
Christian Mission in the Wake of the Arab Spring

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As a Christian and as a citizen of a Middle Eastern country, I write here about the plight—and hope—of Middle Eastern Christians in the wake of the Arab Spring, which has engulfed and roiled the region. I present my concerns in four steps: (1) the situation of Middle East Christians, (2) the nature of the so-called Arab Spring, (3) religion as the key to understanding the Middle East, and (4) the focus needed for Christian mission in the Middle East today.¹

The Christian Presence in the Middle East

Christian communities in many countries of the Middle East are suffering from decline in numbers because of emigration, low birth rates, and, in some places, persecution. In many countries there is actual (if not also legal) discrimination and marginalization.

When one looks at the present physical and statistical situation of Middle Eastern Christians and traces the developments that brought about this situation, one has to admit that on this level the picture looks bleak. The dramatic change in numbers is alarming. A glance at the historical development shows that at

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the end of the Crusader era in the late thirteenth century and as a result of severe persecution and arbitrary and cruel treatment of the Christians of the region at the hand of one Islamic dynasty in particular, the Mamluks, the Christians of the Near East started to decrease rapidly in numbers and influence in society.

When the Ottoman Empire took over the lands of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt in the early part of the sixteenth century, Christians constituted about 6–7 percent of the total population of the region. The Ottoman period, which lasted for 400 years, until the early twentieth century, was a period of stability for Christian communities. The Ottomans officially recognized the various Christian confessions, gave them a certain measure of autonomy, and provided them with state protection. In 1914, toward the end of the Ottoman period and on the eve of World War I, Christians in the Near East constituted about 20–25 percent of the total population.

Today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Christians in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt have seen their numbers return

to only 6–7 percent of the total population of the region.² There are many reasons for this decline, the most important among them being the significantly lower birthrate of Christians and the widespread and continuous emigration of Christians. Sociologists have shown that since the middle of the nineteenth century, one-third of all Middle Eastern Christians have left the region, going mainly to the West.

The Arab Spring

The future does not look bright, given the facts of the past and the recent present. But what about the so-called Arab Spring, the major upheaval that began in December 2010 and is still taking place in some Arab countries today? Does it promise anything different and better for the Christians of the region?

Clearly something major, unique, and exciting has been happening in the Arab world today. Protests, demonstrations, and uprisings in many Arab countries are demanding real change. Three aspects of these protest movements have a potential impact on the Christians of the region.

First, the uprisings and protests have been everywhere primarily calling for democratic changes, for freedom, for the overthrow of dictatorships and political repression. The Arab peoples in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and other countries want freedom from state repression—they want to breathe! Of course, they all denounce corruption and have social demands, but they consider these to be the outcome of repression and dictatorship and lack of democracy. The main cry, therefore, is for freedom, not bread; for democracy and human rights before anything else. This call for freedom and democracy was quite significant and promised a positive outlook for all people there, but especially minorities, including the Christians of each country.

Second, the protests and uprisings did not, by and large, employ the traditional discourse of political street movements in many Arab countries of the last five decades or so, namely, the anti-Western and anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist rhetoric. This element is not completely absent, but it is not the main driver of the movements. In fact, in many places, such as Libya, the West was asked to intervene and help. In Syria, the opposition has practically been begging the United States, Europe, and NATO to support them not only politically but also militarily, even calling for direct Western military intervention. This is also significant because the Christians of the region have always been suspected of being pro-Western, and whenever the West did anything pro-Israeli or anti-Arab, the Christians of the region were placed in an uncomfortable position. Today, instead, the struggle in the Middle East is largely Muslim versus Muslim—Muslim peoples against Muslim leaders/rulers, and more destructively, Muslim Sunnis against Shi'ites. Actually, however, this Sunni-Shi'ite struggle is a far more dangerous threat to Middle Eastern Christian existence than some imagine; it threatens to engulf and do away with any Christians remaining in the region.

Third, in most, if not all, of the countries where protests are taking place, whether they have succeeded in overthrowing the old regimes (Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt) or so far have failed (Syria, Bahrain), the repressive regimes, although clearly Islamic, had actually suppressed Islamist movements and even



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persecuted them. The various *salafi* and *takfiri* groups, and any extremist Islamic groups, were suppressed or at least kept under strict control by the regimes. This was true of Iraq's Saddam Hussein, of Egypt's Mubarak, of Tunisia's Bin Ali, of Yemen's Saleh, of Syria's Assad (both father and son), also of Libya's Qaddafi, and others. In the countries where there are Christians, this has meant that either the Christians were allies of the regime, for it protected them from the more extreme Islamists, or they saw

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no advantage in changing the regime. It guaranteed their existence and safety, and in some cases their prosperity. Especially in countries where a minority ruled or rules the majority (Iraq, Syria), the regime has viewed Christians as valuable allies. When the people in these countries rose up and began protesting, the Islamists were among those fighting for freedom and demanding change. So the Christians have been alarmed, wondering, Are we heading for democracy and freedom for all, including Christian minorities, or are we heading toward a more Islamic society and regime?

