

## On the Place and Role of Christians in the Middle East\*

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Originally I had suggested the title of my talk in the form of a question: “Is there still a place and a role for Christians in the Middle East?” I think it should be obvious why this topic could be put in the form of a question, rather than just a statement. The developments of the last 15 years or so have had devastating consequences on the situation of Christians in this region of the world. Allow me to begin by putting before us certain facts about Christian existence in the Middle East today:

1. Christian existence is the oldest continuing and effective institutional existence and presence in the Middle East. Christianity has been here since its emergence in the first century, but it is not just present in terms of individuals and groups, but also institutionally, I mean as church or churches. There is an institution called the Christian Church – in its variety and plurality – that has been in existence and active for the last 2000 years. There is no other living and continuing institution that is still active and that is older than the Church in the Middle East.<sup>1</sup>
2. Christian existence in the East has been varied and pluralist since the beginnings. Historians and theologians know very well that ecclesiastical variety and plurality was not simply the result of doctrinal schisms and/or political disputes; rather plurality was there before theological disputes and political rivalry. The church was never one, not even in the New Testament, as a centralized, hierarchically organized and uniform body; it was a collection of local faith communities that had a spiritual bond and a communion with each other. Churches grew, expressed their faith, organized their lives and developed liturgies and traditions in accordance with their cultural milieu. Contact with Greek and Roman thought as well as other cultures manifested itself in different theological, liturgical, and spiritual expressions in the earliest big centers of the Christianity: Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Cultural variety led to ecclesial variety long before any doctrinal disputes and political rivalry, but the latter

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<sup>1</sup> C. Malik, *Lebanon in Itself*. Tr. George Sabra (Louaizé: NDU Press, 2004), p. 45.

increased the plurality and the schisms, as well as later historical developments which intensified the plurality, e.g., Catholic and Protestant missions. The important thing to keep in mind, however, is that Christian plurality is not a new development nor is it always a negative thing; it is original and ancient.

3. The two-thousand-year old Christian existence in the region has been living under the rule of non-Christians since the seventh century, nearly, 1400 years, with a few exceptions in certain limited places. Conditions under Islamic rule were varied. There were times of tolerance and prosperity and a certain measure of autonomy, but there were also times of adversity, persecution, repression and violence. The generally dominant condition, however, was that the Christians were not free or independent or completely equal with others in the countries where they lived, and this remains until today in most countries of the region.
4. Christian existence in the Middle East changed over the centuries from a majority status to a minority status. Historians agree that Christianity was the religion of the majority since before the Islamic conquests and until the Crusader period in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, but numerical changes start to appear at the time of the Mamlouks. Within a few centuries, Christians changed from a majority to a minority in the region which witnessed the birth of Christianity. Although Christian existence in the Middle East shrank and expanded at different periods throughout history, it has been shrinking and retreating more or less constantly since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and up until today. From a ratio of 25% of the total population of the Near East on the eve of World War I to 4-6% today. This means that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was catastrophic for the Christian communities, and the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> do not promise anything better.
5. Christians of the region have not only survived and continued for 2 millenia, despite difficulties and hardships; they have also played a positive role in the societies of the region. They have contributed to culture and civilization whenever they were in a position to do so. This happened many times in history, but the most prominent among them was the role of Christians in the Abbasid period when Christians translated Greek science and philosophy to Arabic, so that Arab Muslim culture could benefit from it and develop it. And then again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Christians acted as a bridge between East and West in introducing many ideas and accomplishments of modernity to the

peoples and societies of the Middle East through mainly Catholic and Protestant missions. Christians had a decisive role in reviving the Arabic language; they contributed to the rise of Arab national consciousness; they founded newspapers and literary journals, introduced the printing press to Lebanon and Syria, initiated the education of women, and were always open to new methods and types education and culture and social and medical services. All acknowledge this role, non-Christians as well as western Christians.

Where are we today?

The present situation is generally speaking not good. It is not encouraging. Shrinking numbers, continuous emigration, apprehension and anxiety about the future, in short, nothing bright on the horizon. I need not put before you figures and facts about emigration of Christians – more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Christians of Iraq have fled; hundreds of churches attacked and destroyed in many countries (Iraq, Syria, Egypt) since the beginning of the invasion of Iraq and the so-called Arab Spring. And it is not only physical facts and figures that depress. Perhaps more importantly and more devastatingly is the failure of ideals and of mission: many Christians feel that after many decades of having espoused the causes of the societies of the region, of having identified with the hopes and aspirations of non-Christian co-citizens, everything got engulfed in, and got lost, to a revival of religious extremism and the retaliation of violent dictatorial state repression. The dreams and aspirations of coexistence and secular states and recognition and acceptance of plurality seem to be crumbling after decades of commitment to them and working for them on the part of many Christian individuals and institutions.

