

CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

Henry Martyn Seminar

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Introduction

Christians from the Middle East are frequently asked, ‘When did you or your family become Christians?’ It’s hard for them not to be irritated by the question, and some of them want to answer ‘On the day of Pentecost!’ Arab Christians in the Middle East today, who number between 10 and 15 million, like to remind us of the fact that Arabs are mentioned in the list of ‘God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven’ who were present in Jerusalem on that historic day (Acts 2:11), and they are proud of their continuous presence in the region for nearly two thousand years.

Egyptian Christians think of themselves as the descendants of the ancient Egyptians and see the Arab Muslims who conquered them in the 7th century as foreign invaders. Similarly Lebanese Christians think of themselves as descendants of the Phoenicians and believe that they have been rooted in the region since the early Christian centuries. Christians in Iraq can look back to the golden age of the Eastern Churches between the 4th and 13th centuries, during which the gospel was taken to China and India and Christians made a highly significant contribution to Islamic civilization.

But if Middle Eastern Christians can look back to this glorious past, it’s not an exaggeration to use the word ‘crisis’ to describe the situations that they face today. In order to understand the nature of these challenges we cannot avoid attempting to survey twenty centuries of history. This will inevitably seem very brief and superficial; but every item in the following list is significant in some way for our understanding of the complexity and seriousness of the situations that they face today. The following nineteen themes can be seen rather like chapters of the unfolding drama of the Christian presence and of Christian-Muslim relations in the Middle East.

I should explain that I’m not going to say anything about the different families of churches in the Middle East – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant – because this is a huge subject on its own and it’s not directly relevant to the contemporary issues which I want to explore.

1. HISTORY

1. Christianity in the first six centuries.

It’s important to remind ourselves that for the first three centuries Christians were a powerless minority (probably never more than 10%) and frequently persecuted. With the conversion of Constantine in 313, however, everything changed and Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. By the seventh century the

majority of the population of the Middle East was Christian, and Byzantium was one of the two great powers when Muhammad was born.

2. Muhammad and Christians.

The earliest *Life of the Prophet* written by a Muslim in the 8th century records a meeting between Muhammad as a young man and a Christian monk called Bahira in southern Syria on one of Muhammad's trading journeys to Syriaⁱ. When Muhammad first believed that he was receiving revelations from God, the cousin of Muhammad's first wife, Khadija, who was a Christian named Waraqa ibn Naufal, encouraged Muhammad to believe that these revelations had come from God. When the first Muslims were being fiercely persecuted in Mecca, Muhammad sent a group of them to seek asylum in the Christian kingdom of Abyssinia. It is very likely that Muhammad saw himself as a prophet to the Arabs and believed that by giving them scriptures in their own language of Arabic, he was giving them a contextualized version of Judaism and Christianity. He no doubt expected that Jews and Christians would recognise him as a prophet in the line of the biblical prophets, and was therefore surprised and disappointed when they did not accept him as suchⁱ. According to Islamic sources the Prophet towards the end of his life sent messengers inviting the rulers of Egypt, Byzantium and Persia to accept Islam. And in the last year of his life Muhammad received a delegation of 70 Christians from Najran (in today's Yemen) who stayed for some time in Medina and engaged in serious theological dialogue with him. These different encounters with Christians at different stages of his life are very important for understanding what the Qur'an has to say about Christians and Christian beliefsⁱⁱ.

3. Qur'an and Hadith

The seven passages from the Qur'an on the separate page illustrate a variety of different responses to Christians and Christian belief. Some are quite positive, while others are argumentative and confrontationalⁱⁱⁱ.

The Hadith literature is also important for giving us an insight into the thinking of Muslims concerning Christians in the first centuries after the death of the Prophet. So, for example, 'A'isha reported that during the last illness of the Prophet he said, 'May God curse the Jews and the Christians! They have taken the tombs of their prophets as places of prayer.'^{iv} She also reported that the last thing the Messenger of God charged was that 'there should not be left two religions in Arabia'^v.

4. The Islamic Conquests

By the time that the advance of a Muslim army in France was stopped short at the battle of Tours in 732 (exactly a hundred years after the death of the Prophet), the Muslim Arabs were ruling over a vast empire which stretched from Morocco and Spain in the West to the borders of China and the North West of the Indian subcontinent in the East. The Arabic word used for these conquests is *futuhat*, from

the verb *fataha*, meaning ‘to open’ or ‘to conquer’. While it is a very dangerous half-truth to say that ‘Islam was spread by the sword’, and while the spreading of the religion of Islam was probably not a major motive for these conquests, it was these conquests that created the context in which Islam could eventually spread. For the first two or three centuries a few thousand Arab Muslim were ruling over a population in the Middle East and North Africa in which Christians were the majority^{vi}. One could draw a comparison between this empire and the British Raj in which a few thousand British people were ruling a whole continent.

5. The *dhimma* system and the Code of ‘Umar

The Muslim conquerors regarded Jews and Christians as ‘People of the Book’ and gave them protected status, allowing them to practise their own religion within certain limits in return for payment of a special tax. The so-called Code of ‘Umar is attributed to the second Caliph, but probably comes from a later period. It outlines the conditions attached to the protected status of Christians – like the wearing of distinctive clothing, restrictions on public expression of their faith and building new churches - and of course it was understood that no kind of evangelism was allowed^{vii}. You could never have had a ‘Henry Martyn Centre for Mission Studies’! This code was not enforced in every period and in every area, but was harshly enforced at particular times.

