

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION(S) OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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A question of Belief

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION(S) OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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PROLOGUE

The recent bombings of Christian Churches in Iraq prompts us to ask, is there a Christian religion or even a Christian minority in Iraq and even in the Middle East? The following study is an overview of these Christian religions in this troubled area following a trip to this area along with members of the National Council of Churches several years ago.

In my capacity as Ecumenical Officer for both the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of North and South America and the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA), it was apparent that western peoples must begin to understand the religious complexities of the Middle East at a time when religious confrontation and extremism become increasingly a mark of our times. Christian, Muslim and Jewish peoples are confronting one another at an alarming rate.

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of Christians, Moslems and Jews, as well as an overview of the Christian Churches of the Middle East. This is a tentative undertaking, since momentous changes on a daily basis, further complicate a critical understanding by most Americans of the Middle East and its religious orientation, because of their unfamiliarity with religions and cultures that are not western or Christian. For example, sectarian identities have often been subjected to the manipulation of clerical as well as political leaders, all in the name of power and/or a Supreme Being. And these leaders, (Jewish, Moslem Shiite, Moslem Sunni or Kurdish,) are subject to their national identities. For Moslems, though, "national identities are not fixed", said professor S. Kransner of Stanford University. Indeed, it is rightfully suggested that Shia, Iraqi, Arab Muslims, choose identities depending on circumstances and which will benefit them in the long run. Jews are in this mix. The Christians of the Middle East, a distinct minority, are in this mix. (See the second part of this article for a thorough discussion of the Christian churches of the Middle East.)

To understand the complexities of this issue, one needs to understand the three non-Jewish main ethnic groups:

SUNNI MUSLIMS: This sect is comprised of about 85% of the world's Muslims. 37% are Iraqi. They believe that the first four Caliphs, (highest religious rulers), were the rightful successors to the prophet Mohammed. Saddam Hussein is Sunni.

SHIITE MUSLIMS; They represent about 60% of the Iraqi population, and, therefore, are the dominant religious sect of this region. They reject the authority of the first three caliphs and claim that the true leaders of Islam descend from Ali, the fourth caliph, son-in-law of Mohammed.

KURDS; a non-Arabic people, they are the largest ethnic group in the world without their own homeland. Kurds are concentrated to the north of Iraq and to the south of Turkey. Kurds are made up of Sunnis and Shiites.

Would an alliance of all Moslems help in the peace process in the Middle East? It would depend, as professor Krasner suggests, not so much on a sense of nationalism, but the ability to work out a power-sharing arrangement which would be beneficial to everyone, including Jews.

For all concerned, efforts to bring all groups together in a serious way, could reduce the spread of Middle East nationalism and tensions. Understanding the religions of the Middle East will help speed the process.

I am indebted to the Middle East Council of Churches and to Fr. Ronald G. Roberson's work *The Eastern Christian Churches – A Brief Survey* (1993 edition). I would also recommend *Dialogue With People of Other Christian Faiths*, prepared by the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches of Christ, U.S.A. I would also recommend the book; *God is One*, by R. Marston Speight, second edition.

THE CHRISTIANS OF THE MIDDLE EAST*

The churches of the Middle East can be grouped into 5 families representing about 15 million Christians (approximately 9 million residing in the Middle East). The largest is the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches – the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt, the Armenian Apostolic Church living in various Arab countries in addition to the Armenians of the Republic of Armenia; and the Syrian Orthodox Church. Each is fully self-governing, though they are in communion with one another.

The second family of churches is the Byzantine Orthodox Churches. They are often referred to as Eastern or Greek Orthodox. They constitute three self-governing churches, linked by doctrine, liturgy and canon law with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul (formerly Byzantium or Constantinople), and belong, therefore, to that wider family of Orthodox churches in Russia, Eastern Europe and elsewhere.

The third family comprises the Catholic churches of the Middle East. These churches all accept the supreme ecclesiastical authority of the Pope and the doctrine of the Catholic Church. But only a small percentage of them are Roman, or Latin-Catholic. Most of them can be grouped together as the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches – the word "rite" denoting their forms of liturgy and canon law which differ from the western Latin rite of the Roman Catholics. The largest of these churches is the Maronite Church in Lebanon.

The fourth family is in terms of independent history, one of the oldest and most self-contained in the Middle Eastern churches: the Assyrian Church of the East. Sometimes identified by its historical tradition as the Church of the "East Syrians" or the Church of Persia. It exists in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

The fifth family comprises the Anglican, Lutheran and Protestant Churches, like the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches (possibly excepting the Maronite Church), these churches came into being as a result of western missionary activity in the Middle East. Whereas the Eastern-rite Catholic Churches mostly go back several centuries, this family of churches dates in the Middle East from as recently as the 19th century.

