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ABSTRACT

Marvel for a Remnant: the History and Hope of the Church in the Middle East

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The Middle East is the birthplace of Christianity. It appears, however, that Christianity has found its home further west of its birthplace, and in fact, may not be able to maintain any significant existence there for much longer. Ever since the rise of Islam, Christians native to the Middle East have been under one level of duress or another. After centuries of hardship, thousands upon thousands of Arab Christians are choosing to leave their ancestral homelands to live in more prosperous and liberal countries. This, however, need not spell the end of a Church presence in the Middle East, as some have supposed. For there is another migration at work – the migration of Muslims to faith in *Isa al Masih*! This phenomenon, while offering new life to the Arab church, also portends immense change as regards the form and practice of Christianity in the Middle East. The Arab church has in her future many dangers and decisions to navigate – and immense hope.

MARVEL FOR A REMNANT:
THE HISTORY AND HOPE OF THE CHURCH IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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PREFACE

“Thus says the Lord of hosts: If it is marvelous in the sight of the remnant of this people in those days, should it also be marvelous in my sight, declares the Lord of hosts?” (Zechariah 8:6).

Throughout God’s covenantal history with humanity, he has preserved for himself a righteous remnant: Seth, Noah, Abraham, the people of Israel – with many more between and many more behind. In composing this remnant, he has, according to human understanding, often made unlikely and even absurd choices. Today, the Arab Christian communities of the Middle East are in such a fragmented state that they render a natural parallel to the remnant of Israel which Zechariah addressed. And like the Israel that could not see beyond the destruction – so thorough - before its face, the Arab Christian church has been told that its day has come. The obituary has practically been written. And it is true – something is passing away in the Middle East. But it is not the Church. It may be a way of doing life as the Church, it may be a certain demographic of people that once made up the Church in that region. But God is doing something marvelous among the remnant of his people. He is reviving the Church in the Middle East – with Muslims! As he goes to breathtakingly extreme measures to win and establish a people, God is proving that there is immense and marvelous hope, for remnant (– no matter how wearied) and for outsider (– no matter how hostile) alike.

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Dr. David Garrison, Luke Halton, Paul Heiskell, and Tim Stoyan have graciously shared with me their insights, experiences, and stories. It was an honor to learn from you, and I do hope I have handled what you have entrusted to me veraciously, as it is worthy of great respect. Thank you for the ways in which you have risked to see the Lord's work among Muslims advanced.

When Jesus told us You were coming, He said, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

Truly, You have “done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.”

Holy Spirit, all I have written about is Your work - and so is the written work itself.

CHAPTER ONE

A History: From Pentecost to the Dawn of Ottoman Power

Introduction

Today “Arab” and “Muslim” are typically spoken of in the same breath, and in some western circles, are thought to be synonymous; the idea of an “Arab Christian” strikes members of such circles as oxymoronic. Likewise, the Middle East¹ is seen as being the home of Islam (and logically so - according to Pew Research, ninety three per cent of the Middle East’s and North Africa’ (MENA)² population is Muslim). But before it was it was the home of Islam, the Middle East was the birthplace and home of Christianity. What happened, to cause Christianity to be so eclipsed in the land of its origin that today it is largely forgotten? This chapter will follow events in the Middle

¹ During the first half of my work, when referring to the Middle East, I am speaking of a geographical area stretching (roughly) from the Nile to the Tigris and from the Black Sea to the Arabian Sea. This includes Asia Minor, the modern-day country of Turkey. The churches of Asia Minor were a thriving and integral part of the early Church, and it seems unfitting to me to speak about the early Church without including these believers. Since the first centuries, however, the government, language, and ethnic makeup of what is now Turkey has changed so significantly that the Turkish people would now be most properly identified with the Kazakhs of Kazakhstan or even the Uyghur in China than the Arabs to the south of them. For this reason, when we turn to the subject of what is happening among Arabs in the Middle East today, I will no longer be speaking of Turkey when I use that term.

² Under the Islamic Empire, the Middle East and North Africa came to share a government, a language, a religion, a worldview, and a history. Their histories have differed since the fall of the Islamic Empire, but many of the similarities created during the years under the caliphate have endured. These similarities uphold a connection, such that (as can be witnessed in the Arab Spring) much of what happens in North Africa still affects the Middle East and vice versa. For this reason, the Middle East and North Africa are often thought of as a single geo-cultural entity and studied together. At times in this work I will refer to MENA, instead of the Middle East alone, if the source from which I have drawn did not make a distinction between the two.

East from the birth of the Christianity to the rise of the Ottoman Empire, specifically looking at how those events shaped and altered the Arab church.

Arab World Before Islam

Many people are familiar with the course of Christianity's advancement through the Roman Empire without being aware of its development in its own birthplace and further eastward. Though the Biblical account tells us much more about the Gospel's progression westward than it does about evangelism in countries south and east of Jerusalem, it is not entirely silent on the subject. In the beginning of Acts, we see mention of Arab peoples: And they were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language? . . . both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and *Arabians* – we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God (emphasis mine).³ On the day of Pentecost, there were Jewish Arabs present in Jerusalem. They heard the Gospel preached in their own language, and took tales of the astonishing experience back to their homelands. So we see that from the very first day of Church activity, God has shown an ambition for the salvation of Arabs. Though the Bible tells us little else about any concentrated evangelism efforts aimed at Africa, the Middle East (with the exceptions of modern day Israel and Turkey), or Asia, world history shows us that the Christian message certainly did spread through those regions.

³ Acts 2:7-8, 11

From the missionary hub at Antioch, Christianity was taken to all the surrounding nations. Egypt, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia all heard. Christianity was deeply integrated into the Egyptian people by 300 A.D., and it was Antony, one of these believing Egyptians, who began Christian monasticism. A thriving monastic community in Cappadocia also sprung up around the same time. Christian monasticism in Asia Minor produced some of the best theologians Christianity has ever known - but it was at Edessa, in Mesopotamia, where Christian scholasticism shone the brightest. Edessa also happened to be the capital of the kingdom of Osroene, the world's first Christian kingdom.⁴ And it was from the church in Mesopotamia that the Gospel was launched into Asia, reaching as far as India and China.

It is not difficult to track the quick spread of Christianity through Egypt, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia, because those believing communities were so active, either in scholasticism and/or evangelism. When it comes to the question of a Christian presence in the Arabian Peninsula, there is less productivity to light our way. The Arabian peoples were more nomadic, and largely illiterate, so record keeping was spare. We know there must have been believers, though, because their representatives were present at the ecumenical synods and councils of the Church's early centuries. "Arabian hearers at Pentecost have their counterparts in Arabian bishops at the Council of Nicea."⁵

These councils, specifically at Ephesus and Chalcedon, would have incalculable impact on the course and nature of Christianity in the Middle East. At Ephesus in 431, the teachings of Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople, were condemned. He was exiled to

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 54.

⁵ Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 42.

Egypt, but many of his followers left Byzantium for Sassanid Persia, where they could practice their beliefs without interference, since the pagan Sassanids had no interest in the vicissitudes of Christian doctrine or their activities. The Nestorian believers were a remarkably vital and influential church – it was their missionary activity that reached Asia with the Gospel, eventually establishing believing communities as far away as modern day Xi'an and Beijing.⁶ Although Nestorian effectiveness in Asia is staggering, this dynamic community was condemned as heretical within the Byzantine Empire, and so their influence west of the Euphrates was greatly truncated. This would prove a significant loss for the other Middle Eastern believers. Kenneth Cragg intimates that if the influence which Nestorians once exercised over Edessa and eastern Arabia had remained, Christianity might have had a more meaningful and lasting presence in the Arabian Peninsula. A more Nestorian-natured Christianity in Arabia could have had important implications given that the peninsula would, in less than two centuries, become the birthplace of Islam.⁷

At Chalcedon in 451, a mere twenty years after the schism at Ephesus, Arab Christianity was to be fractured still further. At Chalcedon, the official Byzantine creed affirmed a Christology of two natures, divine and human, “coming together to form one person and one subsistence (*hypostasis*).”⁸ Denominations with a doctrine that described the Incarnation as achieved in a Christ with only one nature, in which divine and human were synthesized, were condemned as heretical. These “Monophysites,” as they would

⁶ Jenkins, 12-13.

⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁸ Greg Strand, “Christology and the Council of Chalcedon,” *Blog Network/Strands of Thought* (blog), EFCA, October 22, 2012, <http://strands.blogs.efca.org/tag/council-of-chalcedon/>.

come to be called, did not leave the empire as the Nestorians had. They stayed in their homelands and continued to be influential, but were on many occasions persecuted by Byzantine authorities. Conflict and bitterness abounded, and soon the fierce disputes created an environment in which different doctrines were promulgated and hotly defended not out of concern for accuracy, but because they had become bound up in the denominations' sense of communal identity. This state of disunity and Christological controversy is the one in which the Muslim conquerors would find the Arab Church upon their invasion in the 600s.

However, before we look at the Islam that came out of Arabia, let us look at the Christianity that preceded it. As I mentioned above, little is known about the believing communities in Arabia proper because of the general nomadic lifestyle. It does not appear that Christianity ever became as deeply rooted or influential in the Arabian Peninsula as it did in Egypt, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia. However, it *was* present, and it did leave a legacy of its presence. Philip Jenkins notes that Mohammad's Arabia was surrounded by Christianity on every side. To the west, across the Red Sea, lay the Christian kingdom of Axum, as well as Egypt. In the south, there were Christian sees in Yemen and Oman. To the west was Bahrain, which, despite its small size, had a Christian presence significant enough to merit two bishoprics. Further west, "other Christians were scattered across the trading communities of the Arab Gulf, along the sea routes that connected Mesopotamia to India."⁹ Two Christian Arab kingdoms lay to the north of the peninsula – the Ghassanids in the southeastern Levant, and the Lakhmids in southwestern Mesopotamia.

⁹ Jenkins, 188.

Al Hirah, the Lakhmid capital, was an important center for cultural development and Christian influence until the time of the Muslim conquest.

We know there were Christians not only around but also in the Arabian Peninsula. Some of the Arabian tribes adopted Christianity, and in the fifth century the town of Najran was a thriving Christian center. The most impressive proof of the presence of Christianity in Arabia is its appearance in the Qur'an. Christians and their beliefs are mentioned directly in the Qur'an several times. They also appear indirectly; important theological themes and some of the vocabulary used in the Qur'an clearly have Christian roots. These themes and words were plucked from "Christian Arabness as their antecedent context. It is here that we are to locate the main test, the most feasible proof, of Christian Arabness, namely its legacy to Islam. 'Legacy' is the proper word in the other sense also that it happened, as far as *Jazirat al Arab* was concerned, in a demise within that territory."¹⁰

Why that demise? Cragg proposes that while the Arab peoples were of a mind to find the monotheism of Christianity attractive, they were put off by the Greek influence in Christianity¹¹, its core message of forgiveness¹², and the subtleties of Christian doctrine.¹³ The Arab mind was ripe for a monotheism, but it required one which would

¹⁰ Cragg, 46.

¹¹ The Greek influences on Christianity were, naturally, especially pronounced among the denominations headed by Byzantium. Among the denominations not in favor with Byzantium, such as the Nestorians, the Semitic nature of Christianity was more pronounced. But as the more Greek-leaning denominations had the greatest representation in the Middle East, this was the Christianity the peoples of Arabia encountered.

¹² "Family and clan loyalty, and the pattern of the feud . . . were basic assumptions of life." Cragg, 33.

¹³ "The Qur'an moves within an Arab characteristic of mind for which concrete imagery was preferable to abstract ideas." Cragg, 33.

sacralize its current culture, with its language, its emphasis on tribal identity, etc.

Christianity does not ratify any culture as it is, but will include any culture within the “radical regeneration”¹⁴ which it necessitates. The Christian requirement that the culture of the Kingdom preside over every earthly culture offends Arabism (or any such –ism). Cragg proposes that this is the main reason Christianity was not adopted in the Arabian Peninsula:

To these . . . handicaps . . . of the content, the practice, and the language form of Christian faith we must add one another, perhaps more decisive factor. It has to do with the Arab search for identity, for an Arab self-assertion – assuming that we can reliably argue from the logic of what Islam finally afforded. The term “nationalism” would clearly be an anachronism applied to Arabs and Arabism in those centuries. But something akin to it is evident both in the Qur’an and in the career of Muhammad. It seems clear that Christianity was held not to satisfy this Arab quest for something to possess them of themselves.¹⁵

Christianity did not take in Arabia because it contradicted the pride of the Arab spirit.

Islam, a religion founded by an Arab for Arabs, provided Arabism with a foundation it had never before possessed; explaining, perhaps, its rapid expansion and unyielding tenure.

In 610, Muhammad had his first revelation. Over the course of the following two decades, he would garner a significant following. In the last two years of his life (630-632) Muhammad established control over the influential cities on the west coast of Arabia, which would become the launching pad for the momentous conquests to come. Upon his death (632), Muhammad’s successors, the caliphs, faced a brief struggle for control over the Arabian Peninsula. They soon quelled the rebellion, and promptly turned their attentions northward. In August of 636, at the Battle of Yarmuk, the Muslim armies

¹⁴ Cragg, 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

solidified power over the Levant. A few months later, in November of that same year, they gained control of the Persian Empire at the Battle of Qadisiya. Just four years after the prophet's death, the Muslim caliphs had conquered all the major kingdoms to the north of them. Then, it was on to Egypt. Alexandria surrendered in 642, after a long siege. The entirety of the present-day Middle East (minus Turkey) came under Muslim control within the span of a mere decade.

Conquest and Islamization

Looking at the world today, we see a sharp distinction between the ethos and practices of Muslims and those of Christians. There is a wide cultural gap between their worldviews and sets of values. Aware of this rift, and the violent conflict often attendant upon it, it is tempting for modern observers to read these acute differences into the history. If one makes that mistake, then one will naturally see the Islamic conquest as a dark cloud rising up out of Arabia to consume Christianity whole and forever alter the complexion of the Middle East. Though the Muslim conquest did, undeniably, set the Middle East on a radically different trajectory, it is important to note that the disparities between the peoples were not so pronounced as they are today, and likewise that Islamization did not happen overnight. Kenneth Cragg writes, "The devastating suddenness of the conquest, rather than outlandishness in its origins accounted for its impact. Rome and Persia had been factors in parts of Arabia for a long time, and Jews and Christians had contributed to the shaping of Muhammad's Islam."¹⁶ The reciprocal

¹⁶ 53.

influences natural to the centuries-long proximity of these kingdoms meant that the conquering Arabs did not strike the people of the invaded countries as so wholly other as we today would imagine. And, as mentioned earlier, there were many Christian themes in Muslim doctrine. Apparently, the similarities between the peoples and their faiths were so marked and so numerous that some of the Christian leaders, such as St. John of Damascus, saw Islam not as an entirely new religion, but as a Christian heresy. So when we today think of those who decided to convert to Islam, we must remember that the leap from Christianity to Islam was not always as momentous a leap as it is today.

And while some people did convert, many more did not. According to *Shari'a* law, monotheistic believers were allowed to maintain their religions under a system of social and political subjection called the *dhimma* contract. Under *dhimmi* status, Christians were allowed to stay in their homelands, and they did. Christians continued to be the majority population in the Middle East for several centuries after the Islamic conquest. “Eastern Christianity had many spiritual and cultural centers, and the map of these religious powerhouses remained little changed between 500 and 1200 – that is, across the seemingly irrevocable change caused by the Arab conquests.”¹⁷ For the first five hundred or so years of Islam, Christians were able not only to survive, but to live relatively well in an empire that was “culturally and spiritually Christian, but politically Muslim.”¹⁸

Christianity’s continuation and prevalence under Muslim rule rested on very practical foundations. The caliphs conquered *a lot* of land with *a lot* of Christian inhabitants very quickly. These Muslim leaders simply did not have the numbers

¹⁷ Jenkins, 58.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

necessary to create an infrastructure that could quickly accomplish a thoroughgoing Islamization. Furthermore, the nomadic tribes of Arabia were often illiterate, while the Christian peoples were not only well educated – they excelled in administrative and literary fields. Throughout the new Islamic empire, the Muslim regional leaders had administrative staffs made up almost entirely of Christians. At the time of the conquest, the Muslims were not yet capable of totalitarian control, and for the control they could exercise they required the assistance of local Christians. Thus Islamization was not an overnight achievement, but took place slowly and by degrees over centuries.

Dhimmitude

Islamization was accomplished slowly – but it was accomplished. Here it is necessary for us to return to the concept of the *dhimma* system. Though the *dhimmi* status was a concession that allowed Christians to keep their lives and their homes, it also, with time, proved to be Islam's most ingenious tool of Islamization. What follows below is a description of what *dhimmitude* would come to mean over the force of centuries. The restrictions and deprivations of *dhimmi* status were not equally applied across the Muslim empire at all times. Implementation was not uniform, but varied in time and place, depending on the zeal and capabilities of local officials. That said, the *dhimmi* condition was integral to the experience of being a Christian in a politically Muslim society, and is probably the single most important historical factor for understanding Christianity as it exists in the Middle East today.

At its most basic, the *dhimma* system was a contractual relationship between the non-Muslim and Muslim communities in which the subjected were granted 'protection'

from elimination in exchange for paying the *jizyah*, or poll-tax. *Dhimma* communities were allowed to maintain their own customs and traditions, such as in matters of doctrine, religious services and ritual, church organization, personal status, marriage and family, the education of children, etc.; however, the allowances did not extend beyond this specific mode of community life which was to be kept private. In the public and political spheres, *dhimmis* were required to observe certain restrictions. These restrictions were numerous, ranging from the principal to the petty. At some times in the history of *dhimmitude*, *dhimmis* were required to wear certain clothes or badges denoting their non-Muslim status. There were rules about precisely how they were to ride and dismount, and rules prescribing that *dhimmis* must give way to Muslims in public spaces. There were certain words and greetings *dhimmis* were not allowed to use when speaking with Muslims. Their dress, manners, and movements - everything about their social presence - were circumscribed in some way by their *dhimmitude*. *Dhimmi* communities were not allowed to erect new church buildings, and when under more strict application of the rules, were not even allowed to repair old ones. *Dhimmis* had no right of retaliation against Muslims, nor were they allowed to testify against Muslims in court, so Muslims could encroach and molest with impunity. Proselytization was strictly forbidden. The *dhimma* contract “required that the churches become private to themselves, subject to a steady decrease in numbers.”¹⁹

The widespread enforcing of minority status inculcated in Muslims a true belief in their superiority. The adoption of *dhimmitude* into the cultural ethos resulted in a neglecting of the civil rights of Christians, a cap on social mobility, discrimination in

¹⁹ Cragg, 71.

employment, limited opportunities, and a host of other disabilities. The social dominance of Islam proved a powerful incentive for Islamization. Cragg describes this effect as follows:

Muslim Arabs were not saturation colonizers but slow assimilators to themselves of native people by dint of the inferiorizing implicit in *dhimmi* status and the economic and other attractions of accession to the dominant faith and the ascendant society... [Christians] were steadily prey to economic, social, and psychological pressures to abandon [Christianity].²⁰

So though the *dhimma* contract seemed to serve as the means by which Christians could maintain their communities in their homelands, it was simultaneously a tool of enduring discrimination and inferiorization, designed to spur conformity. *Dhimmitude* set the social plane at a perpetual tilt so that a gradual slide into Islamization was certain.

Over time, the relentless indignities imposed by the dominant Islam carved certain characteristics into the oppressed communities, which help us understand the nature of Arab churches as we find them today.

Vulnerability. Islam set the terms of survival for the *dhimmi* communities, and Christians continued to survive only at Islam's behest. This "contractual basis of security"²¹ meant they never really had any, for at any moment the Muslim leaders could claim the Christians had broken the terms of the contract in some way, and therefore their lives were forfeit. Though this rarely happened, the fact remained that the existence of the Christian communities was perpetually under the sword of Damocles. Unmitigated vulnerability meant that Christians were easily maneuvered and manipulated. From their eternal one-down position they had no bargaining power or means of self-assertion

²⁰ Cragg, 174 and 179.

²¹ Ibid., 71.

against the vagaries of Muslim notables. Sometimes, especially during the Ottoman period, Christian leaders caved to the temptation of venality, whether to stave off persecution or to purchase a position. The chronic vulnerability of the Christians was always corrosive, and sometimes corrupting.²²

Sectarianism. The legitimate presence of *dhimmi* individuals was mediated to the wider society through the *dhimmi* community. One was either a *dhimmi* or a Muslim; there were no social roles or categories other than those. Thus one's communal identity was essential to one's existence, and the strict restrictions placed upon the *dhimmi* communities did not allow for development, innovation, or growth. Tight social constraints meant that Christian communities were condemned to remain as they were, to be what they had always been. Customs and traditions, denied the freedom to evolve, fossilized, and became the cherished markers of communal identity, zealously defended. Any and all differences, even if coming from within a neighboring Christian congregation, were a challenge of identity and were therefore met with diffidence. The sectarianism engendered by the *dhimmi* status means that the Christian minority lives with perpetually raised hackles. With "its basic concept of rigid identity via community" *dhimmitude* has "ministered to introversion and stagnation"²³ of the Christian communities, as well as "a doggedness engrossed in mere survival."²⁴ This ghettoized frame of mind haunts the Christians of the Arab world today, exposing them to their

²² Cragg, 181.

²³ Ibid., 118.

²⁴ Ibid., 18.

detractors' accusation that they are "that minority obsessed with their sense of being a minority."²⁵

Marginalization. The *dhimmi* system is designed to keep the minority and the majority groups insulated from one another. The thinly veiled hatred of the majority is kept at bay only so long as the minority makes themselves as unobtrusive as possible. They are permitted to exist within society, but not to exercise any influence over it. Cragg describes their dilemma this way: "[Christians] have a language, a culture, and a memory that incorporate them within an isolation. They are caught in a paradox of belonging in exemption."²⁶ The *dhimmi* community typically possesses no position of prominence by which to influence the goings-on of the public sphere. Even the smallest move toward influence is quickly met with resentment and threats. Attempts to exercise a public voice are leveled by "the familiar charge of *istikbar*, or 'arrogance,' from alarmed or aggressive Muslim quarters."²⁷ As mentioned above, in the first centuries of the Muslim empire, Christians distinguished themselves by their administrative and literary skills. These proficiencies would remain a niche for the Christian people for years to come, but they would also raise the ire of Muslims who resented their success. "Strictly orthodox Muslims complained about the conspicuous wealth and power of the Christians. When Muslim activist al Jahiz denounced Christians in the ninth century, his main complaint was that they were too rich and that the people respected them too much for their

²⁵ Cragg, 226.

²⁶ Ibid., 282.

²⁷ Ibid., 171.

business dealings.”²⁸ These were not idle complaints. In some places and times, being a Christian with power or money could get you killed (witness the assassination of Boutros Ghali). Arab Christians are keenly aware of their subordinate place in society, and the dangers incumbent upon seeking promotion. Still today, “they live with the pain of how marginal they are.”²⁹

Unsure Identity. The Middle East is a society strongly motivated by shame and honor. Underlying the *dhimma* contract is an aim to obliterate the *dhimmi*’s sense of honor, and thus their identity. The goal of *dhimmi* status is humiliation, “according to the verse in the Koran which says they must pay the tribute . . . ‘from their own hand (in other words directly) and be humiliated.’”³⁰ In Arab cultures, to undermine a person’s honor is to threaten their sense of self.

Arabs also tend to be very concrete thinkers, with a considerable emphasis on tangibles. Under the *dhimmi* condition, the physical presence of Christian communities was tightly circumscribed. As mentioned earlier, new church buildings were not allowed, and sometimes the repair of old ones was prohibited too. Christian homes were not to be built taller than Muslim houses. Christian noises, of either celebration (bell-ringing) or sadness (wailing at a funeral) were taboo. “Christian churches and rituals were forced into varying degrees of concealment. . . Cities could have a soundscape based on the

²⁸ Jenkins, 112.

²⁹ Cragg, 253.

³⁰ Samir Khalil Samir, “The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society Throughout History,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 72. Referring to verse twenty nine of sura nine.

Muslim muezzin or Christian bells, but not both. Several times a day, the call to prayer sent a straightforward message about who held political power.”³¹

The laws of *dhimmitude* were set up in such a way that a visitor to a city in the Arab world could not fail to notice the imposing call to prayer, nor the minarets defining the skyline. But such a visitor would be hard pressed to find an establishment that was clearly Christian, and if he could, he would find an old shabby building in disrepair. This denial of the physical presence of Christians was tantamount to denying their actual presence. The city was definitively Muslim space, the air reserved for Muslim sounds. The implication of such Islamic saturation was that the very ground the *dhimmi* walked on and the very air he breathed was begrudged him, as being properly Muslim.

Language, as well as space, was so thoroughly Islamized that there were certain words and phrases *dhimmis* were not allowed to say, and topics they were not allowed to speak on. These rules bore the implicit sense that Arab words are too good to come out of a Christian mouth, and are too honorable to be corrupted by shameful Christian use.

Islam’s total preponderance of physical space and language soon turned into an appropriation of the Arab identity. To be Arab was to be Muslim. To be Muslim was to be Arab (at least until the time of the Ottomans). The humiliations of *dhimmitude* and the dominance of Islam served to alienate Arab Christians from pride in their heritage, the physical space they lived in, and their ethnic identity. They were oppressed as “exiles, where they had lately been natives.”³² Is it any wonder that they clung so tenaciously to the communal idiosyncrasies that gave them at least a minimal sense of self? Or, likewise,

³¹ Jenkins, 216-217.

³² Cragg, 60.

any wonder that in later years they would be quick to leave their homelands, when they were capable of doing so? They had long been made strangers where they should have been citizens; their living borrowed from a hostile society that always put the burden of proof on their existence.

From Caliphs to Ottomans

Demographic Shifts Under the Muslim Caliphate

As I stated at the beginning of our foray into *dhimmitude*, the effect that the *dhimmi* status would have on the existence and psyche of Christianity in the Middle East was accomplished over centuries, and the discriminatory measures were not applied with equal severity in all places. So while the *dhimmi* status placed the Christian communities at a permanent disadvantage, which could easily devolve into violence against them, it was not inherently violent. Though there were sporadic instances of religiously motivated attacks against Christians under the Islamic caliphate, the years of the Muslim Empire were, compared to what was coming, relatively peaceful. The greater part of demographic change and Muslim-majority building that happened under the caliphs was accomplished by non-coercive means, such as:

- Conversion, due to....
 - o The influence of local notables and benefactors
 - o A desire for legal, social, and economic advantages
 - o Charismatic powers of Muslim saints
 - o Authentic religious conviction (the converts genuinely deemed Islam to be God's revelation)

- Population Transfer - members of the Christian faith were “outnumbered or diluted by newer population stocks.” Muslims emigrated from other lands to gradually replace the natives.³³
- Differential Population Growth - the new Muslim populace tended to have more children than the Christians, so numbers shifted toward a Muslim majority not primarily because Christians were converting, but because Muslims were reproducing so rapidly.

These gradual means of Islamization in partnership with the *dhimma* system would have been sufficient for the realization of a Muslim majority in the Middle East eventually, though it would most likely have taken hundreds of more years than what we actually see unfold. The process was catalyzed by periodic, noticeable upward swings in the number of converts that coincide with tumultuous events, such as changes of dynasty or regime, economic straits, climate change, and other forms of social unrest. Philip Jenkins calls this pattern of population change “punctuated equilibrium.”³⁴ Conversion happened in surges, instead taking place steadily. After such a surge, when “Muslim numbers reached a new plateau, religious loyalties would remain fairly steady for decades or even centuries before another sudden upward movement.”³⁵

Jenkins notes two specific conversion “booms” that took place while the Muslim caliphs had power. The first surge happened in the late eighth century, and we see its effects reflected, a hundred years later (in the late ninth century - tenth century), in the

³³ Jenkins, 33.

³⁴ Ibid., 114.