One response is utter pessimism and a declaration that it is all over for the Christians of the region. The most eloquent expression of this position was voiced by an anonymous European writer back in the middle of the 1990s – in a book written in French: *Vie et Mort des Chretiens D'Orient* by J.-P. Valognes – a pseudonym. True, this is written by a non-Middle Eastern, but I know for sure that it represents the unspoken view of many Christians of the region. The author declares that it is over for the Christians of the East; the fact that they remained for 2000 years does not guarantee that they will remain forever. They have to realize that their presence in the region is no longer desirable or possible. They better move to the West and enrich the West with their traditions and their contributions instead of slowly disintegrating in the Middle East. That is

precisely what many who are leaving or have left, or want to leave feel, and also many who cannot leave. There is an aura of pessimism and a feeling of loss, defeat and disappointment which is rarely expressed publicly by those who are in the region, but it is strongly there. It is practiced more than it is uttered verbally.<sup>2</sup>

Another response acknowledges that the present conditions are difficult and that there is a general mood of depression, but the future is not seen as utterly dark or that Christian existence in the region is over and done with. There are voices, among intellectuals and church leaders, who say that Christians can build upon their good record in the Arab and Islamic world. Christians, after all, are the ones who contributed to Arab renaissance, participated in Arab and Islamic civilization and espoused Arab causes and defended them, so they can look towards a decent coexistence with Muslims. This way of thinking says that religious extremism – fundamentalism – is a wave, and it is of the nature of waves to rise and ebb, so there is no justification for fear about the long-term destiny of Christians here because of the current wave.

Both responses contain truth, but both are subject to criticism as well. There is no doubt that the pessimistic outlook concerning the future of M. E. Christians is based on facts and real givens. The current situation does not bode well, but this is not something completely new for the Christians of the region. Add to that that committed Christians cannot simply make ultimate decisions about life and death and emigration and future on the basis of socio-political facts and analyses only. And no doubt there is truth in the outlook that says that Christians need not fear their imminent demise because they have always been part of Arab and Islamic societies and they have contributed positively to Arab and Islamic civilization and societies, and should continue to do so. Christians can rely on their positive record and achievements in this regard. But there is something basically faulty about the logic that reassures Christians about their future on the basis of their role and contributions in the past or the present. To say that Christians need not fear for their existence because they can show forth a good and honorable record of siding with the rest of the inhabitants of this region, the majority, in its causes and concerns, is to embrace the logic that a group or a community or even individuals deserve to remain and live because they perform a certain role and so are useful members of society or a state. To hold that

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<sup>2</sup> But a rare public expression of this is the interview with Metropolitan George Saliba (SOC) on 16 April, 2018 on the website of *L'Orient-Le Jour*: The future belongs to Islam; it's over for the Christians of the Middle East (Lebanon, specifically) if things continue as they are.

the positive evaluation of the role of Christians in their larger societies in the past and present earns them the reward of staying and should remove from them all fears, assumes that an individual's or a community's right to existence is bound to a role that they play, or a cultural or national test that they successfully pass. The right to exist and remain and prosper in any part of the world must be based on universal human values – on the humanity of the human beings, and not on a role or a function that they perform well or adequately. Thus the ultimate question about the future of Christians in the Middle East is not: can they look towards a legitimate membership in Arab and Islamic societies and states on the bases of their valuable contributions towards it? Rather: Can Christians – or any other group for that matter – be themselves, and live in freedom and dignity and complete equality with everybody else in the larger Islamic world? This is a very important point, and one that is often missed, not simply in the writings and thinking of Muslims but even by that of Christians when they ponder their present situation and future expectations. Many Muslims, well-intentioned no doubt, such as former Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan in his 1994 book *Christians in the Arab World*, make this point about the valuable place and role of Christians in the Arab world because of their valuable and positive contributions past and present. Many Christian intellectuals make this point as well as they address their larger society, e.g., the late Lebanese historian Kamal Salibi. The whole discourse of meriting and deserving which is bestowed on Christians because of their role and contributions is ultimately faulty and dangerous and philosophically untenable: a human being or a human group need not earn the right to exist and remain in a place because of a role or function or contribution; human beings have the right to be, and they have the right to be respected and accepted and treated as equals and free simply because they are human beings, regardless of their contributions and their achievements. If we must speak of a role here, then it is precisely the role of Christians, along with other groups and communities – for this is not a purely Christian thing – to make this point, to press and struggle for it, for themselves and for others.