The Apostles and their churches

In the earliest years of Christian history churches were founded in various parts of the Middle East and the Mediterranean world where the Apostles traveled as missionaries of the Gospel. In the West we attribute the foundation of the Church of Rome to St. Peter and St. Paul, and in the New Testament we read the letters of St. Paul to several of the early Christian communities with which he was linked in Greece and western Turkey. We also read of the Church in Jerusalem, led by St. James the brother of John, and the Church in Antioch, in the north-western corner of Syria where St. Peter and St. Paul are said to have created a community of Christians which soon became one of the flourishing centers of Christianity. St. Thomas is also associated by tradition with Antioch, though his missionary travels took him eastward through Central Asia and India. So also St. Bartholomew who traveled northward through eastern Turkey and Armenia. Another important Christian center was at Alexandria in Egypt where St. Mark is said to have preached among his kinsmen, the Copts, from whose name we derive the words "Egypt" and "Egyptian". Further south in Africa, St. Matthew is believed to have founded the Church in Ethiopia.

While it may be difficult to verify all these traditions by historical criteria, they have been and remain fundamental to the self-understanding of the eastern churches throughout the ages. It is for this reason that they speak of themselves as being truly "apostolic".

These 15 million Christians represent only a tiny minority of the total population of the Middle East (about 10%), the great majority of whom are Muslim. The churches vary from one another, historically, doctrinally, and culturally, and this produces sometimes different views of the Arab Muslim world in which they live. But the quality of their living traditions is not to be measured in terms of their numbers, nor is their significance to be belittled because of their differences. In our ecumenical age of deepening fellowship between all parts of the Christian Church, and of growing dialogue with Muslims, these churches demand to be understood in their own terms, no longer under the prejudicial stereotypes of "ancient", or "schismatic", or "younger" (i.e. recently converted), or foreign".

THE FIVE "CHURCH" FAMILIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The following survey of the churches of the Middle East, groups them into five "families": Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches, and the Assyrian Church of the East.

The Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox Churches

The greatest number of Christians in the Middle East belong to the churches of the Oriental Orthodox family. The largest of these is the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt. The others are: The Armenian Apostolic Church, seated in the Lebanese coastal town of Antilias, north of Beirut, and the Syrian Orthodox Church, seated in Damascus.

Ethnically and culturally these three churches are in many ways different, each being identified with its own people or nation. The Armenian Church traces its origins to the missionary Apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew. It has since remained the central institution of Armenian nationhood and nationalism.

The Copts trace their descent from the Pharaonic Egyptians. Their conversion to Christianity began with the North African preaching of St. Mark whom they recognize as the first Patriarch of Alexandria. But it took three centuries of persecution before the Coptic Church established itself in Egypt. The desert

monasticism, following the rules of St. Antony and St. Pachomeus, attracted many other Christians to visit Egypt. Their missionary activity in Africa led to the Christianization of much of Nubia, the Sudan and Ethiopia.

Weakened by the withdrawal eastwards of the Assyrian Church, the remaining "Western Syrians" felt themselves abused by the Council of Chalcedon and rallied to the anti-Chalcedonian teaching of the 6th century Jacob (Yaqub) alBarada?i after whom the Syrian Orthodox Church is sometimes labeled "Jacobite".

Notwithstanding such differences, however, these three Oriental Orthodox Churches have in the early centuries struggled to uphold their nations' interests against the imperial presence of the Byzantine and the Persian Empires. With the rise of the Islamic Empire in the 7th century A.D. they fell under a new form of religio-political power which, for the next five centuries, largely improved their situation. The Muslims treated the Christians as a single group, irrespective of the doctrinal differences between Assyrian, Oriental and Byzantine Orthodox Churches, and looked to them to provide the cadre of the "civil service" in the Islamic Caliphate.

This situation was imperiled, however, by the intrusion of the western Christian Crusaders from the 11th to the 13th centuries, and led to periodic persecution and social marginalization of all the eastern Christians as the Mongol dynasties seized control of the Caliphate. From the 14th to the early 20th centuries, therefore, the eastern churches lived as "closed communities", isolated within Islamic society and cut off from the church in the West.

The breach between these churches and the Byzantine family of churches occurred in 451 at the Council of Chalcedon, and thus they accept the authority of only the first three ecumenical councils.

For many centuries the non-Chalcedonian churches lived more or less in isolation from the rest of Christendom and, for political and geographical reasons, even from one another. However, for the first time since the 6th century they held a conference of the Heads of the Oriental Orthodox Churches in Addis Ababa in 1965. Since then they have drawn closer together in fellowship and joint planning. They are presently in official negotiation with the "Chalcedonian" Eastern Orthodox family of churches on Christology and "Chalcedonian" unity and are active members of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC).

The Armenian Apostolic Church

a. Catholicosate of Cilicia

The Armenian Apostolic Church, known also as Armenian Orthodox, has a distinctive ethnical, cultural and historical background from the churches referred to in this issue.

Diaspora has been a permanent aspect of Armenian history. Since the dawn of their history, the Armenians, for one reason or another, have emigrated. However, forced and massive emigration only began in the 10th century, with the successive occupation of Armenia by Byzantines, Seljuk Turks, Persians, Ottomans and Russians. Deportation and migration continued in succeeding centuries. But none of the mass deportations of earlier years equaled those that took place in the period 1915-1922. Over one and a half million Armenians were massacred in Turkey and the rest deported to the Syrian deserts.