³⁵ Ibid.

appearance of a solid Muslim majority in Egypt. There was another conversion boom in the early eleventh century (perhaps in response to the Crusades, and the beginning of the Seljuk invasions) and, in that same century, the Muslim majority was solidified in Syria and Mesopotamia.³⁶ There followed a few centuries of ‘equilibrium,’ in which the Christians of the region experienced a great flowering of creativity and cultural achievement. It is important to remember that, in the midst of the oppression of *dhimmitude*, political instability, and occasional violence, this people “did not just steadily decline from late antiquity onward, shrinking ever more timidly before Muslim advances: it continually showed striking powers of renewal.”³⁷ So, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the Christian communities attained to nothing short of a cultural renaissance. Even 700 years after the onset of Islam, the Arab Church was persisting, in some regards, prospering. It was not until approximately 1300 that “the axe [fell], and quite suddenly.”³⁸

The First “Fall”: Violence Against the Arab Church (1200 – 1500)

The beginning of the end for the church in Asia Minor actually came two hundred years before the thirteenth century, in the mid eleventh, when the Seljuk Turks began their invasion of Anatolia. But the Turks’ warring would continue across the centuries into the 1300s and become a part of the violent landscape of that time. While the Turks could not wholly topple the Byzantine Empire, their incursions drastically weakened Byzantine power and presence in Asia Minor, thereby weakening the empire as a whole.

³⁶ Jenkins, 114.

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 32.

By the thirteenth century, Byzantine influence in Middle Eastern lands had essentially collapsed, leaving a dangerous power vacuum. Warring Muslim states and the recently arrived Mongol invaders rushed to fill the void. In 1258 Mongols conquered Baghdad and killed the presiding Abbasid caliph, marking the end of the Islamic Empire's meaningful existence. For the next two and half centuries, the Mamluks of Egypt and the Mongols would be the prevailing forces in the Middle East.

These were to be disastrously violent centuries, but it is important to note that the bloodletting was not, initially, religiously motivated. From the onset of Seljuk aggression in the eleventh century till the consolidation of Mamluk and Mongol power in the thirteenth, brutality towards certain religious groups was the unintentional byproduct of the horrific but, frankly, typical practices of foreign invasions. The Turks just happened to be Muslim; the Byzantines and Armenians just happened to be Christian. So while there existed the seemingly religiously charged equation of Muslims killing Christians, religion was, in fact, for the time being, incidental. That said, the incidental killing of Christians still has the same result as the intentional killing of Christians. "Although we cannot talk of persecution, the effects of war were cataclysmic enough. Whatever their intentions, the Turks shredded Christian ecclesiastical institutions [in Asia Minor] beyond repair."³⁹ War would continue on that beleaguered peninsula until the substantiation of Ottoman power in the fifteenth century. The result? The near eradication of a church presence. "By the late fifteenth century, the number of bishoprics in Anatolia contracted from three hundred seventy-three to just *three*."⁴⁰ An enclave of Armenian believers was able to persist for several more centuries. But the vibrant believing bodies - established

³⁹ Jenkins, 118.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, 131.

by the apostles, recorded in the book of Acts, and home to the patristic luminaries - were extinguished by the crushing warfare visited upon them during the middle ages.

The religiously neutral violence that persisted into the thirteenth century was devastating, but, tragically, there was worse to come. When the Mongols first arrived on the scene in the 1200s, they showed promising signs of a favorable disposition toward Christianity. Their clemency toward Christians and offensives against Muslim powers were, again, politically motivated. But Christians were so eager to be out from under the thumb of Muslim oppression that they readily aligned themselves with the Mongol invaders, without considering how this alliance could be dangerous should the political climate change. The Christians of Egypt were the first to feel the repercussions of this choice.

Persecution in Egypt. During their tenancy in the Middle East, the Mongols held solid power in Mesopotamia and Syria, reaching at times as far as Palestine, with their sights set on Egypt. They were not able to lay hands on this elusive prize, however, because the Mamluk sultans held them at bay. Despite Egypt's military victories, the Mongols continued to pose a persistent threat to the staunchly Islamic Mamluks; thus, they were intensely feared and hated. The enmity between Mamluks and Mongols put the Christians in Egypt in a particularly compromising position, their Mongol sympathies being well known. Jenkins explains:

After the sack of Baghdad, it was not far-fetched to imagine a world in which Egypt would stand alone as the last remaining Muslim great power, in a Middle East dominated by Christian Mongols. And the more explicitly Islamic the Mamluk campaigns became, the more tempting it was for local Christians to act as a fifth

column for Mongol forces, which in turn called forth worse displays of Muslim revenge.⁴¹

So, in Egypt, in the late 1200s, a great persecution was launched against the Coptic Church. Though activated by political dynamics, it was quite clearly a campaign of sustained violence targeting Christians as such. Religious persecution had begun in earnest, and the active hostility would be perpetuated throughout the fourteenth century.

In Egypt, this persecution took many forms. Churches were looted by mobs, both buildings and relics destroyed. Christians were removed from employment, and blamed for all sorts of social ills, from setting fires in Cairo to using their positions as administrators and financiers to steal Muslim resources. *Dhimmi* codes were enforced with fresh fervor, and new, harsher, more restrictive interpretations of *Shari'a* law were implemented. In fact, writings of intransigent Muslim scholars from this period have served as inspiration for present-day extremist and *jihadi* movements. Ibn Taymiyyah, a prominent scholar of this time, was a professed hero of Osama bin Laden.⁴² Realizing that the policies of Islamic leaders in the late thirteenth – fourteenth centuries have stoked the visionary fires of terrorists today ought to provide a hint of what these Coptic believers were up against. Christians lived under the suspicious, hating gaze of their Muslim neighbors, and when tensions rose too high, sultans would allow their people to perform a purge. By the end of the fourteenth century, the story of Christianity in Egypt had become a catalogue of carnage: “When Al-Mazriqui surveyed Egypt’s monasteries in the early fifteenth century, he was recording a blasted landscape... The entries become monotonous: ‘now destroyed’; ‘fallen into decay’; ‘no one lives there’; ‘now likewise

⁴¹ Jenkins, 125.

⁴² Ibid., 126.

destroyed’; ‘In the district of Al-Bahnasa there were many monasteries now destroyed.’”⁴³ As a result of this persecution, more than a century long, the Coptic Church was reduced to the ten percent minority status they possessed until recently. Thus depleted, they would endure as a church in hibernation for hundreds of years.

Persecution in the Levant and Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, the persecution of Christians was not to be confined to Egypt alone. Initially, as I mentioned, the Mongol conquerors had shown a measure of favor toward Christianity and aggressively subjected Muslim powers. However, as the Mongol tenancy in the Middle East lengthened, ruling families began to lean towards Islam. By the end of the thirteenth century, the Mongol adoption of Islam was decided. Christians would find that the Mongol Islamic regime was far more unforgiving than the Arab had been.

When the Mongol rulers Islamized, they initiated a persecution in Mesopotamia and Syria equal in ferocity to the one in Egypt. And, as in Egypt, this tenure of violence began in the late 1200’s, reaching deep into the coming century. “The story of Christianity in these parts, like that of Egypt, becomes a litany of disasters and ever more draconian penal laws.”⁴⁴ Widespread destruction or closure of churches ensued. Christian leaders were targeted. Mobs attacked. There were intermittent massacres. As many of the clergy were killed, church organization fell into disarray, crippling the remaining congregations.

Even as religious persecution was ongoing, a new scourge rose to plague the earth, in the form of Timur (reigned 1370-1405) - Mongol ruler and one of the most pernicious

⁴³ Jenkins, 128.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 129.

men to ever live. He hated Christians just as much as his Islamized forebears, but he took their brutality to unprecedented extremes, visiting unmitigated destruction upon vast swaths of Asia. His reign of terror spelled the end for the Jacobite and Nestorian congregations of Mesopotamia..

After the time of Timur, Mongol power began, slowly, to wane. As the fifteenth century progressed, the Ottomans, who had begun their growth as an empire in 1299, were gaining steam. In 1453 the Ottomans conquered Constantinople, marking their legitimization as an empire, and likewise the official end of Asian Christendom. Though the fall of Constantinople had immense “symbolic weight,” it was not of much practical significance since the Ottomans had already absorbed most of Byzantium, and “at least as a majority faith, Christianity had long since lost its importance. From the fourteenth century, Islam had gained a decisive role as the dominant faith in the Middle East, and the only remaining question was how long Christians could retain any presence whatever.”⁴⁵

Results of the “Fall.”

The Middle East was subjected to the vagaries and assaults of various regimes starting in the late eleventh century with the Seljuk invasions of Asia Minor, quickly followed by the Crusades, with contests of power between Mongol, Mamluk, and Ottoman continuing into the fifteenth century. Christians were at a distinct disadvantage throughout these bloody centuries; therefore, the ravages of warfare were often magnified in their communities. The many years of political and military turmoil eventually grew

⁴⁵ Jenkins, 138.

(or degenerated) into “a crescendo of violence and discrimination”⁴⁶ against Christians in the fourteenth century. Just as the ongoing attacks of the Seljuk Turks had brought about the de-Christianization of Asia Minor, the persecutions of the fourteenth centuries resulted in the demise of the Nestorian and Jacobite congregations of Mesopotamia, as well as the marked depletion and debilitation of Christian communities across Egypt and Syria. According to Jenkins, “we can properly see the fourteenth century as marking the decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East.”⁴⁷ (Next we shall look at how the remnant of the Middle Eastern Church managed to endure through the oncoming centuries of Ottoman rule.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, 32.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 98.

CHAPTER TWO

A History: Ottoman Empire to Arab Spring

Introduction

In the last chapter, we observed Islam's entrance into the story of the Middle East (and the world, really), the changes that were slowly worked into the demographics of the region while it was ruled by the Islamic caliphate, and the devastation that followed upon the Mongol/Mamluk rivalry. In this chapter we will look at what life was like for Arab Christians in the Ottoman Empire (largely defined by the *millet* system and interactions with the West), and how those conditions set up the perfect storm which would ravage Arab Christianity in the twentieth century. The violence visited upon Arab Christians in the twentieth century constitutes the second "fall," and has subsequently led to the widespread emigration which defines the state of the Arab Christianity today. The pace of emigration has only quickened since the Arab Spring has exposed the Arab church to even greater danger. In this chapter we will finish tracing the history that has brought the Arab church in the Middle East to the condition it is in today.

Life in the Ottoman Empire

Millet System

Christians were both strangely benefitted and harmed by the state of affairs in the Ottoman Empire. The *millet* system, which proved to be a double-edged sword, was the defining feature of Christian life in the Ottoman Empire. Put roughly, the *millet* system was the Ottoman Empire's institutionalization of the *dhimma* system. At least, it continued with the *dhimma* arrangement whereby the religious community "became [an] intermediary [body] between the individual and the State."³ However, it did not apply to Christianity alone, but to every religion within the empire, including Islam. All subjects were organized, ruled, and accounted for according to their religion. The *millet* system made of each religious community an "autonomous, self-governing" entity, allowed to implement its own laws and conduct its own affairs, so long as it maintained allegiance and paid taxes to the Ottoman sultan. Each *millet* was overseen by its own religious hierarchy, so in the case of the Christian *millets*, the highest political leader was each respective patriarch.

The Ottoman Empire, at its zenith, stretched from Morocco to the Caspian Sea and possessed all of the Balkan Peninsula, pressing even further into Europe, almost as far as Poland. Due to its great scope (particularly because of its northern territories), the Ottoman world was far more heterogeneous than the Islamic empire had been. The *millet* system was the Ottoman's bid at managing such heterogeneity. This heterogeneity in turn insured that the sultans treated the different *millets* much more evenhandedly than the

³ Andrea Pacini, "Introduction," in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 5.

Muslim caliphs had treated their *dhimmi* populations. Muslims were still the socially ascendant, but the Ottoman government, in many ways, curtailed the ascendancy of the extremist political agenda. The Ottoman administration via the *millet* system offered Christian populations a measure of stability that had been woefully lacking in previous centuries (especially the centuries immediately preceding the Ottoman rise to power).

In addition to greater stability, Christians found that the Ottoman government provided them with increased opportunities for participation and influence in society. Theoretically, because of the practice of *devsirme*, a Christian could even rise to the heights of being Grand Vizier. But *devsirme* is a perfect example of how the possibility of prosperity often came at great cost. Instead of exacting *jizyah* from their Christian subjects, Ottomans demanded that “Christian families... give a proportionate number of their sons to be raised by the state as slaves, but also as elite soldiers,”⁴ called janissaries. This harvesting of Christian children was known as *devsirme*. Horrific as it sounds, these children typically ended up having better economic prospects and greater social mobility than a normal life within the *millet* could have afforded them. They also typically ended up converting to Islam. So “although the system provided a kind of social advancement for subject peoples, it clearly represented a high degree of religious compulsion.”⁵ Though extreme, *devsirme* is a quintessential example of a truth that obtained throughout the Ottoman years: increased influence for Christians actually tended toward increased Islamization.

⁴ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 143.

⁵ Jenkins, 143.

There were still other ways the Ottomans conducted empire that would, in later years, prove detrimental to Christian existence. Earlier I described a *millet* as “an ‘autonomous, self-governing’ entity, allowed to implement its own laws and conduct its own affairs.” Does a *millet* sound remarkably like a nation? If so, that’s because it was. The dictionary⁶ defines a nation as “a large body of people, associated with a particular territory” and possessing its own government. Substitute the word “territory” with “religion,” and you have a *millet* (*millet* actually means “nation” in Turkish). The Ottoman Empire turned religions into nations, demarcating governmental units by creed instead of geography. This “identification of nation with religious denomination... institutionalized the idea of denomination even more”⁷ in the Middle Eastern psyche. Such equivocation of faith and nationality “was to have a deep influence on trends inside the Ottoman Empire towards the end of its existence, when religion as identified with nationhood caused the break up of multi-religious society in the Turkish and European areas of the Empire.”⁸

The religious intolerance which the *millet* system inevitably engendered, ultimately expressed in the Armenian genocide of the twentieth century, was not to be fully denuded until the Ottoman Empire began falling apart. However, the corrupting influence of the politicization of religion found more immediate expression in its effect upon Christian leadership. Through the *millet* system, the Ottomans essentially turned religious bodies into kingdoms, thereby turning religious leaders into kings. Just as all

⁶ Dictionary. com <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/nation?s=t>>

⁷ Pacini, “Introduction,” 6.

⁸ Ibid.

manner of sordid machinations have customarily been the habitués of political ambition, so they now became standard accompaniment to the succession of patriarchs. The problem was further exacerbated by the fact that the Ottomans initially threw the multitude of Christian denominations together in one *millet*, which put great stress upon the respective hierarchies. “It was, all in all, a perverse system” that “served to intensify the factious temper,”⁹ and broke down and crippled leadership at all levels.

Clearly, even with greater stability and more opportunities for social advancement, Christian life in the Ottoman Empire was still fraught with struggles, and still sat on a socio-political plane tipped toward Islamization. The pressure had been lessened since the great persecutions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, but was by no means off. The degradations and challenges the Christians faced under Ottoman regimes certainly factored into the decisions they made to align themselves with Western interests. European nations were very active in the affairs in the Ottoman Empire, and their interferences became, along with the *millet* system, a defining feature of Christian life in the Ottoman centuries. The effects of Europe’s ventures into Middle Eastern history have been tragic and enduring. If we should omit this part of the story, we would be condemned to misapprehend the straits that Arab Christians find themselves in today.

Wounds from the West

The Crusades. Of course, the history of enmity between West and East began long before the rise of the Ottoman Empire. The West would say it began with the Arab conquest, which they aimed to avenge with the infamous Crusades. The Crusades in turn,

⁹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 118.

provided the grounds for eastern hatred of the West, but also, significantly, hatred of Christianity. The crimes of the Christian West would become an ineluctable bane for the local Christians of the Middle East. The Crusades “left noble piles of architecture on the eastern landscape but seared the eastern soul. They gave Arab Muslims through every succeeding century a warrant of memory to hold against Christian Arabs, as, by association, liable to pseudo-Arabness or worse.”¹⁰

The capitulations and protectorates. From the end of the Crusades (mid to late 1200s) to the around the time of growing Ottoman strength (first half of sixteenth century), Europe managed to keep its distance. These centuries, which had proved so devastating for the Middle East, were disastrous for Europe as well. While the Middle East was being shredded by warfare between Mongol and Mamluk, Byzantine and Turk, Europe was simultaneously being battered by severe famine, the Black Death, and a few of their own wars (most prominent among them the Hundred Years War). Around the same time the Middle East was regaining some equilibrium under Ottoman authority, Europe was also finding its footing, and therefore a revived interest in international trade. Starting with France, European nations began to create contracts with the Ottoman Empire that exempted their tradesmen from inconveniences of Ottoman jurisdiction like conscription, taxation, and criminal prosecution. Included in these arrangements, known as capitulations, was the “right to recruit for commercial purposes the services of local agents, as dragomans or translators, and as facilitators of their enterprises.”¹¹ The

¹⁰ Cragg, 23.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

Christian populations of the empire tended to be more linguistically skilled than their Muslim counterparts, and what with the religious affinity, Arab Christians were a most natural choice for the European merchants. Eventually, European powers began to campaign for the privileges of the capitulations to be applied to their favored local recruits. It soon followed that “western states. . . [extended] the idea of protection from trading clients alone to whole communities in the major ports and cites and beyond.”¹² The Ottomans’ good treatment of native Christian groups became a clause in the trading agreements. In essence, European nations finagled Ottoman authorities into allowing them “to exercise extraterritorial jurisdiction over”¹³ Arab Christian populations within the Ottoman Empire. “In some cases local consuls and resident merchants were actually granted alien citizenship.”¹⁴

The eastern Christians were naturally quite happy to comply with these arrangements. Riding on the coattails of the capitulations provided them with an opportunity to improve their conditions within the Empire. Though the *millet* system had afforded a little more security than mere *dhimmi* status, it was still an institution formulated and upheld by Muslim authorities, and therefore its present moderation could not be counted on to endure. Having an outside, non-Muslim party interested in their welfare proffered an altogether different level of security not to be passed up. Furthermore, being protégés of Europe promised new economic and educational advantages. However, in years to come, the eastern Christians would find that their

¹² Cragg, 122-123.

¹³ Encyclopaedia Britannica online
<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/94037/capitulation>

¹⁴ Cragg, 123.

alliance with the West was often a menace to their well being, rather than an insurance of it.

Uniatism. Europe's renewed commercial interest in the Middle East was soon followed by a renewed religious interest. Catholic missionaries from the West put forth new efforts matching the endeavors of the protectorates; they too, wanted the best for the eastern Christians. And in their humble view, what was best for the eastern Christians was that they become Catholics. Whether their pursuit of new sees for Rome really was a case of mistaken benevolence, or actually another of the West's bald attempts at empire, the fact remains that the protectorates and Uniatism did not merely exist together – they often worked together. “There was pressure – and there was yielding – to extend the logic of protection to that of ecclesiastical affiliation. Churches that could be protégés could well also be ‘uniates’... accepting the rule and discipline of the Western Rome.”¹⁵ Many churches made decisions to become uniate congregations so as to strengthen their alignment with the West, hoping thereby to merit even further favor and aid. The ecclesiastical affiliation, in addition to their mercantile services, was one more tie to bind them to their powerful ally.

Though a comprehensible grab at security, the eastern Christians' partnership with Rome would prove to be less than ideal, possessed of unforeseen pitfalls. First of all, Uniatism visited even deeper division upon the already fractured denominations of the Arab church. “Catholicization incited sharp controversies within the churches, driving

¹⁵ Cragg, 123.

schisms and defections,”¹⁶ and further pluralizing their identities. Instead of being a relief from the pressure of Islamization, Uniatism subjected the Arab church to the twin pressure of Catholicization.

Rather than seeking to see the Arab Christians thrive in their homelands, the western church acted as a “predatory rival bent on annexation.”¹⁷ The congregations they succeeded in annexing experienced a deepened “emotional and psychic alienation from their own locale.”¹⁸ Dependence on the West changed the nature of Arab Christianity. “It estranged [believers] from their own Syriac roots,” giving them “a western orientation at odds with the logic of both geography and politics.”¹⁹ European protection was able to spare Arab Christians some of the injustices typically visited upon minorities, but it could not save them from the insular nature of their existence; ultimately, it just reinforced the tendency toward separatism, making it harder, in many ways, for them to be who they were where they were.

The Eastern Question. What with deepening commercial empires, religious empire, and naturally, some military presence to go with it, European nations had much at stake in the Ottoman world. “The Eastern Question” (which was only a “question” for the West) was the nearly two centuries long power struggle (c. 1768-1948) between Russia, France, and Britain in which they aimed to make the pieces of the crumbling Ottoman Empire fall out according to their best interests. During this time, the West

¹⁶ Jenkins, 147.

¹⁷ Ibid., 240.

¹⁸ Cragg, 123.

¹⁹ Ibid., 127.

attempted to disguise their intrigues by advancing their commercial and political ends in the garb of Christian concern. More plainly than ever before, patronage devolved into manipulation. “At the dramatic close of the Ottoman Empire the West, as ‘protector’ of the Christians, imposed its will on the East... Middle Eastern society was unable to modernize itself, so the West imposed its own ideas and structures, as well as the form of the States which were created.”²⁰

The peoples of the East would never forget how they had been carved up to please western appetites. Though hapless, they were not oblivious to the supposedly sub rosa power plays even as they were going on. Thus during the final century of the Ottoman Empire, an even deeper, more implacable distrust and resentment for all things western was taking root in the Arab mind. And “all things western” could be considered, quite reasonably, to include their local protégés, the Christians. In the eyes of their Muslim neighbors and authorities, Arab Christians became treacherous internal enemies, due to their association with foreign imperialism. Throughout these years, “the easternness of Christian origins was totally obscured in the bitterness of westward grievances.”²¹

Temporary benefits and lasting harm. The very first Catholic missionaries ventured into the Middle East in the latter years of the Islamic Empire, even before Ottoman power. Protestants, however, did not begin earnest missionary activity among Arabs until the early nineteenth century, about a century before Ottoman collapse. Most of these years and efforts ended up being spent in the establishment of hospitals and

²⁰ Joseph Maila, “The Arab Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” in *Christian Communities of the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 40.

²¹ Cragg, 159.

schools, which were then frequented and filled by Arab Christians, since the Muslims were naturally suspicious of such western institutions.

Population growth. With time, this situation led to Christians becoming the most educated people in the Empire. Higher levels of education and modern healthcare eventuated a lower death rate among Christians. For the first time in Middle Eastern history (and probably the last), a differential population growth obtained that was in the Christians' favor. In fact, by the end of Ottoman rule "the percentage of Christians in the Fertile Crescent tripled."²² In 1570, after the depredations of the Mameluke era, Christians constituted a mere 7% of the population. By 1914 that number had risen to about 20% in the Middle East as a whole, and was even as high as 30% in Greater Syria.²³ Though this resurgence of Christian numbers cannot be attributed entirely to benefactions of the West, the ways in which Christians were advantaged by western education and medicine cannot be denied.

Al Nahda. By far the most important way in which western education shaped Arab Christianity, and the Middle East as a whole, was the literary renaissance which it fomented, known as *Al Nahda*. *Al Nahda*, spanning the end of eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, was multifaceted; it was simultaneously a literary movement, a revitalization of the Arabic language, and the impetus of intellectual reform. Cragg describes it as "a flowering of Arabic writing, translation, and journalism . . .

²² Phillippe Fargues, "The Arab Christians of the Middle East: A Demographic Perspective," in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 52.

²³ Ibid.

Newspapers multiplied and debated issues in lively controversy.”²⁴ *Al Nahda* was a “conscientization,”²⁵ an introducing of the Arab world to itself, and it was led at every turn by Christian contributors.

Christians, because of their many connections with the West, but specifically because of the education these connections afforded, were introduced to modernized, Enlightened culture long before their Muslim neighbors. Intellectually, Christians were being shown a new world, full of “concepts of liberty, the nation, and the secular,”²⁶ as well as new ideas about “citizenship, equality, and other fundamental liberties.”²⁷ The Christians’ early encounters with modernization gave them novel perspective on the Arab world which they inhabited and on themselves as an Arab people. They began to write prolifically, flooding literary forums with their new, modernized interpretation of Arab identity. These contributions sparked the *Nahda*, and provided the foundation of Arab nationalism. “The aim of the Nahda was the political, social, and cultural renewal of Arab society and it considered Arab identity as the common base for this. Emphasizing Arab identity therefore gave an ideological base for the construction of national independence.”²⁸ The *Nahda*, seedbed of political Arabism, was pioneered by Arab Christians spurred by their exposure to modernization via western connections and education.

²⁴ Cragg, 144 and 155.

²⁵ Ibid., 155.

²⁶ Ibid., 145.

²⁷ Pacini, “Introduction,” 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

Guilt by association. Though the West bequeathed Arab Christians with a legacy of unrivaled educational and literary achievement, the benefits of western activity in the East would ultimately become negligible beneath the tides of violence unleashed by the other legacy of their involvement: an abiding guilt by association. This factor of Christian existence in the Middle East has shown itself to have boundless powers of destruction. It is a vicious cycle, witnessed centuries ago in the wasting Mamluk persecution of Coptic Christians, sparked by Coptic Mongol sympathies. “The closer the harmony of interests between domestic and foreign enemies, the greater the hostility to Christian minorities.”²⁹ And the more hostile the majority becomes, the more the minority desires foreign backing, thus further solidifying the partnership, which then evokes more hostility.

This dynamic, in concert with the “creed = nationality” equation provided by the Ottoman *millet* system, is cited by historians as a principle cause of the violence that exploded against Arab Christians in the latter days of the Ottoman Empire and the Eastern Question.

. . . matters deteriorated from the early nineteenth century, as Muslim societies felt themselves under increasing threat from the Christian West. As so often in history, the persecutors saw their actions as fundamentally defensive in nature, and the sense that a majority community was facing grave threats to its very existence drove them to acts of persecution and intolerance against convenient minorities. And although this certainly does not excuse the later violence, Turkish fears of predatory Christian rivals were by no means an illusion.³⁰

Here Jenkins alludes to the Armenian genocide, which was not an exceptional instance of violence against Christians, but rather the consummation of a trend spanning decades.

These decades constitute the second ‘fall’, which Jenkins describes as follows:

²⁹ Jenkins, 157.

³⁰ Ibid., 156.

The decline of Christianity in the Near East occurred in two distinct phases, distinct ‘falls.’ In the first . . . Christians lost their majority status within what became Muslim-majority nations . . . In the second phase, however, which is barely a century old, Christians have ceased to exist – *are* ceasing to exist – as organized communities. . . And in both instances, the major mechanism of change was the same. For all the reasons we can suggest for long-term decline, for all the temptations to assimilate, the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration.³¹

In order to understand these decades of violence, we must have a fuller look at their concurrent context: Arab nationalism.

Arab Christianity in the 20th Century

The Rise and Fall of Arab Nationalism

The foundations of Arab nationalism were laid prior to the 20th century. As Ottoman corruption began to become apparent, concerned Arabs started to entertain new ideas and voice the need for modernized, independent forms of government. Upon Ottoman collapse, Arab peoples were faced with the task and the opportunity of defining “a new geopolitical order” as they created “new national States.”³²

Independent Arab nationhood, though a cherished dream of the Arab peoples, was a perplexing reality. The actual creation of new States was very much complicated by the fact that Britain and France were the powers drawing the borders. The nature of Ottomanism, which was the fabric of Middle Eastern society and yet what they so desperately desired to leave behind, provided another frustration to the realization of Arabism’s ideals. All Arab peoples living as equal citizens in properly Arab countries

³¹ Jenkins, 141.

³² Pacini, “Introduction,” 8.

sounded good on paper, but nobody writing such things actually had any experience with relating to people outside their *millet* as co-citizens, countrymen, political equals. For all Arabs, their experience of cohesive people-hood - just as much a part of nationality as belonging to a locale - had been limited entirely to co-religionists.

New Arab territories were formed, their boundaries determined by a Europe with scant understanding of the area but a good helping of self-interest, and the peoples who happened to be thrust together were then expected to carry on as nation. Since the Ottoman's territorial divisions were null, the somewhat arbitrary prescribing of new boundaries could have, possibly, held up – *if* the new land-nations had been populated by peoples with a cohesive social identity and self-understanding. Instead, these new land-nations circumscribed multiple people-nations, and there's no prescribing the kind of cohesion needed to make that work. Instead of healing sectarianism, nationalism (as it was worked out practically in the Middle East) was bound to enflame it. Thus Arab nationalism, though an inevitable outworking of Arab self-awareness, stood on shaky legs from the beginning.

Consequently Christians, though they had themselves been voicing the necessity of reform, naturally had some reservations once they were actually granted citizenship. *Dhimmitude* and life in the *millet* had been oppressive, but they were oppressions in which the Christians were well versed. Citizenship was an untried endeavor, and wildly unpredictable; a new position, with new opportunities and vulnerabilities alike. Christians knew they could not trust the Muslim majority to eagerly welcome them to the ranks of full citizenship. So what would life as citizens actually be like for them?