6. The Crusades

Although the Crusades were not perceived at the time by Muslims as religious wars and did not have any serious long-term effect on Muslim rule in the Middle East, they did have at least two significant long-term consequences. Firstly, they hardened Muslim attitudes towards Christians and Christianity and made life very much harder for Christians. Secondly, they seriously weakened the eastern churches, and the fall of Byzantium to the Muslim Turks in 1453 could be seen as an indirect result of the Crusades.

Most Christians today feel an acute sense of shame over the Crusades, finding it hard to understand how a succession of Popes could encourage so much violence and bloodshed in the name of Christ in order to win the Holy Land back from the control of Islam. It is important, however, for us to listen to what many Middle Eastern Christians say to us on this subject. When I’ve taught about the Crusades for several years in introductory courses on Islam at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, the message that I heard from students goes like this: ‘Do you western Christians really need to have such a guilty conscience over the Crusades? Surely they were simply the delayed reaction of Christendom – delayed by four centuries – to the Islamic conquest. Western Christians today may want to apologise for the Crusades; but are Muslim Arabs every going to apologise for the initial Arab Islamic conquests? Were the Crusades not an entirely natural and inevitable reaction on the part of Christendom to the loss of territories which had been ruled by Christians for centuries?’^{viii}

7. The Mongols

The Mongols, who came originally from Central Asia and eventually dominated a large area of the Middle East, included some Christianized peoples and there were Christians among their leading families. Christians actually took part in the conquest of Baghdad in 1258, and some Mongol leaders later converted to Christianity. Their armies suffered a severe defeat, however at 'Ain-Jalut (in the modern Jordan) at the hands of the Mamlukes from Egypt, and this defeat marked 'a devastating reversal of Christian hopes.'^{ix} Until this time, in the words of Philip Jenkins, 'Christian leaders dreamed that Baghdad itself might be the capital of a new Christian empire that would consign Islam to the catalog of forgotten heresies'^x. Then came the turning point when Mongol rulers began to favour Islam more than Christianity and created a Muslim superstate, so that by 1295 they had begun to persecute Christians and Buddhists. Writing about the swing towards Islam during this period, Jenkins writes: '... that victory was even more critical for the long-term relationship between Islam and Christianity than the original Arab conquests of the seventh century'^{xi}.

8. 'The Great Tribulation'

This is the title that Jenkins gives to the chapter about the fourteenth century which, he says, marks 'the decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East and in much of Africa.'^{xii} He begins by describing the increased persecution of Christians in Egypt:

'Although Egypt's Christians had often been subject to outbreaks of persecution, the events of 1354 reached an alarming new intensity. Mobs demanded that Christians and Jews recite the Muslim profession of faith upon threat of being burned alive. The government struck at churches and confiscated the estates of monasteries, destroying the financial basis of the Coptic church. And unlike in previous conflicts, the persecution now reached the whole country, rather than being confined just to Cairo. Under increasingly violent conditions, many Christians accepted Islam, in a massive wave of conversions.'^{xiii}

He is critical of modern writers like Karen Armstrong who emphasise 'the tolerant nature of Islam and its reluctance to impose its beliefs by force:

'In reality, the story of religious change involves far more active persecution and massacre at the hands of Muslim authorities than would be suggested by modern believers in Islamic tolerance. Even in the most optimistic view, Armstrong's reference to Christians possessing "full religious liberty" in Muslim Spain or elsewhere beggars belief.'^{xiv}

This is his summing up of the devastating effects of this century of persecution:

'Oppression and persecution were not integral to Islamic rule; but such conditions could and did develop at particular times, and when they did, they could be devastating. At their worst, we can legitimately compare the conditions of Christians under Islam with that of Jews in contemporary Christian Europe, and the Egyptian campaigns of the fourteenth century look almost identical to contemporary European anti-Semitism. Though Muslim regimes could tolerate other faiths for long periods, that willingness to live and let live did fail at various times, and at some critical points it collapsed utterly. The deeply rooted Christianity of Africa and Asia did not simply fade away through lack of zeal, or theological confusion: it was crushed, in a welter of warfare and persecution.'^{xv}

9. Increasing conversion to Islam

Writing about the process of conversion, he says ‘we should probably date the rise of a solid Muslim majority in Egypt to the 9th or 10th centuries, and a hundred years later in Syria and Mesopotamia. Even so, large minorities persisted into the thirteenth century, when we see a decisive movement towards absolute hegemony’^{xvi}. Some converted to Islam in order to avoid paying the *jizya* tax and to improve their social standing by adopting the religion of their rulers. Others may have felt that the theological differences between the two faiths were insignificant^{xvii}.

10. The Ottomans

For around 400 years the Ottoman Empire covered Asia Minor, the Balkans, the whole of the Middle East and North Africa as far as Tunis. In 1453 they captured Constantinople, and in 1529 and 1683 they besieged Vienna but failed to capture it. During these centuries there were still sizeable Christian communities throughout the region, and in the 19th century the Ottoman authorities developed the traditional *dhimma* system into what was called the *millet* system, which gave Christian communities powers to administer themselves.