At present they are about two million and can be found almost anywhere on the globe, mostly in Middle Eastern countries, the USA and Canada, South America,

southern and western Europe and Australia. The church in diaspora has three centers: 1. The Catholicosate of Cilicia, reestablished and reorganized in Antelias, Lebanon in 1930. With its diocesan administrative organization, theological seminary and world-wide ecumenical relations, it is the de facto spiritual centers of the Armenian diaspora. It also plays a significant role in the cultural, social and political life of the nation. Its jurisdiction now covers Lebanon, Syria (Aleppo, Qamishli), Cyprus, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Greece and half of the Armenian communities in North America. 2. The Patriarchate of Constantinople; and 3. the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, both of them related to the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin, in the former Soviet Republic of Armenia.

The Armenian Apostolic Church in Lebanon is a strong community of 150,000 members who are now fully integrated into the Lebanese society. The school of theology at Bikfaya, founded in 1930, provides new clergy and also furnishes priests to serve the diaspora communities falling under its jurisdiction.

The Armenian Orthodox are the third largest Christian community in Syria, after the Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches. They number 100,000.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is the largest Christian community in Iran. Armenians were established in Iran mainly in 1605 when Shah Abbas forced hundreds of thousands of Armenians to leave their homeland and migrate to Iran. Presently the church has three dioceses with a total of 170,000 members. The Armenian Church has 3,500 members in Cyprus. Armenians have lived on the island since the 11th century. The Armenian Apostolic Church in Kuwait and the Emirate has about 12,000 members. Large communities of Armenians live in Europe (in France there are 350,000 members), in the USA and Canada 600,000.

b. The Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin

Located in Armenia, the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin is the spiritual center for the Armenians living there. It also has jurisdiction on communities in the Middle East (Iraq and Egypt), France, USA, South America and Australia.

The existence of two Catholicosates with the Armenian Church: the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin (Catholicosate of All Armenians in former Soviet Armenia) and the Catholicosate of Cilicia, Antelias, Lebanon is due to historical circumstances. The diocese of Baghdad, Iraq, is related to the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and counts 15,000 members. The diocese of Egypt is related also the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin and has 20,000 members.

c. The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople

The Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople with its See at Istanbul, Turkey, is dependent on the Catholicosate of Etchmiadzin. The faithful (80,000) are concentrated in Istanbul, where 35 of the Patriarchate's parishes are located. The Patriarchate was recognized in 1461 by the Ottoman authorities as the sole legal representative of all Armenians in the Empire, including those within the jurisdiction of the Silesian Catholic sate.

d. The Armenian Patriarchate of Jerusalem

This church is the largest among the four oriental Orthodox churches in Palestine: Armenian, Coptic, Syrian, Ethiopian. Armenian churches existed in Jerusalem since the 5th century. Spiritually the Patriarchate depends on the Catholic sate of Etchmiadzin. A very good relationship exists with the Catholic

sate of Cilicia. The Patriarchate occupies the entire summit of Mt. Zion. It has 1,500 members. Between 1950 and 1973 almost 90% of the members emigrated. The related church in Amman, Jordan, has 1,500 members.

The Coptic Orthodox Church

The Coptic Church is the largest Christian community in the Middle East. It counts about 6,000,000 believers. It has some 45 dioceses in Egypt, Africa, Middle East, Europe and the USA. 40 of these dioceses are functioning in Egypt. There are Coptic churches in Kuwait, Jordan, Jerusalem, Lebanon and Iraq. Jerusalem has an archdiocese (established in the 9th century) with two congregations in Jaffa and Nazareth. The churches in the other countries are related directly to the Patriarchate. The diocese of the USA and Canada was founded in the 1960's. Twenty-four congregations in the USA and three in Canada are formed mainly from Egyptian immigrants. Five parishes are found in London, Paris, Vienna, Geneva and Frankfurt.

The Syrian Orthodox Church

This Church has its center in the Patriarchate of Antioch (at present in Damascus, Syria) and counts about 160,000 believers. It is a church which has contributed much to the blossoming of early Christian literature and to the treasure of theological thinking, spreading Christianity from the Byzantine Empire to the regions of the Far East. An outstanding bishop was St. Jacob Barada'i (500-578) (after whom the Syrian Orthodox were called "Jacobites"). He revived the ritual life of the church in Syria, Egypt and Persia. During the Mongol invasions of the 14th century, the church suffered greatly. At the end of the 18th century its strength was further reduced due to the establishment of a separate Uniate Syrian Patriarchate (Syrian Catholics). At the turn of the present century (1915-1920) the church was affected by Turko-Kurdish persecutions and in the 1970's by mass emigrations. The Seat of the Patriarchate, after many moves over the centuries, was finally established in Damascus, Syria, in 1954.