The answer to this question would hinge on both the tenor of society and the official position of the government. Though they knew the tenor of society at large would be set against them at first, Christians hoped that if secular governments - willing to ensure their rights and legal position - could be established, with time, society would be moved toward truer egalitarianism as well. Thus they actively pushed for the national governments being installed to be formed around “frameworks... in which adhesion to the State depended on a common national citizenship, and not on religious affiliation.”³³ Such secularity, Christians knew, was their only hope for realizing equality; the only means by which they might even have a chance of a free existence in their homelands. Thus Christians became the activists and even the founders of secular and communist parties – of any party that advanced a separation between religious and civil life.

For some years, it seemed that some of Arabism’s goals –self-contained Arab homelands under the care of modern, authentically Arab governments – were obtaining in the Middle East, even if shakily so. However, as we have already seen, nationalism gave evidence of its propensity for deadly sectarian implosion early on. The failure of nationalism, expressed in the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century, was repeated in different terms in Lebanon at the end of it.

But while Arab nationalism was constructed on the fractured foundation of *millet* society, secularism was set up on no foundation at all. Secularism asks of Islam something it could never do, namely, that it allow itself to be relegated to private spheres and refrain from commanding the functions of public life, whether social or political. Such moderation is antithetical to Islam. Islam is not a merely a religion, as the West

³³ Pacini, “Introduction,” 12.

understands the word. Rather, it is a theocracy - a State, a society, and a culture that is “all-embracing.”³⁴ It demands application to “the most minute details of life,”³⁵ individual and communal. Thus we should not be surprised by the resurgence of fundamentalism, with its call for the thoroughgoing and unyielding application of *Shari’a* law. Fundamentalist revival, Samir Khalil Samir reminds us, is “not a new tendency in the Muslim world . . . At times it subsides, but only to reappear again. Personally, I think it is very unlikely that this tendency will disappear, as it is . . . an authentic interpretation of Islam as conceived by Muhammad.”³⁶ Because the vision of Islamic *society* is “deeply ingrained in the traditional teaching of Islam . . . it has always shown a tendency to re-emerge.”³⁷

Rather than being surprised by the rise of extremist movements, we ought to be surprised that secularism ever had a hearing at all. Probably the only reason secular parties gained any traction was that, in its Pan-Arabism rhetoric, authoritarian regimes saw a banner beneath which they could plausibly advance their own ends. These regimes capitalized on secularism’s appealing synthesis of patriotism and liberality, but once in power, bent the “fragile” “democratic structures”³⁸ into effective tyrannies suited to their purposes. Such “secular” governments were still quintessentially Arab and still presiding

³⁴ Samir Khalil Samir, “The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society Throughout History,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 68.

³⁵ Ibid., 90.

³⁶ “The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society,” 90.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pacini, “Introduction,” 12.

over nations that were, demographically and culturally, saturated by Islam. Christians, therefore, remained in the position of being marginalized and discriminated against, barred from “full participation. . . as citizens in the life of the nation.”³⁹ Even while they existed in name, secular governments could naught but fail to fulfill Christians’ objectives. Writing in the 1998, Samir touched on the oxymoron of Arab secularism, and wondered, “How long will it survive though? And would it have lasted this long if it had not been supported by the ‘authoritarian’ regimes of Syria and Iraq? It is no coincidence that most of the secular parties, or the Communist Party, were founded by Christians; but they were much less popular among the Muslim masses.”⁴⁰ Samir’s suspicions were well founded, for, as we know, the secular government in Iraq has since been dismantled and the Syrian one is also, currently, in a bloody process of demise. The fact is, secularism in the Muslim world, as the Christians dreamed of it, was a delusion that was never to be realized. The distorted existence secularism was able to eke out while stretched upon the exoskeleton of authoritarian regime was not secularism as Christians had intended - and even that was bound to crumble. Failure was inevitable, given that “modern concepts such as political and cultural pluralism, religious freedom, or . . . the distinction between religious life and civil life” that secularism requires “contradict the true teachings of Islam.”⁴¹

Arabs lost faith in nationalism because it failed to bring them the unity, *salaam*, and victory which they craved and it promised. Secularism, anemic from the beginning,

³⁹ Maila, “The Arab Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” 30.

⁴⁰ Samir, “The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society,” 90.

⁴¹ Yusuf Habbi, “Christians in Iraq,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 302.

relied upon the fantastical notion that Islam could be anything other than all consuming, and now the regimes that had been its life-support are toppled or toppling. As these two ideologies have faltered throughout the twentieth century, Muslim extremism has risen. Originally sparked by outrage at Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, modern fundamentalist movements began, in the early 1970s, to exert pointed political and social pressures. The activities of this indurated and narrowed Islam have spread and escalated in the intervening years. Of course, growing extremism is a source of considerable alarm to Christians. They still, in many ways, live under an unofficial *dhimmitude*. If extremist parties were to gain conclusive political control, then Christians would be subjected to the official reinstatement of *dhimmi* existence. Until then, they live beneath the unremitting threat of violence and attempt to shield themselves from swelling currents of hostility within society.

We would be amiss, however, to plunge directly into the current situation without first recalling the severe and various episodes of violence attendant upon the birth and failures of nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Second “Fall”: Violence Against the Arab Church (1800s-1925)

From the late seventeenth century on, the Ottoman Empire took a trajectory of degeneration. As cracks in Ottoman power deepened and became more pronounced, unrest – with its faithful companion, violence – was stirred up. Christians, already disproportionately likely to incur the casualties of civil unrest (a vulnerability inherent in the nature of minority existence), were, in this Ottoman context, not merely trampled in the melee – they were targeted. The Muslim majority saw Christianity as a threat to Arab

homogeneity and a fifth column to western power plays. In the early nineteenth century, spontaneous outbursts of hostility began. From then on, intermittent pogroms and smaller-scale attacks on clergy, church buildings, or whole cities would be typical features of Christian existence in the Middle East. Suspicions and hostilities only escalated, until, in 1860, majority aggression passed beyond small-scale, isolated hate tantrums into a full-fledged massacre spanning several cities. In an area that is today part of Lebanon, Druze and Muslim assailants killed 10,000 Maronite Christians.

Even this unchecked bloodletting could not satiate majority fear and malice. The Hamidian massacres followed a little over three decades later, spanning not just regions but years (1894-1896). And even more alarming than the focused, sustained nature of this violence was the fact that it was a government-organized and government-endorsed initiative. Sultan Abdul Hamid II, for which the bloodbath is named, authorized the murder of 100,000-300,000 Armenians. Naturally, the aggression the sultan unleashed took on a life of its own and precipitated destruction that far exceeded his original purpose, sweeping into areas like Diyarbekir where 25,000 Assyrian Christians were killed. The Hamidian massacres, as the first slaughter organized and executed by a local government (as opposed to a conquering power), became a point of departure in the Middle East's life of violence. Hamid had crossed a threshold, which, tragically, the Young Turk nationalists would pass far beyond. The watershed of violence against Arab Christians was still to come.

In April 1915, the Ottoman government, reorganized since Hamid's day by the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, began to deport Armenian notables. Deportations swiftly devolved into wholesale carnage. Throughout the following months, stretching

even into the latter half of 1916, mass murders and death marches continued. Whether employing “massacre, starvation, [or] exhaustion,” it became clear that “the Turkish policy was [one] of extermination.”⁴² Historians estimate that one million Christian Armenians were displaced and another 800,000 – one million were killed.⁴³ Because the world had never seen such cruel, systematic, and thorough ethnic cleansing before, a word had to be invented for the atrocities visited upon these Christians: genocide.

The appalling butchery of the Armenian people was not the only government-led destruction going on in 1915. The Assyrian congregations were likewise being buffeted by a somewhat less extreme but longer lasting reign of terror, which according to their records, claimed two-thirds of their people. 1915, an especially severe year of this terrible time, is remembered by Assyrian denominations as “the year of the sword.”⁴⁴ In Lebanon, also in 1915, 100,000 Maronites died in a government-engineered famine and epidemic. “All told, including Armenians, Maronites, and Assyrians, perhaps 1.5 million Christians perished in the region.”⁴⁵

Though no year could match 1915 for its ferocity, the years following continued to be convulsed by various paroxysms of violence. 1915-1925 was a decade of widespread ethnic cleansing, characterized by attacks on individual Christian persons and churches, pogroms that emptied village and neighborhood, and massacres eliminating entire Christian populations in cities and even countries. Jenkins calls this decade Islam’s “final

⁴² Henry Moregenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 210.

⁴³ Jenkins, 162.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

purge of Christianity.”⁴⁶ Though a few beleaguered communities managed to still hang on, this purge did clearly mark a noticeable change or “fall” in Christian presence in the Middle East. While in the early years of the twentieth century, “Christians represented 24% of the population,” (a statistic from 1914), by the end of it they had come to total 6.3% (a statistic from 1998).⁴⁷

Fallout of the 20th Century’s Disasters

Continuing Conflict and Imperfect Citizenship

There has not been another wave of violence to match the duration, forcefulness, and pointed cruelty of that which swept through the Middle East from “the year of the sword” till 1925. There have, however, been other kinds of crises with very similar effects. The various battles which accompanied and followed the creation of the nation of Israel sent thousands upon thousands of Palestinians, Muslim and Christian alike, coursing out of their homeland. In no way focused upon Christian Palestinians, violent exchanges still had the effect of drastically reducing the number of Arab Christians in Israeli and Palestinian territories.

The Lebanese Civil War, traumatic for all natives of that country, had disproportionately detrimental effects on Christian populations, and brought permanent change to their presence and existence in that land which had for so many centuries been a Maronite stronghold. The much-trumpeted Christian majority, supposed to be unassailable, was lost, and ongoing emigration has obtained ever since.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, 203.

⁴⁷ Pacini, “Introduction,” 22.

Similarly, political conflicts in Iraq have, however unintentionally, had devastating effects on Christian Iraqis. The Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), followed by the Persian Gulf War (1990-91), followed by the U.N.-imposed embargo (1990-2003) wreaked unqualified economic devastation. Everyone who could leave did so, and Christians tended to be among the groups with greater means for leaving. Huge numbers of Iraqi Christians emigrated during those years. Then, in 2003, the U.S. toppled Hussein's secular government, which occasioned the "unleashing" of "Muslim militancy, both Sunni and Shiite, while removing any central policing authority. In the ensuing anarchy, Christians became the primary targets of mobs and militias."⁴⁸ Even if extremist leaders had not clearly demanded Christian exodus (which they did), their sectarian brutality swiftly created an Iraq in which Christian existence was not feasible.

In such situations, one cannot speak of calculated genocide. Clearly, though, the conflict and violence that seem to punctuate Middle Eastern politics have especially injurious effects for vulnerable Christian minorities. Ongoing large-scale turmoil and the attendant hostilities provide the backdrop against which Christians experience daily life. Muslim majority members also experience the privations of homelands under fire, and it is not uncommon for tensions to boil over into sporadic small-scale attacks against the local Christian minorities. So whether on the national or local level, Arab Christians live with an unsleeping awareness of their vulnerability to impending catastrophe. Jenkins parallels their situation to that of African Americans before the civil rights movement:

In considering the role of violence, we would not have to assume that massacres and pogroms need be frequent or regular, or indeed that they need occur more than once every generation or so. Although not necessarily frequent, such outbreaks leave memories that create a pervasive atmosphere of intimidation. These memories instruct

⁴⁸ Jenkins, 170.

the minority community about their inferior status and the vital necessity of not overstepping their bounds. We might draw an analogy to the effects of race riots and lynchings in the American South before the civil rights era, when sporadic incidents combined to institutionalize fear and submission among African Americans.⁴⁹

This comparison is fitting, not just in regards to the terrorization of a minority, but also as an example of imperfect citizenship. Though African Americans had been officially freed from slavery, they were not granted the same free existence as white people. Discrimination was the qualifier of their public experience, and the bigoted *modus vivendi* was sometimes given official expression in the legislation. The same is true for Arab Christians. Though the *dhimmi* and *millet* systems have been abolished in name, the discrimination that characterized those systems still permeates Muslim outlook and practice. Indeed,

The traditional way of thinking still remains under the surface, in the subconscious. It sees the individual in the nation as a member of a community... which has a pre-established status. . . . Whether they like it or not Christians cannot escape from the concepts of dhimmi, although the term is no longer used in the current laws of most countries.⁵⁰

Despite their best secularizing efforts, Christians have not been able to shake the ghosts of *dhimmitude* and Muslim superiority, which continue to demand a citizenship based upon religious affiliation. This sort of selective integration is called “imperfect citizenship.”⁵¹ Under this unofficial oppression, equal opportunity is withheld, the despised are denied influential cultural or political participation, and are likewise

⁴⁹ Jenkins, 301.

⁵⁰ Samir, “The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society,” 76-77.

⁵¹ Pacini, “Introduction,” 21.

excluded from “matters of symbolic importance.”⁵² Most minority disadvantages still obtain, and the hated are still shown all manner of “intolerance [and] discrimination, if not outright persecution.”⁵³

When this is the tenor of society, minorities can have recourse only to a hope that the government will reinforce their rights. But as we have seen, the secular governments that are supposed, in name, to guarantee equal citizenship have typically allowed Christians’ imperfect citizenship to continue. The only thing that can be said for such regimes is that they have, at least, suppressed sectarian forces that would, no doubt, utterly decimate Christian communities. However, with fundamentalist moves on the rise, even this minimal protection is being tested. With extremist voices speaking louder and having more sway than ever before, “the question of the secularity of institutions and the idea of citizenship, both decisive for the status of non-Muslims, are again open to question in the political debate.”⁵⁴ Furthermore,

the action of the Muslim Brothers and of other Islamist movements is not restricted to the political institutions. It is carried out in the wider context of society, where they spread an ideology which aims to reduce the rights of the Christian communities . . . [and] to institute a regression of democratic practices. The risk is that this ideology may spread and transform into aggressive social pressure towards local Christians.⁵⁵

⁵² Maila, “The Arab Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” 47.

⁵³ Habbi, “Christians in Iraq,” 297.

⁵⁴ Pacini, “Introduction,” 19.

⁵⁵ Andrea Pacini, “Socio-Political and Community Dynamics of Arab Christians in Jordan, Israel, and the Autonomous Palestinian Territories,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 267.

Christians recognize the dilemma they are in, and bear a deep unease. Temporarily redeemed from *dhimmitude* in name, they have never ceased to be “precariously hostage to Islamic will.”⁵⁶

Economic Straits

Ongoing warfare, besides undermining Christians’ scramble for a sure footing on the sociopolitical front, has produced, in the majority of Middle Eastern countries, underdeveloped economies depleted beyond their powers of providing for current and upcoming generations. Unemployment rates, as well as inflation, are high. Food, water, or power shortages are not uncommon. Young couples and families find that acquiring appropriate housing is a Herculean task. Poor economic conditions have left younger generations “oppressed by unemployment and poverty,”⁵⁷ with “little hope of finding acceptable work and standards of living.”⁵⁸

The professional and socioeconomic limitations (whether the result of economic stagnation or imposed by a hostile Muslim majority) are for Christians especially onerous because they, more so than their Muslim counterparts, are especially qualified for professional and socioeconomic advancement. The missionary efforts which created such a disparity in Christian and Muslim educational levels in the nineteenth century have likewise produced a disparity between Christian and Muslim socioeconomic status today. In general, Christians tend to have a better than average education and be a bit more well

⁵⁶ Cragg, 191.

⁵⁷ Habbi, “Christians in Iraq,” 301.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 294.

to do than Muslims. The charitable attentions of missionary schools produced in Arab Christian communities higher educational and vocational standards. Today, these “occupational expectations are not often met in society.”⁵⁹ Christians are, in general, overqualified for the underdeveloped economies they inhabit, making the limited prospects more keenly frustrating for them than for Muslim populations. The economic stagnation and political instability resulting from perpetual states of war have given rise to a general consensus among Arab Christians that they have no hope for a better future in the Middle East. “Among the ordinary faithful, opinions such as ‘This is not our country anymore. It may have been once.’, ‘We have always been persecuted,’ ‘We are forced to live in a ghetto. It’s about time this situation came to an end’, ‘There is no future for us here, and certainly not for our children,’ are very frequent.”⁶⁰ These are the cries of a people whose hearts and minds are already dissociated from their nation; among those with the means to leave, this psychic exile is consistently leading to a decision to finalize the alienation and emigrate.

Attrition by Emigration

In a region as volatile as the Middle East, it is not only Christians who desire to emigrate. A great number of Muslims have emigrated to the West, specifically to Europe,

⁵⁹ Bernard Sabella, “The Emigration of Christian Arabs: Dimensions and Causes of the Phenomenon,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 137.

⁶⁰ Habbi, “Christians in Iraq,” 297.

with the numbers of the Arab diaspora growing each year. Consistently, though, “the rate of Christian emigration is twice the rate for the general population.”⁶¹

Why are they Emigrating? We have already seen how “the permanent situation of conflict,” (282) the ensuing economic malaise, and the distresses of imperfect citizenship are providing ample reason for Arab Christians to desire to leave their homelands. These are the primary push factors. Interestingly, Arab Christians who reported on their desire to emigrate listed the economic hardships as their number one motivator, with fears about the political situation ranking second.⁶²

Arab Christians who are dissatisfied with current conditions, whether because of economic deterioration or political upheaval, see in “Christian countries” a hope for the remedying of both problems. In a “Christian country,” they believe they can build the kind of safe and comfortable life that would never be possible for them in the Middle East. Historical connections with the West inculcate a sense of familiarity with the foreign, alleviating some of the intimidation inherent in making a transnational move. But even if by moving away they did plunge themselves into being “strangers in a strange land,” at least in a Christian land, Arab Christians reason, they could count on being unmolested strangers. They already feel a sense of alienation from their Middle Eastern nations, and there they *know* they are not safe.

Though the long standing connection with “Christian countries” and their promises of freedom are powerful pull factors, the thing that seems to tip the scale is the presence of a family member or family networks abroad (If there’s *family* there, then it’s

⁶¹ Sabella, “The Emigration of Christian Arabs.” 127.

⁶² Ibid.

really not a strange land!). Already having a relative in a foreign country is the third most cited factor for the decision to emigrate. There is an oft-repeated process “of emigration for whole families” that starts with a son or daughter going away “to study and/or work.” But instead of coming back, he/she “eventually pulls the whole family to join him/her.”⁶³

Who are the émigrés?

The urban. The great majority of Christian families (90.4%) already live in cities, so the urban background of an emigrant may seem incidental. However, the Arab Christians living in villages and refugee camps are much less likely to emigrate than those in the cities. And when Arab Christian families do move to large urban areas, this often becomes “an important link in the process of emigration.”⁶⁴

The young. As mentioned above, young men and women often go abroad for temporary study or work positions, and then end up staying. So not only do the youth have a greater desire to leave than older generations, but also greater occasion to. Intention to emigrate is higher among young singles than any other demographic sector of Arab Christians. According to the research of Bernard Sabella, 62.5 per cent of Christian singles intend to emigrate.⁶⁵

⁶³ Sabella, “The Emigration of Christian Arabs,” 149.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 139.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 143.

Those with means. In times of especially destructive political upheaval, such as the final two decades of the twentieth century in Iraq, the factor determining emigration is not who wants to leave (everybody wants to) but who *can* leave (not everybody can). In such situations, Christians have still tended to emigrate at higher rates simply because Christians, as the better educated and more well off, are more often among those who have the means to leave. To travel across a continent (or the globe) and establish a new life requires significant financial resources. Christian groups have historically had a higher percentage of people financially capable of such an endeavor than other groups.

The educated. As I touched on earlier, Arab Christianity's history with western missions has made Arab Christians particularly prone to be distressed by economic prospects in the Middle East and likewise more inclined to see a life in the West as feasible and desirable. Sabella claims that a Christian's level of education is a highly determinative factor in his/her thoughts on emigrating. "Intention to emigrate," he writes, "increases in proportion to education;"⁶⁶ with each successive level of education, "there is an increase in intention to emigrate."⁶⁷ Likewise, those with no education express no desire to emigrate at all.⁶⁸ A well-educated person alarmed by escalating political tensions, and "frustrated by... the absence of prospects for economic and professional advancement,"⁶⁹ is, he claims, the profile of a potential emigrant.

⁶⁶ Sabella, "The Emigration of Christian Arabs," 142.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 150.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 151.

Where are they going?

Arab Christian emigrants are going pretty much everywhere it seems, other than deeper into Asia. Canada, the United States, the Americas, Africa, Australia, and Europe have all received Arab Christian emigrants. The favored locations, though, are the U.S., Europe, and Australia. Some denominations, like the Armenian Catholics and the Syrian Orthodox, now “have a larger following among emigrants than in their country of origin.”⁷⁰ Jenkins proposes that we may soon find ourselves in a world in which Arab Christianity exist only in diaspora, with denominational homes not in the Middle East, but “in Detroit and Los Angeles, Sydney and Paris.”⁷¹

What does this mean?

Halted demographic growth. Because the youth are leaving in such large numbers, Arab Christian populations in the Middle East are aging rapidly.⁷² Also, as young men more often have the means to leave than young women do, emigration has produced an unbalanced male to female ratio.⁷³ Furthermore, Arab Christians have, for a while now, had a much lower birth rate than Muslims.⁷⁴ Therefore the young Christian singles and couples who do stay in the Middle East face all manner of obstacles which

⁷⁰ Jean Corbon, “The Churches of the Middle East: Their Origins and Identity, from their Roots in the Past to their Openness in the Present” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 99.

⁷¹ Jenkins, 171.

⁷² Pacini, “Socio-Political and Community Dynamics,” 282.

⁷³ Sabella, “The Emigration of Christian Arabs,” 152.

⁷⁴ Pacini, “Socio-Political and Community Dynamics,” 282.

make impossible the replenishing of Christian numbers. Emigration has condemned this little group to continue to shrink. Even if all emigration halted today, demographic recovery could not happen.

For, just as Christian communities are shrinking, Muslim populations are exploding. This differential population growth means that even among the few Christian communities in which the total number of Christians has not changed, the percentage of the population that they constitute has grown smaller.⁷⁵ This trend means that Christian representation in nations at large will continue to fade, until the ongoing “population ‘eclipse’”⁷⁶ renders them as good as nonexistent. Some Arab Christians themselves would say they’re already there: “This is our home. And it’s like we’re not even here!”⁷⁷

An impoverished remnant. Emigration changes not just the size but also the nature of a remaining community; indeed, it turns into just that: a remainder. Extensive emigration, such as has obtained among Arab Christians, causes the original community to lose its sense of being a home, and of being at home, in its ancient seat. Emigration shakes one of the few confidences that Arab Christian communities can have in themselves - the confidence of comrades, of “strength in numbers.”

The aging remnant community, its morale wrecked, has less vitality and fewer means for the battles for social equity, cultural contribution, and a political voice that former generations have fought. Instead of campaigning for a strong, recognized presence

⁷⁵ Pacini, “Socio-Political and Community Dynamics,” 277.

⁷⁶ Maila, “The Arab Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” 45.

⁷⁷ Don Belt, “Forgotten Faithful,” *National Geographic*, June 2009.

in their homelands, the communities enervated by emigration tend to become ever more closed in on themselves, fading quietly away. Their best and brightest – the young, the educated, the resourced – have left. The very ones who were most qualified to lead the charge for equal citizenship were the ones most capable of making a life elsewhere – and they did. Those left behind are far more inclined to buckle down for a life under siege, until the inevitable end comes, than to keep up the fight.

Economic losses. Emigration has “severely undermined the economic capacity of the Christian communities.”⁷⁸ It has inflicted profound human losses: the loss of managers, labor, and skill. It also inflicts extensive loss of capital, of “houses, jobs, firms, property, and the use of public infrastructures.”⁷⁹ Whether because of forced displacement or because émigrés willingly sell their lands and businesses so that they might have the means of reestablishing themselves in their respective destinations, Christians are increasingly losing “the use and often the production capacity of agricultural lands, buildings, factories, laboratories, trade, and clientele.”⁸⁰ These resources are not being shifted among Christian hands, but are being commandeered by or sold to “Muslim colleagues, who [take] advantage of these production capacities while they [can] still be used, finding a ready-made clientele in various sectors.”⁸¹ According to researchers, the sale of Christian lands, which then become Muslim lands, is one of the

⁷⁸ Boutros Labaki, “The Christian Communities and the Economic and Social Situation in Lebanon,” in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 246.

⁷⁹ Boutros Labaki, “The Economic and Social Situation in Lebanon,” 223-225.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 246.

⁸¹ Boutros Labaki, “The Economic and Social Situation in Lebanon,” 223-225.

most alarming features of the emigration trend, as it jeopardizes even further Christians' positions in their ancestral homes. Pacini warns,

The transfer of landed property from one religious group to another is very important strategically, as the possession of real estate allows effective establishment in the territory and offers a vital base for significant social, political, and cultural action. In fact landed property give the religious communities an area of freedom and responsibility, and the sizeable reduction of this area of freedom and responsibility is bound to bring an effective loss of power in their interaction with other members of local society.⁸²

The loss of Christian properties is also one more method for erasing the evidence of Christians' physical presence in the land, surreptitiously undermining their legitimacy as citizens. It can only mean an even further weakening of Christians' "geographical relationship with the land."⁸³ Arab Christians cite vexation at the restrictions of failing economies as their number one reason for desiring to emigrate. Ironically, their departure only exacerbates Arab Christians' undesirable position, plunging their native communities into further economic indigence.

Further emigration. A poor economy is the primary motivator for Arab Christian emigration, and emigration makes the economy poorer. In this case, emigration only serves to intensify the motivator for emigration for those who remain. Yet, this is the case for each of the top three factors listed by Arab Christians intending to emigrate.

The second strongest push factor for emigration was the frighteningly unstable political situation. Emigration leaves attenuated communities more vulnerable to the caprices of majority will and the exigencies of intercommunal conflict. When they lose

⁸² "Socio-Political and Community Dynamics," 283.

⁸³ Pacini, "Socio-Political and Community Dynamics," 283.

the leaders who could be a voice for them, Arab Christians' ability to defend themselves and assert their interests in the fracas that is Middle Eastern politics is diminished. Thus escape becomes even more urgent need.

The third most forceful factor for emigration is the pull factor of having a family member or a family system abroad. They're more willing to leave home the more relatives have already done so. So when an Arab Christian acts on this desire to join loved ones in another country, he is himself adding to the list of reasons which (currently) remaining friends and family have for leaving!

The long trend of emigration means that the young Arab Christian adults choosing between a life of discrimination or a life in diaspora today have grown up among "a constant coming and going of Christian refugees, in a 'permanent draught.' The idea of emigration is always at the back of his mind, always a possibility."⁸⁴ "Mark," a Palestinian Christian interviewed by Don Belt in 2009 said, "'80 percent of the Christian guys I grew up with have left for another country to find work."⁸⁵ Mark and his wife, "Lisa," "like Arab Christians everywhere, conduct an ongoing argument about whether or not to leave their homeland for good."⁸⁶ With the question always open, and the factors for emigration intensifying with every émigré who responds to them, it appears that the attrition can only continue. Emigration begets emigration. Or it will, until there is nobody left to leave. And this is just what the experts predict. Various voices all conclude:

⁸⁴ Habib Moussalli, "The Christians of Syria," in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 292.

⁸⁵ Belt, "Forgotten Faithful."

⁸⁶ Ibid.

“Researchers are already reporting a certain death.”⁸⁷

– Joseph Maila

“The Christian presence in the country is bound to disappear.”⁸⁸

– Habib Moussalli

“The world is watching ‘the effective extinction of Christianity from its birthplace.’”⁸⁹

– Tim Holland

“One of the longest battles in history is on the verge of being lost.”⁹⁰

- Jean-Pierre Valognes

Mass Arab Christian emigration is “a suicidal form of genocide.”⁹¹

- Catholicos Karekin II

Published in 1994, Jean-Pierre Valognes’s authoritative work, *Vie et Mort des Chrétiens d'Orient*, claimed - even in its very title - that the story of Arab Christianity in the Middle East is over. Jenkins, in 2008, concurred: “Middle Eastern Christianity has, within living memory, all but disappeared as a living force.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Maila, “The Arab Christians: From the Eastern Question to the Recent Political Situation of the Minorities,” 45.