In this context we can hardly avoid mentioning the Armenian genocide. Jenkins writes:

‘The modern concept of genocide ... has its roots in the thoroughly successful movements to eradicate Middle Eastern Christians... The decline of Christianity in the Middle East occurred in two distinct phases, two distinct “falls”. In the first, in what Europeans call the Middle Ages, Christians lost their majority status within what became Muslim-majority nations... In the second phase, however, which is barely a century old, Christians have ceased to exist altogether – *are* ceasing to exist – as organized communities. We can argue about the causes of that change, whether they can legitimately be described as religious rather than political, but the result was to create a Muslim world that was just as Christian-free as large sections of Europe would be Jew-free after the Second World War. In both instances, the major mechanism of change was the same. For all the reasons we can suggest for long-term decline, for all the temptations to assimilate, the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration ... Although some rulers were more explicitly motivated by religion than others, the Ottomans were often more aggressively anti-Christian than were the original Arab conquerors of the Middle East.’^{xviii}

11. Western imperialism in the Middle East

Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt between 1798 and 1801 marked the beginning of significant European military and political intervention in the Middle East. Later in the 19th century European nations gained a foothold in the Middle East through trade and by offering loans, and individual countries set themselves up as guardians of the various Christian minorities in the Middle East. It is important to remember that the whole of the Muslim world - with the exception of Arabia, Turkey, Persia and Afghanistan - came under western colonial rule in one form or another in the period between 1800 and 1950. And even in these four countries western governments were

actively involved in different ways. Britain's involvement in Afghanistan and Persia, for example, were all part of the strategy of keeping Russia out of South East Asia.

12. The Wahhabi movement

This movement is named after Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, who developed a strict, puritanical and literalist version of Islam in Arabia before his death in 1791. The Sa'ud family who gained control of the whole of Arabia early in the 20th century adopted this form of Islam, making it in effect the official brand of Islam for the whole country. It has been pointed out that it is an accident of history that the discovery of oil in Arabia and the alliance between the Wahhabis and the Sa'ud family have ensured that this form of Islam, which might otherwise have been confined to one particular isolated area of Arabia, has now been exported all over the world. The preferred name for this movement is 'Salafi', which comes from the word *salaf*, referring to the 'pious ancestors', the first three generations after the Prophet.

13. The Arab Nahda

What is important to note here is that Syrian Christians were prominent leaders of this movement which began at the end of the 19th Century. Not only did they want to assert a measure of independence for the Arabs over against their Turkish rulers, but they saw Arab nationalism as a way of ensuring escape from the *dhimmi* status and procuring equality for Christians alongside Muslims.

14. The creation of Israel, 1948

Developing as a response to anti-semitism in Eastern Europe and inspired by leaders like Theodore Herzl with his book in 1896 *The Jews' State*, the Zionist movement deliberately sought sponsorship and protection from the British government and gained it through the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Thus after Britain was given the Mandate for Palestine after World War I, the Jewish community used the protection of the British to prepare for the establishment of the Jewish state. Avi Shlaim, the Israeli Jewish historian, describes the year of 1948 as

'a year of Jewish triumph and Palestinian tragedy... In Arabic, 1948 is called *al-nakba*, the catastrophe. For the Palestinians 1948 did mark the most catastrophic defeat in their protracted fight against the Jewish National Home ... The trauma of defeat, dispersal, and exile seared itself into their collective memory ... Many Arabs still view Israel as a bridgehead planted in their midst by Western powers determined to keep Arabs divided and to frustrate their national ambitions ...'^{xix}

15. Arab nationalism

As championed by Gamal Abd al-Nasser after the coup of the Free Officers in Egypt in 1952, this movement was largely a response to the experience of colonial rule. 'Men and women across the Arab world,' says Eugene Rogan, 'believed that the Egyptian president had a master plan for unifying the Arab people and leading them

to a new age of independence and power^{xx}. One of the reasons for the subsequent decline of Arab nationalism was that it did little or nothing to help the Palestinians in their conflict with Israel.

16. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, 1979

This was a highly significant development since it was the first time in modern history that Shi'ites not only took over the government of a Muslim country but created a completely new political system in which the supreme ruler had to be a legal authority. In trying to understand the events that led up to this revolution, it's sobering for British people and Americans to be aware of the role that our countries played in the events leading up to this revolution. I wonder how many of us are aware that in 1953 the CIA and MI6 engineered a coup which brought down the first democratically elected government in Persia under Mossadeq and brought the Shah back to rule the country^{xxi}. At the present time it's important to understand that Sunnis in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia are desperately afraid of the new arc of Shi'ite power developing between Iran, Iraq (where the majority are Shi'ites), Syria (ruled by Alawites) and Hizbullah in Lebanon.

17. American domination in the Middle East

Let me at this point state what seems to most people to be blindingly obvious: America is the one and only super-power in the world today, and has decisive influence in most international bodies like the United Nations. Its policies in the Middle East are largely determined by its own national interests which include the maintenance of its hegemony in the region, its unquestioning support for the state of Israel and safeguarding its main source of oil^{xxii}.

18. Islamism, 'Islamic Terrorism' and the 'War or Terror'

In teaching and writing about this subject in recent years, I have tried to understand so-called 'Islamic terrorism' as an expression of the anger of Muslims – and especially Arabs – against the West for its policies in the Muslims world. Thus while it is necessary to understand the way violence is justified by Muslims on scriptural and theological grounds, it is also necessary for all of us in the West to ask the question 'Why are these people so angry?' and 'Do they have good reason to be angry?' Part of the tragedy of the responses to 9/11 – especially in the US – was that few seemed willing or able to ask this kind of question, and governments put all their energies instead into 'the war on terror'.^{xxiii}

19. The Arab Spring

What we have been witnessing in the last six months is a spontaneous protest against autocratic regimes, police states, corruption, poverty and unemployment. While the main inspiration for these protest has not been religious, committed Muslims in every country have been involved in the protests, and because groups like the Muslim

Brotherhood are highly organized with extensive networks, they have been finding ways to take political advantage of the situation.