The Syrian Orthodox Catholic sate of the East was reestablished in 1964, after being vacant for centuries. Twelve dioceses are under its jurisdiction. In the 1970's a jurisdiction division occurred in the church. One branch continues to recognize the spiritual supremacy of the Patriarch of Antioch in Damascus and another branch installed its independent Catholicose in Malabar. There are now twelve dioceses related directly to the Patriarchate: four in Syria, two in Iraq, two in Turkey, two in Lebanon, and one in Jordan. Syrian Orthodox dioceses are found today in Europe (Holland and Sweden), the USA and Canada, and two patriarchal vicariates in Brazil and Argentina.

The Eastern (Byzantine) Orthodox Churches

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchates of Constantinople (now Istanbul), Alexandria, Antioch (now centered in Damascus) and Jerusalem belong to the Byzantine tradition of Orthodoxy which also includes eleven other autocephalous or self-governing churches: Russia, Romania, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, Georgia, Cyprus, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Albania and Sinai.

To distinguish them from the Oriental Orthodox Churches, the Eastern Orthodox are also called Byzantine Orthodox, by reference to their use of the Byzantine-rite liturgy of St. John Chrysostom; or Chalcedonian Orthodox, by reference to the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 which condemned "monophysitism".

Others sometimes still describe them as Melkite-Orthodox, a reference to their political allegiance to the Byzantine Emperor ("melik" - king) until the fall of Constantinople to Muslim conquest in 1453, and their subordination to the authority of the Patriarch in Constantinople during the Ottoman period. Another term, Greek Orthodox, tends to be rather misleading as it wrongly suggests them to be part of the Church of Greece, and draws attention away from the fact that, in the Middle East, the great majority are Arab or Arabized.

Eastern Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, as elsewhere, are different from the Oriental (non-Chalcedonian) Orthodox in two important respects. First of all, the Eastern Orthodox recognize the authority of seven ecumenical councils: Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), Constantinople III (680), and Nicea II (787). The term ecumenical in its root meaning is "the inhabited world". As used with reference to those councils, it means the Christian world of the fourth to the eighth centuries. Secondly, Eastern Orthodox Churches recognize the Patriarch of Constantinople as Ecumenical Patriarch. This is largely an honorary primacy of "first among equals" and quite different from the Roman Catholic concept of papal authority, because each of the churches in this group is entirely self-governing (autocephalous).

Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople

The history of Constantinople as a Patriarchate begins in 300, when the Emperor Constantine I decided to move the seat of government from Italy to the eastern region of his empire and chose this small town of Byzantium along the Bosphorus.

The Ecumenical Councils of Constantinople (381) conferred upon the bishop of the city the second rank after the bishop of Rome. The Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) gave a definite shape to the organization of the Church of Constantinople. From 520 onwards the head of the church became known as the ecumenical patriarch.

The patriarchate holds jurisdiction over the faithful in Europe (Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, the autonomous Church of Finland, and the Russian Exarchy of Western Europe) and the Archbishoprics of Australia and New Zealand. The Archbishop of the Americas (New York) governs the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America, also under the jurisdiction of the ecumenical patriarch.

The ecumenical patriarchate was among the first to participate in the formation and development of modern ecumenical movement and has been involved in the WCC from its beginning. It has had a permanent representative at the headquarters of the WCC in Geneva since 1955. The patriarchate is currently involved in preparation for the Holy and Great Synod of the Orthodox churches.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria and all Africa

The Patriarchate counts about 10,000 believers of Greek and Syro-Lebanese extraction divided into 4 dioceses in Egypt (Alexandria, Tanta, Cairo and Port Said), one in Sudan (Nubia), one in Ethiopia (Axum) and one for cities in North Africa (including Libya-Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco). The Patriarchate has received new impetus from the establishment of new congregations in East and Central Africa, which was principally brought about by the influx of black African bishops of East Africa. Important dioceses (called also "Archbishopric of the Mission of the Patriarchate") have been organized in Johannesburg and

Cape Town in South Africa with 40,000 members. Harare, Zimbabwe 10,000 members, Kinshasa, Zaire 20,000 members, Nairobi, Kenya 40,000 members.

The second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381) ranked the Patriarchate of Alexandria immediately after that of Constantinople. After the Council of Chalcedon (451) there was a division, and part of the church joined the "Coptic Orthodox". The Church is governed by the Patriarch in conjunction with the Synod. It recognized the right of its members to worship in their own language, so liturgy is celebrated in Greek in Greek churches and in Arabic in Egyptian churches.

Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem

The 4th Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon (451) granted this church the status of "independent church" and ranked it fourth after Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch. It became known as the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. It has jurisdiction over Palestine and Jordan and counts some 250,000 Arab believers. Church services are held in Arabic and partly in Greek.

The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East

The Patriarchate saw its birth in the town in which the believers were called, for the first time, "Christians". At the end of the 6th century, Antioch witnessed wars and political changes which continued till 638 A.D. when it was conquered and the See of Constantinople administered the church until the 15th century. In the 16th century, the See was transferred to Damascus. The church was affected by divisions occurring in the 18th century, when the Greek Catholic-Melkite Church was founded in Mount Lebanon. In the late 19th century and beginning of our century, reforms were introduced in the church and with the successive patriarchs the renaissance of the church has continued to our days.

