvre is surprised that they bury their dead without any ceremony or funeral, in any place that they can find, 'as if the cadaver was a dead dog'.³² Some of these burial sites become sites of devotion or pilgrimage in themselves, and Febvre claims to have watched as they gathered around tombs singing songs about Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Yezidi, or even Moses.³³

Clearly, Febvre takes material culture seriously enough to place it at the heart of his account of religion in the Ottoman Empire. Even so, this is not to say that he accepts the legitimacy of the practices he describes—and this is where we begin to see echoes of the paradox of Christian materiality described so brilliantly by Bynum. In the last chapters of the *Théâtre*, Febvre lays out two main arguments that, taken together, capture the ambivalence of Capuchin views about religious materiality in the late seventeenth century. The first argument comes in a chapter entitled 'on the errors and abuses common to all Christian sects of the Orient', much of which reads as an attack on some of the central elements of religious materiality in Eastern Christianity. Of particular importance to Febvre is their belief in the miraculous appearance of fire at the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Setting aside the Maronites and those [Eastern Christians] who have converted to Catholicism, the [Eastern Christians] all believe that a miraculous fire appears from the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Holy Saturday. For this reason, every year at the Feast of the Resurrection, four or five thousand pilgrims come from all around, even from the hinterlands of Turkey, Persia, and Georgia, in hopes of seeing for themselves this miracle that is talked about throughout the Orient. They are deluded into believing that globes of light emerge from the Sepulchre [...] in such a way that they fill the entire church and light all the lamps. [...] At the same time, or so they say, a dove as white as snow appears and the air is filled with thunderous noise and wind, similar to that which arrived on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended onto the Apostles. This lovely story is nothing but pure imposture. I never saw anything when I attended the ceremony myself, which took place with such amazing chaos and disorder. Far from seeing any miracles, all that one can see is four large torches carried by the Greek patriarch, from which he distributes one to his own people, one to the Armenians, a third to the Jacobites, and a fourth to the Copts, after he has lit them in the cell of the Holy Sepulchre—all on his own without anyone present to see his trickery.³⁴

Febvre describes how the participants believe they receive a general forgiveness for their sins after having witnessed this miracle, signified in the ashes from the fire that they rub onto their faces. They also return to their villages with any wax remaining from the candles, which they use to rub onto the sick.

Although he doubts the authenticity of the miracle, Febvre does make an attempt to understand its genealogy and function in contemporary practice. 'The reason why the Christians believe what I have just described [...] has something to do with a similar miracle that took place in Jerusalem during the reign of Theodosius on the occasion of the conversion of the infidels.' As Febvre describes it, this miracle was originally reported in Cesare Baronius's ecclesiastical history of the Church: 'He [Baronius] writes that on Holy Saturday two columns of fire and light were seen stretching from the grounds to the heavens, one above the Church of the Resurrection and the other on the Mount of Olives, at the spot where Jesus Christ ascended to the heavens, in memory of which they continue to secretly light a fire in commemoration of the first miracle and as

a mark of their faith being the true religion'.³⁵ In other words, the Eastern Christians erred in accepting as a miracle an event that originated as the *commemoration* of a miracle. Crucially, the original miracle had been recognized as legitimate by Baronius, the Church's own official historian. Even so, Febvre insists that he would not dare to explain their error to Eastern Christians: not only would it scandalize them if he did, but more importantly 'it would raise doubts in their hearts about the true miracles mentioned by the Evangelists'. Here, one feels that we are back in the realm of a similar paradox as described by Bynum in her analysis of Nicholas of Cusa's stance on pilgrimage at the opening of *Christian Materiality*.