It needs to be said that we are going to be very disappointed if we expect Arab countries to develop suddenly into western-style democracies, and Christians especially must reconcile themselves to the fact that Islam is bound to have quite a significant role in every constitution. I trust also that we are aware that there is a very fierce struggle going on at the moment between moderate Muslims and more extremist Muslims for the leadership of these new governments. Terms like 'moderate' and 'extremist' of course need to be used with great caution and the situation in most countries is much more complex – with considerable differences between the different kinds of politically-minded Muslims^{xxiv}.

2. SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

1. History is important; attitudes today are affected by 1400 years of difficult relationships.

When I taught Christian students from Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Armenia, Iran and the Sudan at the Near East School of Theology, I had to remind myself constantly that these were people whose forefathers and mothers had lived under the rule of Islam for centuries, and who in some cases (especially the Armenians, Iranians and Sudanese) had *not* had good experiences of Muslims and Islam. Muslims, for their part, have lived for around thirteen centuries with the assumption that 'Islam must rule' (*al-islam la budda an yahkum*) and have felt it utterly natural that Muslims should rule over Christians. They have therefore found it very hard to accept the last two centuries in which western ('Christian') powers have affectively been ruling over them.

2. We are living with the consequences of the way western powers carved up the Middle East after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

The best explanation that I have found of the significance of these recent developments in the region since the beginning of the 20th C is from a Jordanian-American journalist, Rami Khoury. In an article entitled 'The Arab Freedom Epic', he writes:

'To appreciate what is taking place in the Arab world today you have to grasp the historical significance of the events that have started changing rulers and regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, with others sure to follow. What we are witnessing is the unraveling of the post-colonial order that the British and French created in the Arab world in the 1920s and 30s and then sustained – with American and Soviet assistance – for most of the last half century ... The events unfolding before our eyes are the third most important historical development in the Arab region in the past century ... This is the most important of the three major historical markers because it is the first one that marks a process of genuine self-determination by Arab citizens who can speak and act for themselves for the first time in their modern history.

‘The two other pivotal markers were: first, the creation of the modern Arab state system around 1920 at the hands of retreating European colonial powers. Some of them were intoxicated with both imperial power and, on one occasion, with cognac, when they created most of the Arab countries that have limped into the 21st century as wrecks of statehood. The second, the period around 1970-80 when the Euro-manufactured modern Arab state system transformed into a collection of security and police states that treated their citizens as serfs without human rights and relied on massive foreign support to maintain the rickety Arab order for decades more. Now we witness the third and most significant Arab historical development, which is the spontaneous drive by millions of ordinary Arabs to finally assert their humanity, demand their rights, and take command of their own national condition and destiny.

‘Never before have we had entire Arab populations stand up and insist on naming their rulers, shaping their governance system, and defining the values that drive their domestic and foreign policies ... this is a revolt against specific Arab leaders and governing elites who implemented policies that have seen the majority of Arabs dehumanized, pauperized, victimized and marginalized by their own power structure; but it is also a revolt against the tradition of major Western powers that created the modern Arab states and then fortified and maintained them as security states after the 1970s.’^{xxv}

3. It is almost impossible to separate religion from politics.

Christian history began with the crucifixion and the catacombs, but has included Armenia, the first Christian state, Byzantium and European Christendom. So however hard western Protestants today want to separate church and state, the Constantinian model is part of our history. In Islam an indissoluble link between religion and politics began with the *Hijra* and the creation of the first Islamic state in Medina, in which, as has been said, ‘Muhammad became his own Constantine.’ If therefore we ask why so many Muslims seem to be politically motivated, and why many are insistent on the principle of *din wa dawla* (religion and state), part of the answer must lie in the very origins of Islam with Muhammad being both ‘prophet’ and ‘statesman’^{xxvi}.

4. Both Christianity and Islam see themselves as universal, missionary religions.

If we have our understanding of the *missio dei* and the Great Commission, Muslims also believe that they have received a revelation from God which is ‘the truth’ and which they want to share with the world. This is how Ibn Khaldun, the famous Arab historian in North Africa (who died in 1406) summarized the traditional Muslim understanding of *jihad*: ‘In the Muslim community, the holy war (*jihad*) is a religious duty, because of the universalism of the (Muslim) mission and (the obligation to) convert everybody to Islam either by persuasion or by force.’^{xxvii} Both faiths therefore have had to wrestle with the relationship between truth and power and worked out different formulae for how to relate ‘the things that are Caesar’s’ to ‘the things that are God’s’.

