

Christians in the Middle East: Present Situation and Future Prospects

I will develop this topic in four points:

- I. Christians in the Middle East**
- II. Recent developments**
- III. What Future for the Middle East?**
- IV. Final Considerations**

I. Christians in the Middle East

1. Christians have been living in the Middle East since the dawn of Christianity, 600 years before Islam. They have enriched the cultures of the region with their different traditions. They belong to the various Catholic, Orthodox and Evangelical Churches: in addition to the Latin Church following the Roman Tradition, the Catholic and Orthodox Eastern and Oriental are Patriarchal Churches which were formed around the Apostolic Churches of Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Jerusalem. Likewise, we have the Chaldean and Armenian Churches.

The patriarchal Church of Alexandria of the Copts; Catholic and Orthodox, the three patriarchal Churches of Antioch: Maronite, the only non uniate Eastern Catholic Church, Greek Melkite, Greek Orthodox, and Syrian Catholic and Orthodox; the patriarchal Church of Babylon of the Chaldeans and the Assyrian Church of the East, and that of Cilicia for the Armenians, Catholic and Orthodox and Etchmiadzin for the Armenian Orthodox. Also living in the area are Bishops, priests present are Indian priests and faithful from the Major Archbishoprics of Ernakulam-Angamaly of the Syro-Malabars, and from Trivandrum of the Syro-Malankaras, as well as priests and faithful of the Oriental Churches and the Latin Church in Asia and Eastern Europe, and many members of the faithful from Ethiopia and Eritrea. All the Evangelical protestant traditions are present also in the Middle East.

All those churches have their hierarchical structure, their educational, social and medical services and more. Most of those Churches are thriving particularly in Lebanon, because of the atmosphere of freedom secured by the nature of the political system there which separates Religion and State, and regulates the coexistence between Christians and Muslims on equal basis within a democratic system.

2. Christians and Muslims have lived together for fourteen hundred years. Christians have always played an invaluable role in the educational, cultural, social, economic and national revival. They helped spread the culture of diversity, moderation, openness, respect, acceptance and cooperation with those who are different. They helped also develop the concept of equality in citizenship, and they promoted freedom and human rights. They lived in their countries with wisdom and prudence; they respected political authorities, obeyed the laws of their countries and honored their Constitutions. They are usually good and law abiding citizens and this is why they gain normally the confidence of rulers, kings and presidents, who offer them opportunities to live and work, with dignity and respect.

3. The Christian presence has enriched the Middle East its cultures and history with evangelical values on the human, political, cultural and social levels. This includes the sacredness of human life, the dignity of the person, fundamental human rights and liberties, solidarity and interdependence, a culture of justice and peace, unity in diversity, equal rights of citizenship, the respect of differences, openness as well as moderation, and a sense of democracy and dialogue with various components of society.

4. Christianity became an essential part of the culture of those countries, and it has also benefited from Islamic values and traditions. This Christian-Muslim cultural interaction has resulted in a spirit of openness and modernity for the majority of Muslims. This constitutes a sign of hope for a better future for the Middle East.

II. Recent developments

5. The countries of the Middle East, with the exception of Lebanon, have been governed by authoritarian political regimes. For all of them Islam is the religion of the State, except for Syria, where the Constitution requires only that the head of State has to be Muslim. When the so called "Arab Spring" started a wave of hope swept through the peoples of the region who felt that there was an opportunity for change towards some sort of democratic governments. However, suddenly the peaceful and well intentioned youthful and popular demonstrations appeared to take a different direction, and they were eventually replaced by Islamist movements and terrorist organizations such as Al Qaeda, Al Nusra and ISIS (Daesh), which is the so called Islamic State. Those organizations were joined by mercenaries from all over the entire world. They went to war against the existing regimes and they attacked Christians and Muslims alike as well as other ethnic and religious minorities.

Over and above those wars, and besides the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the bloody conflict between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Shiite), along

with their Eastern and Western allies, on Syrian soil, in Iraq, and Yemen as well. This war extended into a political conflict between the various countries made up of predominantly Sunni or Shiite populations, and in Lebanon it turned into a political conflict between the Sunni and Shiite factions. For that reason Lebanon has been unable to elect a President for the past three years.