Here we must distinguish between discourse about Christians as a community or communities of human beings who happen to be a minority in the larger Islamic world and Christians as committed faith communities. It is obviously not possible to separate these, but it is necessary to make a distinction between them. Christians exist in this region as a sociological group or groups, and Christians also exist as faith-based communities. As far as being a sociological

group, they are entitled to be, to be themselves, to be free and equal to everybody else, whether minority or majority. They are human beings and ought to be respected as such, regardless of a special role they perform or don't perform. But this important and basic principle of human rights is not sufficient when we talk about Christians as ecclesial communities, as committed faith-communities. So, when we ask about the future of Christian existence in the Middle East as committed faith-communities, we cannot put forward an answer that does not take into consideration their role and contribution – in theological language their witness. Simply to exist or to survive is not enough, is not viable, for faith-communities; mere survival is not a Christian virtue. To be Christian is to witness, to serve, to be for God and for others. Without authentic witness to the incarnate God, the Word who became flesh, to Jesus of Nazareth who lived, taught, healed, suffered, died, and rose again for the salvation of human beings, Christian existence in this part or any other part of the world is meaningless. Christians do not have to invent a new witness; it suffices if they witness in their lives, in their deeds and words and their whole existence to the gospel of forgiveness, reconciliation and love in appropriate and relevant ways which may change and be renewed, but it is the same witness: that God so loved the world that God gave His Son, Himself for it, and that Jesus Christ, “who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself taking the form of a servant, being born of the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name...” (Phil. 2:6-9).

This is not a new witness, but it is a unique one which only the committed Christian and the faithful community of faith can render, and it ought not to be absent from the Middle East, especially in these days. Christians live in a part of the world that has given the world the three great monotheistic religions, as they are called; religion and religious identity and awareness are basic constituents of the societies of the Middle East, and they still play a central and decisive role in all aspects of life – political, economic, social, moral, legal and cultural. In a region of the world where religious affiliation and loyalty, in other more theologically appropriate words, where God, still moves individuals and groups, urges them, inspires them, guides them and shapes their future, who is this One God who moves, inspires and urges? Who is the God to be witnessed to? Alongside, or perhaps above everything else, this is a struggle for the identity of God, and thus for the witness to God: It is thus crucial to ask: witness to which God?

Is it a witness to the strong and powerful God, the landowner and real estate deity, who is preoccupied with land affairs, who grants his people a land and expects them to fight and kill in order to keep and preserve it, and urges them to expand it and rule over it in any way they can, including the trampling on other people's rights around them and among them, as some Zionist religious zealots do and say in our region?

Or is it a witness to a warrior God who holds a machine gun in his fist, calling his followers to fight and demanding the blood of martyrs, enjoying the military victories and heroic deeds of his believers, who die while killing others, as some Islamist religious extremists among us do and say?

Or is it the great Avenger God, the clever and successful military strategist, who has planned the final and decisive battle in the region to the last detail, where millions shall die and blood shall flow "from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle" (Rev. 14:20), so that he may be recognized as the true God, as some Christian fundamentalists coming from the West tell us?

If Christians have a role in the Middle East, if they have a witness and if their existence and presence have a meaning, it is to witness to a God different from all three mentioned above: it is to witness to God who is the father of human beings, a loving God, a crucified God who gives life, and does not rob us of it; who defeats death and does not glorify it; who gives himself, and is, for others, not against them. Christians and churches need to remain here to witness to a God who became human for human beings, who became weak for the weak, who was rejected and marginalized for the sake of the rejected and marginalized. The God of Jesus Christ is not a domineering God, not a tyrannical God, not a protector of minorities at any cost, not a deity repressive of freedom and killer of pluralism; God is not a general leading an army of believers to war, but a loving father, a liberator, a compassionate God, who does not call for usurping land for his delight, nor for setting up republics and founding political parties in his name, but God also does not call his followers to withdraw from the world, rather invites them to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth in which they live.

The Middle East badly, urgently, needs to hear this witness and to see it serve its societies; that's what an ecumenical organization like MECC must exist and what ultimately is its *raison d'être*.

That is why Christians must remain: to be true to this witness, to live it and enact it in their

deeds, words and thoughts, and in their relations with all other people. We must remain to witness by our mouths, by our hands and by our whole existence that “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” (I Cor. 1:25)

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