5. Churches can die.

One of the many strengths of Jenkins’ books is the way it reminds us of the fact that the Eastern churches flourished and spread centuries before many of our churches

came into existence in Europe, but that many of these churches have experienced severe decline or been completely extinguished. He writes: ‘This older Christian world perished, destroyed so comprehensively that its memory is forgotten by all except academic specialists... Theologians seldom address the troubling questions raised by the destruction of churches and Christian communities.’^{xxviii} If in some places the blood of the martyrs has been the seed of the church, in other places and at other times it has been the death of the church. The population of Asia Minor in 1050 were nearly all Christians; but by 1450 Christians were only 10 or 15% of the population. Between 1200 and 1500 the number of Asian Christians fell from 21 million to 3.4 million. It is sobering for us to be reminded that as late as 1900 Christians were still around 11% of the population throughout the whole of the Middle East and 46% of the Ottoman Empire^{xxix}. Jenkins concludes: ‘For practical purposes, Middle Eastern Christianity has, within living memory, all but disappeared as a living force.’^{xxx}

6. We need to separate factors related to Islam from those which have nothing to do with Islam.

Another strength of Jenkin’s book is that while he recognises the significant role of pressure - if not persecution - from Muslim authorities which led to the decline of the church, he insists that all the blame cannot be laid on Muslims and Islam: ‘In stressing the role of conflict with Islam, we should not exaggerate the intolerant or militaristic nature of that religion ... Nothing in Muslim scriptures makes the faith of Islam any more or less likely to engage in persecution or forcible conversion than any other world religion.’^{xxxi} He is at pains to point out the many other factors which contributed to this decline which had nothing whatsoever to do with Islam, such as: the weaknesses of the churches (from theological, cultural and political division, from isolationism, failure to contextualise and association with particular authorities); the general culture of cruelty; climate change and geography; the scape-goating of minorities at times of difficulty; economic hardship; social breakdown; population transfers, emigration and immigration; and finally from political threats from outside powers and from political alliances (like the alliance with the Mongols).

7. Some patterns in history repeat themselves.

Muslims see the foreign policies of the West in recent years – which they perceive as ‘the Christian West’ – as a repetition of the pattern of the Crusades in which the Christian West waged war on the Muslim East. Islamist rhetoric has consistently seen the Iraq war and the ‘war against terror’ as a continuation of the Crusades. Is there not an element of truth in this perception? A second pattern that can be discerned is that, in the words of Jenkins, ‘... a church that allied with the wrong nation or faction could make its own position worse as it became identified with the wrong side. This is what happened with those Christians in Mesopotamia and China who came to be seen as tools of the Mongol conquerors.’^{xxxii} A third example is that persecution can sometimes be caused by *political* rather than *religious* factors, and this pattern may help us to understand some of the present persecution of Christians in the region. This is how Jenkins tries to explain some of the motivation behind the Armenian genocide:

‘... matters deteriorated from the early 19th century, as Muslim societies felt themselves under increasing threat from the Christian West. As so often in history, the persecutors saw their actions as fundamentally defensive in nature, and the sense that a majority community was facing grave threats to its very existence drove them to acts of persecution and intolerance against convenient minorities. And although this certainly does not excuse the later violence, Turkish fears of predatory Christian rivals were by no means an illusion ... The savagery of Muslim regimes must be understood as a manifestation of the shock and outrage felt at the resistance of peoples they had come to view as natural inferiors ... The closer the harmony of interests between domestic and foreign enemies, the greater the Turkish hostility to Christian minorities ... Christians communities within the Turkish Empire looked like a clear and present danger to the survival of Ottoman and Muslim power.’^{xxxiii}

3. TWO MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIAN RESPONSES TO ISLAM

I want at this point to present a highly original analysis of the different ways that Middle East Christians tend to respond to Islam. George Sabra is a Lebanese Protestant scholar who has been teaching systematic theology at the Near East School of Theology for over twenty years. In an article published in 2006 he seeks to describe and account for two fundamentally different responses that have been evident among Middle Eastern Christians from the beginnings of Islam to the present day^{xxxiv}.

1. ‘*The Arab Christian*’. This approach can be summed up in the words ‘*avoid estrangement from Muslims at all costs.*’ This was the general reaction of Syrian and Egyptian Christians to the coming of Islam in the first century. Being anti-Byzantine and anti-Chalcedonian, they welcomed the Muslim conquerors as liberators freeing them from the dominion of Byzantium.

Christians of this kind today feel more positively inclined towards Islam, and their basic instinct is ‘Don’t antagonise Muslims!’ They emphasise their Arab identity and history and feel themselves to be part of Islamic civilization. They have always been strong supporters of Arab nationalism, and have often been anti-western (both Anti-European and anti-American). They are strongly anti-Zionist, and sometimes hate Israel more than they hate Islam.

Sabra believes that this ‘Arab Christian’ responses had its hey-day through most of the 20th century, and sees the Greek Orthodox Bishop Georges Khodr as a representative of this view. He suggests that it is now on the wane, having proved – with the rise of Islamism – to be irrelevant and unrealistic.

2. ‘*The Eastern Christian*’. This approach can be summed up in the words ‘*Save Middle Eastern Christianity at all costs!*’ This was the response to Islam of the Byzantine Church which felt threatened by Islam over a period of many centuries. For this kind of Christian the only way to maintain their identity as Middle Eastern Christians has been to be connected to a larger form of Christianity – as represented, for example, by Byzantium, the Crusaders, Roman Catholicism and the Protestant Churches.

Eastern Christians want to distance themselves from everything Islamic, and their central concern is the freedom and integrity of Christian existence in the Middle East. Their primary posture is oriented towards the West and they emphasise their distinctiveness from Arab and Islamic identity. They see the main threat to Christians as not the West, or Israel, but Islam.

Sabra sees the most articulate expression of this response in the life and work of Charles Malik, formerly professor of philosophy at the American University of Beirut, and later Foreign Minister of Lebanon and Chair of the General Assembly of the United Nations.

