

RELIGION MATTERS

THE EXPERIENCE OF SYRIAN/LEBANESE CHRISTIANS IN AUSTRALIA FROM THE 1880S TO 1947

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Neither invited nor welcomed, people from the Middle East began arriving in Australia in noticeable numbers in the 1890s. Most were from modern Lebanon.¹ The dramatic increase in the number of Syrian/Lebanese arriving in Australia coincided with a period of economic decline, drought and high unemployment.² In these circumstances, non-Europeans were increasingly perceived as a threat, and anti-Chinese legislation was extended to all Asiatic and coloured persons.³ This broadening of legislative discrimination included Syrian/Lebanese, who, based on the location of their homeland, were officially classified as Asian. However, eventually, Syrian/Lebanese were treated differently to other Asians, and, by 1920, were granted access to citizenship. Although this change in status appears to be an act of tolerance, a close study of documentary sources suggests quite the opposite. Indeed, the evidence shows that Syrian/Lebanese were judged to be suitable candidates for citizenship because due to their physical appearance and religion they were considered more likely than other Asians to be assimilated.⁴ Hence, the experience of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants in Australia illustrates the fundamen-

al importance of race and religion in determining acceptability.

According to Samir Khalaf, there is 'virtual consensus' that in the 1890s there was a 'sharp and sudden' increase in emigration from Syria and Lebanon.⁵ The arrival of increasing numbers of Syrian/Lebanese in Australia in the last decade of the nineteenth century was part of this mass emigration from the Syria/Lebanon region, and these newcomers were soon recognised as a distinct, non-European group within Australian society. In 1892, for example, the article 'Syrians in the South: a Colony at Redfern', appeared in the *Illustrated Sydney News*.⁶ Syrians were described as 'Eastern immigrants' who entertained visitors in their homes 'with Arabic hospitality'.⁷ Patronisingly tolerant in tone, the article clearly differentiated between these immigrants, 'from the Eastern land, where life is more natural and less constrained by conventionalities than in the Western World', and 'their European neighbors', 'our own people'.⁸ References to *Syrians* as an identifiable group were appearing in Queensland newspapers by the late 1890s. In 1897, for example, newspaper reports regarding a set of Customs prosecution cases clearly identified the defendants as Syrians.⁹ In

February 1897, the *Bundaberg Mail*, referring to the issue of customs fraud, cited 'the nest of invoice-salting Syrians in Stanley Street', while an article in the *Worker* described Stanley Street, South Brisbane as 'Syrian town in verity'.¹⁰ The assertion in the *Brisbane Courier* in 1901 that the violent death of a Syrian/Lebanese hawkers was the result of 'bad blood amongst the Syrian community' is further evidence of a discernible Syrian/Lebanese presence.¹¹

As well as providing evidence Syrian/Lebanese were identified as a specific minority group, early newspaper reports make it clear these immigrants were non-European and non-white. In May 1897, for example, the *Worker* agitated against a perceived 'influx of coloured labour', a category which clearly included Syrian/Lebanese:

Will the white people of Queensland suffer themselves to be ousted by Javanese, Syrians, Chinese or Japanese, and go down before the black, brown, and yellow invaders?¹²

An observation in the *Brisbane Courier* during February 1902, that the police court had been 'crowded with Syrians as well as Europeans' shows Syrian/Lebanese were considered to be distinct from Europeans.¹³ By describing Syrian/Lebanese as 'swarthy-skinned hawkers', the *Bundaberg Mail* intimated they were not white.¹⁴ Similarly, the *Worker* described them as yellow-skinned aliens whose deviant behaviour was keeping the South Brisbane magistrate in a job at great expense to the 'white taxpayer'.¹⁵ More specifically, the *Worker* accused Syrian/Le-

banese traders of eroding the livelihood of white traders:

Does it look like keeping Australia for the white man? We regard it as but another phase of "commercial morality" which not only permits wholesale firms to create white slaves, but carries the principle of sweating to an extent which allows the Syrians to grow fat on the life's blood of the white retailer.¹⁶

As most early newspaper references to Syrian/Lebanese occurred in a negative context, they tended to reinforce a perception that they were indeed, undesirable immigrants.