Indeed, Febvre's attack on the miraculous fire is part of a larger anxiety sparked by Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The fire was 'only publicized to encourage people to come to Jerusalem'.³⁶ He complains at having seen how the Christians 'bow and scrape' near the tomb of the crusader Godfrey de Bouillon, where a 'miraculous image of the Virgin Mary can be still seen at the spot where she spoke to Saint Mary the Egyptian', or how they worship the site of Calvary, which they 'say they do to protect themselves from any evil things in the future'.³⁷ It is difficult to know what lay behind this critique, but part of it seems to be a concern about the resources wasted on such pilgrimages: as Febvre describes it, 'the poor and the rich, men and women alike' sometimes fast a great part of their lives simply to save enough money to travel to the Holy Land. Much to his dismay, this money often ends up going into the pockets of the Turks who control the roads and the tolls along the way.

Apart from this focus on Jerusalem, Febvre attacks other aspects of religious practice, for example the lack of attendance of women at church ('it would be said that they were only coming to church to show off their beauty, and ultimately in hopes of getting married') or restrictions on sexual activity among the clergy during periods of fasting ('According to them, he that transgresses this rule has committed a moral sin.'). In this context, Febvre tells a story about the lengths to which patriarchs would go to ensure that the clergy were not engaging in sexual activity during Lent:

An Armenian cleric who I know went one day to the Patriarch to ask him to come and baptize his new-born son, and he fell into a trap without thinking. Having been asked if his son was doing well, and if the baby arrived on time, this good man responded that he did, to which the Patriarch replied, 'You miserable man,

you conceived the baby during Lent! And if you do not believe me, let us do the calculations together and tell me is there not nine months between the middle of Lent and the present day? Or is your wife a mare or a cow to have carried the baby for longer? What do you say to that?'. The poor priest did not know what to say, and he was completely lost for words. At this, the Patriarch continued, 'Who taught you to make babies and to enjoy the company of your wife at a time of mourning and penitence? Do our laws not forbid this explicitly, even for laymen? They will be looking to you for an example so that they might do the right thing themselves. Get out of here, while I reflect on what punishment you deserve'. The Patriarch pretended that he would suspend the priest entirely of his functions, but he only did so in order to terrify him and so that he might extract a sum of money from him.³⁸

There are several potential subjects of criticism underlying Febvre's discussion above. On the one hand, he appears to be concerned by Eastern Christian confusion about different categories of sin. Yet the anecdote also recalls a recurring critique in the *Théâtre* about the greed of the higher clergy and a real discomfort about the role played by money in the religious lives of Eastern Christians. It is difficult to determine whether Febvre's account reveals something genuine about practices in Eastern Christianity, or simply reflects the strange preoccupations of a Capuchin missionary during this period. Either way, such comments are a testament to the importance of materiality in Febvre's wider critique of the abuses of Eastern Christianity.

Alongside such critiques, however, the *Théâtre* ends with a second argument that uses the material practices of Eastern Christianity as part of a wider defence of Roman Catholicism against its Protestant, and especially Calvinist, critics. This is an intriguing way to conclude a book that has presented, until now, a nuanced, empirical and goal-oriented use of materiality as a tool for making comparisons within Christianity and between Christianity and Islam. Instead, Febvre here sets aside the significance of the distinctions he has made throughout the work and insists rather that Eastern Christians are, all in all, in conformity with Rome. It is best to let Febvre's apologetic tone speak for itself:

After all that I have described to you about the schismatic Eastern Christians and their religious practices, I should add that even though they are clearly heretics

in certain ways, they are not heretics when it comes to the main controversies between us [Roman Catholics] and the Calvinists. On the contrary, the Eastern Christians condemn the practices of the Calvinists, and they embrace those that are taught by the Roman church. [...] For who among the Eastern Christians does not believe in transubstantiation, the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ? Is there one among them who does not agree that there are seven sacraments in the church, namely baptism, confirmation, confession, the Eucharist, anointing, consecration as a priest, and marriage? In their churches, do they not carry images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints, who they honour in the same way we do? Do they not use the same vestments and mitres as we do when they carry out their services? Do they not use holy water like us, and carry out their burials in the same way? Do they not say mass every day? Do they not fast, no more or less, than us? Do they not have deacons, priests, bishops, and patriarchs? Do they not have clergy who make vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity? Do they not accept all the same books of scripture—both Old and New Testament—as identified by the Roman Church, and do they not reject those books used by the Calvinists, such as Judith, Tobias, Maccabees, Esdras, etc.? Do they not practice confession out loud, the celebration of fasts, salvation through faith and good works, the invocation of saints, and prayers for the deceased? [...] Who would dare say then that all of these practices were newly invented by the Roman church in recent centuries, if we simply consider the fact that these Eastern Christians (who have been separated from Rome for the past twelve to thirteen hundred years) also carry out the same practices, and that they observe them exactly as we do in Rome? This is clear proof that these practices have been in use long before the separation of our churches and, consequently, that they derive from God and the apostolic tradition.³⁹