In response to the criticism that this analysis oversimplifies the issue, Sabra himself would say that any individual Christians can in one situation and at one time adopt the first approach and in another situation at another time adopt the other. But while he sees both tendencies within himself at different times, he believes that one of these responses is stronger in any person than the other and therefore influences their main responses.

4. ISSUES AFFECTING ALL CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Before coming to recognize how the situations for Christians differ in many countries in the region, we note here issues which affect *all* Christians of *every* kind throughout the region.

1. Identity: who are we?

Charles Malik used to ask ‘Is a Christian Arab possible? Is a Christian Arab culture possible?’^{xxxv} In cultures in which it is assumed that ‘Arab’ means ‘Muslim’, Christians are made to feel that they don’t belong. So how do they affirm their identity as Christians? Can they feel that they are part of the history of the Arabs? Can they feel proud to be Egyptian, Syrian or Palestinian Christians?

2. The Ghetto mentality

I have several times presented Christians students with the text of the Code of ‘Umar and been surprised to find that very few of them have ever seen a text of this kind. But then the penny drops, and they begin to understand their fears and prejudices about Muslims and Islam. A Presbyterian Christian pastor from Assiut in Upper Egypt told me some years ago that it took him twelve years to get permission from the Governorate of his province to repair the toilets in his church. A Lebanese Christian once said to me, ‘You know we fear them and despise them at the same time.’

3. The struggle between Islamists and moderate Muslims

Does Al-Qa‘ida represent the most faithful and authentic interpretation of the scriptures, dogma and history of Islam in our present world context today? Or are

other Muslims who dissociate themselves totally from that particular Islamist interpretation and who present a much more peaceful and moderate interpretation of Islam nearer to the true spirit of Islam? This is the struggle which is described by John Esposito as ‘the struggle for the soul of Islam’^{xxxvi}.

4. Economic hardship

When Middle Eastern Christians are emigrating in thousands to Europe, America and Australia, the main reasons are not religious, but economic. They are certainly conscious of increasing pressure from Islamists in different countries. But the main reason why they emigrate is that they can’t find work, can’t pay their bills for housing, education and medical care, and don’t see a great deal of hope for the future.

5. American foreign policy

I wonder if you can appreciate the bewilderment and disgust felt by almost everyone in the Middle East – Muslim and Christian – at the spectacle of Benjamin Netanyahu receiving 29 standing ovations from the American Congress during his visit to Washington in May? I therefore feel I must disagree quietly strongly with Peter Cotterell and Peter Riddell when they write:

‘In our view it is not the non-Muslim world that stands at the cross-roads, but the Muslim world. Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimized by certain passages of the Qur’an, though put in question by other passages ... Ultimately it is only the Muslim world that can deal with the roots of the problem, which, in our view, do *not* lie in Western materialism or nineteenth-century colonialism or American imperialism, but in Islam’s own history, both distant and recent.’^{xxxvii}

6. Christian Zionism

How do Palestinian Christians feel when they learn that there may be as many as between 30 and 50 million evangelical Christians in the US who believe that the Jewish people have a divine right to the land for all time? Christian Zionism has become an enormous stumbling block for the gospel.

5. ISSUES IN INDIVIDUAL COUNTRIES

Here we need to underline the point that while there are things that are common for all Christians in the region, every country has a different history, different proportions of Muslims and Christians and a different dynamic in Christian-Muslim relations. Generalizations about Christians and Muslims can be very dangerous.

Egypt. The Coptic community have all the complexes of a ghetto community. In January and February this year, however, Christians protested alongside Muslims in Tahrir Square, and Christians and Muslims held worship services alongside each

other. The interim government has already passed legislation making it easier for Christians to build churches. But many Christians are afraid that the 25 January revolution which was largely inspired by non-religious motives is in the process of being high-jacked by forces close to the old regime (especially the army) and/or certain kinds of Islamists who have their own agenda. It is important, however, to recognise the considerable diversity among Muslims associated with political Islam. For example, The Muslim Brotherhood have created a party to fight the upcoming elections which has a Coptic Christian intellectual as one of its vice-presidents and around 100 Christians among its founder members. If these represent more moderate Muslims, they have to be distinguished from the Wahhabi or Salafi Muslims who have a much more extremist political agenda.

Syria. The Assad family who have ruled the country for 40 years come from the Alawite community (an offshoot of Shi'ite Islam), which numbers about 10% of the population. Being a minority community themselves, they have had a special sympathy for the Christian community which is also around 10% of the population. In recent months Christians have faced a cruel dilemma: do they support the government or do they side with the opposition? The majority until now has sided with the government, and it wasn't good news a few weeks ago when we heard that the newly appointed Minister of Defence was a Christian. Sunni Muslims have been taunting Christians in the streets shouting, 'Alawites to the coffin and Christians to Beirut' (*il-'Alawiyya 'a-beirut, wa'l masihiyya 'a-Beirut*). Philip Jenkins is very pessimistic about the prospects for Syrian Christians:

'... debates over intervention have missed one overwhelming argument, which is the likely religious catastrophe that would follow the overthrow of the admittedly dictatorial government. Any Western intervention in Syria would likely supply the death warrant for the ancient Christianity of the Middle East. For anyone concerned about Christians worldwide – even if you firmly believe in democracy and human rights – it's hard to avoid this prayer: Lord, bring democracy to Syria, but not in my lifetime.'^{xxxviii}

Iraq. The Christian community in Iraq felt reasonably secure under Saddam Hussein and his secular Arab Nationalist Ba'athist ideology. In fact Saddam Hussein was once described by an Armenian Christian as 'the best possible protector of Christians'^{xxxix}. As a result of the war in Iraq in 2003, Christians have experienced what can only be described as ethnic cleansing.