⁸⁸ Moussalli, “The Christians of Syria,” 291.

⁸⁹ “Christianity Becoming Extinct in Its Birthplace, Says Holland.” Lapidomedia - Centre for Religious Literacy in World Affairs. September 20, 2013. <http://www.lapidomedia.com/christianity-becoming-extinct-its-birthplace-says-holland>.

⁹⁰ Camille Eid, “Significance of the Synod for the Middle East,” *Oasis*, November 6, 2009. <http://www.oasiscenter.eu/articles/eastern-christians/2009/11/06/significance-of-the-synod-for-the-middle-east>.

⁹¹ Corbon, “The Churches of the Middle East: Their Origins and Identity,” 106.

⁹² 172.

The Arab Spring

If Arab Christianity is dead, or close enough, can any more harm be done to it? In his 2009 article “The Forgotten Faithful,” Don Belt memorializes the Arab Christianity passing away before his eyes. In a motion to the Middle East’s roughly 1,400 year history of Muslim-Christian coexistence, he wrote, “Communities in Syria offer a reminder, beneath the hostilities of today, of how closely related the two religions really are. There are oases of tolerance – once widespread, now less so – where Christians and Muslims attend one another’s weddings and funerals and worship at one another’s shrines.”⁹³ At the time, his referring to Syria as an oasis of tolerance made an exaggerated sort of sense. Today, it is a chilling absurdity.

Can things get worse? Yes, apparently, they can.

Some have seen from a distance the disaster (yes, further disaster) coming for Christians in Syria and in the Middle East at large. In 2008, Jenkins wrote,

Christians thus survive in the Middle East, but their collapse in numbers and influence over the past century has been astonishing, and only a wild optimist would predict that the process of decline had finished. The most vulnerable groups are those in Syria, which has since the disasters in Iraq become yet again the refuge for thousands of exiled Christians. Yet any change of regime could easily produce a radical Islamization such as occurred in Iraq, with similarly dreadful effects on minorities... Perhaps within a decade or two, Egypt itself might find itself under an Islamist regime, driving the remaining Copts to choose between mass migration and conversion.⁹⁴

Both of Jenkins grim prophecies have come true, through the events of the Arab Spring.

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire as act of protest against injustices suffered at the hands of government officials.

⁹³ Belt, “Forgotten Faithful.”

⁹⁴ Jenkins, 171.

Bouazizi's self-immolation sparked the Tunisian Revolution of December 18. Up roar in Tunisia kindled revolutionary fires throughout all of MENA which spread with breathtaking speed. By 2013 leaders had been ousted in Tunisia, in Egypt twice, in Libya, and in Yemen, civil war had erupted in Syria, and six other Middle Eastern countries had seen demonstrations of protest of some kind. Western spectators have dubbed this staggering outburst of revolutionary spirit among the people of the Arab world, and the subsequent overturn in government, the "Arab Spring." The West has hailed the Arab Spring as a felicitous (if messy) inauguration of freedom in an area of the world that had formerly been the most backward and oppressed. For the Christians native to these roiling regions, there is nothing to celebrate. The radical Islamization, threatened for so long, prefigured in Iraq, and predicted by some such as Jenkins, seems to be precisely what is taking place.

Lt. Colonel Janos Besenyo, while not claiming that Christians were enjoying ideal circumstances before the Arab Spring, reveals how their positions have deteriorated dramatically since it began. "The former dictatorships," he points out, were "led mainly by secularists (Gaddafi in Libya, Mubarak in Egypt, Assad in Syria)."⁹⁵ This meant that while they had power, Christians could hope for a certain level of security. It also means that the failures of these secular leaders' are made fodder for extremists seeking political power, and have clearly "contributed to the popularity of the Islamist opposition."

As these factors play out in Egypt, it means inescapable tragedy for Arab Christianity's most resilient community, the Coptic Church. Under the Mubarak regime,

⁹⁵ Lt. Colonel Janos Besenyo, Geoinformation Service of the Hungarian Defense Forces, and Roland Gomori. "Arab Spring, Christian Fall? – The Situation of Christian Minorities in the Middle East after the Arab Spring." (Thesis, University of Szeged, June 2013), <http://www.ict.org.il/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=5m1IqFJOa44=&tabid=66>.

Coptic Christians endured harsh restrictions, but their sociopolitical position was about as stable as it had ever been. And from the general populace, Copts met with the limited tolerance which is the best that Christians can hope for in the Middle East. However, since the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, the Egyptian majority has adopted an increasingly intolerant position. Now 74 percent of the population is calling for Christians to "subject themselves in every issue to the regulations of Muslim religious law, the sharia."⁹⁶ Accordingly, attacks against Coptic institutions and persons have increased notably.

Egyptian native Anne Zaki was living in Canada when the Egyptian Revolution, Egypt's expression of the Arab Spring, began in January 2011. In March of the same year she determined to visit Egypt to get a pulse on how her country was changing and what her people were facing. In an interview in the fall of 2012, Zaki said that she was impressed by the "high spirit of hope" and unprecedented level of involvement that she witnessed among the Egyptian people, "especially among the youth."⁹⁷ But, she said, she also saw

"anxiety, especially among Christians and also moderate Muslims. There was contradictory reporting about and interpretations of various events, and utter confusion about the role and agenda of political Islam in all of it. There was a real fear that the Muslim Brotherhood would hijack the revolution and take over the nation. This fear was confirmed later during the parliamentary elections in November when the Islamists secured more than 70 percent of the seats... We saw people perplexed. We saw the church apprehensive about what the future would hold. And we saw violence, unlike anything in Egypt's recent history."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Lt. Colonel Janos Besenyo, "Arab Spring, Christian Fall?"

⁹⁷ Anne Zaki, "For Such a Time as This." Interview by Myrna DeVries Anderson. *The Spark*, Fall 2012. <http://www.calvin.edu/spark/past-issues/2012-fall>.

⁹⁸ Anne Zaki, "For Such a Time as This."

As aggression toward the Coptic Church has increased, so has emigration. This group, which, more than any other Arab Christian community, has held on to its sense of self and belonging despite cruel centuries, is now entering into the history of Arab Christian emigration and joining other denominations in the diaspora with ever-increasing frequency.

Meanwhile, in Syria, a country that used to be, relatively speaking, an oasis of tolerance is becoming a slaughterhouse, and its Christians have been caught in the crossfire. Though Christian parties are typically neutral and uninvolved in the politics at work, they are nevertheless hated by fundamentalist forces for the sheer fact of their Christianity, and thus they are targets. Naturally, the war is producing thousands upon thousands of refugees. In an Iraq-repeat, destitute refugees are pouring into Lebanon and Jordan, while those whose resources have not yet been blitzed are taking up and fleeing into countries further flung. Recent estimates show that there are nearly half a million refugees in Jordan, and the Lebanese government has reported that one million displaced Syrians are now living in their land.⁹⁹ Though of course not all of the refugees are Christian, Middle Eastern history assures us that Christians are going to be harder hit by these disasters than any other subset of the population. As the conflict is ongoing, we shall simply have to wait and see what is left of the Church in Syria when the smoke clears.

In the Middle East as a whole, not just in Syria, the final effects of the Arab Spring are still untold. There is the troublesome possibility that the developing Syrian refugee crisis could affect Lebanon the way the Palestinian refugee crisis did, throwing off the

⁹⁹ Lt. Colonel Janos Besenyo, “Arab Spring, Christian Fall?”

delicate political balance and catalyzing a whole new civil war. There are, to be sure, possibilities even the most perspicacious cannot foresee, since the Arab Spring itself came on so unexpectedly.

This unpredictability is not a source of hope for Arab Christians; they sense keenly that they have been brought to a terrible impasse,¹⁰⁰ and that, as far as their fortunes are concerned, nothing good can come of these revolutionary tides. Whatever course the waves of revolution may take from here on out, we can assume that when they have receded, we will find a Middle East more in thrall to radical Islam than it was before, and likewise an Arab Christianity even closer to annihilation than it was before. As things stand today, the Christians of MENA constitute an infinitesimal one percent of worldwide Christianity, and “only 4 percent of [their] region’s population, compared to 20 percent a century ago, and thus they can be declared the world’s smallest regional Christian minority.”¹⁰¹ Current events, informed by history, would prompt us to ask whether, in years swiftly approaching, there will be any Christian minority to speak of. The Middle East, which gave birth to Christianity so many years ago, could, in our lifetime, become the land from whence it is conclusively dispatched.

¹⁰⁰ "Jordanian Article Discusses Plight, Exodus of Arab Christians." *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, Oct 03, 2013., <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1439110147?accountid=7014>.

¹⁰¹ Lt. Colonel Janos Besenyo, “Arab Spring, Christian Fall?”

CHAPTER THREE

A New Picture

Introduction

As we have seen in history, the Arab church in the Middle East has endured much. And while it endures in remnants still, experts predict these last remnants, too, will soon be uprooted. For, while the mutual history between Islam and Christianity in the Middle East is full of instances of Christians converting, being killed, or emigrating (and the Arab church subsequently shrinking), there is no evidence of any movement in the other direction. Muslims stay Muslim, and are growing demographically at a rapid pace. Christians convert, are eliminated, or leave, and they don't tend to reproduce much; either demographically or through evangelism.

That's how things have been historically. However, things are changing in the Middle East, and in the Muslim world at large (*Dar al Islam*)¹⁰². In this chapter we will look at how the story is changing, as thousands upon thousands – even millions – of Muslims are turning from Islam and being drawn to faith in Jesus. The Arab church is, against all odds, *growing*, and the swelling numbers are coming from Muslim quarters of

¹⁰² We will, for this chapter, be temporarily turning our attention from the course of the traditional denominations in the Middle East to that of the Church within *Dar al Islam* as a whole. *Dar al Islam* is a term (literally meaning “the House of Islam”) encompassing any land where Islam is practiced freely and significant portions of the population are Muslim, and so there is a prevailing Muslim culture.

society. We look at why and how this change is taking place, and how it is in turn changing the spiritual landscape of *Dar al Islam*.

Movements: Sparse History, Present Growth

As we have already touched upon, Islam was established c. 610 and its prophet died in 632. Likewise, we have already seen how the Muslim caliphs bore their religion and their rule up from the Arabian Peninsula to overtake the Middle East with lightning speed. We did not, after that, trace the rest of their expansion, which spread with equal ferocity far beyond the borders of the Middle East. At its height, under the Umayyad caliphate, the Muslim empire stretched from modern day Portugal and Morocco to modern day Pakistan. Through the Mongols, Muslim influence penetrated even further north and east into Asia. During the Ottoman Empire, Islamic rule spread into Asia Minor, Greece, and significant stretches of Eastern Europe. Though there is no longer any official Muslim empire today, Islam still constitutes an “invisible religious empire” that is larger than it has ever been – larger, in fact than “any previous earthly kingdom.”¹⁰³ *Dar al Islam* is immense, “encompassing 49 nations and 1.6 billion Muslims.”¹⁰⁴ Today, “Islam directs the spiritual affairs of nearly a quarter of the world’s population.”¹⁰⁵

Catholic efforts to confront this religious monolith can be traced back to Francis of Assisi and Dominic de Guzman, who both began to practice and encourage outreach to the “Saracens” during the second and third decades of the thirteenth century. A few

¹⁰³ David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is drawing Muslims around the world to faith in Jesus Christ* (Monumnet, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014) 5.

¹⁰⁴ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 5.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

decades after these missionary pioneers died, Conrad of Ascoli, a monk of Francis's order, started to minister in Libya and reportedly won 6,400 Libyans to Christ. However Conrad was called away from his ministry in Libya, and the fruit of his work there did not grow into a healthy church that continued to produce in kind.¹⁰⁶

The next breakthrough for Catholic missionaries was another six hundred years in coming. In 1887, Charles Lavigerie, the archbishop of the See of Algiers, baptized three Kabyle youth. Though he died a few years afterwards, the work he had begun continued into the twentieth century. However, the number of faith responses among the Kabyle Berbers was minimal: "as late as 1930 one could count no more than 700 baptized Catholic converts among the Kabyle."¹⁰⁷ At this point - 1,320 years after the inception of Islam, and over 700 years after Catholics first started trying to reach the Muslim people for Christ – there were only two instances of a notable response to the Gospel, neither of which had much momentum or longevity.

The record of Protestant missions to the Muslim world, beginning in the early nineteenth century, is similarly bleak. Though Protestants were exceptionally active in establishing schools, hospitals, and charitable organizations in Muslim countries, they were not nearly so successful in establishing bodies of new believers. They found the spiritual ground so hard that they often chose to redirect their efforts toward the traditional denominations, evangelizing, in effect, their fellow believers (not that the Catholic missionaries were innocent of this either, but we have already touched on the

¹⁰⁶ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 8-9.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 15.

strife caused by Uniatism - how ironic!). Protestant missionaries faithful to their vision to preach the Gospel to Muslims saw even less fruit than the Catholics had.

Samuel Zwemer, a Dutch Reformed missionary from Michigan, is known as the Apostle to Islam for his long career of mission work among Muslims in Yemen (1890-1913) and Egypt (1913-1929), but he is not known for winning many converts. The first chapter of his 1924 work *The Law of Apostasy in Islam* ponders the question: “Why so Few Converts in Islam?” Zwemer reports that in his day 438 missionaries in Egypt together won no more than 150 converts.¹⁰⁸

Ruth Tucker, Zwemer’s lifelong assistant, noted just before his death that for all his years of ministry, he personally saw “fewer than a dozen conversions.”¹⁰⁹ This is not to say that the centuries of combined missions efforts from both Catholic and Protestants were meaningless. But it is a simple fact that well into the twentieth century, there was no evidence that any of these efforts had resulted in a substantial number of Muslim converts that then became a sustained fellowship of believers.

Until the final decades of the twentieth century, history tells of only two significant, voluntary moves of Muslims to faith in Christ. Both of them, tellingly, were headed by native leaders. In the 1890’s, Shaikh Zakaryas of Ethiopia converted to Christianity (a process begun when he had some miraculous dreams) and started leading others to Christ as well. By his death in 1920, over 7,000 former Muslims had been baptized because of his witness. After his death, these new believers assimilated into the existing Ethiopian churches.¹¹⁰ Meanwhile in Indonesia, similarly astounding things were happening. A Javanese believer, Radin Abas Sadrach Surapranata, was evangelizing his

¹⁰⁸ Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Evangelizing Islam,” *First Things*, December 2012, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/12/evangelizing-islam>.

¹⁰⁹ Tom Doyle and Greg Webster, *Dreams and Visions: Is Jesus Awakening the Muslim World?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012) 268.

¹¹⁰ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 15.

people with such success that he would be remembered in later years as “the Apostle of Java.”¹¹¹ Sadrach died in 1924, but not without leaving behind a Javanese Church 10,000 – 20,000 strong. The fruit of Sadrach’s ministry “marked a historic breakthrough, as the first uncoerced Muslim movement to Christ in nearly 13 centuries of Christian witness to the Muslim world.”¹¹²

These two movements, these two victories, remained the only ones to speak of until the 1980’s and 1990’s. The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed a surge in international missions activity as well as unprecedented openness to such missionaries and their message because of cataclysmic political changes (the Iranian Revolution, the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus its Iron Curtain, and the ending of the Cold War). Under these conditions, Muslims responded to Jesus like never before, forming “11 additional movements. These occurred in Iran (2), Algeria, Bulgaria, Albania, West Africa, Bangladesh (2), and Central Asia (3).”¹¹³ Eleven movements in twenty years, following two movements in approximately 1,300 years, could be considered explosive. Amazingly, there was more to come.

Writing in 2011, Kevin Greeson, a church planter among Southeast Asian Muslims and author of the CAMEL method, reported that he knew of

¹¹¹ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 13.

¹¹² Ibid., 14.

¹¹³ Ibid., 18.

...at least 25 Muslim populations that had seen at least 1,000 baptisms and/or 100 churches planted over the previous decade. Of those 25 movements,¹¹⁴ a dozen reported more than 3,000 baptized former Muslims, some as many as 300,000 converts from Islam. At least 16 of these movements appear to be church planting movements¹¹⁵ in the fullest sense of the word.¹¹⁶

When Greeson wrote this, David Garrison, was working on research that has only this year been published. Garrison's findings show that Greeson's report, though astounding, falls far short of the full picture. Garrison recounts his project:

In 2007, a colleague encouraged me to conduct a study of these Muslim turnings. At that time, we could count at least 25 Muslim movements to Christ that we knew of personally or had heard about through the global grapevine... By the time we completed our study, six years later, we were able to identify 82 movements to Christ taking place in every corner of the Muslim world.¹¹⁷

Eight two is the total number "across the scope of Islam's shared history with Christianity"¹¹⁸ to date, so it includes the two movements that spanned the turn of the twentieth century and the eleven that occurred at the end of the twentieth. That means that sixty nine movements have begun in just the last thirteen years. Two movements in thirteen *hundred* years. Eleven movements in twenty years. *Sixty-nine* movements in

¹¹⁴ In the previous sentence, Greeson has just summarized the IMB's working definition of a movement, which is the one Garrison uses in *A Wind in the House of Islam*. On page 39, he defines a movement as "at least 1,000 baptized believers over the past one or two decades or 100 new church starts over the same time frame within a given people groups or ethnic Muslim community."

¹¹⁵ On page seven of his booklet entitled "Church Planting Movements," Garrison defines the term as "a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment."
http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/CPM_Profiles/cpm_booklet_standard_english.pdf

¹¹⁶ Kevin Greeson, "Church Planting Movements Among Muslim Peoples," *Mission Frontiers*, March 1, 2011, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/church-planting-movements-among-muslim-peoples>.

¹¹⁷ *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 22-23.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 230.

thirteen years.¹¹⁹ As the first chapter of Garrison's book so aptly concludes: "Something is happening."¹²⁰

What does this "something" look like in numbers? Garrison's findings mean that, in the last thirteen years, *at least* 69,000 Muslims across Dar al-Islam have given their lives to the Jesus of the Bible. But as can be seen in Greeson's report from 2011, a single movement can contain far more than 1,000 believers. Garrison acknowledges this in his book, saying,

In some countries the numbers within these new movements have grown to tens of thousands... Though we have established a clear floor of 1,000 baptized believers or 100 churches for defining each movement... we are less confident in guessing the *ceiling* of these movements. The cumulative number of converts to Christ is these movement seems to range somewhere between *two and seven million*.¹²¹ (emphasis mine)

These two to seven million Muslim-background believers (MBBs) are distributed throughout every "room" of *Dar al Islam* – and other sources think the number could be higher. For, as astonishing as Garrison's report is, it covers only Muslim conversions that fit within his definition of a movement. Many other Muslims, he acknowledges, have put their faith in Jesus but either remained isolated and anonymous, participating in Christian fellowship only via media outlets, or have left their ethnic identity as Muslims and been assimilated into previously existing, traditional churches. The extent to which these sorts of conversions are being made is likewise momentous, such that some estimate that, with all means of converting combined, "there may be a million or more people turning from

¹¹⁹ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 230.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹²¹ Ibid., 5 and 41-42.

Islam to Jesus every year.”¹²² Because openly declaring Christian faith would, in most Muslim countries, result in various forms of persecution (often quite severe), most choose to remain undeclared, at least to the government, local officials, and the institutionalized church.

Likewise, the phenomenon of these conversions is so recent, and the numbers are growing so rapidly, that it is difficult to say with certainty how many have put their faith in Jesus. Very few peer-reviewed or academically recognized sources have been written on the subject. There are figures available from sundry websites, but of course there is no way of verifying if such figures are accurate. However, the fact that sources from within popular culture reporting such movements are cropping repeatedly (and with noticeable consistencies) can be taken as a signal that *something* is happening. Further investigation is required. “For the time being,” Garrison cautions, “estimates of size will remain only estimates based upon as many perspectives as possible, but with no pretense of precision.”¹²³

Still, the testimonies are flooding in from all reaches of *Dar al Islam*. Researchers studying this Islamic apostasy declare, “we are looking at a worldwide phenomenon.”¹²⁴ Garrison’s research followed this phenomenon through “45 movements in 33 Muslim people groups in 14 countries.”¹²⁵ The number of movements and conversions is not

¹²² Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2012), 24.

¹²³ *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 42.

¹²⁴ Mohammad Khalil and Mucahit Bilici, “Conversion Out of Islam: A Study of Conversion Narratives of Former Muslims” *Muslim World* 97 no. 1 (2007): 111.

¹²⁵ 28.

evenly distributed throughout all Muslim countries. “Certainly there have been some places more affected than others – Algeria, Indonesia, parts of Central Asia, areas in South Asia, the Persian Diaspora, and so on – but that does not negate the fact that what we are seeing is truly unprecedented.”¹²⁶

The Brush Strokes: Factors for Conversion

The question that naturally springs up when unprecedented things happen is, “Why?” Why now? What changed? What caused the number of converts to jump so drastically and so rapidly? The most straightforward way of finding the answer to these questions would be to ask the MBBs themselves what influenced their decisions. Some researchers have done just that. They have uncovered both push and pull factors that compel Muslims to leave Islam for Christianity. Push factors are creating a deep sense of dissatisfaction with Islam, which is being expressed all around the Muslim world. The push factors alienate people from their religion and culture, causing them to be open to new ideas and solutions. Which new options they turn to, however, will depend on which pull factors are at work. Not every person who abandons Islam decides to adopt Christianity. Clearly, though, hosts of them do make that decision, which means that the Christian faith is exercising a strong pull on those questioning Islam. What is it that Muslims are finding attractive about a faith they have traditionally opposed? First let us look at the reasons Muslim minds and hearts are turning away from the faith of their fathers.

¹²⁶ Duane Alexander Miller, “Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body: the Genesis of World Islamic Christianity” (Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary), 31.

Dissatisfaction with Islam: the Push Factors

Status and treatment of women in Islam. According to the research of Khalil and Bilici, this is the number one reason to which Muslim apostates, male and female alike, refer when explaining their reservations concerning their former faith.¹²⁷

Islam as oppressive. The second most oft-quoted deterrent found in Khalil and Bilici's study is the spreading feeling that Islam fosters cruelty, oppression, and backwardness in societies. Muslims who are willing to critique their religion on intellectual grounds report that they see in Islam "general intolerance," a tendency toward totalitarianism, and even say that Shari'a law is "incompatible with human rights."¹²⁸

Islamic militancy or jihadism. Dovetailing with the general oppression of a thoroughgoing Islamic culture, Muslims are pointing out that the militant impulses of Islamic extremism demonstrate not the superiority but rather the failure of Shari'a law. Woodberry's research agrees, saying, "Muslim-on-Muslim violence has led to considerable disillusionment for many Muslims."¹²⁹ And he continues:

This disillusionment is broad in the Muslim world. Many Iranians became interested in the gospel after the Khomeini revolution of 1979 brought in rule by clergy. Pakistanis became more receptive after President Zia al-Haq (1977-1988) tried to implement Islamic law. And Afghans became more open after Islamist Taliban conquest and rule (1994-2001).¹³⁰

¹²⁷ "Conversion Out of Islam," 120.

¹²⁸ Khalil and Bilici, "Conversion Out of Islam," 115.

¹²⁹ J. Dudley Woodberry, Russell G. Shubin, and G. Marks, "Why Muslims Follow Jesus," *Christianity Today*, October 2007, 82.

¹³⁰ Woodberry, "Why Muslims Follow Jesus," 83.

These observances are corroborated by Khalil and Bilici, who note: “three of the testimonies [of apostasy] specifically mention the 1971 crisis in Bangladesh. This seems to parallel a 1996 report published in *Muslim and Arab Perspectives*, which states that there has been ‘widespread *riddah* (apostasy) there since 1971.’”¹³¹ Paul Heiskell, explaining the unprecedented openness we now see, said, “Radical Islam’s on the rise. People are looking around and going, ‘I don’t like that. These people kill and behead people, make you wear a burqa, and despise women, and that’s what Islam is. And if that’s what it is, I don’t want it. But I’m culturally Muslim. What do I do?’”¹³²

The violent enforcing of Islamic fundamentalism is a factor for openness to the Gospel? At first blush it seems counterintuitive, but the answer is - apparently so. The testimonies of Muslim converts are revealing a connection between harsh political expressions of Islam and a response to Jesus.

Legalistic rigor of Islam. Former Muslims also expressed bitterness toward the myriad of rules that they deemed unnecessarily strict or even petty. One woman said that the burdensome expectations made Islam “almost impossible... to practice.”¹³³ Many have experienced deep discouragement when their religious leaders tell them that the resolution to their problems rests only in a more devoted performance of the law. A former sheikh in Africa confesses that he found it personally humiliating to repeatedly

¹³¹ “Conversion Out of Islam,” 119.

¹³² Paul Heiskell, interview by Bethany Simons, Waco, TX, December 19, 2013.

¹³³ Khalil and Bilici, “Conversion Out of Islam,” 115.

offer the members of his mosque the one answer he knew to give: “more sharia”¹³⁴ – fully knowing it was a fruitless shibboleth. Muslims, inundated with rules and admonitions to observe them, experience both frustration and despair at the arbitrary, unattainable nature of the expectations.

Moral failures of the prophet Muhammad. Speaking of rules: Muhammad didn’t follow them. More and more Muslims are voicing their unease at the questionable mores of the prophet, and the ways he failed to live up to his own pronouncements of the will of God. The inconsistencies between the prophet’s message and his life have led Muslims willing to look objectively at his legacy to conclude: “‘Muhammad was not qualified to be a prophet of God.’”¹³⁵

The Qur’an. There is a trend in the testimonies: when Muslims begin to inquire deeply of their holy book, even for the most pious and zealous of reasons, they begin to discover problems - lots of them. More intellectual objectors take issue with the dubious historicity of the Qur’an and the hadith. The more ethically minded discover the contradictions between the prophet’s life and his word and are vexed. Muslims outside the Arab world (which is most of them) feel belittled by the Arab imperialism implicit in *I’jaz* and the prohibition of translation that follows upon it. Literate Muslims who do manage to get a ‘transliteration of the meaning’ of the Qur’an in their own language are often dismayed by the muddled and implausible theology they find within. In typical Muslim communities, the imams alone have a more than surface-level knowledge of that

¹³⁴ Trousdale, 21.

¹³⁵ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 248.

book which is the fount and bedrock of their faith. Ironically enough, their more intimate knowledge actually prepares them to be people of peace, because they see in depth the bankruptcy of Islam, although they are supposed to be the guardians of Islam among their people. Trousdale writes:

... the vast majority of Muslims can't read, and those who can read still don't read the Qur'an. Significantly, it is clear that some Muslim leaders don't want it any other way... Many former senior Muslim leaders whom we interviewed believe that this practice of restricting translations of the Qur'an effectively prevents most Muslims from discovering its contradictions with other Muslim writings and some Muslim practices, and also conceals the multiple passages that affirm the special status of Isa al Masih (Jesus the Messiah).¹³⁶

Garrison expounds: "For many Muslims whose testimonies we gathered, their pilgrimage to Christ began with a clear reading, for the first time, of the Qur'an in their own language."¹³⁷ Upon such readings, their confidence in their religion was shaken. "So potent is this discovery of the Qur'an's limitations that many Muslim-background Christ-followers have urged the spread of the colloquial Qur'an translations as a prelude to gospel witness. As one Muslim-background evangelist put it, 'Only after I read the Qur'an in my own language did I realize how lost I was.'"¹³⁸

Nasr, whose story you will hear later, turned toward Jesus when a Christian TV program prompted him to examine the Qur'anic materials he had been publishing for years.¹³⁹ Jamil, a sheikh who made his living by teaching the Qur'an, began to be converted when Jesus appeared to him in a dream and grilled him on his knowledge of

¹³⁶ Trousdale, 76-77.

¹³⁷ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 247.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 248.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 213.

the book. In this dream, Jesus never directed Jamil to the Bible or himself (which he has done in multiple dreams for other Muslims) – he simply challenged Jamil’s Qur’anic knowledge.

This dream went on for some time with Jamil’s confusion regarding the Qur’an growing. Finally, Jamil awoke in the darkness. He found a flashlight and began to read the Qur’an to see if what he had dreamed was true, and to his astonishment, all the verses quoted by the man in the dream were accurate, even though he had no memory of reading them before.¹⁴⁰

The testimonies of Muslims who have chosen Jesus are littered with similar themes.

There are also multiple stories of devout Muslims setting forth to defend and prove the veracity of the Qur’an and consequently being dissuaded by their own efforts and won over to Christianity.