What immediately stands out in Febvre's attempt to defend the Roman church from claims of innovation is his attempt to construct, out of the diversity of practices of distinct communities of Middle East Christians, a wider, ecumenical category of 'Eastern Christianity', which appears entirely in conformity with Roman Catholicism. In other words, Febvre's claims here go directly against observations made elsewhere in the

Théâtre about specific communities. In his earlier chapter on the Syrians, for example, Febvre had complained at length about the fact that Syrian bishops and patriarchs did not wear mitres. Likewise, he criticized the Nestorians for the absence of images in their churches. And Febvre's claims about the 'vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity' are seriously undermined, as we have seen above, by his anxieties about the materialistic desires of Eastern patriarchs. Yet the importance of these details about the diversity of religious practices among the Eastern Christians paled in comparison to Febvre's larger concern for defending the immutability of Roman practices. In this way, the *Théâtre* concludes with Febvre's having dismissed the very diversity that he had painstakingly charted out in encyclopaedic fashion in the preceding chapters of his work. So far as Febvre was concerned, even if some of these practices were heretical, when it came to the ones that mattered most – that is, those that constituted the subject of ongoing debate between Catholics and Protestants – the religious materiality of Eastern Christianity had to be defended if Febvre hoped to argue persuasively that Roman practices were ancient, immutable, and legitimate.⁴⁰

Coming at the end of a five-hundred page unravelling of the religious practices of Eastern Christianity, the whitewash that concludes the *Théâtre* is consistent with what Caroline Walker Bynum has described as the 'paradox of Christian materiality' in an earlier period. This does not mean that Eastern Christianity itself expressed the same preoccupations with religious materiality as the Latin West, a question that requires a great deal of further research. Rather, what I am suggesting here is that the example of Febvre reveals something of the enduring anxieties about Christian materiality that persevered into the age of the Catholic Reformation as well as how such anxieties intersected with Catholic encounters with other religious communities, Christian or otherwise. In Febvre's case, when faced with the diversity of religious practices in the Ottoman Empire, a focus on materiality provided him with a method of comparing, distinguishing, and drawing boundaries between different groups whose practices, it must be said, did not map easily on to linguistic, religious, or ethnic identities. His approach – with its uncanny attention to even the smallest of details – reveals just how important religious materiality remained in the Catholic missions of the late seventeenth century. Although Febvre criticized several elements of Eastern Christian practice – for example the belief in the fire at the Holy Sepulchre – in the final reckoning, he also recognized that a total demolition of these practices did not sit well with a

defence of Catholicism from the pens of Protestant polemicists. Cognisant of the diversity of religious practices in the world around him, therefore, Febvre ultimately downplayed the significance of religious materiality at the micro-level of everyday life in order to preserve a more general, and fundamentally more important, vision of the unity of religious materiality as it connected East and West and past and present. This is an important reminder that religious materiality was never simply a phenomenon in itself, that is, a set of practices used by believers to express their religiosity. Rather, religious materiality could also prove an important tool to be used purposefully in several ways: as an early method for comparing different religions, as a way of constructing a theological argument against one's enemies, and even as a justification for continued efforts at proselytization.

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* This essay draws on research conducted for the project funded by the European Research Council and hosted by the University of Oxford, *Stories of Survival: Recovering the Connected Histories of Eastern Christianity in the Early Modern World* (grant agreement no. 638578).

