

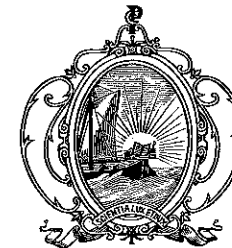
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ORIENTALIA LOVANIENSIA  
ANALECTA  
————— 134 —————

## REDEFINING CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

*Cultural Interaction in the Middle East  
since the Rise of Islam*

edited by  
J.J. VAN GINKEL, H.L. MURRE - VAN DEN BERG,  
T.M. VAN LINT



UITGEVERIJ PEETERS en DEPARTEMENT OOSTERSE STUDIES  
LEUVEN – PARIS – DUDLEY, MA  
2005

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Redefining Christian identity : cultural interaction on the Middle East since the rise of Islam / edited by J.J. van Ginkel, H.L. Murre-van den Berg, and T.M. van Lint.  
p. cm -- (Orientalia Lovaniensia analecta ; 134)  
Chiefly in English; one contribution in Italian.  
Proceedings of a symposium held Apr. 7-10, 1999 at Groningen University.  
Includes bibliographical references and index  
ISBN 90-429-1418-1 (alk. paper)  
1. Middle East--Church history--Congresses. 2. Islam--Relations--Christianity--Congresses. 3. Christianity and other religions--Islam--Congresses. I. Ginkel, J.J. van (Jan J.) II. Murre-van den Berg, H.L. III. Lint, Theo Maarten van, 1957- IV. Series.

BR1070.R43 2004  
305.6'756--dc22

2003064755

T004525510

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Bondgenotenlaan 153, B-3000 Leuven/Louvain (Belgium)  
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ISBN 90-429-1418-1 (Peeters, Leuven)  
D. 2004/0602/25

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## INTRODUCTION

“Cultural interaction in the Middle East since the rise of Islam” — such was the title of a combined research project aimed at describing the various ways in which the Christian communities of the Middle East expressed their distinct cultural identity in Muslim societies. This project was initiated in 1995, by a group of researchers of the universities of Groningen and Leiden, consisting of Han (H.W.J.) Drijvers, Gerrit J. Reinink, Lukas Van Rompay and Jos (J.J.S.) Weitenberg. The theme of cultural interaction was the common denominator of four research projects, which together covered over a thousand years of Christianity in West-Asia — from the early years of the rise of Islam till the end of the eighteenth century, with the main emphasis on the Syriac (Syrian-Orthodox and Church of the East) and Armenian communities, whose main languages were Syriac and Modern Aramaic, Arabic and Armenian. All these communities distinguished themselves from surrounding Muslim culture, often by their language and social structures, always by their religion and canon law. With the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach, the project aimed at describing in more detail the various ways in which these communities reacted to the ascendancy of Islam, from the earliest encounter in the seventh century up to the late eighteenth century, when Christians had become a relatively small minority in many parts of West Asia.

After funding had been secured from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), five more researchers were attached to the program: Jan J. van Ginkel and Barbara Roggema from Groningen, and Theo M. van Lint, Alessandro Mengozzi and Heleen (H.L.) Murre-van den Berg from Leiden.

Towards the end of the project, Van Ginkel, Van Lint, and Murre-van den Berg organized an international symposium for which the theme of the initial research proposals was given a slightly different slant. Rather than cultural interaction, cultural strategies became the principal theme, mainly because the research of the past years had shown that although in many cases “interaction” indeed characterized the developments within the Christian communities, in other times or places cultural isolation appeared to be just as important. It was decided, therefore, to use the