According to the *Illustrated Sydney News* in 1892, Syrians in Sydney were sometimes incorrectly called *Assyrians* and, to their detriment, were also 'frequently credited with the nationality of Afghans, Indians, Greeks, Italians, and other peoples'.¹⁷ This observation, made in the early days of Syrian/Lebanese settlement, illustrates an ongoing ambivalence regarding the identity of these immigrants. In 1906, for example, the *Bulletin* described Syrians as one of the three 'non-fusible Asiatic races', but argued that, unlike the Chinese, whose 'ways' were 'familiar to everyone', and the Indians, 'known to all by sight at least', Syrians, who were 'less distinctive in personal appearance and unmarked by peculiar dress', were less easily identified.¹⁸ This difficulty was ostensibly accentuated by the fact that, in further contrast to the Chinese and Indians, these Asiatics were Christian and white, and by migrated in family groups had indicated they were permanent settlers.¹⁹ Unwittingly, the *Bulletin's*

overtly hostile portrayal of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants actually isolated the distinguishing characteristics, appearance, religion, and migration in family groups, which eventually led to them being officially treated more leniently than other Asians.²⁰

As the percentages in Table 1 illustrate, from its inception, Syrian/Lebanese immigration did indeed include a significant proportion of women. In the most accessible official documents, women are frequently invisible and therefore, it is more difficult to quantify women than men. Married women, for example, did not apply separately for naturalisation because their citizenship status was determined by that of their husband.²¹ Therefore, it is likely that the number of women is underestimated. However, in each decade being studied, with the exception of the 1940s, at least a quarter of the Syrian/Lebanese immigrants arriving in Queensland were women. This is an important finding because it demonstrates that a significant proportion of these immigrants arrived in family groups. Significantly, this migration in family groups and the birth of at least eighty-six Syrian/Lebanese Queenslanders between 1887 and 1899, indicate the intention of the early immigrants was to be settlers not sojourners.²² The presence of women in the earliest days of migration was also important because, at a time when inter-racial marriage was feared, it meant Syrian/Lebanese men, unlike their Chinese and Indian counterparts were not seen as a threat to white women.²³

Table 1: Percentage of male and female Syrian/Lebanese immigrants arriving in Queensland

YEAR	% MALE	% FEMALE
1880–1889	81	19
1890–1899	71.5	28.5
1900–1909	68	32
1910–1919	66	34
1920–1929	71	29
1930–1939	55.5	44.5
1940–1949	87.5	12.5

Official records provide irrefutable evidence that skin colour was quite overtly a primary consideration in the treatment of non-Europeans. When reporting on an applicant for naturalisation, the police were routinely required to ascertain whether the applicant was coloured. Although in the majority of cases Syrian/Lebanese were reported to be white or not coloured, as the following examples show, some were perceived to be coloured or, at the least, not entirely white. George was considered to be ‘a coloured man, but not a full-blooded foreigner’; while Lutoof was described as a coloured man, probably of Syrian parentage.²⁴ Another applicant was reported to be ‘a coloured man, usually termed a Syrian’.²⁵ Fred was described as being of sallow complexion; Salim as being the ordinary colour of the Syrian, but not what would be termed a coloured man; and Richard as swarthy in complexion ‘but not darker than many natives of Europe or some individuals of the British race’.²⁶ In another case, it was noted that although the applicant was not coloured, he was very dark complexioned and swarthy like most southern Europeans.²⁷ While these examples demonstrate skin colour was definitely a consideration in the processing of naturalisation applications, they also indicate

significant confusion about whether Syrian/Lebanese were actually white or coloured. Apparently, Syrian/Lebanese did not fit easily into designated categories and this made their racial identity problematic.