Lebanon was created in 1920 by the French who took parts of the mountainous areas of Lebanon which were the heartlands of the Maronite Christians and added to them areas to the north and south where Muslims (including both Sunnis and Shi'ites) were a majority. At the time of its creation the proportion of Christians to Muslims was 6:5, and by setting up an elaborate system of proportional representation (with a Maronite President, a Sunni Prime Minister and a Shi'ite Speaker), they were able to maintain an uneasy balance – with a Christian majority - for some decades. Then the presence of around 300,000 Palestinian refugees upset the balance and the country was plunged into 15 years of civil war from 1975 to 1990. The situation of Christians in Lebanon has therefore been very unique and they have felt that this was the only country in the region in which Christians could feel secure as a community and be politically involved. But the decreasing numbers of Christians and the increase in the power and influence of Hizbullah have made Christians feel very much less secure, and they

have the feeling that their country has been turned into the battleground of the Middle East^{x1}.

Israel/Palestine. Many who speak on behalf of the Christian community in Israel/Palestine say that Muslims and Christians stand shoulder to shoulder because they face exactly the same pressures from the continuing illegal occupation. The real situation, however, is probably more complex. One Palestinian Christian said to me once, ‘We feel like the falafel in the sandwich, caught between the extremist Muslims on the one hand and extremist Jews on the other.’

Algeria. Roman Catholic missionaries and their many different institutions played a very significant role during most of the 19th and 20th centuries, and this witness and service continued, although in a drastically reduced form, after Independence and even after the civil war in the 1990s. There has been remarkable church growth in the last fifteen years or so, and it is estimated that there may be as many as 20,000 to 40,000 Algerians, mostly Berbers, who have become Christians. Some of these have sought official recognition for their churches from the government, while others have felt that the price they would have to pay for official government recognition would be too high.

Sudan. For many decades Sudanese Christians in the South felt that they had been on the receiving end of a deliberate policy of Arabisation and Islamisation from the government in Khartoum. They were therefore ecstatic about the creation of an independent South Sudan on 9 July. At the same time the Christians from the South who have been living in the North because of two decades of civil war are fearful that the government may want to impose shari‘a law and make their situation as Christians very much harder. And in recent months Christians in the Nuba Mountains in the southern part of the North have been appealing desperately for help because of what they see as a deliberate policy of ethnic cleansing carried out by the government, similar to what happened in Darfur.

6. CRUCIAL QUESTIONS FACING MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANS TODAY

1. What can stop the numerical decline of Christianity in the Middle East? If emigration is possible and comparatively easy, what is there to encourage Christians to stay rooted in the region?

If you can’t find employment, educate your children and pay for medicine, if you are fearful of your present government being replaced by an Islamist government of some kind, and if you have a ‘green card’ because you have relatives who have emigrated and settled and feel secure in the US, why don’t you go and join them? When I gave this paper at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies in July, Munther Ishaq, a Palestinian Christian lecturer at Bethlehem Bible college and doctoral student at OCMS, suggested that the best way to encourage them to stay is to give them a sense of mission and help them to see what they can contribute to the life of the countries of the region.

2. What kind of constitution will enable Christians to feel secure?

What is the new constitution of Egypt likely to say about the role of Islam in the constitution and laws of the country? Will it be ‘the sole source of legislation’ or ‘a source ...’? Some Egyptian Islamists have been saying publicly for some years that if and when they get into power, they want to reinstate the *dhimma* system and make Christian Copts pay the *jizya* tax. Other Muslims have said that the *dhimma* system should be consigned to the cupboard of history and insist that Christians and Muslims must be equal as fellow-citizens^{xli}. The confessional system in Lebanon has until now guaranteed the security of the Christian community. But with the decrease in the proportion of Christians to around 35% of the population and the increasing power of Hizbullah, can the security of the Christian community be secured by the constitution?

3. Can Christians ever be involved politically?

It is encouraging to notice that some Christians in Egypt have felt that they now have new opportunities to be involved. The Egyptian director of the Alexandria School of Theology in an email from Egypt in the summer wrote, ‘Christians are now much more active evangelistically, socially and politically.’ An ordained American Presbyterian OT lecturer at the Coptic Evangelical Seminary in Cairo preached at an evangelical church in Cairo early in February during the Revolution on texts from Jeremiah including the letter to the exiles in chapter 29. After an incredibly enthusiastic response from the congregation after the service she wrote: ‘I was amazed that the church here, whose pietistic (and fearful) isolationism has driven me crazy in the past, is now starting to engage in integrated reflection about public life and civic responsibility ... Christian hope means a vision for society, for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

4. How should Christians relate to Islamists and moderate Muslims?

It’s comparatively easy, of course, to have dialogue with moderate Muslims and many Christians feel they want to strengthen the hands of the moderates in their struggles with the extremists. If it seems impossible to have dialogue with Islamists who are committed to violent *jihad*, we need to be challenged by the example of people like Brother Andrew who shocked many of his supporters in 1998 when he visited the Hamas leaders who had been expelled by Israel and were camping out in tents during the winter on the mountains in southern Lebanon, and has on several occasions visited Hamas leaders in Gaza^{xlii}. Similarly Sami Awad of the Holy Land Trust, has worked closely with some Hamas leaders, exploring with them the principles of non-violent resistance^{xliii}.

