

'Indigenous, not Christian': Secular Separations and Decolonial Sovereignty in Global Assyria

In 2014, ISIS took control over large swaths of land in Iraq and Syria. Iraq's minority communities and especially Christians were specifically targeted by the group leading to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands. Christian displacement by ISIS was read by Western (and particularly Christian) politicians and policymakers as part of a larger concern over the future of Christianity in the Middle East and global Christian persecution. During this onslaught, a new generation of Assyrian diaspora organizations was formed in places like Detroit, Chicago, and Washington DC to aid and advocate for kin back in the homeland, as well as unify an ecclesiastically divided diaspora into a movement for indigenous rights. This paper asks: How is indigenous sovereignty in northern Iraq (espoused by transnational Assyrians) shot through secular mediations of ecclesial forms of kinship and contextualized by colonial legacies and imperial presents? In tracing the shadows of secularity in the geopolitics of concern over Middle Eastern Christian suffering, this paper broadly explores how we may be better able to parse a decolonial approach to the intersections of Christianity and indigeneity in the Middle East, that exceeds Western, neo-colonial instrumentalization.