¹ Similar concerns have been raised by historians of science, for example in Brusius, 'Towards a History of Preservation Practices'. More generally, consider the diversity of preservation practices that underpin the essays in Morgan, ed., *Religion and Material Culture*.

² Shaw, *Possessors and Possessed*; Bahrani et al., *Scramble for the Past*; Çelik, *About Antiquities*.

³ Briquel-Chattonet, *Recueil des inscriptions syriaques*; Snelders, *Identity and Christian-Muslim Interaction*; and Ball, 'A Sixteenth-Century *Batrashil* in the Metropolitan Museum of Art'.

⁴ Hahn and Klein, *Saints and Sacred Matter*.

⁵ See, for example, Meri, 'Relics of Piety and Power in Medieval Islam'; Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden*; Meri, *The Cult of Saints*; and for an earlier specimen of this approach, see Horowitz's important comments on a 'social history of piety' in 'Coffee, Coffeehouses'.

⁶ Also relevant here is a similar critique made of Buddhist studies in Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*.

⁷ For one example, see Grehan, *The Twilight of the Saints*; much earlier, the path was set by Hasluck, *Christianity and Islam under the Sultans*.

⁸ For the concept of 'ruling' and 'ruled' religions, I am inspired here by exchanges with Dorothea Weltecke and others in 2015-2016 within the framework of the 'Religious Minorities' group at the Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Konstanz.

⁹ Febvre, *Théâtre de la Turquie* (1682), hereafter *Théâtre*.

¹⁰ Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, especially pp. 267-286.

¹¹ See the comments on comparisons in *Christian Materiality*, pp. 273-280.

¹² Febvre, *Teatro della Turchia* (1681); the earlier version included a second author, Giustiniano da Novi, in Febvre, *Specchio, o vero descrizione della Turchia* (1674).

¹³ Two Capuchins working in the region in this period have been suggested, namely Justinien de Neuvy-sur-Loire and Jean-Baptiste de Saint-Aignan; cf., D'Alençon, 'Le sieur Michele Febure (P. Justinien de Neuvy-sur-Loire, missionnaire capucin)'; Clemente da Terzorio, 'Il vero autore del "Teatro della Turchia" '. As I am less interested here in the identity of the compiler than in the content of his writings, I will simply refer to him as 'Michel Febvre' since that is the pseudonym that appears in the book's title.

¹⁴ Heyberger, 'FEBVRE'.

¹⁵ This was a common trope among French writers in this period. See, for example, McCluskey, 'Les ennemis du nom Chrestien'.

¹⁶ Febvre, *Théâtre*, p. 345.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

²¹ What follows draws from the chapter on 'des Suriens ou Jacobites' in *ibid.*, pp. 453-456.

²² On the Maronites, see *ibid.*, pp. 466-470.

²³ For a contemporary view, propagated in Latin by a Maronite in Rome, see Naaman, ed., *Essai sur les Maronites*.

²⁴ Febvre, *Théâtre*, p. 467.

²⁵ His reference to the 'Nestorians' refers to the Church of the East, or the community of Christians originally settled outside the borders of the Roman Empire. I will use Febvre's classification in this essay, mindful of the problems of the term as studied in Brock, 'The 'Nestorian' Church: A Lamentable Misnomer'.

²⁶ Febvre, *Théâtre*, p. 462.

²⁷ This analysis draws from the chapter on 'des Nestoriens ou Caldeens' in *ibid.*, pp. 461-466.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 363-373; for a critical study of the Yezidis, see the excellent work by Guest, *The Yezidis*.

²⁹ Febvre, *Théâtre*, p. 373.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

³¹ For full details of the respect accorded to the chalice, see *ibid.*, p. 366.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 369.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 504-506.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 504.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 507.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 512.

⁴⁰ This was part of a larger debate in the period captured for example in Arnould, *La perpétuité de la foi*; more generally, see Gabriel, 'Les témoins orientaux d'une querelle latine'.