Veiled deception. Another theme among the accounts of MBBs was the covert, suppressed, but persistent inkling that they were being misled. Amal, a young Arab believer, shared this in her interview with Garrison: “When I was young, I would always have this pressure on me and I’d think, *There’s something wrong with this*. I’d try to escape the pressure. But when I would try to do something, I’d be told, ‘Don’t do that. It’s shameful or forbidden.’ Even to give my opinion was not allowed.”¹⁴¹ Countless former Muslims report bringing their questions to their religious leaders, only to be sharply reprimanded and have their hopes squelched. Those who refuse to drop their inquiries after the initial censure have sometimes been beaten and even imprisoned. Once Muslims discover Jesus, they can boldly affirm their former suspicions, declaring, “We

¹⁴⁰ Trousdale, 149-150.

¹⁴¹ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 218.

have been lied to!”¹⁴² This sense of hurt and outrage at the deception foisted upon them is a riptide roiling beneath the disingenuously placid surface of Islam’s doctrinal uniformity and complacency.

Winsomeness of Christ: the Pull Factors

Those are some pretty compelling push factors! But the push factors only serve to open the Muslim heart to new input. Without similarly compelling reasons to choose Christ, disillusion with Islam merely strips the former Muslim of a sense of order, security, and identity (treacherous though it is), while exposing him to the chaotic winds of naturalism, humanism, rationalism, and a host of other western follies; or, in some geographical locales, the blandishments of alternate religions like Buddhism, Hinduism, or spiritism. Fortunately, the bankruptcy of the western offerings has already been demonstrated across North Africa and the Middle East, which might be why “most of the people who leave Islam to become Christian come from the Middle East and the Arab world.”¹⁴³ But as we saw earlier, waves of conversion to Christ are sweeping across the whole of *Dar al Islam*, so clearly, Christianity wields pull factors of immense strength. Let us now examine those.

Christian example: seeing a lived faith. Muslims who have Christian friends or live in a community with Christian families have noticed how faith in Jesus, put into practice, results in a much different lifestyle than the one produced by Islamic practice,

¹⁴² Heiskell, interview; and Muslim Journey to Hope testimonies, <http://www.muslimjourneytohope.com/watch.php>.

¹⁴³ Khalil and Bilici, “Conversion Out of Islam,” 119.

and find it desirable. They have observed that “Christian pastors tend to be morally superior to Muslim clerics”¹⁴⁴ and “noted with approval that there was no gap between the moral profession and the practice of Christians.”¹⁴⁵ The lived witness of local Christians, exhibiting the true peace of a submitted disciple, stands in sharp contrast to the emptiness, frustrations, and failures of those laboring under the corrosive mandates of *Shari’a* law. Former Muslims specifically cite the honoring treatment of women; “loving Christian marriages;” the extension of forgiveness instead of violent revenge; the kindness of Christian interactions; their genuine concern for the poor, marginalized, and oppressed; and Christians’ ongoing generosity as being factors for their conversion.¹⁴⁶ For many Muslims, their interest in Jesus was piqued, or their unthinking dismissal of Jesus was overturned, when a follower of Jesus befriended them.

The character of Jesus and the God of the Bible. Jesus is venerated as a prophet in the Qur’an, which actually has quite a lot to say about him. Many Muslims who eventually gave their lives to Jesus say they had always been fascinated by the Islamic teachings about Jesus, and wanted to know more. Eventually the Qur’anic material wasn’t enough to sate their curiosity, and they sought information from other sources, like a believing friend, the Bible, satellite TV programs, or the Internet. For others, their longing to know more about *Isa al-Masih* was born in an instant, at the hands of a personal crisis or a miraculous occurrence, and they were immediately willing to look beyond what Islam has to say about him. Whatever the motivations for their search,

¹⁴⁴ Khalil and Bilici. “Conversion out of Islam,” 115.

¹⁴⁵ Woodberry, “Why Muslims Follow Jesus,” 82.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

Muslims, upon learning more about this mysterious prophet, report being captivated by the person of Jesus. They are awed by his sinlessness, confounded by his humility, thunderstruck by his teachings about love for one's enemy instead of retaliation, and undone by his offer of complete forgiveness. The winsomeness of who Jesus is stands out all the clearer as he is contrasted with the prophet of Islam. The same Muslims who discover and declare that Muhammad was unsuited for prophethood, discover Jesus and say he is "Messiah, God among us, and the only way to salvation."¹⁴⁷ Islam fares ill at the juxtaposition of Isa and Muhammad, because, as Garrison points out, "There's really no comparison."¹⁴⁸

Similarly, when Muslims learn that God is a father who cares for them, desires to provide for them, and wants be involved in their lives, their hearts are stirred. Former Muslim Abraham Sarker says of his discovery of God's character in the Bible: "I was so moved that my Creator loved me unconditionally."¹⁴⁹

Many converts are willing to respond to the person of Jesus long before they are willing to associate with or identify themselves as Christians, because the name of Christianity has been blackened by long histories of imperialism and more current associations with debauched western culture. Despite the myriad of barriers to a real understanding of God's character, by the power of the Holy Spirit the truth shines forth still, and Muslims are responding.

¹⁴⁷ David Garrison, interview by Bethany Simons, phone interview, November 22, 2013.

¹⁴⁸ David Garrison, interview.

¹⁴⁹ Lee, "Why Revival is Exploding Among Muslims."

The gospel message. The gospel message, with its assurance of forgiveness and eternity in heaven, is unlike anything offered in Islam. Muslims are taught to call Allah “the most gracious, the most merciful,” but also to pray for Muhammad’s soul because even he is not guaranteed access to Paradise. The mercies of Allah may be abundant - but they are also arbitrary. There are no means by which a Muslim can ascertain if he has found favor with Allah, and absolutely zero possibility of being secure in any favor that might be anticipated. The Gospel declares that when anyone puts their faith in the Son of God they will have unassailable peace, favor, and relationship with God forever, because they, too, are brought into sonship by adoption. Furthermore, in Islam, people are controlled by unrelenting shame; the Gospel promises complete forgiveness. For many, the Gospel promises alone are incentive enough to make a decision to follow Jesus.¹⁵⁰

The Bible. One of the primary factors for conversion is an introduction to the Bible. A deep reverence for and faith in holy writings is ingrained in Muslim spirituality, but as we have seen, an honest foray into the Islamic texts tends to reveal a cracked foundation unworthy of the confidences placed upon it. By contrast, when Muslims encounter the Bible, they find a scripture that satisfies their hopes and questions. The ubiquitous reports vary in their expression but all tend towards one theme: Muslims find the Christian scriptures uniquely compelling and satisfying. Seekers of an intellectual bent remark upon the plausibility and cohesiveness of the Bible, and appreciate how the stories of individuals work into a metanarrative that is relevant to every reader in every context (instead of being time-bound and applicable only to the life of Muhammad). The spiritually inclined experience a dynamism in the words that lead them to conclude that

¹⁵⁰ Woodberry, “Why Muslims Follow Jesus,” 82.

the Bible is the truth from God.¹⁵¹ Even fierce Islamists seem to recognize an unexplainable power latent in the Bible's pages, and so they warn their students to stay away from it, claiming that it casts a spell upon those who venture to read it.¹⁵²

Missionaries too have noticed the power of the Bible to break down the defenses of Islamic indoctrination. Muslims are taught from birth some standard objections to Christianity, chief among them being 1) the violation of *tawhid*, derived from an unfair explanation of the Trinity ("Christians worship three gods") and 2) the claim that the revelations from the prophets preceding Muhammad, which make up the Christian scriptures, have been corrupted.¹⁵³ Every Muslim knows to say these things, but rarely have they ever actually looked at the Bible themselves. Missionary Tom Doyle says that "Usually the sheer power of reading the Word of God does something to the objection."¹⁵⁴ Faith in Islam is undermined upon study of the Qur'an, but the strength of objections to Christianity begins to fizzle upon study of the Bible.

The testimony of a Muslim convert who has led three movements in his country makes an even bolder assertion:

In our experience, every Muslim who is given a Bible... they experience the Bible as the Word of God. There is power in the Bible. It is God-breathed. It will not return void. And that power just captivates Muslim leaders. It holds them bound.

I've heard some say, "The story of Jesus – what He did and what He went through – how can someone go through this for you?" That demonstration of a man loving someone to the point of laying down his life, it really grips them. It resonates with them. It is the power of the Bible.

¹⁵¹ Woodberry, "Why Muslims Follow Jesus," 83.

¹⁵² Lee, "Why Revival is Exploding Among Muslims."

¹⁵³ Doyle, 129; and Heiskell, interview.

¹⁵⁴ Doyle, 129.

And the simplicity of the Bible – it is so simple. People have fooled us when they tell us it is so complex, so difficult, but really it is so simple. I want to say that the power of the Holy Spirit is really the driving force when people are reading the Bible.¹⁵⁵

It is a mighty force indeed, one that leads many to choose to become disciples of the Jesus they encounter in the Bible.

Christian prayer. Devout Muslims pray five times a day, but only in a religious context (at the mosque or while facing *kiblah* in their homes), and the prayer is a rote recitation performed to earn merit. Prayer in Islam is not a means of communicating with God, but rather of appeasing or impressing him. When Muslims discover that the God of the Bible listens to the cries of their hearts and *responds*, it registers with them strongly. For the Jesus-follower, prayer is an at-all-times and in-all-places living reality of communing with God and seeing his will done on earth as it is in heaven. Muslims find Christian prayer so attractive that it is often a prominent feature in testimonies of conversion.

Namir, a formerly Muslim disciple of Jesus in North Africa, conducts a prayer and evangelism ministry out of his cart-driving business. He shares the Gospel and prays for the patrons who ride in his cart, and, Namir reports, “They give me their written requests... I pray that God will bless them with all they need. I have got all the requests and answered prayers recorded. I have 904 answered prayers written down in this book. And when God speaks to me, I write that down in this book.”¹⁵⁶ Trousdale, who observed Namir’s undercover ministry, writes, “He carries that book with him whenever he is

¹⁵⁵ Trousdale, 108.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 177.

driving his cart, and today many people will wait at the marketplace for his cart, bypassing other, more modern taxis so that they can ask ‘the praying cart man’ to add their names to his book.”¹⁵⁷

Another African believer’s testimony is full of all kinds of factors for conversion, both push and pull: attacks of illness credited to his father’s activities as a *marabout*, discouragement and anxiety despite stringent religious efforts, aversion to the Arabness of the Qur’an, friendship with a Christian, access to the Bible, questions about the Qur’an but a sheikh who would not answer them, and a miraculous dream. Despite this extraordinary litany, this believer completes his testimony this way: “all this began because I saw that the God of the Bible answers prayer!”¹⁵⁸ Muslims, like all people, hunger deeply to pray to a God who hears them and responds.

Demonstrations of the power of God. Demonstrations of the power of God can include healings, deliverance from demonic oppression, answered prayers, or dreams and visions of Jesus (which are happening so often they merit their own heading). Reports of such expressions of God’s power are becoming a common feature of these Muslim movements to Christ. Wajeeh, a regional leader among the churches in Africa, tells us to expect them: “You see, according to the Bible, when we go to reach the nations, to tell people about Jesus, miracles will follow. It is a biblical principle.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Trousdale, 177.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 80-82.

¹⁵⁹ Jerry Trousdale, 127.

Jerry Trousdale's research shows that "depending on the region, a minimum of 50 percent... and a maximum of 70 percent of all the new churches planted among Muslims happened in part because of signs and wonders (typically miracles of healing and deliverance) that accelerated and facilitated the process of disciple making."¹⁶⁰

Miracles catalyze the growth of already existing churches but also serve to break down the walls of spiritually closed-off communities or people. An intensely belligerent *marabout* was softened to the Gospel when, after all of his own sacrificing and spell-casting had failed, Jesus's power healed a leg which had pained him for years.¹⁶¹

Likewise an entire village was opened to the Gospel when the following unfolded:

One day, the mother of the sheikh in the town began to manifest demonic spirits. She was taken to the witch doctors, and then to the Muslim *marabouts* who read the Qur'an to her. The sheikh tried everything he could think of to set his mother free from the demonic influence that was gripping her... but he could find no answers and nobody to help. But suddenly, one afternoon, the mother (in a brief moment of lucidity) announced the right answer: 'I must go to the home of the [local Christians]!' she cried out. And with that one brief sentence, she ran from the sheikh's home straight to the Christian woman's house.¹⁶²

The two believers in the town prayed for her, and she was set free.

Word went around the village instantaneously: "The sheikh's mother is healed! The spirits have been defeated!" The sheikh heard the news and came running... And that day, both the sheikh and his mother became followers of Jesus. If news spread quickly about the demons leaving, the news of the sheikh becoming a Christian spread even faster. That very evening, people from the village began to flood the Christian woman's home, seeking healings and deliverance from evil influence through the power of her God.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ 135.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁶² Ibid., 172 – 173.

¹⁶³ Trousdale, 173.

This story, excluding anachronistic details, sounds like it could be lifted straight from the pages of the four Gospels or the book of Acts. As astonishing as it may be to western sensibilities, it is, according to MBBs across the world, a frequent feature of their evangelistic efforts and the founding of their churches. Clearly, miracles such as these constitute a compelling reason to follow Jesus, as they communicate God's powerful presence and tangibly demonstrate his care for hurting people.

Dreams and visions. As I mentioned above, Jesus is appearing to Muslims in dreams and visions so frequently that multiple websites and books have been created to track this phenomenon alone. To be sure, there is some sensationalism in the testimonies, since the subject is sensational in nature, but the reports are too numerous and there are too many consistencies among them to be ignored. Multiple sources indicate that 40% “of Muslim converts to Christianity mention a dream as being instrumental to that decision,” but some say that number could be as high as 70%.¹⁶⁴

The visitations tend to fall into two broad categories: preparatory and empowering.¹⁶⁵ The preparatory appearances arrest the attention of the Muslim concerned, instill burning questions within him, and set him on a seeking journey that leads ultimately to conversion. The empowering appearances come to those who have already chosen Jesus and are being persecuted for that decision.

In the sources I have examined, one thing that all reporters have emphasized is that the dreams or visions are never stand-alone events. One does not have a dream of Isa and wake up a Christian. In some rare accounts, Jesus has, in the dream, clearly presented

¹⁶⁴ “Types of Isa Dreams,” Isa Dreams, accessed February 2014, <http://www.isadreams.org/wake-up-to-dreams/types-of-isa-dreams/>.

¹⁶⁵ Isa Dreams, “Types of Isa Dreams.”

the Gospel or expounded upon issues of doctrinal belief, but *far* more often he has directed the dreamer to the Bible, or to a specific person or place (such as a church) where they can receive a full explanation of who and what they just encountered. Quite often he has merely issued the simple but obscure invitation to “follow me,” so that the dreamer awakens not with answers, but with questions. Spurred by their urgent questions, they are then willing to seek out the Christian resources they used to evade or ignore. If Jesus is going to take the initiative to miraculously appear to Muslims in their sleep (or in broad daylight, as sometimes happens), why doesn’t he just go all the way and clearly present the gospel to them? Many observers have asked this question. Mike O’Quin proposes that it is because Christ has given the Church the ministry of reconciliation, and he takes our appointment seriously. “Ultimately, it’s not the dreams themselves that lead people to Christ; it’s believers.”¹⁶⁶ Nik Ripken agrees: “We do not find that dream and visions alone ever change anybody’s life... what it does, it seems, is to send them on a spiritual pilgrimage.”¹⁶⁷ It also serves to pierce through the traditional objections Muslims are trained to brandish. “When a Muslim comes to me after having a dream or vision,” writes Doyle, “the two standard objections evaporate.”¹⁶⁸ Through his miraculous appearances to Muslims, Jesus prepares their hearts to receive the Gospel, but his people still need to be there to preach it to them.

Missionaries who have picked up on both the prodigious prevalence of dreams and the role they can play in conversion have decided to employ the phenomenon to their

¹⁶⁶ Lee, “Why Revival is Exploding Among Muslims.”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Doyle, 130.

advantage. Instead of waiting for someone who has dreamed to come to them, they are seeking the dreamers themselves. Some workers are daring to begin their conversations by asking their Muslim friends if they have had any interesting dreams. Ads are appearing in the classified sections of newspapers, such as these examples from Cairo and Ramallah:

“Have you seen a man in a white robe in a dream? If so, call this number...”¹⁶⁹

“The man in a white robe that you met in your dream has a message for you. Call this number...”¹⁷⁰

The mention of the white robe brings us to the recurring themes threaded through all the various appearances. The white robe is just one motif that has typified them. Some others I have observed are as follows:

Further direction. In the dreams, Muslims are often shown specific places and people to whom they must go for an explanation of their experience. Sometimes, if the Muslim already has some background knowledge on Jesus and is asking questions, the dream consists only of an image of the physical persons or places (Jesus himself is not in it).

The Bible. The Bible is often an element of these dreams. In some, Jesus hands a Bible to the person, or he tells them to read the Bible, or the dream evokes a comparison of the Bible and the Qur'an and communicates the Bible's superiority.

¹⁶⁹ Doyle, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 246.

Light. Reports of a man in a shining robe are just as common as reports of a man in a white robe, and other Muslims report having a general experience of light, or of actually seeing a disembodied but physical light in front of them, or of their rooms being filled with light.

A power encounter. In many stories, the Muslim is being attacked or oppressed in some way by an evil spirit, and when he calls upon Jesus, Jesus' power manifests in some form and the attack is cut off.

A healing. In multiple stories, someone who was ill or injured had an encounter with Jesus (dream or vision) and found him or herself completely healed at its close.

The demeanor of Jesus. Muslims are impressed by the countenance of Christ, and their narratives frequently mention: his smile (warm, beautiful, brilliant, welcoming), his eyes (loving, piercing, beautiful), or his overall appearance (magnificent, glorious, shining).

The emotional experience of the dream. In retelling how they were feeling during the encounter with Jesus, Muslims often report the same keynote experiences: a feeling of remarkable and total love, such as they had never known before; a feeling of deep and palpable peace; a feeling of being truly and entirely forgiven; the absence of all shame.

Invitation. In many of the dreams and visions, Jesus issues an invitation, often with the words: "Follow me" "Come to me" or just, "Come!" In some encounters, he says not a word but his body language and facial expression are beckoning, and the

dreamer awakes with the unshakeable knowledge that, even though no words were spoken, he has been summoned.

Ongoing encounters. Some Muslims only see Jesus in a dream or vision once. For others, the encounters are ongoing. An Alawite leader in Syria had dreams of Jesus once or twice a month for about a year, and then, right before he gave his life to Jesus, he had forty-five consecutive nights of Jesus dreams.¹⁷¹ For a period of three months, an Afghani man met Jesus every time he went hiking in the mountains surrounding Kabul.¹⁷² A sheikh-in-training in Qom, Iran who decided to secretly study the Bible had, over a period of six years, repeated two-way conversations with Jesus in which he asked him questions about what he was learning. Again and again, “the Man who met him in his dreams said the same things [he] would inevitably read in one of the Gospels the next day! That his dreams led him to the Bible assured [him] he was still sane.”¹⁷³

Scriptural themes and quotes – Just as for the sheikh in Qom, the Jesus dreams regularly contain biblical imagery, allusions, or full quotes, which the dreamer is typically unaware of at first since most Muslims are not acquainted with the Bible.

- The most frequent reports are of Jesus saying simply, “I am the way,” but there are also reports of him declaring fully, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.”

¹⁷¹ Doyle, 154.

¹⁷² Ibid., 217.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 92.

- A Syrian woman (who was healed after Jesus appeared to her) heard him say, “Come to me, you who are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.”¹⁷⁴
- A member of the secret police in Syria was distressed when Jesus asked him in a dream, “Why are you persecuting me?”¹⁷⁵
- Another man dreamed that he was standing on the threshold of a door, looking into a banqueting hall where a wedding reception was going on. One of his Christian friends was sitting at a table near the door, already eating. He called out to his friend, asking, “Why didn’t you wait for me? I thought we were going to eat together.” In the dream, his friend answered, “You never responded to the invitation!” When he awoke, he called the friend he had seen in the dream. This friend then led him to the parable of the wedding banquet in Scripture.¹⁷⁶
- One missionary, while talking with a man who had dreamed of Jesus, opened his Bible to the passage in Matthew 7 about the transfiguration and invited him to read it. When he read the end of verse two (“His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light”), the man looked up, startled, and said, “That’s the guy, the guy in my dreams! Who is this?”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Muslim Journey to Hope testimonies

¹⁷⁵ Doyle, 146.

¹⁷⁶ Muslim Journey to Hope testimonies

¹⁷⁷ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 243.

The details sound fantastic (and yet surprisingly orthodox), but the sheer number of reports demands consideration. It appears that Jesus is honoring Muslims with direct communication from God, and they are taking note. Phil Parshall explains the significance of a dream to a Muslim heart: “In general, there is little evidence of Muslims experiencing climactic, life-changing encounters with God. This personal dimension of God’s directly interacting with man is lacking.”¹⁷⁸ Today, Jesus is changing the story for this distanced people, and taking the initiative to connect with them. If personal devotion, biblical training, and discipleship with fellow believers are the way in which Muslims walk across the threshold and respond to the invitation, then these miraculous encounters are Jesus opening the door for them. Understandably, thousands, if not millions, are walking through.

Desire to join fellowship. Woodberry’s research has found that Muslims see in Christian communities a vivacity and concord in which they desire to share.¹⁷⁹ To put it biblically, the love the disciples have, one for another,¹⁸⁰ is attractive to those who aren’t experiencing such fellowship. Among these movements in the Muslim world, quite often whole families, peer groups, or communities will come to faith at the same time. When this happens, the transformation of their culture is marked. In some of the countries where this is happening, church leaders have been approached by messengers, even

¹⁷⁸ Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1980) 79.

¹⁷⁹ “Why Muslims Follow Jesus,” 84.

¹⁸⁰ John 13:35.

imams, from nearby villages saying, ““Please send us the storytellers!”¹⁸¹”¹⁸² Trousdale says that, among the movements his ministry oversees, requests like these have been “repeated again and again... It was never part of our strategic planning to make Muslims jealous to have the gospel because their neighbors had been blessed by it, yet that, in a nutshell, is just what continues to happen” (123). Muslims see others around them transformed and thriving in Christian community, and they want to experience the same.

Setting the Plane: Factors of Modernity and Missionary Activity

The push and pull factors for conversion (FFC) explored above are those repeatedly mentioned by MBBs in their own testimonies of how they came to a saving knowledge of *Isa al Masih*. But there are other factors, underlying these occurrences and working in concert to produce the providential collusion we are witnessing today. The plane is being strategically set for Muslims to find Jesus and choose faith, in ways never seen before. We will now look at those factors that go into creating an environment ripe for breakthrough.

Prayer. While there is no way to study or prove the effects of prayer empirically, there is no leaving it out, either. Every movement leader whose interviews I have read or whom I have interviewed myself has mentioned the power and necessity of prayer. It is an indispensable feature of these movements. When I asked Tim Stoyan, a shadow pastor of the movement in the Middle East, why he thinks these miraculous things are

¹⁸¹ In the African countries in which City Team International works, orality strategies, such as Chronological Bible Storying are often used. So saying “Please send us the storytellers!” is the equivalent of saying, “Please come preach the Gospel to us!”

¹⁸² Trousdale, 123.

happening in our day, he replied, “The bowl of intercession in Heaven has tipped.”¹⁸³ A missionary interviewed by Duane Miller said, “There would not be the response if it were not for the prayers.”¹⁸⁴ The works of God in *Dar al-Islam* are “catalyzed by prayer” and “sustained by prayer,”¹⁸⁵ says Trousdale, who has discovered the Muslim-background leaders he trains to be far more inexhaustible in their practice and zealous in their promotion of prayer than even the western initiators of the movements. These believers bear a primary, unmovable conviction that it is the intercession of the saints enabling the salvation of their countrymen.

Availability of contextualized scripture. The two centuries of Protestant mission work in *Dar al Islam* brought with them a proliferation of Bible translations, as the Protestant axioms of the priesthood of all believers and *sola Scriptura* have habitually produced an impulse for education and translation. The availability of the scriptures in the native languages of unreached people groups has always been a powerful FFC.

However, missionaries today recognize that the far-reaching effectiveness of these written translations is foundering upon the shoals of illiteracy. The fact is, most of the world’s Muslims cannot read. The figures vary, but the more moderate claim that, worldwide, illiteracy among Muslim men is at 32% and it is 52% for Muslim women.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Tim Stoyan, interview by Bethany Simons, Waco, TX, June 28, 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Miller, “Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body,” 15.

¹⁸⁵ 52.

¹⁸⁶ Todd M. Johnson, “Seven Signposts of Hope and Challenge in Global Christianity,” (Article adapted from a plenary talk given at the joint meeting of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association (IFMA) and the Evangelical Fellowship of Mission Agencies (EFMA) in St. Louis, Missouri, USA, 2004) 22.

The more extreme report 80% illiteracy.¹⁸⁷ It's not just Muslims, however; approximately two thirds of earth's population learns by oral communication, meaning "they can't, won't, or don't learn through literate means."¹⁸⁸ This proportion rises when looking at unreached people groups: 70 -80% of the unreached are oral communicators.¹⁸⁹ While written Bible translations are valuable, clearly, their scope is limited. Education, though an obvious and imperative solution, is a slow-moving undertaking of gargantuan scale. The majority of unreached oral communicators alive today are not going to be taught to read, so if they are going to have access to the Bible in their lifetime, there must be an increase in orality strategies and audio-visual resources.

In recent years, these sorts of mediums have been employed in the Muslim world to great effect. Radio and TV programs have been a resource for many with no other access to biblical teaching. Organizations like the Global Recording Network are taking advantage of today's technologies to pioneer new means of getting audio recordings of the Bible to oral learners.¹⁹⁰ Oral Bible Storying and Chronological Bible Storying have brought the narrative nature of the Christian scriptures to life in a way that is naturally palatable to oral communicators and Arab learning styles in general.¹⁹¹ The Jesus Film has, in the past, been a hugely successful means of presenting the Gospel to those who cannot acquire or read a Bible for themselves. Recent projects have revisited the classic

¹⁸⁷ Doyle, 133.

¹⁸⁸ "The GAP," International Mission Board Global Research, accessed January 4, 2014. <http://public.imb.org/globalresearch/Pages/GAP.aspx>.

¹⁸⁹ International Mission Board Global Research, "The GAP."

¹⁹⁰ Miller, "Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body," 24.

¹⁹¹ Miller, "Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body," 9.

tool, filming the story again using a colloquial Arabic script, and featuring Palestinian actors and locales. As sources such as these, contextualized to both the culture and the learning style of the people group involved, are becoming available, response to the Gospel is growing.

New strategies for evangelism and discipleship. After centuries of unproductive outreach to Muslims, today's mission workers are beginning to hit upon some fruitful methods of sharing with Muslims. Some of these methods can seem very counterintuitive. However, they have biblical precedents, and the fact is, they are reaching Muslims in ways which the practices considered normative up till now have not. The foci of these effective means of evangelism and discipleship are considerably different than those of the past; the new strategies...

- Start not with conversion, but with discipleship¹⁹² (An exception to this would be Any-3).¹⁹³
- Begin their presentation of the Gospel not with the crucifixion, or even with Christ, but with the biblical creation story¹⁹⁴ or even the Qur'an.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² Trousdale, 43.

¹⁹³ Mike Shipman, "Any-3: Lead Muslims to Christ Now!" *Mission Frontiers*, July 1, 2013. <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/any-3>.

¹⁹⁴ Trousdale, 42.

¹⁹⁵ AJ Hague, "Guide Muslims to the Bible," *Missions Frontiers*, July 1, 2013. <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/guide-muslims-to-the-bible>.

- Aim not at the mass evangelism of individuals, but focus on reaching smaller groups (such as families, villages) as wholes,¹⁹⁶ or the person of peace who will introduce his community to the Gospel.¹⁹⁷
- Begin the process of evangelism with the goal of a reproducing, indigenous church in mind.

