



Crisis and Reason in Ottoman Syria: The Life and Thought of Mikhael Mishaqa

Event Summary

Lecture by Dr. Peter Hill (Northumbria University) | Discussant: Dr. Varak Ketsamian

In the lecture "Crisis and Reason in Ottoman Syria," Dr. Peter Hill from Northumbria University presented a compelling examination of the intellectual trajectory of Mikhael Mishaqa (1800–1888), a polymath and key figure in 19th-century Ottoman Syria whose writings offer invaluable insight into the region's religious, political, and epistemological transformations. Through a biographical lens, Hill positioned Mishaqa's life within a broader context of imperial reform, sectarian violence, and transregional intellectual exchange. Afterwards in a discussion format, Dr. Varak Ketsamian from the History Department at AUB highlighted the methodological challenges of writing biography in this context, drawing attention to the tension between personal experience and historical structure. Born in the village of Rashmaya to a Greek Catholic family, Mishaqa's early life was shaped by both privilege and precarity. His father, a banker and advisor to Amir Bashir Shihabi, fled with the family to Egypt during times of regional instability. These early disruptions fostered a heightened awareness of uncertainty, prompting Mishaqa's lifelong pursuit of order and explanation through reason. Notably, the solar eclipse of 1813 and an unusual snowstorm became interpretive touchpoints that launched Mishaqa into a deep inquiry into cosmology, religion, and science.

In his youth, Mishaqa traveled to Damietta, where the cosmopolitan trade hub exposed him to new epistemologies. The outbreak of plague and the various religious and magical responses to it contrasted with emerging medical reasoning. This prompted Mishaqa to question traditional belief systems. He became increasingly skeptical of organized religion and began reading Arabic Translations of European deist and scientific texts, particularly those associated with Enlightenment rationalism. Influenced by works such as *Ruins of Empire*, Mishaqa came to view the universe as governed by natural laws rather than divine intervention, and religious doctrines as socially constructed mystifications.

While Mishaqa's religious views shifted frequently throughout his life, his intellectual posture remained consistent: a commitment to the use of reason as a tool for understanding crisis. Upon returning to Mount Lebanon in the 1820s, he resumed his role within elite financial circles while also studying medicine, mathematics, and theology. His skepticism deepened, and he frequently engaged in debates with religious authorities, often mocking their dogmatism.

By the 1830s and 1840s, Mishaqa found himself increasingly embedded in the shifting political landscape of Ottoman Syria. The Egyptian occupation under Mehmed Ali and his son Ibrahim Pasha brought centralized reforms, disarmament of local groups, and direct taxation— all of which catalyzed new forms of dissent and division. During this period, Mishaqa moved to Damascus, married into a prominent trading family, and became an interlocutor between local notables, European missionaries, and imperial officials.

A pivotal moment in Mishaqa's spiritual evolution came through his engagement with Protestant missionaries, most notably Eli Smith. Though often critical of missionary efforts, Mishaqa found elements of rationalist Protestantism, particularly its emphasis on internal conviction and scriptural historicism more intellectually satisfying than Catholicism. He read works such as Alexander Keith's *Evidence of Prophecy*, which attempted to demonstrate the truth of Christianity through historical evidence and rational argumentation. In 1848, he publicly converted to Protestantism, sparking disputes within the local Greek Catholic community. His conversion, however, was not solely doctrinal. It reflects a broader attempt to reconcile faith with reason in the context of personal and collective crisis.

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Dr. Ketsamanian emphasized the complex nature of Mishaqa's conversion, questioning what it meant to convert in a time of epistemological fragmentation and political transformation. Mishaqa's adoption of Protestantism was not merely a religious realignment but part of a larger intellectual journey shaped by translation, global exchange, and personal disillusionment. His case challenges linear narratives of modernity and religious reform, offering instead a model of intellectual experimentation and self-definition amid disruption.

The lecture also explored the impact of the 1860 civil war and sectarian massacres in Mount Lebanon and Damascus, an event that profoundly influenced Mishaqa's later writings. He fled to Damascus, where he reestablished himself and continued to write. These traumatic experiences tested his rationalist framework, yet he remained committed to understanding the violence not as divine punishment, but as a product of political manipulation, sectarian populism, and the breakdown of older modes of governance. Unlike contemporaries who framed 1860 as the result of religious destiny or European betrayal, Mishaqa sought rational and historical explanations.

Throughout his life, Mishaqa maintained a distinctive independence. He was not formally employed by religious institutions or state bodies and resisted the intellectual conformism of his peers like Boutrous Boustany. Though he operated within elite networks, his writings often expressed ambivalence about modernization and progress. His final memoir reflects both a personal spiritual journey and a broader historical critique. He admired the political cohesion of the Shehabi era over the divisive sectarianism of the late Ottoman period and emphasized individual integrity over collective identities.

In closing, Hill and Ketsamanian pointed to the relevance of Mishaqa's thought today. Living through what seemed like an endless series of crises, Mishaqa never surrendered to fatalism. Instead, he turned to reason; not always to find definitive answers, but to search for coherence. His work invites us to consider how individuals process instability, navigate competing truths, and respond to disorder not only with survival, but with intellectual and moral inquiry.