The experience in Iraq has not been encouraging at all. Since the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and until today, and although a dictatorship was toppled in that country, over sixty churches have been attacked, more than one thousand Christians have been killed, and over one-half of Iraq's Christians have fled the country.³ The coming to power of the Muslim Brethren in Egypt in the 2011 elections, along with strong *salafi* wins in those elections, confirmed the fears of Christians. Even though the regime of the Muslim Brethren has been overthrown, the fate of Christians does not seem to have improved. Since the removal of Mohammad Morsi, the Islamist president, forty-two churches have been attacked, seventy-two churches burned down or looted, and many Christians killed. It was not the Christians who removed Morsi, but the predominantly Muslim Egyptian Army; nevertheless, the Christians paid the price. And what has been happening in Syria does not bode well for the future of Christians in that country or in the region as a whole. Since the protests started in 2011, forty churches have been damaged or destroyed, over one thousand Christians have been killed, two prominent bishops have been kidnapped, and hundreds of thousands of Christians have been displaced within and outside Syria.

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Religion: Key to Understanding the Middle East

Christians clearly are facing serious challenges in the Middle East today. The outcome of the Arab Spring so far makes evident that the main issue is Islamic resurgence. Is this a new situation? A new context for mission? Not really. It is an old situation that reappears in different forms throughout history. The main source of identity and the main driver of events and mover of souls in the Middle East has always been something religious. Many have misunderstood this reality, especially Western politicians, policy makers, and historians.

The genius of the Middle East is religion. The Lebanese philosopher and diplomat Charles Malik (1906–87) put it this way:

The peoples of these lands [Near East] did not create in science and philosophy, in the arts of beauty and the arts of self-government. The greatest science, the greatest philosophy, the greatest art and the greatest forms of government matured elsewhere, and nobody comes to the Near East to study them and bask in their splendor. . . . Shabby and unworthy as the Near East may be in these earthly-human achievements, it has been reserved to it to storm the heaven itself and open its doors. If it did not create in science and philosophy and the arts, it has been granted—if I may say without blasphemy—to create God, or, more correctly, God has chosen to reveal Himself in it, and therefore to create it as well as its history—through the suffering and trials of its peoples.⁴

To analyze the causes of problems and challenges in the Middle East and to suggest solutions that rely merely on political, social, and economic factors and components is to miss the whole point. Of course, all these dimensions are necessary and helpful; but without grasping the central religious component, one has not understood the Middle East.

The fundamental issue facing Middle Eastern Christians. The real and formidable challenge facing the Christians of the Middle East concerns this religious character of the region. The challenge is not that there are religions other than Christianity, not that there is religious fanaticism (hardline religious fundamentalism), for this comes and goes. The real challenge is how the different and differing religions and religious groupings perceive one another, how they relate to one another, how they envisage living with one another, how they relate to power and authority—in other words, how their worldviews can coexist with one another.

The Christians of the Middle East are a very diverse group. Historically, they have different origins and experiences; doctrinally, they are not one; culturally, they are varied; liturgically, they are diverse; politically, they live in different contexts and do not share the same outlooks; socially, they do not all belong to one class. Yet what all Christians and all churches have in common in the Middle East, what unites them all today, despite their huge variety and religious and political differences and disagreements, is that they have been under Islam in one form or another since the seventh century and thus their future is inextricably linked with the future of Islam. This, in my view, is the source of the most crucial and decisive challenge facing the Christians of the Middle East. Again I quote Malik, who wrote prophetically in the 1950s, long before the surge of religious revivals and Islamism: "Whither the Near East' is ultimately, for the most part, 'whither Islam.' . . . [This] question concerns not only the Moslems, but the entire world. For Islam is a vigorous force in the world and therefore much depends on its development. . . . And for the Christians of the Near East it is obvious that this is a peculiarly crucial issue. The fate of Islam is in a certain sense their fate."⁵ Kenneth Cragg echoed the same idea in the 1990s in his book *The Arab Christian*, concluding that the future of Middle Eastern Christians "has to be on Islam's terms."⁶

Whither Islam in the Middle East? This question lies at the root of the challenge facing Christians.⁷ I fully realize that Islam is not one uniform phenomenon today, that there is pluralism in Islam, that Muslim societies and countries are not all identical. But no one can deny that Islam is the umbrella under which the whole Middle East has lived for the last fourteen centuries, and

that a revived Islam, in one form or another, is currently gaining political and social ground in many countries and societies, especially in the countries that have recently undergone major transformations and changes. This broad question encompasses several issues now facing Islam.