As a result, most of the Christians in Iraq and Syria were either killed or displaced. Those attacks were perpetrated despite the fact that Christians never took sides in the international, military, ethnic or racial conflicts. They ended up paying the heaviest price in those conflicts.

6. Despite everything, **Christians remain attached to their lands**, their countries and, of course, their freedom, as original citizens of those countries. They are **committed to their gospel values**, and to the teachings of Christ and of the Church, which guide their relations with the others and more particularly with their brother and sisters Muslims who are sharing the same citizenship with them. However, many of them have had to emigrate either into neighboring countries or to the West.

Nevertheless even with all their troubles, Christians who were able to stay in the region remain **committed also to the cooperation with their compatriots**, and desire to live peacefully and on equal footing with the various components of their societies, living the principle of unity in diversity, far away from any religious or ethnic discrimination. They are also committed to Christian witness through an untiring effort to promote peace, stability and human rights, and to promote particularly the freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of conscience. They are also committed to respecting the freedom of others who are different, and they consider diversity to be a source of richness and a means to complement each other.

III. Future prospects for the Middle East and the world.

Those prospects are the following:

- a) **A political solution** to the conflicts ought to be the top priority, and a just, global and permanent peace should be established as soon as possible. The International Community should commit itself to that peace, and work to secure the return of the refugees to their homes and their land, because the great risk is that refugees may become easy targets for those recruiting for terrorist organizations. The tragedy has gone way beyond Syria, and the International Community is now fully aware that

terrorism has become a dangerous phenomenon, both locally and on the international level. Along with a peaceful solution to the conflicts in the region, moderate political regimes ought to be encouraged so that various peoples in the region may be able to enjoy stability, basic human rights and especially religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

- b) **The Israeli-Palestinian conflict** is at the origin of the Middle Eastern problems. A solution to that problem ought to be found in accordance with the United Nations Resolutions, which would allow the establishment of a Palestinian State alongside an Israeli State, the return of Palestinian refugees, and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon.
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- c) **The separation between Religion and State** for both Judaism and Islam is one of the basic conditions for a permanent political solution in the region. The Lebanese formula could serve as a model in that respect, despite all the difficulties plaguing the Lebanese system.
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Islamic Nations cannot remain silent observers, simply looking and doing nothing about the so called "Islamic State" (ISIS) and all terrorist organizations. They are causing great harm to Islam itself. Both Sunni and Shiite religious leaders ought to issue Fatwas that condemn attacks on Christians and ethnic and religious minorities, including the violation of their churches, homes and possessions.

IV. Final considerations

7. The International Community bears a good part of the responsibility for the conflict raging in Syria, as some of them support terrorist organizations with funds, arms, combatants and political backing. They thus end up helping terrorist organizations, which are taking the conflict into the neighboring countries, and into the very heart of Western nations, where terrorism has become a global problem for all.

8. **The problem of the refugees** has become also a source of great concern to Western countries and the countries of the Middle East. A small country like Lebanon, with a population of four million inhabitants, has had to shelter over one million and a half displaced Syrians, and this is over and above the half a million Palestinian refugees. This is a real threat to the security and the stability of the country economically, socially and educationally. **The world now has the highest number of refugees ever** and those numbers are constantly on the rise.

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9. The countries of the Middle East, sadly enough, are victims of international competition motivated by political, economic and strategic interests related to oil and gas, and linked more particularly, to the most inhuman disregard for life, the constant profiting from the sale of arms.

10. Finally we should remember that **the absence of Christians from the Middle East**, or the weakening of their cultural influence, will certainly impoverish both Christians and Muslims, as it harms the culture of dialogue and co-existence so desperately needed in the world today, if one is to promote multiculturalism as a viable way of life, both in the East and the West. So instead of encouraging Christians to leave the Middle east they should be helped to remain in their countries, live in harmony with their compatriots, and witness to their Christian values.