With the exception of Any-3, these new strategies often feature a considerable amount of pre-evangelism (though not as much as the previous standard practices, as we shall see). Means of pre-evangelism include:

- *Conversational questioning* – Nasr, whom we shall hear more from later, asks Muslims questions about their faith to probe whether or not they are open to hearing the Gospel or might be a person of peace.
- *Service/Compassionate witness* – Many MBBs have found their “in” to a community by befriending the families and seeking practical ways to meet their tangible needs. Similarly, compassion ministries that seek to address injustice and alleviate crisis (like refugee relief ministries) often occasion an openness to hearing the Gospel.
- *Doctrinal bridging* – Methods that progressively move Muslims from Qur’anic teachings to biblical material, or from an Islamic worldview to biblical one have been very effective. Some examples are the CAMEL method, Path of the Prophets, Bible storytelling, and Creation to Christ.

¹⁹⁶ Trousdale, 40.

¹⁹⁷ Greeson, “Church Planting Movements Among Muslim Peoples.”

The modern principle most counterintuitive to traditional western modes of evangelism is that of discipling *to* conversion. Under this paradigm, pre-evangelism often bleeds into discipleship, which leads, eventually, to a clear presentation of Jesus and the call for a decision. As opposed to the older paradigms of ministry, these new strategies do not allow for easily identifiable categories or stages of conversion. The new methods are inherently relational, making them slower, harder to describe, more successful, and much longer lasting than a Billy-Graham-crusade-style presentation. Plainly, discipleship that shepherds someone to and through conversion is going to look very different from the sorts of program- and knowledge-based discipleship that have historically been implemented on the back end of it. Indeed, the kind of discipleship producing fruit among Muslims today is group based, discovery based, obedience based, and reproducible.

Group based. Phil Parshall, writing thirty years ago, noted that because of the eastern core value of unity, important decisions are typically not made by an individual alone, but by a community arriving at a shared consensus.¹⁹⁸ Therefore when western evangelism efforts focus on individuals, those who are converted have an extremely difficult time remaining integrated in their communities. The gravitational pull of such situations tends toward extraction. The new believer, ostracized from his original context, also feels out of place in the western contexts he is forced to adopt. Furthermore, the believer's old community remains closed to the Gospel. It's a lose-lose situation. Seeing this, Parshall called for "new approaches . . . which allow for groups to come

¹⁹⁸ Parshall, 71.

simultaneously to Christ.”¹⁹⁹ Today, such group-oriented approaches are being implemented, and are producing amazing response. Trousdale explains why:

- Groups learn faster, remember more, and require less repetition on the part of the teacher because the group repeats the teaching within itself, and collective memory becomes individual memory.²⁰⁰
- Because they appropriate new training so quickly, groups reach the point of being able to pass on what they know faster than do individuals, meaning groups replicate more rapidly and more often.
- A group’s natural instinct to self-correct means that groups are less likely to fall prey to bad leadership and heresies.
- “Groups keep individuals accountable,”²⁰¹ causing the fruits of discipleship to be deeper, more thoroughly integrated, and longer-lasting for each individual.

When a group is discipled and comes to Christ as whole, the result is communal transformation with a) the capacity for longevity and b) the power and momentum to reach surrounding groups or communities.

Discovery based. The ineffective evangelism of the past largely consisted of telling Muslims what the Bible says about Jesus and salvation and why Islam is wrong. But Muslims are furnished from their youth with stock replies to the classic claims of

¹⁹⁹ Parshall, 71.

²⁰⁰ 102.

²⁰¹ Trousdale, 103.

Christian apologetics, so such efforts from Christians are easily dismissed. Even if a Christian is able to ferret through a Muslim's typically half-baked doctrinal defenses and prove him wrong, it does not follow that he can then introduce the truth and expect it to be accepted. The prove-them-wrong strategy has made many enemies and few to no disciples, because "nothing galvanizes Islam like an attack."²⁰² If you can demonstrate to a Muslim that he does not possess the truth, you have practically guaranteed that he will not accept it from you. However, if a Muslim discovers for himself that he is lost and deceived, and then personally draws truth from Scripture through his own quest for understanding, the story changes drastically. Paul Heiskell has used David Watson's Discovery Bible Study in the Middle East with great success. He has this to say of it:

The Discovery process is a little bit different, because it doesn't do a teaching model. You're not teaching to somebody. You're putting the Scripture in front of them and asking them questions that let them draw the meaning out. Now the significance of that is you're letting them draw the meat out of the passage instead of telling them what it is. So we watched them do that. It took down their defenses... When we would share with them and *they* would discover it, then they owned it. Any point that they got, they owned.²⁰³

Heiskell also pointed out that eastern learning styles are discursive rather than linear, with a tendency to go back and reexamine concepts. "We would say they don't think logically," says Heiskell. "It *is* logic, but it's a different kind of logic, and it just doesn't look like our western thought patterns. DBS really helped them there too, because when they would *discover* something they tended to hang on to that. They wouldn't go back and re-question that again. So it made the learning process immensely faster." Discovery-based discipleship is a key element of the breakthrough the Muslim world is experiencing

²⁰² Garrison, interview.

²⁰³ Heiskell, interview.

because it both bypasses the militant Islamic instinct and is a catalyzing learning tool in the process of growth and replication.

Obedience based. Another tactic of today's effective strategies that surprises western audiences is the emphasis on obedience. As leaders are taking groups through the discovery material week by week, they are not waiting until the group has made a commitment to Jesus before they train them to obey what they learn. Obedient response is required from the beginning. These leaders realize that the most mature disciple is not the one who knows the most, but the one who obeys the most.²⁰⁴ Rather than extensive doctrinal knowledge being eschewed, obedience to Christ's most fundamental teaching is prioritized, with the understanding that a disciple who can be counted upon to obey what he knows can naturally be entrusted with more in-depth teachings as he progresses.

The fruit of obedience training is astounding: "many of the Muslim peoples" among the movements to Christ

discovered God's will and learned to collectively obey God in a [DBS group]... By the time these groups make their way through Scripture to the death of Jesus, they have already begun to see God changing their lives as they obey what little they are learning. When they discover that their sins have been paid for by the blood of Jesus, there is no altar call, just a whole family or clan²⁰⁵

professing their faith in Christ.

These new believers have been known to decide amongst themselves, apart from the prompting their Christian leader, "We need to be baptized!"²⁰⁶ Their baptism is their

²⁰⁴ Heiskell, interview.

²⁰⁵ Trousdale, 44.

²⁰⁶ Garrison, interview; and Trousdale, 44.

unsolicited, organic response to *scripture*, which they have already been in the habit of obeying. Such discipleship is inherently reproducible because the integral piece is not the leader, but the Word of God; the goal is not amassed knowledge, painstakingly accumulated, but immediate obedience.

Reproducible. Evangelism and discipleship models must be reproducible, because the relatively small number of foreign missionaries on the field is not going to be able to evangelize the 1.6 billion people residing the 49 nations of *Dar al Islam*.²⁰⁷ The Great Commission requires the evangelization of all nations and people groups. Such deep-reaching evangelization requires movements of disciples making disciples and “churches planting churches to reach an entire nation of people.”²⁰⁸ Church planting movements require indigenization. Successful indigenization will require different strategies depending on which people group the Kingdom is becoming native to! That is why “the proliferation of strategies has probably been one of the factors leading to the growth of Islamic Christianity.”²⁰⁹

One requirement of indigenization, however, is universal: native leadership. “Muslim movements to Christ may begin with outside stimulation, but they become movements only when the new believers own and advance the lordship of Christ

²⁰⁷ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 5.

²⁰⁸ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements (booklet)*, (Richmond: International Mission Board, 1999) http://www.churchplantingmovements.com/images/stories/CPM_Profiles/cpm_booklet_standard_english.pdf.

²⁰⁹ Miller, “Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body,” 11.

themselves.”²¹⁰ This understanding is transforming the priorities of strategic workers in

Dar al Islam. Kevin Greeson’s experience is instructive:

In February 1999, a national Baptist pastor and I began work in a remote district where no known previous mission work among Muslims had been attempted. The first baptisms took place in December of that same year... By 2006 the movement saw over 1,200 baptisms in 47 house churches. As early as 2005, though, signs of stagnation were visible, and by the end of 2007 growth had stopped. Growth to this point had been dependent on the leader’s abilities and he had reached his limits. It was then that we realized that we did not have a reproducible discipleship plan.²¹¹

Greeson’s national partner decided to implement some CPM strategies that utilized smaller groups and empowered more lay leaders, but 44 out of the 47 churches in his association were against it.

In 2008, my partner made a bold move to disassociate himself from the other 44 churches and run the training with the three cooperating churches. In 2009 alone, they saw 2,680 new MBB baptisms with multiple streams of 2nd generation house churches . . . The CPM today has doubled its size since 2009 and is spreading its training program all over the country.²¹²

Greeson discovered that strategic risk taking was rewarding in other ways as well. He eventually decided to participate in some high-profile initiatives that lasted for a year and half. During this time Greeson and his colleagues were far more vulnerable to government reprisals than ever before, but they despite the dangers, their high visibility attracted key national leaders. They found two people of peace who launched movements that, in just two years, resulted in over 4,300 baptisms and more than 560 house churches

²¹⁰ Garrison, *A Wind in the Housel of Islam*, 248.

²¹¹ Greeson, “Church Planting Movements Among Muslim Peoples.”

²¹² Ibid.

which are now “reaching into distant countries with their own missionaries.”²¹³

Reflecting on that experience, Greeson concludes,

... there remains a roadway [foreign missionaries] will never be allowed to travel. This young Muslim man traveled down his own *oikos* roadway and saw incredible fruit. The risk of losing my visa was worth it to gain access to this young MBB. I learned that, in a sense, the Person of Peace is looking for us as much as we are looking for him. If we are hidden beneath a platform or covered with fear of losing our visas, we may miss meeting that Person of Peace. Without that meeting, movements never begin... Granted, security concerns and platform issues are real, and my intention is not to belittle this serious matter. The lesson for me, though, came down to the fact that I had been asking the wrong question. I was asking, “What’s it going to take to stay in the country?” instead of asking, “What’s it going to take to find Persons of Peace who can start movements?” Both questions are legitimate, but for me the second question transformed our ministry and our results.

Indigenous lay leaders overseeing simple cell groups that themselves constitute a church is a reproducible model capable of carrying the Gospel throughout entire countries.

Across *Dar al Islam*, missionaries are realizing the limitations of their own involvement and opting to shadow pastor native leaders. Contextualizing efforts on the part of the missionary are regularly the key to the successful introduction and initial spread of the Gospel. But once the contextualized tools have been developed and entrusted to the first generation of converts, local leadership must take over, because indigenization is the key to a church that endures and reproduces long after the missionary’s ministry. “When this occurs, these new believers take discipleship to deeper levels than outsiders can ever anticipate.”²¹⁴ And this is the way nations are transformed for God’s glory.

The humble, determined, and innovative efforts of missionaries have, during the past few decades, produced strategies that transform the priorities and practices of

²¹³ Greeson, “Church Planting Movements Among Muslim Peoples.”

²¹⁴ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 249.

ministry. These new strategies have changed the game of Muslim missions, giving Kingdom players a distinct edge they've never had before.

Risk-taking. Greeson's experience has already demonstrated how missionaries today are taking greater risks and seeing greater fruit than ever before. Luke Halton, a missionary with many years of experience in multiple Middle Eastern countries, says that while such risk-taking flies in the face of the historical missiological position, it is necessary to the future of mission work in the Muslim world. Missionaries who are willing to take risks to see the Gospel spread rapidly in a region are able to find and establish native leaders with similar courage and drive, because, Halton says,

People don't follow what you say, they follow what you do. . . Friendship evangelism, contextualization – well, we all need to be contextual in some degree . . . We're always being contextual. But for a long time there was this whole thing of, "We're gonna *slowly* build relationship, slowly talk about the full truth of who Jesus is." All theologians, all missiologists, when we moved over to Lebanon, everybody said – the world renowned missionaries, missiologists, theologians had all the stats, all the stories saying, "It takes an average of seven years for a Muslim to come to Jesus after you first start sharing with them." Now we know that's now true, but I'm telling you, that was taught as truth. And so, I remember, when we moved overseas all of the sudden like twenty five people got kicked out of Lebanon, we didn't have our long-term visas yet, every missionary's telling us [the seven year statistic] is true, every missionary's telling us, 'You can't give out tracts, you can't give out Jesus Videos.' There were one or two missionaries saying, 'Yes, you can!' - but none of the other missionaries wanted to talk to [those two]!

And then I'm reading Brother Yun's book *Heavenly Man*... and I'm like, "Okay. If we want to see movements that transform nations, then we've got to find the Peters, the Pauls, the Lydias, the Brother Yuns. . . . That's what we've gotta find! We've gotta find those guys who are like, "*I don't care what happens to me!* I need Jesus, and I love him so much, and my people must have him!" . . . that's what we've got to find! And I just realized as I got into Lebanon, "Oh my goodness, if I spend seven years . . . before I start talking about the full truth of who Jesus really is, and then they finally come to Jesus" – because, the whole way this friendship evangelism model has taught is, "Just love on people to build trust. And when you build trust then you can start talking about God in the general sense. After that you can start talking about the teachings of Jesus . . . Then we start talking about his miracles. Then we start talking about him being 'son of God,' 'savior,' 'the only way, the truth, and the life,'" – over years! And I still don't ever start with "Son of God," "Savior," "Jesus Christ," – unless

they just got healed right in front of me. But I just realized, “Man, if I take forever to really talk about him, and I’m discipling some guy forward over years and years, and then I’m like, ‘Okay, now that you’ve given your life to Jesus, you’ve got to go everywhere and be ready to die, and share boldly and openly!’ . . . But what I’ve demonstrated is – something else? Then that’s probably not the best idea.”²¹⁵

Like Greeson and Halton, missionaries among Muslim peoples worldwide are starting to realize that the way they model evangelism matters. If they model caution, the MBB leaders follow suit. If they make bold decisions, the MBB leaders will have a model of boldness to follow. A new willingness among foreign missionaries to question old paradigms and make some risky choices is redefining the process and, most importantly, the timeline for making disciples in Muslim nations.

Activities of Muslim background believers. Foreign missionaries who show great boldness in evangelism choose to open themselves up to opposition, and sometimes the cost they have counted *is* exacted from them. One of the missionaries I interviewed has been, on two different occasions, cast out of the country in which he was ministering, imprisoned once, and is currently blacklisted from places where he longs for people to hear the good news. However, the bold sharing of national believers is a risk on an entirely different level. They will have no foreign embassies fighting for their release if they are imprisoned. Outside agencies will not be clamoring about human rights if they are beaten... or worse. For them, the question of persecution is not one of “if” but “when.” And so while these MBBs do not have the same freedoms as, and so must typically be more discreet than, the foreigners in their midst, they are still finding ways to rapidly and boldly share their faith.

²¹⁵ Luke Halton, “God’s Desire for the Nations to Know,” Speech to Antioch Discipleship School Class at Antioch Community Church, Waco, TX, February 6, 2014.

Throughout history, different nations and people groups have possessed different excellencies in following Christ (for example, in the early centuries of the Church one sees that the Egyptians were inclined to asceticism and prayer, believers of Jewish background were natural theologians, the Syrians were senders, etc.). Today, Muslims who come to faith in God are exhibiting a genius for evangelism that is astonishing even to the missionaries who are watching it happen first hand. The individualist notions of the West, which paint religion as being properly a private matter, do not inhibit Muslim converts. Once they are convinced of the truth of the Gospel and have experienced the freedom it brings, they see this amazing news as belonging properly to all their kinsmen, and feel a responsibility to share with their people, no matter the cost. This is what western missionaries have to say about the courage of their MBB friends:

“...the ability that they have to rapidly reproduce themselves is just- it’s *awesome*, what they are capable of doing. It’s not uncommon for us to have someone come to faith, and within two weeks they’ve led someone in their family to faith, and within two weeks that person’s led people to faith. It just spreads at an incredible rate.”²¹⁶

– Tim Stoyan

“When Muslims discover the truth of Christ, they almost always begin to share with their families or close friends about God’s free gift of eternal life . . . When Muslims discover that God really loves them, no power in the world will stop them from sharing it with other Muslims.”²¹⁷

–Jerry Trousdale

“I can assure people that the faith of Muslim background believers is real [because] they often bear very much spiritual fruit. Passionate about their faith in Christ, they influence others to follow Jesus like no other group of people I have ever seen . . . As

²¹⁶ Stoyan, interview.

²¹⁷ 113 and 153.

Muslim converts persevere, their influence inevitably spreads – bears fruit – often far beyond their hometowns.”²¹⁸

– Tom Doyle

And this is what the MBBs themselves have to say about the risks that they take:

We have a unique love for these people because we all came from them. It is we who understand them, and we know that Muslim people have a great, unsatisfied hunger for salvation. Every day their daily prayers open with, ‘Show us the right path,’ from the first chapter of the Qur’an. We are the answer to that prayer! We want to be there to show them the right path.²¹⁹

The power of MBB witness is changing *Dar al Islam* and providing a platform for the Gospel in those lands that has never existed before. And if Biblical principles hold true (as I believe that they will), persecution will not be able to crush this platform, but, if anything, only build it higher. MBBs hold the keys to their peoples’ hearts, and they are not hesitating to turn them. As they do so, the plane is shifting, and what used to be impossible is happening.

Globalization and media. The present-day advance of globalization, along with the media which is a chief means of effecting it, is searing the Muslim world to its core, unleashing abrupt and accelerated changes on a worldview long accustomed to both the comforts and the tenebrousness of an insular ethos. The changes being worked are sure to permeate all areas of Muslim life, but especially in matters pertaining to faith, they are providing a heretofore unheard-of interest in alternatives; and, simultaneously, the means of investigation and the ability to interface with others about their discoveries. In today’s

²¹⁸ 242- 243.

²¹⁹ Trousdale, 144.

world, existing “frontier zones”²²⁰ are widening and new ones are constantly opening up; the Internet is itself a frontier zone of wildly boundless proportions. Here are some key components of this modern phenomenon, in matters pertaining to Muslim conversion:

The upending of Islamic worldviews. The forms and presence of media in *Dar al Islam* are increasing due to modernization. At the same time, natural disasters, ethnic violence, and wars are creating crisis zones to which relief workers (often Christian) are flocking. The media creates a frontier zone in the Muslim’s living room or bedroom, and local emergencies drawing Christian responders creates frontier zones in the Muslim’s backyard. Consequently, Muslims have more access and exposure to novel information and ideas than ever before. For the first time in history, elements of Islamic propaganda are subject to widespread falsification. The flood of new information is transforming Muslims’ worldviews, aspirations, and expectations. This exerts stress on typically rigid Muslim institutions and leaders who are unable to adapt with the rapid changes, and the result is rampant disillusionment. Fissures in the Islamic monolith produced by advancing globalization are both threatening and promising. Revolutions of this magnitude are historically volcanic – there doesn’t really seem to be any way around that. But in the midst of the chaos of a colossus crumbling comes the opportunity to build sounder structures on surer foundations. This is the hope of the missionary; and sixty nine movements in the past thirteen years suggest that it is not a vain one.

The power of media to spread the Gospel. Media such as Internet, TV, and radio give evangelists access to millions of people they could never meet in person. Satellite

²²⁰ On page 118 of “Conversion Out of Islam,” Khalil and Bilici use the phrase “frontier zones” to describe any place “where Muslims are more likely to have immediate contact with members of other religions.”

TV especially has become a ragingly successful means of broadcasting the Gospel message. Miller writes, “Today, throughout MENA [satellites] are ubiquitous. I have even seen Bedouins living out of tents, yet they have a satellite dish so they can watch their favorite shows.”²²¹ *Iran Alive*, Hormoz Shariat’s Christian satellite program, is estimated to have a regular viewership of seven to nine million Iranians – that’s ten per cent of Iran’s population.²²² The famous polemics of Father Zakaria Boutros reach even more people. “It is estimated that when Father Zakaria . . . is on television in the Middle East, 60 million viewers watch.”²²³ Many of the Christian satellite programs provide further materials online, chat rooms, call centers, and follow up networks so that those who desire to give their lives to Jesus can either be disciplined in the safety of anonymity or successfully connected to neighboring believers. The CPM in the Middle East, which we shall look at shortly, was sparked by one such connection. Paul Heiskell, a pastor of that movement, has an extensive history of work in the Middle East. He has long anticipated the prodigious potential of satellite TV:

Arabs trust authority implicitly and don’t tend to seek out the truth. Well, that’s changing, with the advent of satellite TV. In fact, I remember, when I went to [Palestine] in ‘99. I was standing on the balcony of the home of one of my Arab friends, looking out over the city. And I said to him,
 “Kamal, I am looking at the end of your culture.” And he said,
 “Really?! Why do you say that?” And I said,
 “See all these satellite dishes all over your roofs? Ten or fifteen years from now, your culture won’t be the same.” And I’m seeing the opportunity in that; of course he’s only seeing it from the negative side. But the opportunity is the Gospel has come in. It’s freely available. It’s on Arab TV... on the Hot Bird, which is the European satellite, there are all *kinds* of evangelistic Christian programming. Now, as God

²²¹ “Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body,” 3.

²²² Doyle, 82.

²²³ Ibid., 264.

would have it, that's also where all the football channels are that show the European leagues that everybody loves... You can look - if you know what you're looking at - at everybody's rooftops and see where they've got their satellite pointed, so you know which people have access to the Christian stations and which people don't. It's a really interesting thing that you can *see*. And now with the Internet, there's just a proliferation of stuff in Arabic, quality stuff! We were on a follow up network that worked with the *al Hayat* station and several other TV stations, as well as Christian radio and internet, and we were getting thousands and thousands of hits on Christian websites and phone calls to the Christian television stations. It's unbelievable. In the history of the Arab Muslim world, it's unprecedented what's going on now. The controls are down.²²⁴

The power of media to disciple. As I alluded to above, TV, Internet, and radio ministries are using their exclusive powers of infiltration to connect with MBBs in difficult countries. In most Muslim countries, the consequences of conversion, if discovered, are designed to be so harsh as to be prohibitive. Today, the power of fear to *prohibit* is being regularly overwhelmed by the irresistibility of the love of God, but, understandably, many MBBs are still deeply *inhibited* when it comes to publicly declaring their faith. As I mentioned earlier, MBBs in the underground house churches are making radically bold (and yet discerning) choices to preach Christ to their people. However, thousands more are making independent decisions of faith and then remaining largely, if not totally, isolated within their Muslim surroundings, only engaging in Christian fellowship via the media. For some, this is the only option. In *Dreams and Visions*, Tom Doyle shares the story of two different women in Saudi Arabia who experienced authentic Christian discipleship while incapable of meeting other believers in person.

²²⁴ Heiskell, interview.

Nasreen, a cloistered housewife of Mecca, accidentally stumbled upon Christian materials on the Internet. She was intrigued, and also began studying the Bible and listening to sermons online. When she was confused by what she learned, she would make inquiries in Christian chat rooms. Nasreen's chat room activity is how Rima, a believer working in "the basement of an underground ministry center in Amman, Jordan,"²²⁵ found and began discipling her. Nasreen and Rima were soon Skyping regularly. Between information from the Internet, a relationship with Rima, and the Trans World Radio program coming in via the radio hidden in her bathroom, Nasreen had the impetus she needed to make a decision for Christ. She is a true disciple, operating in the power and authority of the Spirit, and participating in the fellowship of believers without ever meeting one in person.²²⁶

Fatima, the youngest daughter of a proud and prominent Saudi family, began researching Christianity when writing a paper about Islam for school; she wanted to make a sub point about Christianity. But her research led to her to startling conclusions.²²⁷ "She began reading everything she could find about Jesus"²²⁸ and Christianity, poring over the New Testament, and grilling the Christians she met in online chat rooms about their faith. Her search soon led her to conclude that Jesus was indeed the way, the truth, and the life,

²²⁵ Doyle, 49.

²²⁶ Ibid., 47-55.

²²⁷ "Sara Fatima Al-Mutairi, Christian Martyr." Sara Fatima, accessed March 9, 2014, <http://www.sarafatima.info/>.

²²⁸ Doyle, 58.

and worthy of *her* life. Once she chose Christ, Fatima became an ardent and active member of the Body, and a discipler of many.

Although Fatima never went to a church, she prayed almost every day online with believers around the world... She joined the Gulf Christian Forum, a group...who flood the Internet with e-mails and blogs declaring Christ... Every night Fatima fielded questions from Muslims searching for the truth about God, and blog by blog, her penname 'Rania' became famous for her inspiring poetry about Jesus.²²⁹

Eventually Fatima's family discovered her belief in Jesus. One of her older brothers killed her for the sake of the family's honor. Before he killed her, he locked her in her room for four hours. During those last hours she reached out to "her online church and beyond,"²³⁰ asking for prayer but also proclaiming her continuing resolve and invoking Muslims to surrender to the love of God and forsake their violent ways. Faithful unto death, pastor and preacher to hundreds, this martyr never attended a church and conducted her ministry entirely online.²³¹

The power of global technology to unite the Church. As demonstrated in the case of Fatima's martyrdom, the Internet can be used to share testimonies, counsel, revelations from personal devotion, encouragement, and prayer needs. The fact that I, a young English-speaking woman sitting behind a computer screen in a small Texas city, can know the details of the martyrdom of an Arabic-speaking woman that took place in a tightly controlled Saudi Arabian community 7,700 miles away, and read her last words in my own language, is a miracle of modern education, technology, and globalization. Its implications should not be ignored.

²²⁹ Doyle, 59.

²³⁰ Ibid., 60.

²³¹ Ibid., 57-62

Members of the Church outside of *Dar al Islam* must realize that today's technology is not just useful for *sending* Christ's message, but for *receiving* it as well. We have much to learn from our (chronologically) younger brothers and sisters in the Lord. They may have met Jesus after us, but they have invaluable experience, insight, and perspective that the global Church needs if it is to "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God," and to "grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ."²³² The Church's maturity and fulfilling of her Commission (and thus her Bridegroom's return!) awaits her unity. And though the Church's unity is by no means an issue riding upon the development of sophisticated technological tools (Church unity is an issue of individuals "submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ"²³³ and *actually* believing that "we are members of one another"²³⁴ and so "if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together"²³⁵), the fact is, we would be fools not to take the utmost advantage of the stunning avenues available in this new global context. Our persecuted brothers and sisters need our awareness, prayer, encouragement, and advocacy, and we need their courage, passion, urgency, and revelation. Thanks to modern technology, this exchange is now possible on a miraculous scale.

²³² Ephesians 4:13, 15.

²³³ Ephesians 5:21.

²³⁴ Ephesians 4:25.

²³⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

In Conclusion

Apparently, God has designs upon the hearts of Muslim people. For centuries, it seemed that these were the impossible ones, the ones who would never be receptive to the Gospel. But within just these first fourteen years of the twenty first century, the story has changed radically. There are many reasons for this unprecedented Muslim response to Jesus, and they are fascinating. But how have these factors been at work in the Middle East, and how are they changing the nature of Arab Christianity there? We shall now turn to what these movements have looked like in the Middle East, and what they could mean for that specific area of *Dar al Islam*.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Church in the Middle East: A Portrait

Introduction

God is doing something amazing among Muslims worldwide in our day. In the past two sections we have surveyed the overall picture of these movements to Jesus, and examined more in depth some of the specific factors contributing to these tremendous breakthroughs. I think it is important to have a grid for what is happening among Muslims worldwide as we turn our gaze toward the heart of *Dar al Islam* and the area of concern for this project: the Middle East. Last time we were looking here we were lamenting the desperate straits to which the traditional denominations have been reduced. But as we have seen, the birth and growth of Muslim background churches (MBCs) is changing the spiritual landscape. Now it's time to examine what this new terrain looks like specifically in the Middle East.

Before we plunge in I must say this: there is, by David Garrison's definition, only one church planting movement in the "Arab Room"²³⁶ known of to date. I have had the great privilege of interviewing not only Dr. Garrison but also Paul Heiskell and Tim Stoyan, the two people primarily responsible for spearheading and now shadow pastoring

²³⁶ As a means of studying the movements scattered throughout *Dar al Islam*, Garrison divided that huge swath of the globe into nine "distinct geo-cultural clusters or complexes of Muslim people groups" which he dubs "rooms" (page 23 of *A Wind in the House of Islam*). The Arab Room includes the countries of the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, the countries of the Levant, and Iraq (it does not include Turkey or Iran). Garrison's Arab Room is what I will now be referring to when I talking about the Middle East.

that movement. What is happening in the Middle East now in the way of MBB CPMs is properly their story to tell, and since there are no more recent or accurate sources from which to draw, I thought it best to largely let them tell their own story in their own words. There will be little interposition from me, as none is needed. I am deeply grateful to these men for entrusting me with their story.