- Is Islam moving in the direction of making it possible for non-Muslim minorities to coexist in complete equality with the Islamic majority?
- Will some form of separation between religion and state be possible in Islam? In other words, will the possibility of real change develop in Islamic societies?
- Will freedom of conscience, not just freedom of worship and practice of religion, be accepted and acknowledged in Islamic societies, so that people of different convictions, and not only religious convictions, will be able to exist as equal citizens with equal rights?
- Will all persons in Islamic societies and countries have the freedom to change their beliefs and convictions? If freedom of conscience is not respected, acceptance and openness to the other is ultimately impossible.
- Is Islam moving toward the possibility of real and fundamental self-criticism? Will questioning and critically discussing one's identity, traditions, and the holy ever be acceptable?
- Will the Islamic doctrine of revelation remain one that identifies God's final and complete revelation and will with the literal content of a seventh-century text that is considered the source of all subsequent legislation and that is valid for all aspects of life?
- Will reform and renewal and progress always elevate the past, a supposed Golden Age, as the ideal in matters political, social, and economic?

There is change in some Islamic countries of the Middle East today; a huge process of transformation has begun. It is difficult to predict its outcome, but what can be seen so far is not very encouraging for non-Muslims in Islamic societies. What began as movements of liberation and reform and democracy have for the most part been overcome—some say usurped—by Islamist forces that do not seem to promise a new direction for Islam. This is true particularly in Tunisia and Egypt, and perhaps also in Syria. The rise of religious fervor, the increasing Islamization of society and politics, and the growth and proliferation of hardline fundamentalist religious movements do not bode well for Christians.

If the situation remains as it is in Islamic countries and no serious attempt is made to face the above questions, then the future of Christians and their mission in the Middle East is grim indeed. It is true that Christians living among Muslims have known great prosperity in the past and have enjoyed a measure of tolerance and acceptance that the historical record of European Christian treatment of minorities—Jews and others—cannot match. Nevertheless, mere tolerance is not enough. To avoid grappling with the above questions will mean the persistence of Christian bleeding that has been going on for centuries and will continue until one day Christian existence in that region becomes of interest only to historians and archaeologists. No wonder, then, that Christians in that region are very concerned—nay, obsessed—about their survival. For some it is a luxury to think about mission when their very existence is daily at stake. Nevertheless, we Middle Eastern Christians need to go beyond the survival issue as the only issue at hand. Every time I hear

fellow Christians in the Middle East obsess about survival or I catch myself being preoccupied with survival, I am put to shame by the words of Jesus, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (Mark 8:35).

Christian Mission in the Middle East Today

What ought Christians to do in the face of this situation as they reflect on their mission and ponder their future? What is the Christian mission in the context that I have just described? Let us first of all be clear on whose mission we are talking about: Christian mission *to* the Middle East, or the mission of Christians *in* the Middle East? As for the former, Western mission to the region has not really learned the lessons of history, for its adherents still go there and attempt to convert Muslims, totally oblivious of the Christian presence and role there, or even viewing Middle Eastern Christians as though they too were just a field of mission. I am not saying that the nineteenth-century mission was a mistake, but I am saying that something should have been learned from that experience.

The stated aim of that missionary endeavor was to evangelize the non-Christian peoples—Jews and Muslims—of the Near East. The foreign missionaries soon discovered that there were Christians in that region of the world and that evangelizing non-Christians, mainly Muslims, was a most difficult affair. To begin with, the Near East was under the Islamic Ottoman Empire, wherein it was against the law to convert Muslims (it still is in all of the countries except Lebanon). Evangelizing and trying to convert individual Muslims here and there was a long and arduous task, and not so rewarding. Within a short time the Protestant missionaries decided to concentrate their efforts on reviving Eastern Christians, mainly the various Orthodox churches, so that these in turn could evangelize their fellow Muslim compatriots. The original aim of the mission was not to create new Protestant ecclesiastical bodies but to awaken and revive already existing Eastern churches. For about a quarter

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of a century the American missionaries intentionally refrained from setting up new Protestant churches, restricting themselves to spreading the Scriptures and renewing individuals. Eventually, the "revived" Eastern Christians who were attracted to the Protestant way could not continue to remain in their own Eastern traditions; and after 1846, missionary policy changed to become one that accepted the setting up of organized Protestant church communities alongside all the other churches that already existed in the East.⁸