For liturgy and prayers, the Antiochian church uses the language of the land: Arabic. It counts the largest number of believers rooted in the Arabic population of the region. While it does not fully overlap with the Arab nation in its entirety, the Orthodox Church of this Patriarchate nevertheless is markedly Arab.

Today it counts about 1,300,000 Orthodox in the Middle East. Syria has six organized dioceses (Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Latakia, Houran) with a total of 800,000 faithful. Lebanon also has six dioceses (Beirut, Tripoli and Koura, Akkar, Zahle and Baalbeck, Tyre and Sidon) with a total of about 400,000 members. The dioceses of Iraq and Kuwait number 30,000 members. The Patriarchate extends to the Arab-speaking Orthodox who live in the USA, Canada, Latin America (Mexico, Chile, Brazil and Argentina), Australia and New Zealand with about 1,000,000 members.

The Church of Cyprus

"Those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch" (Acts 11:19). That was in 37 A.D. In 45 A.D., Paul and Barnabas, bringing Mark with them, landed at Salamis and crossed the island of Paphos where they converted the Roman proconsul Sergius Paulus. Barnabas later became the first Bishop of Cyprus.

The church grew rapidly, and Bishops from Salamis, Paphos and Tremithus were present at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325). The Church of Cyprus received autocephalous (self-governing) status at the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) along

with the Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria, Constantinople and Jerusalem.

During the Byzantine era, the Church suffered occasionally as a result of Arab raids. Then, during the period of the crusades, while the island was under Frankish rulers, and later, under the Venetians, the Orthodox archbishops were replaced by Latin clergy. In 1571, Turkish rule began on the island and in 1572 the Turks expelled the Latin hierarchy and reinstalled the Orthodox leadership in recognition of their help in the war against Venice.

Approximately 80% or more of the Cypriot minority is Byzantine Orthodox, and there is virtually no aspect of the island's history and society that have not been touched by the Church of Cyprus. For centuries, it acted as a kind of department for social welfare, ministry of justice and ministry of education.

Following the 1974 invasion of Cyprus by Turkey, nearly 200,000 Greek Cypriots were forced to leave their homes in the occupied areas and became refugees. Their fate constitutes a primary concern of the church. Two of the bishoprics, Kyrenia and Morphou, as well as Nicosia, seat of the Archbishop, are partially or wholly within the occupied territories.

The Church of Mount Sinai

The Emperor Justinian built the fortified monastery of St. Catherine and the splendid basilica in 527. For the defense of the monks the emperor sent two hundred Christian families from Romania and Egypt. With the revival of Islam, they all converted to the new religion and remained as vassals in the monastery compound coming to be known as Jebelieh.

The monastery is famous with its library with more than 3,000 incunabula, 300 manuscripts in Greek and in other oriental languages, Bibles, Gospels, sacred books and the picture gallery containing precious icons of the 6th century.

(The conclusion in the Next (November) issue: The Catholic, Evangelical and Apostolic Churches in the Middle East)

THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION(S) OF THE MIDDLE EAST (Continued from the October issue)

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THE CATHOLIC CHURCHES

The Catholic Church of the semitic Orient is divided into seven branches of different ethnic and cultural origins. About one half of the believers of this Church live in the Middle East and the rest in emigration.

Most Westerners use the term "Catholics" and "Roman Catholics" as synonymous, the first being no more than a quicker form of the second. But this is an incorrect usage, and from the point of view of Catholics in the Middle East it is misleading. "Catholic" is a comprehensive term for all Christians who accept the spiritual primacy of the Pope as the head of the Church. "Roman Catholic" refers to those members of the Catholic Church who follow the "rite" —that is, the form of liturgy and canon law — of the Patriarchal Church of Rome. This is known as the Latin rite.

But the Latin rite is not the only rite of the Catholic Church, which includes the Byzantine (or Melkite) rite, the Armenian rite, the Syriac rite, and the Coptic rite. These are the eastern-Catholic rites of that family of Middle Eastern churches which recognizes the sovereignty of the Pope and accept Catholic doctrine.

The oldest and largest of the Catholic groups is the Maronite Patriarchate which claims to have preserved its union with Rome since the age of the ancient, undivided Church. Certainly there is no Orthodox counterpart of the Maronites whereas the other five Eastern Catholic Churches all broke away from the Assyrian or the Oriental and Byzantine Orthodox Churches under the influence of Roman Catholic missions of the Middle Ages. The earliest were the Chaldean Catholics who broke away from the Assyrian Patriarchate in 1522, to establish their own Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon in Baghdad. In 1622, the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch emerged, with its center originally in Turkey, now in Beirut. Then, in 1724, a similar break-away took place within the Byzantine Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria, resulting in the creation of the Greek (or Melkite) Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East, Alexandria and Jerusalem. Later in that century, in 1773, The Armenian Catholic Patriarchate was created, with its center also in Lebanon. Lastly came the creation of the Coptic Catholic Patriarchate in Alexandria in 1824. These churches are in communion with the Church of Rome and are related to the Vatican through the Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches. This is why sometimes they are called uniate churches.

a. The Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon

The Chaldeans have the distinction of being the first uniate church established under its own patriarchate in 1552. In that year, part of the Assyrian community refused to accept the election of Simeon VIII Denha as Patriarch of the Church of the East. They sent a monk named Youhannan Soulaka to Rome where he was consecrated Patriarch of Babylon.