The Story of the First Movement in the Middle East

The Heiskells moved to the nation where the movement would unfold in 2002, and the Stoyans joined them in 2004. Their vision was to participate in the founding of a “nationally-led, reproducing cell church movement among Muslims that impacts the Arabic-speaking world.”²³⁷ Though one must clearly be a dreamer of the most audacious order to even come up with such a mission statement, after seven years of unfruitful efforts, even their faith was beginning to flag. They had tried everything they could think of, but their strategies were ineffective. They had indulged in the polemical style which Islam naturally elicits from its assailants, and won enemies, not disciples. They practiced the theory that one could ease Muslims into wanting to hear the Gospel by befriending them and showing them a lived faith. They made some friends, but not disciples.

Eventually they learned the method that bridges people into Biblical truths about Jesus by starting with the prophets that the Qur’an and the Bible have in common. They began to see some limited response when they used this strategy. “People were coming the Lord in ones and twos, as individuals, more than they ever had,” said Heiskell, but

²³⁷ Paul Heiskell, interview by Bethany Simons, Waco, TX, December 19, 2013. All quotes from Heiskell are taken from this interview.

they still weren't seeing these converts gather in believing bodies and commit to discipleship.

They were confounded by the question: how do you turn faith into discipleship that reproduces? They tried the T4T model that they learned at an intensive training. This strategy, astoundingly successful in China, was useful as an evangelism tool in the Middle East, but "bombed" as a discipleship tool, said Heiskell, "because we failed to understand the culture." After T4T, the team went through three more discipleship models that didn't work. Then they came across David Watson's Discovery Bible Study. After modifying it for their context, they had a tool which rendered their mammoth mission statement significantly more plausible than it had been. Possession of the DBS tool, however, does not a movement make. They needed national partners leading house churches with indigenous momentum.

They needed a person of peace.

They hadn't found him yet, but his name was Nasr, and he was actually desperately seeking discipleship of his own initiative. According to Heiskell, "God had been working in his heart for about three years" before they met him, "through Arabic TV." Apart from this avenue which brought him the Gospel message, Nasr had no Christian resources, friends, or training. In an interview granted to Dr. Garrison, Nasr said,

I had a little print shop in my house where I had printed 2,000 books over the years of Shari'a law. When I began to hear Abouna Zakaria talk about the problems with the Qur'an, I went and got one of my books and started studying it to see if what he was saying was right. I found that, not only was it true, but that the Qur'an and sharia were filled with these kinds of problems. . . . Most of my life was behind me now," (Nasr was in his early sixties at the time) "so I asked myself, *Why are you waiting? What do you have to lose?* I began talking to my relatives and friends, urging them to question

what they had always been taught. Within a few years, I had led 21 of them to faith in Jesus.²³⁸

Nasr was hungry to know more about Jesus and how to follow him, so he began approaching local congregations, asking for help and instruction, but they turned him away. “Nasr went to *eleven* churches asking for a Bible,” laments Heiskell, “before he finally called into the TV station and said, ‘Can you just send me somebody? Because nobody here will give me a Bible.’” The somebody they sent was Tim Stoyan.

Stoyan recalls, “I got this phone call. . . . You see we had agreed as a team to take on the responsibility of doing follow up with people who had written into different media outlets: TV stations, radio stations, that kind of thing. And we had a system set up where an Arab believer would vet them to kind of weed out the people from the Muslim Brotherhood, and weed out Al Qaeda, and weed out the people who were troublemakers to find the ones who were really seeking after Christ. And we’d do follow up with them. So I get this phone call. And this is how it goes:

‘Okay, I’ve got two guys here. And you can have one, and we have to give one to another organization.’ I said,

‘Great.’

‘This first guy - he’s young, he’s super charismatic...’ (Everyone wants the young buck leader, right? The one who’s full of passion and zeal and can be the banner-carrier for his generation). And he said, ‘And then I’ve got this other guy – he’s old. A little crazy. Really sweet. He’s got this crazy story that he’s telling.’ And as I opened my mouth to say, ‘I’ll take the young guy,’ the Holy Spirit arrested me in a way he never has

²³⁸ David Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God is drawing Muslims around the world to faith in Jesus Christ* (Monumnet, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2014) 213-214.

before or since.”²³⁹ So Stoyan paused, made a counterintuitive decision based on the Spirit’s prompting, and told the caller he would get in touch with “the old man.”

Despite the fact that the Holy Spirit had indicated that there was something important about this man, when Stoyan and Nasr met for the first time, Stoyan had his reservations. In fact, he thought Nasr was lying. Leading 21 other Muslims to faith without any instruction or help whatsoever? It was too unlikely to be believed. “So he began to tell me [his story], and finally he was getting a little frustrated with me, because he could tell I didn’t believe him. I was asking those kinds of questions that make you repeat yourself over and over - you know, the ones that nobody likes. So, finally he said,

‘Do you want to meet my people?’ And I said,

‘I would absolutely like to meet your people.’ And he said,

‘Great. Come to my house tomorrow.’

So, we go. And this is what happened: [Paul and I] walk in, and it’s just Nasr . . . We’re sitting here with this guy, and there’s a knock at the door . . . the door opened, and in walked six covered women . . . So I’m looking at Paul and Paul is looking at me and I’m saying,

‘I don’t know what to do!’ and he’s saying,

‘I don’t know what to do either, but we’re *here*, so we might as well do *something!*’ And I said,

‘That’s great, let’s do it.’”²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Tim Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises,” Speech to Antioch Discipleship School Class at Antioch Community Church, Waco, TX, December 4, 2013.

²⁴⁰ Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises.”

The something they decided to do was facilitate a DBS covering the creation and fall accounts from Genesis. They asked Nasr and the women to do the reading. “They sang it!” remembers Stoyan, “the way they sing the Qur’an. So this woman is *singing* the Bible. It was awesome!” After a successful meeting, Stoyan was both elated and chagrined. “We were now convinced that these people were real because – there they were.”²⁴¹

The men began to disciple Nasr, committing themselves “to the service and spiritual development of Nasr, teaching the elder brother how to listen to God, interpret his word, and walk obediently in the Spirit.”²⁴² They adopted the role of a “‘shadow pastor,’ a vision caster, sounding board and encourager, never the high profile leader.”²⁴³ Nasr, emboldened by Heiskell’s and Stoyan’s support, led the little band of believers to multiply exponentially.

Over the next year, the group of believers grew rapidly, sometimes doubling in size within a month.²⁴⁴ After just eleven months, according to Nasr, they had seen 2,845

²⁴¹ Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises.”

²⁴² Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 214.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Figures provided by Heiskell:

Nov 10	21
Dec 10	42
Jan 11	82
Feb 11	124
Mar 11	175
Apr 11	298
May 11	560
Jun 11	700
Jul 11	987
Aug 11	1120

baptized.²⁴⁵ “And I would meet some of these people,” says Stoyan, “and they were changed! They were changed! They would talk about the freedom they experienced in Christ. They saw miracles regularly.”²⁴⁶ Heiskell continues: “We’ve had mosque leaders, we’ve had heads of households, we’ve had women. At one point sixty per cent of the movement was women. And that was unprecedented” (historically, missions efforts in the Muslim world have seen a much higher response rate from men than from women²⁴⁷).

The new believers were meeting together in their homes, putting into practice what they read in Scripture. Stoyan told me of one the many DBS sessions that he found personally impactful: “We were teaching on Acts 2, and trying to help them understand, ‘Hey, this is what we’re going for.’ And we read it out and they looked at us and said, ‘Yup, that’s what we do.’ It was overwhelming . . . None of the concepts in the Acts 2:42-47 passage was foreign to them. They had figured out how to implement these things into daily life.”²⁴⁸

A rapidly reproducing house church movement was beginning to take shape in the capital city. And as quickly as it took shape, it also began to spread in influence. Heiskell and Stoyan were astounded at how eager the new believers were to share their faith, apart from the prompting of either man. “We’ve got some guys that are already sending!” Stoyan told me. “They’re raising up young Muslim-background believers and sending

²⁴⁵ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 217.

²⁴⁶ Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises.”

²⁴⁷ Confirmed by Khaili and Balici’s study, “Conversion out of Islam,” 117.

²⁴⁸ Tim Stoyan, interview by Bethany Simons, Waco, TX, June 28, 2013.

them into other nations. On their own initiative!’”²⁴⁹ This work of evangelism in other countries started happening, quite literally, before they knew it. Heiskell shared with me the following stories:

“Nasr, a political leader, had friends in the government in both our nation and neighboring nations. One day I came over to Nasr’s house while he was entertaining a politically prominent friend from a neighboring country. I decided to share the Gospel with this man before I left Nasr’s house, but the man didn’t respond to my presentation. After I left, however, Nasr continued to talk with his friend. A few hours later, he texted me saying, ‘We have a new brother!’ Of course I was excited, but when several days followed without a word from Nasr, I began to worry about him. So I called his home and his wife answered.

‘Oh, he didn’t tell you?’ she said.

‘Tell me what?’

‘He’s gone out of town. Our visitor asked Nasr to return with him to his country. He’ll be back in few days.’

When Nasr got back, I sat him down and asked about what had happened across the border. Our newest brother, upon arriving home, had invited all his connections in the government to a dinner; there was at least a couple hundred people present. Nasr’s friend then asked him to stand up and tell the group, ‘Why he has become a Christian.’ So Nasr shared! After hearing what he had to say, one of the elder statesmen stood up and said, ‘This is what I believe. I think this man is telling the truth.... And this is what we need to follow. Anyone who wants to follow that will get the support of us from the government.’

²⁴⁹ Stoyan, interview.

And so there was a lot of response! Nasr spent the next four days just going around from village to village starting house churches in the villages.”

On another occasion, Nasr met a man from this same neighboring country, envisioned and trained him for a few hours, and then sent him back to his home. The man who had met Nasr won a new convert and started doing DBS with him. This second-generation MBB began sharing the DBS material with six of his friends. Eventually they all met together (the man who had first met Nasr, his friend who had started DBS with six, and the six), and came to find out that each of the youngest six were discipling five or six themselves! What started with Nasr evangelizing a visitor from a neighboring country had quickly turned into a network of disciples three or four generations deep in that other land.

“So it’s spreading!” says Heiskell. “There’s still a large thing going on [there]. I don’t know how deep it is... I don’t know how they’re surviving with [the rampant violence]. But I know it’s there.” Whether the conversions and house churches cropping up in other nations can properly be considered separate CPMs in their own right is up for debate. In *A Wind in the House of Islam*, David Garrison only counts the original activity instigated by Nasr and shadow pastored by Heiskell and Stoyan. Because the fruit that this original movement is bearing in other nations is harder to monitor and quantify, we cannot not know if it meets the standards of the CPM definition used in Garrison’s research. But Heiskell and Stoyan report that the momentum of the original group in their nation has been carried forth in four distinct “streams” or “branches” into surrounding nations.

Such ambitious efforts on the part of the house churches could not go unnoticed very long. Two and a half years after they started working with Nasr, he was forced to leave the country because of threats on his life. Just before Nasr's departure, three of the key women leaders in the movement were taken captive by their Muslim extremist relatives. One of these ladies has, like Nasr, escaped the country, but the other two, to our knowledge, are still being held prisoner. By the time this persecution broke out the Stoyan family had already moved back to America as per God's leading. But the Heiskells were still there. Soon after Nasr fled, the Heiskells were put in prison. After being released on bail, they, too, fled the country.

Though severe, this persecution has not shut the churches down. Nasr continues to evangelize Muslims in his new location and serve as counsel for the movement in his home country. Heiskell and Stoyan, likewise, serve as shadow pastors to Nasr and to the movement that remains in the original country. In spite of fierce opposition, the movement continues, other missionaries are growing in faith and boldness, and reports of stirrings in other Middle Eastern countries are coming in. Stoyan says, "We've had some martyrs, people fleeing persecution, lots of threats – lots of stuff going on. But you know? I look back on it, and I just can't help but believe that God is doing the *full* work. Because we go back, and you know what happens? It's amazing; we talk to other missionaries, and whereas they were seeing nothing before... almost every single person that I worked with that is a missionary in the Middle East has house churches meeting now, whereas five years ago nobody had any. And so with Nasr, even though we're experiencing a lot of troubles - because, we're the first to do this, and so we're not doing everything right – the faith level has risen! And never did we know that God was going to

affect the region not through just one movement but through raising the faith level of everybody . . . I just got a report the other day that there's a 300 house church movement in Egypt! That's the first one I've ever heard of. And guess who I heard it from? An Arab. Who's leading it.”²⁵⁰

These men are not insensitive to the challenges of the future. But their understanding of what the growing movement is up against has not diminished their faith. When talking about what the future might hold, both men mentioned the perils of persecution and the need for more thorough discipleship. Stoyan says:

“The house church movement that is happening across the nations is still very much in its infant stage, and so to try to label it at this point would be the equivalent of trying to determine the vocation of a two-year old. It's not the great thing that it might become. It could become even *greater* than what we think, or it could not. There's no way to know how they're going to react to persecution, how they're going to respond to martyrdom. There's just so many things that have yet to be answered... It's still very fragile. It has been lacking in discipleship. They've done a great job with evangelism; they haven't done as great a job with discipleship. So, some of the depth of people, once you get beyond second and third generation people, is not as strong. That's an area where we're working now to try to strengthen them.”²⁵¹

Heiskell too, is mindful of the task of discipleship before them. “This is one of the things that really struck me early on: I thought, ‘Gosh, this is gonna take so long!’ I mean, what does it take to lead a church? You've got to be mature and grounded in Christ.

²⁵⁰ Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises.”

²⁵¹ Stoyan, Interview.

You've got to have character. You've got to understand the Scripture; you've got to know how to deal with problems. There's just tons of things on the resume that you really have to have if you're going to lead a megachurch, for example. And that's we're giving these people, is we're giving them a megachurch, in a church planting movement. But they're six months old in the Lord! So there needs to be enough structure and help for the next four or five years, where we're getting the Word into the people, where the discipleship is really filtering down.

Then - I've heard two or three Arab leaders say this now, where they're looking at me, and they say: 'You know what? It's just a matter of time. When we get to a critical mass - where there's 20,000, or 30,000 or 40,000 of us - then, *then* it doesn't matter if we're public. They can't stop us. You can't put 40,000 people in prison.' And they say those kinds of things, and I can see that they can see the societal transformation from afar, and they're hungering for it. That's what it will really take for this thing to thrive and make it, is a mature leadership, a discipleship and a knowledge of the Scripture that gets into the people.

In fact, we don't talk about it terms of discipleship – we don't use that word, it's a very Christian term. I use the word 'enculturation.' I say 'We've got to give them the *culture* of the Kingdom.' Because they get that; they understand 'culture.' But 'discipleship' is a very Christian word. So the way we talk about it is, 'I want everybody in this movement to have the culture of the Kingdom.' So that if someone strikes them on one cheek, they can turn the other. So that they know, 'We don't lie; we're disciples.' 'We don't cheat and steal; we're disciples.' I want that culture to permeate who they are. We're not there yet. Not by any stretch of the imagination are we there yet. And there is

great danger that we *won't* get there, that the whole thing will fall apart before we could get there. I don't think that's God's plan, though. I certainly have faith that that's not God's plan. That's where we are."

The Unique Challenges of Church in the Middle East

There are two important groups of Arab believers whose stories, as of yet, have not intersected with that of the house Church: the Christians of the traditional denominations, and the secret believers of Arab Crypto-Christianity. The environment of the Middle East is intensely Islamic, and thus intensely hostile to Christian belief in all its expressions. The Middle East is still the most restricted region of *Dar al Islam*, which is surely one of the reasons that the Arab Room was the last of all to experience a movement to faith in Christ.²⁵² The dangers of this harsh context are what have, primarily, kept the traditional Arab Christians, the members of the MBCs, and the most sequestered crypto-Christians from identifying with one another.

The Challenge of Identity

In the secular western world, a person's national, cultural, and religious identities are remarkably discrete entities, easily separated from one another. If a formerly Sikh Brit decides that Buddhism is actually the way for him, his change in religious affiliation will have no impact upon his status as a British citizen and need have no impact upon his participation in British culture. His change in religious identity has minimal ramifications for other facets of his identity, so why would he not self-identify as a Buddhist?

²⁵² Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 33.

There is no such motility in the Middle East. Religious affiliation is factored into one's political identity and cannot be changed. In countries where apostasy is illegal, officially announcing a change in one's religion could, at worst, be punished by death, and would, at best, result in an appreciable alteration of one's legal status. Declaring conversion would change one's citizenship.

More foreboding than even the official ramifications are the cultural ones. To be Muslim is not merely to hold to a certain creed - it is to practice a certain way of life and belong with a certain people. The word "Muslim" indicates a religion *and* a culture; within distinct geographical areas, it can even be synonymous with an ethnicity. The hypothetical Brit I mentioned can declare a change in religion without saying anything about his allegiance towards nation, culture, or family. But for Muslims in the Middle East (indeed, in most of *Dar al Islam*), declaring apostasy from Islam because of religious convictions would also be taken as a denial of one's Muslim-ness as a whole; therefore, of one's nation, culture, and family.

The Islamic worldview tends toward this melding of the facets of identity not only when looking in at *Dar al Islam*, but also when looking out at *Dar al Harb*. For a Muslim mind, the word "Christian" immediately evokes a morally bankrupt Western culture and the imperialism of Western foreign policy, perhaps even before a contrary set of religious beliefs. In short, it calls to mind an enemy.

Islam's utter fusion of religious and cultural identity places Muslim converts to Christ in a singularly involved morass. Though the MBB is happy to identify with *Isa al Masih*, to officially identify with Christianity would communicate:

- 1) A rejection of his Muslim cultural identity, and

2) An acceptance of, or even an allegiance to, the Western enemy.

Such communication would:

- a) Not be true. MBBs love their families, nations, and cultural heritage.
- b) Only serve to ostracize them from their affinity groups, which need to be reached with the Gospel. Overtly identifying with Christianity practically insures that a new believer's access to his original *oikos* would be severed.
- c) Possibly get them killed.

Those are the consequences at the cultural/familial level. Consequences prescribed by the government vary from country to country, but often are as severe as the death penalty, and at the very least, expose the believer to the virtual *dhimmitude* experienced by the Arab Christians of the traditional denominations. So ultimately, if an Arab MBB is to officially declare his Christian beliefs, he has two options:

- 1) Abandon his Muslim community and culture, assimilating entirely into the foreign community and culture of the Western missionary. This has, historically, tended toward emigration and certainly precludes effective evangelism.
- 2) Abandon his Muslim community and integrate into a traditional Arab Christian church. Whether or not an MBB can do this, though, depends on whether the churches around him will receive MBBs, and, typically, they won't. Even if an MBB can find a Christian church that will receive him, these communities are themselves emigrating. And this option, too, precludes effective evangelism.

These are not good options. In the countries that uphold the death penalty for apostasy, they're not options at all. So *really*, the Arab MBB's options are: declare Christian faith

and be ostracized within his own country, declare Christian faith and leave his country, declare Christian faith and die, or concealment. No wonder so many are choosing to officially maintain their Muslim identities while covertly following *Isa al Masih*.

Such concealment is not unique to the Arab Muslim world. Jenkins calls widespread, hidden belief in Jesus “Crypto-Christianity,” and says,

crypto-Christians are startlingly abundant. The World Christian Encyclopedia suggests that in the year 2000, 120 million believers fell in this crypto-Christian category, some 6 percent of the world’s Christians, mainly concentrated in Asian nations like India and China. If we were to separate them out from the main body of believers, these crypto-Christians alone would today constitute the world’s fifth largest religion.²⁵³

Since at least sixty nine movements have occurred since the beginning of 2000, the number of crypto-Christians is surely much higher now. Of course, crypto-Christianity is inherently difficult to study, as its goal is to remain unobserved. Wide-ranging knowledge of crypto-Christians will always be approximate, at best. However, we can be confident that there are more of them in the Middle East than ever before.

Crypto-Christianity in the Middle East takes two primary forms. Some MBBs, while opting not to officially reveal their conversion, identify themselves to other believers and gather in underground house churches. When these house churches maintain some kind of connection between themselves, or can be traced back to a specific evangelistic or discipleship effort then they can be said to constitute a movement, the like of which David Garrison investigated in his research. Garrison himself points out, though, that there are many converts to Christ not accounted for by his study. These are the second type of crypto-Christian, the Nasreens and the Fatimas of the faith. These believers come to faith privately and in isolation, through the witness of Christian media,

²⁵³ Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – and How it Died* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 37.

and then remain anonymous. They do not even identify themselves to other believers in their community (if there are any), and do not gather in any systematic way. These are the crypto-Christians that are especially hard to account for. Of them, Garrison says: “There are reports of lots of individuals coming to Jesus via satellite TV and radio. They are appearing in chat rooms, but they’re anonymous, and we’re not finding them. There could be thousands and thousands, but it’s hard to know because of the underground nature of it.”²⁵⁴ Noting the higher risks intrinsic to gathering in house churches, Garrison predicts that the majority of the conversions the Middle East has yet to see will be of this secret, individual type.

Nasr is himself an excellent example of the crypto-Christians who can be found in movements, officially concealing their faith so as to boldly but discerningly advance it within their communities. Nasr, a respected elder, a *Hafez*, a political leader, and a publisher of Qur’anic literature, is the last person you would expect to be a Christian. He seems like the model Muslim. This makes him the perfect evangelist. His preferred method is to approach Muslims as if he is an insider in the Islamic faith - who happens to have a few questions. Heiskell describes the process: “Nasr told me, ‘I know how to open a conversation with someone to see if they’re soft-hearted or not.’ ... He would go in and ask them simple questions, such as, ‘Hey, I saw this in the Qur’an- I’m a Muslim; you’re a Muslim – right? Yeah? Okay. I saw this in the Qur’an over here and I saw this in the Qur’an over here, and they seem to contradict each other. What do I *do* with that?’” If the person responded saying, ‘You can’t ask questions like that!’ he’d just back off. But if they stopped, looked around to see if anybody was listening, and responded, “Right?!

²⁵⁴ David Garrison, interview by Bethany Simons, phone interview, November 22, 2013.

I've wondered the same thing!" Then he'd go, "Well, let me ask you another question!" And he'd move them through this process until he got them to Adam and Eve, and then he'd put the Scriptures in their hands, and then he'd let them discover . . . And we quickly had hundreds and then thousands of people that were responding to the Gospel."

In *A Wind in the House of Islam*, Garrison records his own conversation with Nasr. When talking specifically about Nasr's unique methods of evangelism, Garrison asked him:

"Do you think this is something that you can do, but I, as a Westerner, should not do?"

Nasr laughed, "No, no, no, no, no. I can do this because I am a Muslim." I was struck by this casual admission, "I am a Muslim," by a man who had now given his life to dismantling Islam."²⁵⁵

Nasr's decisions and experiences constitute just one piece of the vast identification puzzle laid before Muslim converts today. It is a puzzle not just for the MBBs, but for the Church at large, as well. "It's difficult to assess, difficult to know what's really going on," Garrison told me, "because if you ask the native people, what you'll hear is, 'Everyone is a good Muslim, everyone is a devout believer!' etc. But very few people actually are. Many people take up mantles of Muslim devotion to disguise other leanings, like Druze or Christian. This makes things very complex. We in the West might even call it duplicity, but it's due to the climate of forced religion. That's the nature of the beast. There's essentially a spiritual, underground, guerilla war going on. So, it's going to be messy for a long time."²⁵⁶ This is the challenge of identity.

²⁵⁵ 216.

²⁵⁶ Garrison, interview.

Challenges for the Historical Arab Christian Church

As we have already seen, the historic Arab church has been attenuated to the point of that lassitude which precedes death. Their imminent demise, taken as fact, makes the sudden birth of these new movements of Muslim conversion all the more astonishing. Surely, the birth and growth of the MBB house church will have ramifications for the pre-existing church.

So one would think. Actually, there has been very little interaction between the historical churches and the house churches. This is partly at the behest of the house churches, in a bid to maintain obscurity, but it is primarily a result of the historical churches' anxiety-induced myopia.

During their first years of ministry in the Middle East, the Heiskells and the Stoyans tried attending a local church and partnering with the Arab Christian population to reach Muslims. They quickly discovered, however, that such partnership was a hindrance, not a help. Stoyan explains why: "The vision gap was too large to overcome. We tried, early on, to train Christian background people in the way that we were doing things. We had a few pastors that came to us and said, "Hey, we know you're seeing Muslims come to Christ, can you help us learn how to do it?" But they couldn't – what we discovered is that the cultural gap between a Christian-background Arab and a Muslim-background Arab was actually *larger* than the cultural gap between the Muslim-background Arab and us. And so they actually had more issues that they had to overcome to get to a place of open, trustworthy conversation than we did. And so it became very clear that unless a Christian-background person didn't have a strong ritualistic history,

they were actually less effective. We actually had a couple of guys who had fallen away from the church and then came back to Jesus, and they were very effective at reaching Muslims, because they carried no institutional baggage with them; it was all about the people. But the organized Church there, because it's been such a introspective entity for so long, has lost its capacity, by and large, to be able to see outside its four walls. And so when they're thinking about [these movements], they're thinking about, "How can we take this thing that God is doing and make it benefit our church?" Instead of thinking, "How can we get in on what God is doing and benefit *them*?"... Their desire is to pull, to pull into their agenda, instead of giving something life-giving to the people or reaching them."²⁵⁷

With a mindset tempered by a history of persecution more than thirteen hundred years long, the institutional Arab church has, understandably, not proved ready to make the sacrifices or take the risks necessary to incorporate among themselves the Muslims who are coming to Jesus. Instead, there is a general mistrust of Muslims (again, entirely understandable), which inclines them to refuse the Muslim seekers who dare to approach them. Justifiable though it may be, Nasr's story exhibits the fruits of this pervasive suspicion: when searching for more information about Jesus, eleven churches turned him away before he finally gave up and called the TV station. A man with the potential to lead thousands of Muslims to Jesus was knocking on their door, and they refused him. "Why?" asks Heiskell "Because he's a Muslim. And they can't trust him."

The mutual mistrust between Muslims and Christians is constantly reinforced by underhanded government activity. Heiskell recalls: "We would go do a training at a

²⁵⁷ Stoyan, interview.

Christian church, and then some of our [Arab ministry partners] would get called in by the secret police and questioned. They had nothing to do with the training! But the secret police, in the interrogation, would describe to our friends what we had done in the churches, asking if had anything to do with it. So we realized, ‘Wow - It’s like the secret police are *in* the churches, or they’re getting information *from* the churches.’

Every time a Muslim-background believer would go to a church, they would end up being called in, questioned, beaten. The churches would kind of accept them, but there were people from within the churches that were turning them in, just as fast as they would come in the front door. So at that point, we decided, ‘These guys can’t even *know* about there being any house churches, or if we lead a Muslim to the Lord we can’t even *tell* the Christian churches about it.’” Heiskell believes that the betraying of MBBs is due not to maliciousness, but to naiveté. “It’s not that there aren’t trustworthy people in the midst - but there are loose-lipped trustworthy people; people who would never turn somebody in themselves, but they tell people, and then word gets around. While I believe in my Arab friends in the church, and I am amazed at the sacrifices they have made and the endurance they have had just to live, just to make it – I also recognized that the government was playing all of us against each other. I had to honor my friends there, but pursuing that strategy was not working for any of us.”

The government’s playing of Arab Christians against MBBs only heightens tensions and shores up the walls of mistrust. So MBBs become increasingly unlikely to approach the Arab Christian churches, and the churches becoming increasingly unlikely to admit the MBBs or seekers who do dare to come. Were the churches to incorporate converts with any consistency, it would most certainly jeopardize what shreds of security

they do possess, quickly inviting pointed reprisals from government quarters. Garrison thinks this threat of persecution will continue to be prohibitive. “There’s not a lot of a room for cooperation or association between the traditional churches and the house churches,” he says, “because the structures of society do not allow for it. The Muslim authorities would hammer them both.”²⁵⁸

All in all, contact between MBBs and Arab Christians is rare, and fraught with danger. Thus the birth of these Muslim movements to Christ has had minimal impact on the position and condition of the Arab Christian churches (if anything, they have endangered each other). It appears that if they both stay away from each other and things continue as they are, the Arab Christian churches will die out, just as historians have predicted, and the underground MBCs might stand a chance. That’s a grim outlook. When I asked my interviewees if they saw any hope for the historical churches, Stoyan said this: “Like everything, it’s an obedience-driven issue. I believe that there is always hope for the Church, and I believe honestly that God’s plan A, his desire, would be that the Arab church that’s been there for so long would rise up, and believe, and step out in who they are. Though persecution would most certainly come, it would also open the door for His presence and His kingdom to come. If the church continues to be lethargic, and to just try to maintain the status quo – they are already marginalized, and they will soon become irrelevant. And so, the scholars are correct if things don’t change. But there’s always hope for change.”²⁵⁹

²⁵⁸ Garrison, interview.