What lessons can we draw from this brief sketch of mission to the Middle East, especially insights that are relevant to the discussion of mission in the wake of the Arab Spring? One point

stands out sharply for me: it was not really a setback or a failure when the foreign missionaries changed their policy of converting Muslims to one of renewing Eastern Christians so that these Christians would do what the missionaries could not do. The foreign missionaries unconsciously landed upon a truth that has proved itself over and over again in the Middle East: you cannot have access to Muslims and Islam in the region while completely bypassing the local Christians. Many in the ecclesiastical and missionary West have realized and appropriated this point, but not all. Even dialogue with Islam cannot be done effectively and fruitfully by simply jumping over Near Eastern Christians, who have lived with, among, and under Muslims for centuries. Their experience and contribution are essential. Have all the subsequent missionary waves from the West, including those coming today, learned and accepted this truth? I do not think so, and this is a problem for Near Eastern Christians. But those who have learned

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from the past and who still want to have a mission to the Middle East have realized that such a mission must support and cooperate with the Christians of the region, not bypass them.

In fact, there is mission *in* the Middle East, in the midst of the Arab Spring, which can be done only by the Christians of the region. Christian mission is the same yesterday, today, and forever—to witness to the love of God as revealed and embodied in the life, teachings, and destiny of Jesus Christ. In the Middle East today, the mission of Christians there is to continue to proclaim the Gospel of God's love by living that Gospel. *The main concrete challenge to this mission in the Middle Eastern context today is how to have a say in the future of Islam.* Given the resurgence of Islam as the dominant characteristic of the Arab Spring, the challenge facing Christians in the Middle East and their mission is how to have a role in the "whither" of Islam without antago-

nizing Muslims. That is, how can Middle Eastern Christians be partners from within in the change and transformation of Arab and Islamic societies, not as subversive or mistrusted elements, but as genuine partners working together with Muslims for a better quality of human life on all levels? As Malik reminds us:

Islam is more than a religion; it is a total outlook. Thus for the Christians of the Near East, Moslem culture, whether Arab, Turkish or Persian, is in a deep sense their culture. They [Christians] have always shouldered civic, economic, political and intellectual responsibility with their Moslem brethren. Therefore they cannot be too deeply interested in the development of their common heritage.⁹

Middle Eastern Christians are called to cooperate with, and critically accompany, moderate Muslims in the transformation of Islam. Has this been done in the past? Yes! Consider one of the effects of the Protestant missionary enterprise on Middle Eastern and Arab societies, especially in Lebanon. Some missionaries, influenced by the rise of liberal theology and the social gospel in the last quarter of the nineteenth century in the United States, gradually moved away from purely evangelistic work, engaging also in activities that were rather successful in creating common ground with the Muslim majority and were quite influential in shaping a more moderate and enlightened form of Islam in some places, especially in Lebanon. The so-called liberal or cultural Protestantism actually helped transform many Muslims to become open-minded, tolerant, and other-accepting persons who could coexist with Christians peacefully, and this change has affected their perception of their own religion. The humanizing and liberalizing aspect of mission is not to be downplayed or deplored as a betrayal of the evangelizing aspect. The complementarity of the two should be emphasized, appreciated, and supported. The challenge today is how to pursue and strengthen this cooperative, nonantagonizing relation to Islam and Muslims.

In conclusion, I am arguing that the proper role and mission of Christians from outside the region is to support Middle Eastern Christians and enable them to carry on their mission. Middle Eastern Christians are called specifically to "salt" Islam. For its part, world Christianity as a whole is called to make sure that the region is never emptied of its salt.¹⁰

Notes

1. This article is based on a lecture given at the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut, on December 6, 2013.
2. In 2012 the total population of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan, and Iraq was about 160 million, of which an estimated 10–13 million were Christians.
3. The figures and statistics presented here and in what follows are based on Reza Aslan, "The Christian Exodus: The Disastrous Campaign to Rid the Middle East of Christianity," *Foreign Affairs*, September 11, 2013.
4. Charles Habib Malik, ed., *God and Man in Contemporary Christian Thought: Proceedings of the Philosophy Symposium Held at the American University of Beirut, April 27–30, 1967* (Beirut: American Univ. of Beirut, 1970), xxxii.
5. Charles Malik, "The Near East: The Search for Truth," *Foreign Affairs* 30 (1952): 255.
6. Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christians: A History in the Middle East* (London: Mowbray, 1992), 280.
7. This section is based heavily on an unpublished address, "The Situation of Christians in the Near East," which I delivered in Frankfurt on April 24, 2009, at the annual synod meeting of the Evangelische Kirche in Hessen und Nassau.
8. The story of why the policy changed has been told and discussed by Habib Badr, "Mission to 'Nominal Christians': The Policy and Practice of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions" (Ph.D. diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1992).
9. Malik, "The Near East," 255.
10. Such commitment would include, for example, support for long standing middle institutions of civil society and Christian agencies of social transformation, as well as churches, Christian universities and seminaries.