While acknowledging the paucity of available statistics, it is generally agreed that, regardless of their destination, the majority of emigrants from Syria/Lebanon before 1950 were Christian.²⁸ Kemal Karpát, whose work differs from other studies because it is based on Ottoman documentary sources, challenges this view. According to Karpát, Turkish records suggest the number of Ottoman, and specifically Syrian emigrants, was higher than has previously been estimated; and so too was the proportion of Muslims.²⁹ Karpát argues the proportion of Muslims was probably fifteen to twenty per cent of the total.³⁰ As early as 1892, for example, the Ottoman legation in Washington noted there were 'considerable numbers' of Muslims among the Syrian immigrants.³¹ In the case of Muslim immigrants, the general lack of reliable statistics is aggravated by the fact that the Muslims themselves often concealed their religious affiliation for two main reasons: the ban on Muslim emigration from Ottoman territories; and the perceived hostility to Muslims in their new countries:

... the report mentions the fact that in many cases Muslims preferred to pass as Christians – particularly as Armenians ... - in the hope of gaining easier acceptance in the U.S. and of avoiding trouble with the Ottoman government.³²

While Karpát's work demonstrates how documentary research can challenge

commonly held views, with the exception of four people who were Druzes, the Syrian/Lebanese immigrants arriving in Queensland from the 1880s to 1947 were Maronite, Melkite and Orthodox Christians.³³

Religion has played a significant role in the history of Lebanon. Over an extended period, the mountains of Lebanon became home for a number of religious groups seeking refuge from persecution.³⁴ In the seventh century, for example, the Maronites, a schismatic Christian sect from Syria found sanctuary in the mountains of Lebanon.³⁵ Later, in the eleventh century, the Druzes, an offshoot of Shi'ism, also sought refuge in these mountains.³⁶ In the Lebanon region, geographical features and theological disputes combined to create a multi-religious yet religiously segregated society. For centuries, both the Christians and the Muslims have been divided into numerous and often hostile sects.³⁷ The Muslims are divided into three major sects: the Sunnis, the Shiites and the Druzes. The Christians include the Maronites, the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholics or Melkites, the Syrian Catholics, the Syrian Orthodox, the Chaldeans, the Orthodox and Catholic Armenians and the Protestants. Although the population of Lebanon is often simplistically characterised as being divided between Christians and Muslims, the reality is obviously more complex.

Under Ottoman rule, non-Muslims were organised in millets, religious minority communities with internal autonomy.³⁸ The millet system created 'separate and distinct civil societies predicated on sect (rite) and religion', and in effect, this organised a church into a nation-

ality.³⁹ Under this system, political structures and social organisation were inseparable from the religious group. Writing about Syrians in America in 1924, Philip Hitti argued a Syrian was born to his religion in the same way that an American was born to his nationality.⁴⁰ Consequently, for the Syrian/Lebanese, Church took the place of State.⁴¹ In their study of Syrian/Lebanese in the United States, Philip and Joseph Kayal conclude that Christian, Arabic-speaking Americans became 'Americans of Syrian and eventually, Lebanese ancestry' because they needed 'to have a relevant identity in western terms'.⁴² Similarly, in the Australian context, the acceptance of the term *Syrian* was merely a political expedience adopted when, as immigrants, a collective identity became necessary. In the same way, in Lebanon, these people are most likely to have identified themselves according to their religious sect (Melkite, Maronite or Orthodox) rather than as *Christians*. Consequently, the *Syrian/Christian* identity, constructed in the context of the emigration process, was merely a practical label. It was not how these immigrants usually identified or thought of themselves, and certainly did not signify the existence of a cohesive group.

If any of the early Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were in fact Muslim, this has not been evident in the sources on which this study is based. Early newspaper reports, for example, clearly identify Syrian/Lebanese immigrants as Christian.⁴³ Politicians and bureaucrats also identified Syrians as being mainly Christian. In 1909, for example, Egerton Batchelor, the Minister for External Affairs, noted that the religion of a Syrian was 'very often the same as ours'.⁴⁴ Similarly, the Chief Clerk of

the Department of External Affairs observed that Syrians 'all belong to the Christian faith'.⁴⁵ According to Atlee Hunt, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Syrians were 'practically all Christians being adherents either of the Greek Church or of a Church affiliated with the Roman Catholic'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, some Ottoman immigrants were obviously Muslim. In 1922, for example, Mohammed, 'a Turk, born in Stamboul', was granted naturalisation.⁴⁷ As he had been an Australian resident for twenty-seven years, Mohammed had obviously arrived in the 1890s.⁴⁸ However, in 1922, a memorandum regarding Turkish residents in Australia included the following observation:

The number of Turks of Ottoman characteristics in Australia is negligible. There are no prominent members of the race and the true representatives of the Crescent – Mohammedan in religion and Turkish in national viewpoints – probably number not more than the fingers of one hand.⁴⁹

This observation is supported by specific figures which demonstrate that the majority of Turkish subjects in Australia were Syrian/Lebanese. In Victoria in 1922, for example, while the total number of people regarded as Turkish subjects was 160: 119 of these were Syrians; 3 were Armenians; 35 were Palestinian Jews; and only 3 were Ottoman Turks.⁵⁰

By the 1920s, the official perception of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants had shifted. Rather than being considered as undesirable aliens, they were now thought to be acceptable candidates for citizenship. The documentary evidence provides a

clear indication as to why politicians and bureaucrats became increasingly sympathetic towards the Syrian/Lebanese; and why, although officially Asian, they were eventually exempted from some of the legislative disqualification applied to non-Europeans. Although understood to be technically correct, the classification of Syrian/Lebanese as Asiatic was clearly problematic, and was, evidently, considered by some politicians and bureaucrats to be inaccurate. According to Atlee Hunt, since the *Immigration Restriction Act* had come into force in 1902, the question of how to deal with *Syrians* had caused the Department considerable difficulty.⁵¹ While there was 'unanimity respecting the black, brown and yellow races', Hunt pointed to a 'considerable divergence in decisions relating to the admission of Syrians'.⁵² In regards to the implementation of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, these doubts were important because Syrians were consequently granted special exception in their favour and, as a result, were the only Asians in Australia to add to their numbers by both natural increase and immigration.⁵³

During the Naturalization Bill debate in 1903, Senator Playford (South Australia) argued against the amendment precluding 'all aboriginal natives of Asia, Africa, or the Pacific Islands, except New Zealand' from applying for naturalisation, specifically because the term Asia included 'Syrians and others' whom he considered to be 'as white as we are'.⁵⁴ Playford did not disagree with the principle of excluding non-Europeans from naturalisation, but with the inflexibility of the clause that would not allow for people like the Syrian/Lebanese to be treated as exceptions to the rule:

... there were a few Syrians who lived in South Australia a considerable time, and who, as employers of labour were recognized as good citizens. They were quite as white as many of us are, and as I may remind honorable senators, they were of the same race as the great founder of Christianity.⁵⁵

Playford's view that Syrians should be considered white and were worthy of differential treatment was not shared by others. According to Senator Higgs (Queensland), Syrian/Lebanese were 'not desirable citizens' and their inclusion as citizens would be contrary to the popular desire 'to preserve Australia for the white races'.⁵⁶ Higgs was supported by Senator Pearce (Western Australia), who described Syrian/Lebanese as 'parasites' who competed unfairly with local, European traders.⁵⁷ The majority feeling in the Senate in 1903 was obviously that, as non-Europeans, Syrian/Lebanese were undesirable and should be disqualified from naturalisation. However, Senator Playford's perception of Syrian/Lebanese as being distinct from other Asians raised the problematic issue of their exact racial identity. His advocacy indicated doubts about the application of the geographic definition in the case of Syrian/Lebanese and foreshadowed an opinion which would eventually become Immigration Department policy.

It is apparent that by 1909, the Minister for External Affairs, Egerton Batchelor, had decided Syrians should be permitted naturalisation.⁵⁸ A letter from Batchelor to the Chief Secretary of the Australian Natives' Association provides an account of his personal views and also an outline of the debate regarding the status of Syri-

an/Lebanese residents.⁵⁹ In particular, Batchelor isolated race and religion as the key factors in favour of Syrian/Lebanese being accepted as citizens. Specifically, he believed there was nothing to fear 'from the inclusion' as citizens 'of Syrians – men of a race not far removed from our stock, and whose religion is often the same as ours'.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Batchelor questioned the use of the geographic definition to determine whether a Syrian was European or Asiatic:

Is there any logic in saying that men belonging to a family resident in one of the suburbs of Constantinople on the south shore of the Bosphorus, are not eligible for Australian citizenship, while their brothers who happen to be born in the city itself are fully qualified. The distinction imposed by our law is merely geographical. It is not racial nor religious. It has no scientific or rational basis whatever.⁶¹

Batchelor's views clearly influenced later deliberations regarding the status of Syrian/Lebanese as both their appearance and their religion were consistently raised as favourable characteristics.⁶²

In 1914, for example, the Chief Clerk of the Department of External Affairs noted:

The Department has from time to time granted authority to certain resident Syrians to bring their wives or other female relatives to Australia and some of those who have been brought to the Department subsequently were as fair-skinned as any woman to be met in our cities. So far as Syrian men

are concerned, they are dark, but not more so than the Italians, Spaniards and Greeks, and if it were not for the fact that the Syrians disclose their race on going on board ship on route to Australia, they would easily pass muster with nationals of the countries just mentioned.⁶³

In addition to being similar in appearance to southern Europeans, according to the Chief Clerk, 'all' these Syrians were also Christian.⁶⁴ Atlee Hunt, the Secretary of the Department, held similar views. In a 1914 memorandum to the Minister, Hunt argued that Syrian/Lebanese were more European than Asiatic in appearance:

They are of swarthy appearance, with dark hair and in most cases sallow complexions, but approximate far more closely to the European types than to those of India or parts of Asia further East. As far as general appearance goes they can not be distinguished from the people of Southern Spain, Italy or Greece and in fact are considerably lighter in complexion than the Turks.⁶⁵

Additionally, he noted that the Syrian/Lebanese immigrants were 'practically all Christians', belonging either to an Orthodox or Catholic Church.⁶⁶ When Hunt recommended changing naturalisation laws by dropping the racial disqualification in favour of ministerial discretion, Syrians were evidently the primary target of the proposed change:

The point has come up most conspicuously in the case of Syrians who are ineligible; though Turks

born in Europe are eligible. Many Syrians who we have been obliged to refuse are people of high character and substantial property.⁶⁷

Archival sources support the view that Syrian/Lebanese immigrants knew their physical appearance and Christian affiliations were favourable attributes in their bid for equitable treatment. Race and religion were repeatedly referred to by the immigrants and others advocating on their behalf. In 1903, Joseph was refused naturalisation because he was a single, Asiatic male.⁶⁸ In a letter to the Home Secretary, Joseph disputed the correctness of this classification:

Although I am termed an Asiatic Alien, I would respectfully point out that I am of the Christian Religion, the same as the rest of the people of Australia.⁶⁹

Similarly, Alf, who was able to read and write English, French and Arabic, informed Atlee Hunt that he was 'not an aboriginal native of Syria but a whit[e] man of good English education'.⁷⁰ Another Syrian/Lebanese immigrant, excluded from naturalisation because of his birthplace, responded with the following:

Sir, the External Department says that I am not eligible to become a subject of the King in the 'Commonwealth' of Australia on account of being born in Syria[.] I am a Christian and I think I am eligible to become a subject of the King ...⁷¹

Advocating on behalf of a Syrian/Lebanese client, solicitors described him as 'a sober steady man', who, like his father

before him, was a Roman Catholic.⁷² Marie's comments to Atlee Hunt in 1914, suggest she thought business success and being Christian would contribute positively to her family's acceptance as citizens:

My husband has been in business in Adelaide for over 20 years. May I add we are all born Roman Catholics.⁷³

In correspondence with the Department of External Affairs in 1904, Richard, who claimed to be a direct descendant of a European Crusader, alleged that modern Syrians were considered to be white or Caucasian and that at no time in history had they been considered coloured.⁷⁴ In another case, an applicant's solicitor argued that Syrians were not aboriginal natives of Asia but were a civilised Christian race and descendants of the European Crusaders.⁷⁵ Whether legitimate or not, the professed links with European Crusaders were evidently intended to imply Syrian/Lebanese were more European than Asian.

