

# **CHRISTIANITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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# CHAPTER ONE

## Christians in The Middle East

### Christians

The delegates to the International Education Conference were assembling. A delegate from the host country smiled a welcome to the lady about to sit beside her, and glanced at her name tag. "You're from the Middle East, I see. Then you will be a Muslim?" The reply was swift and emphatic. "No, I'm a Christian; from a Christian family. And how long have there been Christians here in Australia?" "Oh, about two hundred years," her neighbour answered, rather lamely. "We have had churches in Lebanon for nearly two thousand years."

"Nearly two thousand years." At the time when Augustine and his missionary team were braving the wilds of far-off heathen Britain, over fifteen hundred years ago, Christians in the long established Church of Alexandria, Egypt, were receiving a letter of thanks for their part in praying for that enterprise - "for your prayers can be where you are not, at the uttermost corners of the earth".

A modern Egyptian, Dr. Aziz Atiya, has said of his Church, "Like a solitary temple on the edge of the desert, weathering sandstorms over the years until it became submerged,...the ancient Coptic Church led its lonesome life on the fringe of civilisation. Like the same massive temple, it has proved to be indestructible, though battered. Its potential vitality has survived. In the last few decades...its sons have started to remove the sands from around it". (*A History of Eastern Christianity*, 1968)

Why did the sand accumulate? What began the emerging process? Is it happening elsewhere in the Middle East as well?

This book tries to give some answers to these questions, and to raise others. Its purpose is to open a door of understanding, first about the existence of the Historic Eastern Churches, then about present movements within them. It is more an introduction to the subject than an exhaustive study, but we hope it will stimulate understanding prayer for the Christians of the Middle East.

Most of these Churches reach right back to the planting that was done in the first three centuries after Pentecost. Two things in particular are quite breath-taking. One - that they have survived. The 'Ship', which they like to use as a symbol of the Church, has ridden the waves of heresy, doctrinal controversies, persecution, secularising pressures, minority status: conditions that made for ignorance and stagnation. Secondly, they have been kept from error on the great fundamentals of the Faith - the Triune nature of God, the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the reality and importance of His incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension for the redemption of mankind.

We must surely see God's hand and purpose in this. If we are concerned that the non-Christians of these lands should hear the Good News of Christ, can we ignore the Ancient Churches? Do we expect God to bypass them all, and use only the witness of the small local Evangelical minorities, and of foreigners?

The Middle East is a vague term. Everyone has a general idea of where it is, but people draw its boundaries according to their particular interest. In this study we include the six Arabic language countries from Iraq in the north-east, west and south to Northern Sudan, and the non-Arab states of Cyprus, Iran and Turkey. The Arabian Peninsula is not specifically discussed because its countries, though undoubtedly Middle Eastern, have no officially recognised churches except those made up of expatriates.



The region is by no means one homogeneous unit. There are great contrasts of climate and terrain - intensive cultivation in the Nile Valley; dry, empty deserts; deep winter snow on the mountains of Lebanon, Iran or Turkey; orchards and vineyards on terraced hillsides; semi-arid grazing lands; isolated villages and crowded cities. These have produced great contrasts of isolation and openness to new ways, of conservatism and modernity.

Politically, it is a number of sovereign states, each with its own government, laws and foreign alignments, creating a *climate* for the Christian minorities that varies from one area to another. In all these countries each citizen is registered at birth according to the religion of his family. To be a Muslim or Christian, therefore, is to be part of a social, and in some cases a specific ethnic, unit; religion is not simply a private matter. There are no truly secular states; and almost everywhere *freedom of religion* has a particular and limited meaning.

The Middle East is unique in that it is the birthplace of the world's three great monotheistic religions. This is more than just an interesting coincidence, of course, given that the Old Testament events took place here, as God's preparation for His saving acts in Christ. Historically the sequence is Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. First, the Lord Jesus Christ came, the Reality that the Old Testament had been foreshadowing, and His Church came into

being. Then Judaism as it now is developed from those who, tragically, could not recognise “the time of God’s coming to you” (Luke 19:44, NIV). Later, the Arabia of Muhammad knew both Christians and Jews, in the neighbouring lands and within the Peninsula and their influence on Islamic thought and practices are clearly recognisable.

It was in these Bible Lands, we know, that Christ’s Church was born. But Western Christians tend to have a vague idea that it’s main growing up was done in the West. We are even hazier about what, if anything, happened back in the old birth-lands. What did happen was that the Eastern Church story went on unfolding, and is still being written.