Today the Chaldeans number 242,000 mainly living in Iraq, where they form the largest Christian community. They are organized in 10 dioceses in Iraq, Iran (15,000 members), Syria (7,000 members), and smaller communities in Egypt and the Lebanon.

b. The Armenian Catholic Patriarchate of Cilicia

The Armenian Catholic Patriarchate was established officially in 1840. A substantial number of Armenians had been converted to the Latin-rite church at the beginning of the 14th century through the efforts of Armenian Dominican fathers known as Fratres Unitores. During the Turkish massacres at the turn of our century, the church suffered severe losses. The church was reorganized in 1928 through a synod held in Rome. The seat of the Patriarchate (originally in Constantinople) was placed in Beirut, Lebanon. It bears the name Armenian Catholic Patriarchate of Cilicia and has 35,000 members in the Middle East. The Patriarchs take the name of Peter. The recent Patriarch is John-Peter XVIII Kasparian.

c. The Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch

Maronite history began at the end of the 4th and beginning of the 5th century. In 685 they elected a Patriarch of Antioch and by the twelfth century united with Rome. Maronites are Eastern-rite Catholics but not uniates in the same sense as the Melkite Chaldean, Armenian and Syrian Catholic Churches whose reunion with Rome came after centuries of alienation.

In the 9th century the Maronites sought refuge in the mountains of Lebanon. The patriarchate moved to Bkerke in 1790 from the mountains of Qannubin. Maronites living in Lebanon number today 1,200,000. Those who have emigrated from the Middle East number as many as 6,500,000. There are 10 archdioceses and dioceses in the Middle East:

The Maronite liturgy is in Syriac and Arabic.

d. The Greek (Melkite) Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch

The word Melkite means "King's men". It was used from the latter part of the 5th century onward to designate all Christians who have accepted the theological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon which had also become the official position of the rulers in both the Roman and Byzantine empires.

It is now used primarily with reference to this one Eastern-rite Catholic Church which separated from the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem and was established in union with Rome under its own patriarch in 1724. The members are Arabic speaking and the liturgy is celebrated in Arabic. The membership of the Greek Catholic Church is concentrated in the Lebanon, Syria and Palestine.

e. The Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch

A part of the ancient Syrian Orthodox Church was reconstituted as an Eastern-rite (uniate) Catholic church in 1662 through the influence of Jesuit and Capuchin missionaries who had settled around Aleppo. In 1773, the presiding bishop of this faction was given the title of Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Antioch. The Patriarchal See, located for more than a century at Mardin, Turkey, was transferred to Beirut in 1899. The Syrian Catholics have four dioceses in Syria and two in Iraq. Patriarchal vicariates are in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Turkey. There is a widely scattered diaspora in the Americas and elsewhere.

Liturgy is celebrated in the Syriac (Aramaic) language with increasing use of Arabic in certain parts of the service. Syriac is still a spoken language, particularly in some solidly Christian villages and towns of eastern Syria and northern Iraq.

f. The Coptic Catholic Patriarchate of Alexandria

There have been Catholic Copts since the 17th century but no patriarchate was established for them until 1824. This Church now has some 100,000 members, by far the largest Catholic community in present-day Egypt and the only one which is growing significantly in size.

g. The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem

A Latin Patriarchate was first created in Jerusalem at the end of the 11th century and re-established there in 1847 by the Apostolic Letter "Nulla Celebrior" of Pope Pius IX. Numerous Roman Catholic missionary orders have worked throughout the area, beginning with the Franciscans in the 13th century. One response to this impact was the emergence of Eastern-rite (Uniate) Churches. Even earlier than that, however, was the establishment of Latin-rite dioceses which continue into the present amidst the eastern churches.

The Assyrian Church of the East

A separate mention needs to be made concerning the Assyrian Church of the East which remains outside all the other families of churches on the alleged ground that it followed the teachings of the excommunicated Nestorius.

Historical Background

The Assyrian Church is one of the oldest churches of the East. It has been a missionary church as early as the first generation of Christianity in Mesopotamia. Its message went as far as India, China, Tibet and Mongolia. Its presence linked the Mediterranean Sea to the West and India to the East and due to its location East of the Roman Empire, it was called "Eastern Church", besides having been known by many other surnames, among which the Church of Fares (Persia).

The Assyrian Eastern Church was one of the first churches to be established. It has given many a martyr of faith, as it gave many thinkers and scientists who greatly contributed to Arab culture. The more regrettable it is that the fate of these people today is one of poverty.

It was designated by the Arabs as the Nestorian Church, because it was thought by some that the Assyrian Church was established by Nestorius, who was the Patriarch of Constantinople in the 5th century. In reality its See was in Salio, Katisphon (Al-Madae'n) or Babel, at that time the Patriarch of this See being Mardad Yashu. Thence, this church knew nothing about the theological argument that was debated in the western part of the Roman Empire.