5. What’s the future for Israel/Palestine?

I continue to believe that this conflict lies at the heart or very near the heart of many of the problems of the Middle East. Everything in the region is inter-connected, and I

dare to believe that a peaceful and just solution to this conflict would go a long way towards reducing the anger of many Arabs and many Muslims towards the West. When Barak Obama became president, I felt a certain optimism based on his declared statements of intent about addressing the issues. At present, however, I have little confidence that he or the US are able or willing to play the role of peace-makers. Will the recent Palestinian request to the UN for recognition as a nation force the US to use its veto in the Security Council and therefore contribute to its isolation? Will Britain abstain, as it is expected to? And even if a Palestinian state is recognised, how will it deal with Israel's occupation? I have to confess that I don't feel very optimistic.

6. Can Protestant Christianity ever be deeply rooted in the Middle East?

One of the reasons why Christianity virtually disappeared from North Africa following the Islamic conquests was that it had not become deeply rooted all over the country and its membership and leadership were largely foreign. Some (but not all) Protestant churches in the Middle East today look like carbon copies of the western churches which planted them and exist almost on a financial life-support machine. The Eastern churches look thoroughly contextualized – although some would argue that the contextualization process got stuck in the 5th century. Is it conceivable that some Protestant churches could wither away in the same way that the churches did in North Africa in the 7th and 8th centuries?

7. What role can the world church play?

Here I want to make the specific point that among evangelical Christians world-wide Christian Zionism of some kind is probably the majority view, so that the majority of evangelical Christians all over the world probably have an instinctive sympathy for the state of Israel, seeing it as the fulfilment of biblical promises and prophecies^{xliv}. My challenge to Christian Zionists goes like this: 'Do you understand the political implications of this theology and can you try to appreciate the enormous problems that it creates for Christians in the Middle East and for their witness to both Jews and Muslims?'

8. What are the most effective forms of Christian witness – schools, hospitals, development, advocacy, dialogue, media, or Bible distribution?

A former Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem used to describe the institutions of the diocese – including schools and hospitals – as 'the arms and legs of the church.' In Egypt the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services (CEOSS) has developed a wide range of development projects over many decades which are all serving the whole community of both Muslims and Christians. In recent years Christians have discovered a new boldness through imaginative and creative use of media – including radio, literature distribution and satellite television and the internet^{xlv}.

9. Can we look forward to an increasing number of Muslims becoming disciples of Jesus?

It is an understatement to say that life is often very difficult for Muslims who turn to Christian faith or to any other kind of faith. They are regarded as apostates who, according to all the four major schools of Islamic law, forfeit the right to life. There is *some* heart-searching in *some* Muslim circles on this issue. But it may take a long time before the traditional Muslim mind can embrace Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights.

I am usually cautious when I hear statistics quoted of the number of Muslims who have become disciples of Jesus in different countries in recent years. But there can be no doubt at all that there has been remarkable church growth in areas of Algeria, and that considerable numbers of Iranians, both inside and outside Iran, have come to Christian faith. Some who follow particular approaches to contextualization, like those associated with ‘the Insider Movement’ and with the ‘Common Ground’ approach, claim that in Egypt, for example, many thousands of Muslims have professed faith - even if secretly. Some missiologists have coined the term ‘Islamic Christianity’ to describe this phenomenon, and I know of an American missionary in Israel who is writing a doctorate on this subject. In 1918 Samuel Zwemer wrote a book with the title *The Disintegration of Islam*. If it is understandable that such a book could be written in that context at the end of the First World War, it’s inconceivable that a book with this title could be written at the beginning of the 21st century. But should we be praying and working for the time when larger numbers of Muslims will come to see that Jesus is ‘more than a prophet’ and experience less opposition from Muslim communities?

CONCLUSION

The title of this lecture was probably far too ambitious! This really is ‘big picture’ stuff! We’ve tried to cover twenty centuries of history and see how history, politics and religion are inter-related. We’re up against deeply theological questions like ‘How should Christians think about Islam?’ and ‘How do we understand the existence of Islam within the providence of God?’ At the same time we’ve been thinking about the very practical questions of how Middle Eastern Christians should respond to the Arab Spring. I feel deeply challenged and humbled by the task of trying to understand this complex history and to see how an understanding of this history can help Christians in the acute dilemmas they face today.

We can of course take comfort from the promise of Jesus who said to Peter after his confession, ‘You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it’ (Matt 16:18). We dare not forget, however, that churches have died in the Middle East in the past, and, some would say, are in danger - for a variety of reasons - of dying today. If we don’t know our history, there’s a danger that we will repeat the worst parts of our history and make the same mistakes again. At the same time we can rejoice that in some of the churches in the Middle East today there are real signs of hope as individuals and whole communities wake up to the opportunities to be salt and light in their society and to bear witness to the gospel.

Some outside observers like William Dalrymple and Philip Jenkins are quite pessimistic about the future of Christianity in the Middle East. I personally want to be as realistic as they are, but do not feel as pessimistic as they do. My own engagement with Middle Eastern Christians over many years makes me much more hopeful that Christians, however small their numbers, will continue to be a creative minority in this troubled and strategic region of the world where ‘the Word was made flesh’.

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