²⁵⁹ Stoyan, interview.

It appears that the historical Arab Christian church has two choices: resist the urge to self-protect, take some strategic risks, and face the wrath of the authorities and wider culture; or, maintain the status quo and thereby accept the slow death that has been closing in on them for so many years. Either way they are imperiled. Everything they do from here on is a risk.

This is the challenge for the traditional Arab Christian Church.

The Challenges (and Opportunities) of Indigenization

No matter what becomes of the traditional denominations – whether they fight for continued existence in the Middle East, or endure only in diaspora – there will a body of believers, there will be a church, in the Middle East. What this church will look like, though, has largely to be determined, as its foundations are still being laid. This is the challenge of indigenization: constructing a kingdom culture with an Arab expression²⁶⁰ from the ground up. Though there is no way to describe the details of the edifice that a full-bodied indigenization will comprise (since it doesn't exist yet), missionaries have this to say about the foundations they see being laid:

MBCs are thriving under the leadership of lay believers. “A cursory look at the book of Acts demonstrates that the work of ministry was largely done by nonprofessional Christians . . . that DNA is being recaptured in today's Disciple Making Movements that are based on empowering every member, regardless of background, as a disciple

²⁶⁰ “a kingdom culture with an Arab expression” is a concept Heiskell and Stoyan pulled from trainings by Steve Smith and the historical works of Philip Jenkins.

maker.”²⁶¹ These leaders are keeping their day jobs, so their service to the MBC is unpaid volunteer work. While still a significant sacrifice, this choice is feasible because the MBCs tend to have an emphasis on shared or collective leadership in which members “work toward a consensus of opinion,”²⁶² and ministry is seen as the proper activity of all church members.

MBCs are keeping things small and simple. Trousdale writes, “The churches being planted are often small, basic churches built around family and clan structures and out of public view.”²⁶³ Lots of MBCs are planted using the DBS, disciple-to-conversion method. Once these groups reach a point of making a decision for Christ and can properly be called a church, they tend to continue using DBS as the template for their meetings. Typically, the sum total of their church activities consists of: weekly meetings to worship and study the Word together, occasional additional gatherings for prayer and fasting, and ongoing evangelism. Meetings range in size from 5 -30 people.²⁶⁴

Trousdale calls this small, simple way of doing church “rabbit churches” and compares it to the western way of doing church, which he calls “elephant churches”:

Elephant churches have lots of programs, activities, and people. We need churches like this, but they are very slow to multiply . . . Rabbit churches are small, able to hide in plain sight, and multiply very quickly. . . . [Elephant churches] serve wonderful functions. But from every strategic perspective, megachurches and average-sized churches will never fulfill the Great Commission without a goal and a plan to launch

²⁶¹ Jerry Trousdale, *Miraculous Movements: How Hundreds of Thousands of Muslims are Falling in Love with Jesus* (Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 2012), 170.

²⁶² Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1980) 171.

²⁶³ Trousdale, 31.

²⁶⁴ Garrison, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, 220; and Trousdale, 117.

thousands of rabbit churches. Only a rabbit church has the ability to reproduce rapidly, thrive in a dangerous environment, and naturally facilitate obedience-based discipleship within every member . . . everything these churches do tends to fulfill a function of reproducing obedient disciples of Jesus . . . There are not many programs, but quite a lot of genuine transformation of individuals, families, and whole communities.²⁶⁵

MBCs are supplying and deploying their own finances. The MBCs of the house church movements are not financially dependent on aid from foreign churches. They bring in their own funds by tithing and generous giving, and since they are not funding staff salaries, building construction and maintenance, or a multiplicity of programs, “the tithes of the church are spent on things like meeting needs of people inside the church, doing acts of kindness for the larger community, and sometimes supporting some members to pioneer evangelism in new Muslim areas.”²⁶⁶

In the paragraphs above, we see some foundational elements of the MBC that is emerging in the Arab world. From the foundations alone, we can tell that the finished structure is going to turn out to be a very different sort of church than can be found in western societies (as it should be). But much of what the MBC will turn out to be has yet to be seen. There are many issues and decisions still before these pioneering believers, including:

Church structure and organization. The models the MBCs are currently employing are, to a large extent, contextualized tools provided for them by foreign missionaries. As the churches grow in size and in demographic scope, new paradigms may be necessary.

²⁶⁵ Trousdale, 118 – 119.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 117.

Leadership. The same holds true for leadership. The model of lay leadership is highly effective for now, and probably will continue to be so for the bulk of the MBC's leadership needs. However, as the church grows, members will have to continue to make decisions about who will lead, the roles and requirements of leaders, and the ethos of leadership for Arab followers of *Isa al Masih*.

Training. Though the church is being successfully led by people claiming some profession other than full-time ministry, it does not follow that neither leaders nor members desire ministry training. Actually, they fervently desire it. How they will answer the need for training (and if access to it will affect their leadership and ministry models) remains to be seen.

Discipleship. Because the Arab MBC is "still very much in its infant stage," (S interview) it still very much needs the spiritual parenting of shadow-pastors like Heiskell and Stoyan, who train new believers in the ways of kingdom culture. But as the MBBs begin to mature and appropriate the kingdom values for themselves, they will take greater ownership of their brand of kingdom expression, and its replication. They will have to make decisions about the modes and priorities of discipleship in the Arab MBC.

Baptism. This is a particularly sensitive subject given the high-persecution environment in which Arab MBBs come to faith. In fact, this has proved to be a particularly sensitive subject throughout Christian history, and various ways of practicing the sacrament abound. A clear-cut MBC position on baptism has yet to be vocalized.

Persecution. The MBC in the Middle East has already faced and will assuredly continue to face persecution. There is not one definitive “right” way to deal with persecution seen in Scripture. Sometimes believers scattered, leaving dangerous areas and carrying the Gospel with them to their new locales. At other times, believers gathered, drawing strength from their fellowship and boldness from prayer, so as to courageously face what might come. How the MBC responds to persecution will most likely vary from one time and place to another, and will be instrumental in determining how this church matures.

Emerging. The MBCs of *Dar al Islam* are still inherently underground. Must it always be so? The MBB leaders don’t think so. But when the right time to emerge has come is a call only they can make. On this topic, Stoyan cautions: “The question of emerging, of coming out from underground, is always one that different people have different opinions about. The church in China stayed underground for 75 years, and emerged millions and millions and millions strong. The question is – and this is a question they have to answer themselves, we can’t answer it for them – ‘At what level are you willing to risk? And what cost do you want to pay?’... Early on, we thought that when they hit five thousand, that that would be a good time to emerge. They didn’t feel that way. And it’s not our cost to count, it’s theirs. And they were right, we were wrong. The longer it stays underground, the better off it is, because it gives it an opportunity to spread rapidly without rampant persecution.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ Stoyan, interview.

Gatherings. Until emergence is an option, the gatherings of MBBs will have to remain small and uncomplicated. These kinds of “rabbit church” meetings are actually very beautiful, and maybe MBBs will choose to do church that way no matter their circumstances. But if emergence is achieved, the believers will suddenly have more options at their disposal as they forge a definition of MBC (like an artist with new colors on his palette), and it will be exciting to see how they innovate!

Forms of worship. In most regards, the MBC’s potential for innovation is tremendous, even with the restrictions they face. Specifically in the area of worship, they are practically bound to come up with novel expressions of praise and devotion. MBBs don’t have to be trained to worship Isa; they instinctively take the forms that are part and parcel to their experience of religion (the *shahada*, chanting of the Qur’an, poetry, etc.) and direct them to their experience and praise of *Isa*. The spontaneity with which MBBs generate novel forms of Christian worship can be witnessed in Heiskell and Stoyan’s account of their first DBS with Nasr: one of the ladies chanted the Bible as Muslims do the Qur’an. In other areas of *Dar al Islam*, former Muslims are creating Christian poetic masterpieces.²⁶⁸ As these are but the first fruits of MBB devotion, the global Church can eagerly anticipate further contributions that are sure to follow upon continuing indigenization.

Civil customs. Not every Islamic practice, however, can be translated into Christian experience. As MBBs continue to grow in their faith, they may decide that ways in which Islam found expression in their civil customs (such as surround births,

²⁶⁸ Such as the poetic translation of the Book of John, by Iranian scholar Abbas Aryanpur. He translated the content of the Gospel of John in rhyming Farsi couplets.

marriages, deaths, holidays, and weekly rhythms like mosque/church attendance, etc.) are no longer tenable. Room for innovation in this area, however, will probably remain tightly constricted for the foreseeable future, as most MBBS “are still legally Muslim, and their children are or will be legally Muslim, and any questions of family life – like marriage, divorce, and inheritance – are governed by a Shari’a court.”²⁶⁹ Whereas Muslim forms of worship lend themselves naturally to Christian transmutation, the public nature of civil customs makes them more intractable, and of all areas, one of the least likely to see indigenous Christian expression in the near future.

The above issues are some of the principal components of indigenization that MBBS will have to navigate as their nascent churches become more established. Each one is laden with spectacular opportunities for an Arab expression of the life of Christ, as well as a myriad of ways that things could go wrong. It is just this unpredictability that brings out the challenges indigenization poses for onlookers.

The Challenge of Humility: A Word to the West

Usually, movements are started when foreign missionaries find and disciple a native person of peace, who then stimulates the spread of the Gospel through his people group. After this is accomplished, successful indigenization requires that the foreign influencers move even further into the background, giving the national leaders space to take responsibility. Of course, there are all kinds of risks inherent in such yielding of control. But it is an essential step in the formation of a movement. Without the

²⁶⁹Laura Merzig Fabrycky, review of *Searching for Heaven in the Real World: A Sociological Discussion of Conversion in the Arab World*, by Kathryn Kraft, *The Review of Faith and International Affairs*, December 10, 2013, 71.

withdrawal of foreign leadership, the churches that have been planted will never develop the internal momentum needed to perpetuate themselves throughout a nation or *ethne*. Though the missionaries may personally find the distance to be painful, they acquiesce to backseat involvement because they appreciate the necessity of it. Wider western audiences, however, tend not to understand. The missionaries I either talked with or whose words I have read acknowledge that the birth and growth of the MBC poses a challenge to the western church in the following ways:

The challenge to honor differences. Much of what the western church considers to be essential to the living out of the Christian faith is actually just a matter of culture, a part of the way *western* believers follow Jesus. These cultural forms of Christianity would not only be ill-fitting for an Arab MBB - many are downright impracticable in the Middle East.

MBBs are bringing in new believers at the rate of hundreds per month. They have no facilities. They have no form of governmental recognition or protection whatsoever. If anything, they have the pledge of their government's opposition. "The kind of church communities we are used to considering integral to Christianity are simply not allowed to exist in the Middle East," says Garrison (interview). Given such circumstances, the way MBBs live their faith and organize their churches is just going to have to look different from the way western believers do it. "A church *will* emerge in that area of the world," asserts Garrison. "The challenge for the West is, will recognize it? Will we receive it?" Will we recognize that, as these believers face tests we've never dreamed of, they can, and will most likely have to, come up with innovative alternatives we've never thought of? Throughout this paper I have repeatedly used the word 'unprecedented' to describe

what is occurring in *Dar al Islam*, because the situation we are witnessing today really is entirely new. The western church must recognize that entirely new circumstances could quite reasonably call for entirely new courses of action. The unprecedented requires the unprecedented. No matter how unorthodox they may seem, if the MBC's innovative forms and practices can be corroborated with Scripture they deserve full support from western quarters, because how they decide to navigate the obstacles of their unique environment is their prerogative.

Addressing the ways in which disagreements over the practice of baptism have ripped up the Church, Parshall writes, "The only reconciliation between divergent views among evangelicals has been humble and loving acceptance of diversity in the body." He then, fittingly, applies this lesson to the western Christianity's acceptance of Arab Christians' differences: "We also need to extend that love to new converts who, after prayer, practice baptism" (or any other facet of Christian life) "in a form that may be personally unacceptable to us. We must trust the Holy Spirit to be active in the lives of the emerging Body of Christ."²⁷⁰

The challenge to serve. If we can resist the urge to distrust and resent the diversity of the MBC, then we will be free to support these believers without agenda. Though they are proving to be remarkably resourceful, there are still things that the western church can offer them. Whether its technology that vaults the illiteracy gap, satellite TV infiltrating a closed country, new evangelism strategies, contextualized Christian literature, or extension programs for leadership training, our role is to put the tools in their hands and then release them to put those resources to work in whatever way they deem appropriate.

²⁷⁰ Parshall, 196 – 197.

Can the West give what we have, without expecting the recipients to then do things our way? “Will we support what is effective, instead of pushing for what looks like us?”²⁷¹ Would we even humble ourselves so far as to place ourselves at the MBBs’ disposal, allowing them to tell us what they need from us, instead of only providing what we prepared ourselves? This is the challenge of service without self-interest.

The challenge to engage. Investing MBCs with the responsibility of their own leadership and giving them our resources without our agenda does not mean that we ensconce ourselves on the other side of the globe and occasionally shoot some new Bible materials their way. While MBCs need to be empowered to figure things out and carry things forward themselves, they still need the close, loving, and committed involvement of mature believers. What Heiskell told me in reference to the historical Arab Christian church applies to the western church as well:

“The thing that makes me sad in it is the way the traditional Christian church has rejected [the house churches]. They don’t trust Muslims. They certainly don’t trust any kind of house church movement among Muslims because they can’t control it. And if they can’t control, then there could be heresy, and there could be problems, or whatever. Of course there could be! That’s what you see all through the New Testament, is that kind of mess. That’s why Paul had to write the letters that he wrote. It’s because of those things. So when you clamp down on it, and you control it, you stifle the very growth that you’re wanting. And I think that’s why we haven’t seen a movement like this before,

²⁷¹ Garrison, interview.

because we haven't been willing to deal with the mess. It's messy; it's painful messy. But – it's God, in the midst of it.”

Jerry Trousdale, whose ministry has seen multiple movements started among Muslims in Africa, shares that at one point, he gave up his dream of seeing Africa reached with the Gospel because he was frustrated by how time-consuming and fruitless his efforts had been. He was tired of the mess. Sixteen years after he had given up and turned his attentions elsewhere, God began to stir his heart and reawaken those old dreams. “Finally,” Trousdale writes, “[my wife and I] had to reengage with no clear idea how to proceed. Eventually, we discovered the radical, hidden-in-plain-sight, disciple-making principles described in [*Miraculous Movements*], and those changed everything, including my thoughts about what God might do and how fast he might do it.”²⁷²

What both men are pointing to is the fact that breakthroughs came, at least partly, as a result of their willingness to be personally given to the arduous labor of disciple making, especially, even, to the cluelessness, the mess, the problems. MBBs, even when responsible for their own movements, need men and women who are with them in the risk, and patient with the process, of them figuring things out. They need spiritual brothers and sisters who, while yielding control, will not dissociate but stay engaged, lovingly involving themselves in both the failures and the victories of the growing churches.

The challenge to get out of the way. Because the Middle East's history with the West is fraught with imperialism and abuse, anything that could possibly be associated with the West is instantly mistrusted. This includes Christians, whether they're local

²⁷² Trousdale, 178 – 179.

Arabs or foreign missionaries. This is why people of peace can start movements and while missionaries alone cannot. This is why “the future will be hindered the more it’s associated with us.”²⁷³

It’s not just staunch Muslims who distrust westerners. MBBs, too, are suspicious of imperialistic motives in western missionaries. Stoyan’s experience from his first DBS with Nasr’s little band of believers is demonstrative:

“As we were sitting there . . . [the Holy Spirit] dropped something into my heart” – just an inkling of something that ought to be said. “And so I said, ‘Okay, guys, I need to tell you something . . .’ I said, ‘I promise, I will never give you my opinion about anything – ever.’ I held up the Bible and I said, ‘If it’s not in here, you’re not responsible for it. But if it *is* in here, you *are* responsible for it.’ And we kind of talked through what that meant. But I said, ‘I will not bring any of myself into the process. It will be in here [the Bible] and you will see it with your own eyes.’ I didn’t think it was that big a deal, at the time. It just seemed like something God wanted me to say. Six months later we’re sitting with these same ladies, and the leader says, ‘You know . . . the first time we sat together, you told us that you would never give us your opinion about anything. And just so you know, we were judging you in this first meeting.’ She said, ‘If you hadn’t said that, you would have never seen us again.’”²⁷⁴

Some of the advice that these missionaries have shared may seem contradictory. “Give them distance!” “But stay engaged!” “Get out of the way!” “But be with them in their struggles!” However, if viewed via the paradigm of a parent ushering a beloved

²⁷³ Garrison, interview.

²⁷⁴ Stoyan, “Stewarding Your Promises.”

child through adolescence to maturity, it makes much more sense. Thought applications can be complex, the undergirding principles of love and humility are simple. Heiskell summarizes it all well:

“I think as a church we need more of an understanding that it’s going to be these Muslims that we empower to reach Muslims. It can’t look like the western church. If we expect it to look like the western church before being ready to support it, then they’re never going to be supported . . . We’ve got to do more to be willing to get our hands dirty . . . We’ve got to walk with them where they are.”

Finishing Touches

How Do We Respond?

Prayer. The first thing both missionaries and MBBs would ask of the worldwide Church is that they pray. These movements did not start without the prayers of the saints, and they will not continue or reproduce without them either.

Humility. As I have already set forth, the new MBCs of the Middle East need the acknowledgement, resources, wisdom, and encouragement that their older brothers and sisters in the global Church can offer them. However, if we (especially we of the western heritage) are to be allowed the privilege of continued involvement in the work God is doing in the Middle East, we must approach it with no expectations other than our humble service.

Strategy. One of the ways we can serve is by continuing to develop strategies that address the unique challenges of growing “Islamic Christianity”²⁷⁵ in the Middle East. Current and upcoming MBC leaders need training. Programs offering training by extension (rather than extraction) that are feasible for the Middle Eastern context need to be developed, or even entirely new modes that capitalize on the untapped potential of technology and modernization. As more and more Muslims come to Christ, the demand for contextualized Christian resources will increase exponentially. We can help create and provide those. And, lastly, the crypto-Christianity adopted by so many of the believers in the Middle East demands new strategies for discipleship and integration into the Church. These are just a few of the needs that await solutions. As we continue to apply our innovative efforts to the tasks, we could be the ones to provide them!

Advocacy. When detailing the history of the church in the Middle East, I mentioned how political decisions of the West have sometimes exposed Arab Christians to the trampling of Muslim extremists or sectarian violence. When speaking of the MBCs, I said that they are far more vulnerable to persecution than the missionaries who found them because they have no outside parties willing to champion their welfare. It does not have to be so. Indeed, “my brothers, it should not be so.”²⁷⁶ We, as citizens of western societies, have the power to help, instead of harm, the Arab churches, if we will dare to vote and take political positions not based on national foreign interests, but based instead on our status as citizens of the Kingdom of God and as the brothers and sisters of the

²⁷⁵ Duane Alexander Miller, “Woven in the Weakness of the Changing Body: the Genesis of World Islamic Christianity” (Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary).

²⁷⁶ James 3:10.

persecuted. We ought to engage in temporal politics with the eternal, with the Church, in mind.

Receiving. We are not only in the giving position with the MBCs, giving our prayers, our strategizing efforts, our political clout; we have much to learn as well. Engaging with the Arab church can, for one, help us perceive what in our practice of Christianity is authentically Christian and what is merely particular cultural expression. The MBBs, as they learn how to respond to persecution, can teach us by example (an education the western church will probably find increasing need of in the coming years). And these are just the first, the obvious things. The Christians in the West stand to be greatly enriched by their Arab counterparts if they will not fail - on account of pride, ignorance, or prejudice - to receive what these brothers and sisters can teach them.

Going. As Garrison pointed out, *Dar al Islam* is not simply immense; it is more expansive than any previous earthly empire (G,5). Though there is at least one movement in every “room” of the “house,” there is still a lot of ground to cover, and well over a *billion* Muslims who have yet to hear. “Only a tiny portion of the Muslim world, less than one-half of one percent of Islam’s 1.6 billion adherents, has turned to follow Christ” (G, 236). So Christ’s claim that “the harvest is truly great but the laborers are few” applies to *Dar al Islam* just as legitimately now as it did before the miraculous movements of the past few decades (Luke 10:2, KJV). These movements have not changed the call, but they have brought a new reality to the hope. Stoyan describes the hope of what’s happening:

“I think that the outpouring that’s coming now is unprecedented in history. And I think we’re still very much on the front end. I think it’s gathering momentum. And I think we’re going to see this happen more and more and more. We already are . . . What this says about God is there’s literally nothing that he can’t break down. There is no place so walled in or so deceived that he cannot break through. And it would seem, in these days, that the places he most *loves* to break through are the places everyone says he can’t . . . I remember when Mongolia and Russia were called ‘The Graveyard of Missions.’ But he broke through there. ‘Oh, well, the Middle East? There’s just no way. You know, God may have done it *there*, but He’ll never be able to do it in the Middle East.’ Well, now he is. And I’ve just come to see that if believers will stand up and walk in the things that God’s called them to do, with absolute conviction of the promises he has given, that he comes through, and he is looking to change the world. And anyone who wants to be a part of it can be a part of it. One of the greatest moves to God among Muslims in the Middle East in history - I’ve gotten to do that! I’ve done that! And it’s still going; it’s not over. I’ve seen enough people who have done it that it’s not an outlier anymore. It’s not a case of, ‘Oh, well, you just got lucky.’ You still have that. You still have people who say, ‘That’s not real.’ You’re gonna have people like that no matter what. But it is - it is real.”²⁷⁷ And you can go!

Areas for Further Research

The diaspora. What is becoming of the Arab Church that now exists in Europe, America, and Australia? How is their process of adaptation to their new locales changing

²⁷⁷ Stoyan, interview.

their nature as a people? What are the hurts and needs of a community in diaspora, and how can we help them? What are the challenges and hopes for their future?

The developing Muslim background church. As the MBBs face the challenges and answer the questions of indigenization, they are forging an entirely new expression of Christianity, a new church personality, if you will. Those who follow and chronicle these developments will have a privilege akin to that of Luke writing the book of Acts! There are all sorts of questions I personally am eager to have answered, concerning the nature of the growing MBC. What is their unique church culture, the meeting of their Arabness and their discipleship? What do they excel at, as a community? What values are most important to them? What weaknesses are they prone to? What is their style of outreach and service? Do they have any unique customs, and what are their meanings? What do they, more than any other community, pick up on in the character of God? What are the emphases and insights of their theology? How do they observe the sacraments? There is a new church personality being formed, which occasions the extremely exciting opportunity to profile it!

Impact on wider culture. As the MBCs gain traction and grow in numbers, they will inevitably have some kind of influence on their wider Muslim contexts. Perhaps it will be overt, like Peter preaching at Pentecost, or perhaps covert, like tectonic plates shifting beneath the ground. Probably, it will be both, at different times. What will this influence achieve? Missionaries have already proposed (and even experienced) some effects:

- the lifting of an oppressive spiritual atmosphere

- a refuting of the fatalism that is so typical in Islam
- higher regard for and better treatment of women
- forgiveness putting an end to cycles of violence based on the ethic of revenge

And we have already seen from history the power Christians have to stimulate learning and the exercise of truth-seeking reason. If Christians can gain and exert a viable presence in the Middle East (or even just an ineluctable one – disregarded as ever, but simply too numerous to put in prison) then there will have to be some ramifications for Middle Eastern society - and there could be wonderful solutions to ills which have plagued Arabs since the arrival of Islam. These possibilities are worthy of further study.

Closing Remarks: Present Weakness and Resurrection Life

So what we can say about the church in the Middle East? Though the Church was born in the Middle East, it has not been at *home* there for at least thirteen hundred years. Actually, if we are to believe Scripture, hostility against the Church in its homeland is as old as the Church itself: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.”²⁷⁸ The Church has faced vicious opposition since its inception, and is still under attack. The miracle, however, is, it is still *there* to be under attack. The traditional denominations in the Middle East are by no means thriving, but the fact that we are still speaking of them at all is a miracle of endurance. This tenacity has always been sorely tested, and within the last decade, has, perhaps, been pressed to the point of being crushed. Will the visible Arab church, direct

²⁷⁸ Matthew 11:12.

descendents of the first apostles and venerable patriarchs, survive? If we consult history, we must conclude their demise is certain – in fact, it should have already occurred. If the original Arab church were an ailing, elderly relative, then history would be the doctor telling us, “It is only a matter of time.” Thankfully, neither we nor history are officials on the future, nor is the vitality of the Body of Christ subject to the laws of aging and decay which govern human bodies, as its Head is the “resurrection and the life”²⁷⁹ Himself. Furthermore, as fellow members of such a Body, our charge is not to consult history, but to believe for the Arab church, to hope for them, and to love them. For “these three remain: faith, hope, and love,”²⁸⁰ and “love... always hopes, always perseveres.”²⁸¹

We also *must* not neglect the amazing ways God has been building His Church in these latter days. The traditional Arab church has testified to the worthiness of Jesus by its miracle of endurance, and the ever-growing MBC is testifying to His power by the miracle of its birth. If there is any rebuke for the idea that the future of the Church can be read in its history, it is this very recent history. The very recent history of the church in the Middle East is a re-writing of history, a new story that nobody but the hopeful could have predicted, and proof that God is still into doing the unprecedented. In speaking of the traditional Arab church earlier, I alluded to Paul’s remarkable exhortation in 2 Corinthians 4:

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in

²⁷⁹ John 11:25.

²⁸⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:13.

²⁸¹ 1 Corinthians 13:7.

our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.²⁸²

This paradox of death and life at work in the same body is a strikingly apt parallel for what is occurring in the Middle Eastern church today. Observers have, for decades, if not centuries, been tolling the death knell for the Arab Christianity. They've had reason. Much has been lost. And perhaps we are currently looking at the fulfillment of these grim prophecies in the waves of attrition convulsing the original denominations; in the fear and apathy afflicting the small, petering communities that remain – perhaps. But there is something else at work too – something that few people prophesied, and even fewer believed, and yet happens anyway. Life is at work in the Middle East. The massive move of those who were formerly Muslims to faith in Jesus corroborates Scripture's claim that the church in the Middle East is "persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." In the miraculous means and astonishingly rapid growth attendant upon these movements, we are reminded of the events of Pentecost, and reminded likewise that Jesus is just as ambitious for the hearts of Arabs as He was on that first day. Just as we acknowledge, grieve, and seek to alleviate the present weakness inhering in the Arab church, let us also turn our attention and efforts to the resurrection life that is daily bringing new believers into the Body. Both the ailing and burgeoning are the Church of Christ.

²⁸² verses 8-12.

Conclusion

The current consensus within academia on the Arab church in the Middle East is that it is fragmented and irrelevant, and will soon be no more. As a long history of violence, discrimination, and demographic decline - compounded by the current flow of emigrants - attests, there is abundant reason for believing this to be true. And I would say I even agree; the Arab church *as it exists today* cannot endure much longer. But a new kind of Arab church is emerging in the twenty first century: the Muslim background church. Conducted in underground - not institutionalized - contexts, and filled with Muslim background believers – not descendents of traditionally Christian families – it is quite unlike the visible Arab church as it exists today. Yet it is still the Arab church.

Currently, there is only one affirmed movement with four branches in the Middle East. Nor is there, at this time, any track record of MBCs and traditional Arab churches connecting and benefitting from one another. But is believing for more than one movement (there are already rumblings of more) or positive interaction between the different forms of Arab church any more unreasonable than believing for a single movement? Just one movement was (only a few years ago!) considered to be an absurd impossibility. And now it exists.

Movements like it are taking place throughout the globe. Due to their newness, and their typically clandestine nature, they are very difficult to study in an academically verifiable way. However, attempts to do so ought to continue to be made, because these movements are changing Islamic-Christian history, and, more specifically, the story of the Arab church in the Middle East. I believe that because of these movements, the

twenty first century will witness not the death of the Arab church, but its transformation and renewal.

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