In his decade long bid for citizenship (1910-1920), Michael's arguments echoed those of other Syrian/Lebanese and the professionals and politicians advocating on their behalf.⁷⁶ Although he had spent almost all his life in Queensland, Michael had been born in Zahle, Lebanon and therefore, as an aboriginal native of Asia, was ineligible for naturalisation.⁷⁷ His case for naturalisation became even more unlikely when, as a Turkish subject, he became an enemy alien.⁷⁸ In correspondence with the Department, Michael questioned the validity of being classified 'an aboriginal native of Asia', citing an example from the United States in which, he claimed, it had been proven 'beyond a

shadow of a doubt' that Syrians were not Asiatic.⁷⁹ In common with others, he thought his success in business and status as a sole proprietor and employer would add to the suitability of his candidature.⁸⁰

After 1914, in response to his status as an enemy alien, Michael emphasised the distinction between Christian Syrians and Muslim Turks. In July 1918, for example, the first point he made in relation to his application for naturalisation was that he was 'a Christian born at Zahley, near Damascus, Palestine'.⁸¹ In a later letter, Michael repeatedly referred to his Christian faith and his antipathy to Turkish rule.⁸² Not only were his parents 'Christians of Lebanon (Palestine)', but:

Our sympathies have always been British and never Turkish: otherwise my parents would not have fled from the continued persecution of the Turks to this fair country, which I have learnt to call home.⁸³

Furthermore:

The atrocities committed by the Turks on our people just before the British occupation should convince you of the hatred existing between them. When have we, during the five centuries of Turkish oppression, sympathised with Turkey? Their continued massacres should be sufficient answer.⁸⁴

Advocating on Michael's behalf in 1916, the District Grand Secretary (Queensland Branch) of the Freemasons, noted that:

His parents fled from Palestine to escape from Turkish persecution they being Christians. They were naturalized here, became subjects of the British Crown, and are well known to be loyal.⁸⁵

In his communications with the Department, Michael made deliberate reference to the depth and authenticity of his Christian roots. He consistently described his country of origin as 'Lebanon, Palestine', not Lebanon, Syria. Furthermore, his claim that his parents fled from 'Lebanon, Palestine' when he was 'child in arms', has biblical overtones; as does the following:

It surely does not follow that a person born in a stable ceases to be a human being.⁸⁶

As Michael's case illustrates, during World War One, religious affiliation became increasingly important for Syrian/Lebanese as religion was used to distinguish between the predominately Christian Syrian/Lebanese and Turks, who were generally European but more likely to be Muslim. As enemy aliens, Syrians were required to register at their local police station and then to report at designated intervals during the war.⁸⁷ However, in January 1915, the Commonwealth Government recognised that Turkish subjects who were Greek, Armenian or Syrian were likely to be opposed to the Turkish regime.⁸⁸ That the government understood the position of Syrian/Lebanese is confirmed by Atlee Hunt's comments in 1916:

Syrians are technically Turks and our enemies, though they are recognized, at any rate those from the Mount Lebanon region, as

having no sympathy with Turkey and in consequence have received special concessions in the way of reporting carrying on business etc.⁸⁹

As a consequence of this understanding, District Commandants were given the discretion to exempt Turkish subjects who were Christian and 'well-known to be opposed to the Turkish regime' from certain requirements applying to enemy aliens.⁹⁰ In 1918, for example, Michael, a Syrian/Lebanese resident of Melbourne, was granted exemption from reporting every week to the police because he had:

... satisfied this Section that he, although a subject of Turkey, is a Syrian opposed to Turkish rule, and he is a Christian.⁹¹

In 1920, the *Nationality Act* removed the racial disqualification from the naturalisation laws.⁹² However, in the aftermath of the War and in the absence of the racial disqualification, religion remained an important indicator of acceptability. In 1921, for example, when Michael applied for naturalisation, it was requested that, in addition to the routine enquiries, the police also ascertain whether he was 'of the Christian or Mohammedan faith.'⁹³ When Assaf applied for citizenship, a similar request was made:

Confirmation as to place of birth is specifically desired As this man is a Syrian, his religion, Mohammedan or otherwise, should be shown on the report.⁹⁴

As, after 1920, the police consistently reported the religion of an applicant for naturalisation, it appears that the specific

request articulated in the two previous examples, became generalised. Although there was no specific question about religion on the standardised form, as an applicant's religion was invariably included in 'General Remarks', it would seem that those responsible for completing the forms had been instructed to include this information.