Already by the middle of the second century it was beginning to get its independence from the Antiochian church. This independence allowed its bishops the full power to consecrate patriarchs without reference to Antioch.

Its Faith

The Eastern Church goes by the "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed" agreed upon in the First and Second Ecumenical Councils, calling for one Church, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic.

The Eastern Church believes in the one God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and in Jesus Christ, totally God, and totally Man, two natures and two hypostases in one person, and in the Virgin birth of Christ, in one Baptism and in the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father.

Persecutions and Sufferings

Since its very inception, the Assyrian Church has never been able to settle in one specific country. Because of persecution and massacres, its believers were forced to emigrate every hundred years.

The Evangelical and Episcopal Churches in the Middle East

The complexity of the Middle East church history often seems beyond comprehension to western Christians, and has often been beyond their patience to understand. The summary given here is simplistic at many points, but we hope it may serve to give a generally accurate orientation, and that therefore it will shed some light upon the enormity of the challenge of inter-church relations facing Christians in both the Middle East and the West.

The largest Protestant group comprises the Evangelical Reformed Churches which grew up amongst the Armenians, Copts and Syrians, and organized themselves in national synods. Most of the Baptist Churches are linked to the Southern Baptist Convention of the U.S.A. The Anglicans come under the Episcopal Archdiocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East. The main Lutheran Church is in Jordan. These churches have retained neither patriarchal structure nor affiliation.

Today, the Evangelical and Episcopal Churches are a small minority (some 2.5% of the Christian minority in the Middle East), characterized more by their diversity than unity, which goes back to their varying cultural backgrounds and differing concepts of history of salvation. Their missionary origin has not endowed them with any significantly corresponding unity. At the very outset, missionaries did not strive to foster unity and rather tended to value diversification.

The National Evangelical Union of Lebanon

The National Evangelical Church came into being in 1847, when a small group of Lebanese Evangelicals decided to found a national Evangelical Church in Beirut by presenting a petition to this effect to the missionaries working in Beirut at the time. For quite some time, the pastors of this church were Arabic-speaking missionaries until 1890, when Yusul Bard, a Lebanese Presbyterian minister was installed as the first Lebanese pastor of the Church. In 1870 a church was built on a compound that was used by both the Lebanese and American congregations.

The membership of the Church comes to about 6,500 persons, spread in and around Beirut. In the mid-sixties the National Evangelical Church of Beirut joined hands with about eight other congregations in the suburbs and mountains around Beirut and formed the National Evangelical Union of Lebanon.

The National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon

Beginning in 1819, a number of missionary representatives came to various parts of the Middle East. Those who responded to the Bible message came to be known as "injiliyyeh", a term based on the Arabic word for Gospel. The Protestant faith was given official recognition in Lebanon in 1848. In 1851, a church was organized in Hasbaya on the slopes of Mt. Hermon, and the following year a church was founded in Aleppo, Syria. In the next few years churches were established in the Syrian city of Horns, in South Lebanon at Sidon, and in two Lebanese mountain villages. In 1870, these churches reported a total of 243 adult communicant members. The present membership is about 10,000The Coptic

Evangelical Church - Synod of the Nile

The Evangelical Church in Egypt started in 1854. It became independent from the Presbyterian Church, USA in 1926. The moderator is elected every year.

Since 1860 the church has been active establishing schools. In 1865 it founded the Assiut American College. The agricultural department of this college, established in 1928, contributed to the improvement of dairy farming in the country.

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Iran

The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Iran developed out of the work of the American Presbyterian and congregational missionaries, the first of whom came to Iran in 1934. The work was begun among the Nestorian Assyrian Christians of the

Urmia (Rezaieh) district in north-western Iran. In 1855, several Protestant congregations came into existence in and around Rezaieh. The first presbytery was organized in 1862, and other presbyteries later.

The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East

The Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East was officially inaugurated in January 1976. It succeeded the old Jerusalem archbishopric and was established in accordance with principles set at the Anglican Consultative Council in Dublin in 1973. It consists of four dioceses: Jerusalem, Egypt, Iran, Cyprus and the Gulf. The President is elected by the Synod from among the diocesan bishops.

Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan

Protestant mission work in the Holy Land started in the middle of the 19th century by missionary societies from England and Germany. They founded congregations and schools in Beit Jala, Bethlehem, Beit Sahour, Jerusalem. Later, congregations were established in Ramallah and Amman.

Union of The Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East

Beginning in the second decade of the 19th century as an indigenous reform movement with the Armenian Orthodox Church, it developed into an independent community in 1846 in Istanbul, and in subsequent decades registered a membership of 60,000 throughout the Ottoman Empire. After the First World War, when the Armenian population was decimated and the remnants deported from its historical homeland in what is now called Turkey, the Union was reorganized in Syria and the Lebanon. The Union is composed of 24 autonomous congregations (about 10,000 faithful). It provides also a ministry for a number of Assyrian Protestant congregations.