Indeed, sometimes an applicant's religion is the only comment recorded in this section. The only 'General Remark' about John, for example, was that he was 'of the Roman Catholic Faith'.⁹⁵ Similarly, Solomon was described as a Roman Catholic, and it was noted that all his family had been baptised in the Roman Catholic Church.⁹⁶ In another example, Joseph was described as 'well educated' and as 'a loyal and well respected citizen' who 'belongs to and regularly attends a Christian Church'.⁹⁷ As well as being Christian, Michael was also described as a 'good' and 'loyal citizen'.⁹⁸ That it had become necessary to report the religion of an applicant is particularly supported by examples in which the report had obviously been completed and the applicant's religion has been added later, sometimes by a different person.⁹⁹ The specified inclusion of an applicant's religion is further supported by examples in which the question is actually added to the form.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, on some applications the question: 'What is applicant's religion?', is added to the form as question '2a'.¹⁰¹

As well as demonstrating the role of religion in determining acceptability, the following example illustrates the improved status of Syrian/Lebanese after 1920. In 1922, not realising it was no longer critical, and obviously wanting to be recognised as European rather than Asian, George

applied for naturalisation as a Turkish national.¹⁰² Handwritten notes and various comments throughout the file indicate George's claim to be Turkish was questioned on the basis of his name and religion:

This man though he calls himself a Turk is, I think, really a Syrian, according to his name + religion. No Turk is a Roman Catholic...

...(2) Does the surname(M...) suggest Syrian origin?... (2) M...is more suggestive of Syria than Turkey

...Mr Fawaz says M... is a Syrian name.¹⁰³

The changed status of Syrian/Lebanese after the passing of the *Nationality Act* is clearly evident from the following remarks:

The fact of his being a Roman Catholic would lead one to believe that he is of Syrian descent, and, as such, could be accepted for naturalization.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, it is quite obvious why, despite falsely claiming Turkish nationality, George's application was successful:

I recommend that, as M... has married an English woman, is of good character, a Christian – in contradistinction to Turks, who are Mohammedans, and do not marry outside the Mussulman[sic] community – and may fairly be assumed to be of Syrian extraction, the application is approved.¹⁰⁵

Despite their Eastern origins, Syrian/Lebanese immigrants in Australia were,

in contrast to other Asians, eventually considered suitable candidates for citizenship. While, at an official level, they had gained qualified acceptance, to achieve this, Syrian/Lebanese immigrants denied their Eastern characteristics and insisted that they were, in fact, white and European. Furthermore, as being 'Christian' was obviously essential in their bid for naturalisation, they de-emphasised their Eastern Rites (Maronite, Melkite and Orthodox) and, contrary to their usual practice, described themselves simply as Christians. Hence, while the eventual acceptance of Syrian/Lebanese has the appearance of tolerance, viewed in the wider context, it was really a victory for prejudice and bigotry. Evidently, because of their appearance and religion, it was decided Syrian/Lebanese were more likely than other Asians to become totally assimilated. Using this evidence, it can be assumed that, if these first Middle Eastern immigrants had been predominately Muslim, the outcome regarding their acceptance as citizens would have been quite different.

ENDNOTES

¹ Before the political re-definition of the Middle East after World War One, the term Syrian, quite accurately, included all immigrants from the modern nations of Jordan, Palestine (Israel), Lebanon and Syria. As this study focuses on the immigrants who came from the area now known as Lebanon, they will be referred to as Syrian/Lebanese.

² F. G. Clarke, *Australia: A Concise Political and Social History*, Sydney, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992, pp. 158–68.

³ C. Y. Choi, *Chinese Migration and Settlement in Australia*, Sydney, Sydney University Press, 1975, p. 27.

⁴ A. T. Yarwood, *Asian Migration to Australia: The Background to Exclusion 1896 – 1923*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1964, pp. 141–50.

- ⁵ S. Khalaf, 'The background and causes of Lebanese/Syrian immigration', in Eric J. Hooglund (ed.), *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940*, Washington D.C., Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987, p. 18.
- ⁶ *Illustrated Sydney News*, 19 November 1892, p. 4.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁹ The story was covered in the *Brisbane Courier*, *Queenslander*, *Capricornian*, and *Bundaberg Mail*.
- ¹⁰ *Bundaberg Mail*, 10 February 1897; *Worker*, February 1897, p. 2.
- ¹¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 'Man killed at Mount Cotton: a Syrian affray', 28 October 1901, p. 2.
- ¹² *Worker*, 15 May 1897, p. 2; *Worker*, 22 May 1897.
- ¹³ *Brisbane Courier*, 6 February 1902, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ *Bundaberg Mail*, 26 May 1897.
- ¹⁵ *Worker*, 29 May 1897, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ *Worker*, 20 February 1897, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ *Illustrated Sydney News*, 19 November 1892, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ *Bulletin*, 18 January 1906.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.*
- ²⁰ Yarwood, op. cit., pp. 141–50.
- ²¹ *Aliens Act of 1867*, (31 Vic. No. 28), Queensland.
- ²² Queensland Births 1885–1889, Register General's Office, Brisbane, 1989.
- ²³ Yarwood, op. cit., p. 144.
- ²⁴ Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 10 June 1909, A1/1, 09/13029, National Archives of Australia (NAA) (ACT); Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 16 February 1915, A1/1, 15/665, NAA (ACT).
- ²⁵ Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 31 August 1911, A1, 30/2416, NAA (ACT).
- ²⁶ Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 12 October 1909, A1/1, 21/3816, NAA (ACT); Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 27 January 1908, A659, 43/1/6000, NAA (ACT); Postmaster, Charters Towers to Department of External Affairs, 27 December 1905, A1/1, 05/8109, NAA (ACT).
- ²⁷ Chief Secretary's Office, Brisbane to Department of External Affairs, 20 October 1914, A1/1, 21/11220, NAA (ACT).
- ²⁸ This claim is made in almost every study of Syrian/Lebanese immigrants.
- ²⁹ K. H. Karpas, 'The Ottoman emigration to America 1860-1914', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, 1985, p. 193.
- ³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 183.
- ³¹ *ibid.*, p. 182.
- ³² *ibid.*, pp. 182–83.
- ³³ In K. S. Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon*, Delmar, New York, Caravan Books, 1997, p. xviii, Salibi describes the Druzes as the 'followers of the Fatimid Caliph al Hakim (996-1021) who proclaimed his own divinity in the early eleventh century, deviating from traditional Isma'elite Shi'ism'.
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- ⁴³ *Illustrated Sydney News*, 19 November 1892, p. 4; *Bulletin*, 18 January 1906.
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- ⁴⁵ Memorandum from the Chief Clerk, Department of External Affairs, 27 October 1914, 14/20363, A1/1 14/20363, NAA (ACT).
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- 92 *Nationality Act*, no. 48 of 1920, Commonwealth of Australia.

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⁹⁶ Report on Application for Naturalization by Solomon G., A1/1, 21/24875, NAA (ACT).

⁹⁷ Report on Application for Naturalization by Joseph M., A1, 21/1418, NAA (ACT).

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⁹⁹ In the following, the comment on religion is obviously written by a different person: Report on Application for Naturalization by Abraham M., A1/1, 21/15432, NAA (ACT); Report on Application for Naturalization by Massoud N., A1/1, 21/24130, NAA (ACT); Report on Application for Naturalization by Habib M., A1, 23/27431, NAA (ACT); Report on Application for Naturalization by John M., A1/1, 24/29587, NAA (ACT).

¹⁰⁰ Report on Application for Naturalization by Alfred M., A1/1, 24/20562, NAA (ACT).

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¹⁰² Statutory Declaration, George M., 3 April 1922, A1/1, 22/9133, NAA (ACT).

¹⁰³ Handwritten notes, George M., Naturalization application, A1/1, 22/9133, NAA (ACT).

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¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*