Evangelical Church in Sudan

The Evangelical Church in Sudan was founded by missionaries of the United Presbyterian Church, popularly known "American Mission". In 1965, the mission decided to transfer responsibility for Evangelical work in the Sudan to the Sudanese themselves. Thus the Council of the Evangelical Church in the Sudan was created and took charge of the management of the schools and institutions belonging to the American Mission .

Episcopal Church in Sudan

The first successful attempt by Protestants to establish a church in Khartoum is to be credited to the Anglican Bishop Llewellyn Gwynne. In 1899, he started to work in Qmdurman. The year 1904 saw the laying of the foundation stone of the first Anglican Church in Khartoum. This church was considered as a diocese of the Jerusalem Archbishopric until 1974, when it reverted to the sole jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Canterbury as an extra-provincial diocese while awaiting the setting up of the new province of Sudan.

Presbyterian Church in the Sudan

The Presbyterian Church in the Sudan is the fruit of missionary activity in Sudan by Presbyterian and Reformed Churches in the USA. It achieved autonomy in 1956 . This Church is the third largest church in the country after the Roman

Catholic Church and the Episcopal Church. It maintains close relations with the United Presbyterian Church of East Africa.

Denominational and non-Denominational Protestant Churches

The following churches do not take part in the ecumenical movement, nor are they member churches of the Middle East Council of Churches.

Baptist Churches in the Middle East

These churches have a small but growing membership with a wide variety of missionary origins. Those related to the Southern Baptist Convention, USA, are located primarily in Lebanon and Jordan, with smaller groups in Egypt, Palestine and elsewhere.

Armenian Evangelical Spiritual Brotherhood

The Church was established in Beirut in the early 1920's. It is related to the Armenian Evangelical Brotherhood Churches in the world, which have three main branches: South America, North America, Europe & Middle East.

The Evangelical Assemblies of God

The Evangelical Assemblies of God in Lebanon is related to the Assemblies of God in the USA. It was granted the right of establishing churches, schools, orphanages, etc. by a presidential decree in 1956 in Lebanon.

Seventh Day Adventists - Middle East Division

The church has existed in Beirut since 1904. Adventist congregations are found in Jordan, Turkey, Cyprus, Iraq and Iran..

The Church of Nazarene

This church has a total of some twenty small congregations and three schools in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine.

The Church of Christ

This church began missionary activity in Lebanon in 1961 and now has three organized congregations along with a Bible training school in Beirut

The Church in the Gulf

Today many churches in the Middle East have congregations or dioceses in the Gulf. The Orthodox Church of Antioch has the diocese of Baghdad and the Gulf. The Armenian Church has the Prelature of Kuwait and the Gulf, the Coptic Orthodox Church has a diocese based in Kuwait.

The Anglican Church has developed from a variety of sources. The British Forces were served by chaplains who also encourage the formation of congregations for other expatriates. The Gull Archdeaconry was formed in 1970 and this led to the establishment of the Anglican Diocese in Cyprus and the Gulf in 1976.

The Roman Catholic Churches in the Gulf came mainly from India and East Africa. Capuchin Fathers, centered on Aden, began church buildings after the end of World War II in Bahrain and elsewhere. In Kuwait there is a Roman Catholic

church and a cathedral. Today there is another cathedral at Abu Dhabi, the center of the Diocese of Arabia.

In the last few years the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Mar Thoma Church of India, the Church of South India and the Urdu-speaking Church of Pakistan have established parishes or congregations in several centers, usually sharing Evangelical or Anglican church facilities.

Co-Existence and Peace

The sad example of the division which religion can stir up is exemplified by the term "Holy Land". The phrase today conjures up several contrasting views. Some read it and picture soft brown hills, dotted here and there with ancient olive groves and slowly shifting herds of sheep. Others feel a stirring within as they imagine the ancient prophets who appeared in that region to change the destinies of so many. Then too, there are those who follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ in and around Galilee, Jerusalem, Capernaum, etc. Then there are those who cannot help but shake their heads at the irony in the phrase as they consider the war and destruction that strained the history of that "Holy Land".

Although there is cause and Justification for despair, the three great Monotheistic religions which developed successively there - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - share much more than is generally known or suspected. That sprang from the same basic geographical area and, thus, are all semitically rooted. And due largely to their common ancestor, Abraham, the teachings of each were originally written and spoken in closely related languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic).

Many of the teachings are similar and several of the same incidences and characters are mentioned in the scriptural writings of all three religions. The Jewish Torah is included in the Christian Bible, and both, Jews and Christians are respected by Muslims as " People of the Book".

With so many common strands, it is not surprising, then, that historically Jews, Christians and Muslims have often lived side by side in the same communities in the Middle East.

Perhaps this point is the key to peace for the conflicts, not conflicts of religious beliefs; they pertain, rather, to questions of economy, politics and rights of self-determination and, to a large extent, have been exacerbated by influence and powers outside the area.

Perhaps the greatest hope for salvation is that because religion is never far removed from society in that part of the world, it will also help to bridge the differences and heal the wounds and build the foundation of true peace and unity.

(end)