TODAY, then, there are Christian communities in the Middle East, as well as Muslims. Minorities they may be, but they are there, many tracing their roots back to the Churches of the first three hundred years after Pentecost. Surely we must take seriously the fact that God has kept them alive in this region, the very centre of the Muslim world. “Their tremendously important achievement in coming to terms with Islam and maintaining a Christian presence (however emasculated) in Muslim countries is often ignored when Muslim-Christian dialogue is discussed.” (M. Nasir-Ali, *Islam, A Christian Perspective*, p146)

### **Some Basic Facts**

- There are about seventeen million Christians in the Middle East, in a total population of about four hundred million.
- Of these, just over a million are Evangelicals (in this context meaning Protestants), three to four million are Eastern Catholics, and some twelve million are Orthodox.
- To understand Christianity in the Middle East, therefore, it is necessary to know something about the Orthodox Churches, those Christian communities that have been there since before the Crusades of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.
- The official name Orthodox, meaning right belief or right glory, was taken in the sixth century to emphasise that the Church had from earliest days championed the Truth against heresies, or wrong teaching, judged to be contrary to Scripture. Basic Christian truths, for example the Triune nature of God, the full deity of Christ, the Holy Spirit as a Person within the Godhead, have come down to all Christians through the Eastern Church Fathers.
- The Orthodox Church is not one monolithic structure, with one world-wide authority, like the Papacy in the West. Each Orthodox Church is independent and autocephalous, that is appointing its own Head. This head is usually called Patriarch; or in some countries Archbishop, or Metropolitan.
- Orthodoxy, therefore, is more like a *Family* of independent Churches, in which all sister Churches are in communion with each other. They have a common faith, a common liturgical pattern of worship, and to some extent a common early history.
- It is misleading to call all these Churches *Greek* Orthodox. Properly, the Greek Orthodox Church is the Orthodox Church of Greece. The Eastern Orthodox Church of Lebanon and Syria, for example, is officially called the Patriarchate of Antioch. It has

its own Arab Patriarch, living in Damascus, and Lebanese and Syrian bishops. It was once *Greek* in the sense that the whole region was once part of the old Greek-Byzantine Empire, administered from Constantinople, and using Greek as their Church language.

- Celibacy is not compulsory for Orthodox priests; indeed, parish priests are usually married and this is preferred. Monks remain celibate, and it is from their ranks that bishops and patriarchs are chosen.
- There are, in fact, not one, but two, branches of Orthodoxy in the Middle East, plus three other *Families* of Churches, as we shall see.

How these five Families developed must be the subject of our next story.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Present and Past

Communities are like individual people. What they are now has grown out of their past. They have come from somewhere and are moving to somewhere. To understand the present pattern of Christian Communities in the Middle East we need to know something about the processes that have shaped them.

To travel back through almost seventeen hundred years seems a long journey; but that is where the story begins.

In the year 312 AD most Christians of what is now the Middle East were within the Roman Empire. Beyond the Empire there were Christians in Persia and probably in parts of Arabia and South India. The Bible was in Greek, and was being translated into Syriac, Coptic and Armenian, the local tongues. These four languages are still found in Eastern Church liturgies.

In that year the Empire had a new Emperor, Constantine, and with him ten years of fierce persecution of Christians came to an end. He gave religious toleration, and became increasingly friendly to Christianity. Gradually it moved from permitted to favoured, to become finally the official religion of the Empire.

For a number of reasons Constantine decided to move his administration from Rome eastwards to Byzantium, on the Bosphorus in Asia Minor. This town he rebuilt and renamed Constantinople (now Istanbul). From his momentous decisions much has stemmed. Desert monasticism, for example, began largely as a protest against the increasing secularisation of the Church in its now favoured position. When ordained priests saw how nominal was the faith of the many now flocking to be baptised, they began to set an increasing distance between the laity and the *holy things* of the Communion Table.

Furthermore, as Old Rome weakened under repeated Germanic attacks, 'New Rome', Constantinople, grew to be the capital of a prosperous Eastern Roman, or Byzantine, Empire. With a close association of Church and State this Byzantine Empire, Greek in language, officially Christian in religion, built a culture and commerce which last for a thousand years, until the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

The non-Greek peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean, however, were no better off under imperial Constantinople than they had been under Rome. The resentments that built up over the years contributed both to schisms within the Church, and later to acceptance of the invading Muslim armies.

## Defining the Faith

During these early centuries Christians were struggling to find adequate ways of expressing the almost inexpressible; what God is like, and what He did in Christ for our salvation. From the time of Constantine onwards, bishops and other church leaders were called together from as many places as possible to represent the thinking of the Church of the Inhabited World, in World-wide or Ecumenical Councils. For over two hundred years these Great

Councils were the means of thrashing out divisive doctrinal issues. Unfortunately - though perhaps inevitably - doctrinal and political loyalties often became entangled.

During the fifth century the major issue was how Christ could be both fully God and fully man. In 431 Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, was condemned for his views of Christ's nature. Nestorius was banished, and many of his exiled followers took refuge with the Persian Christians. Here, beyond the reach of the Roman-Byzantine Empire, the *Assyrian Church of the East*, sometimes called from this connection the Nestorian Church, ordered its own life.

A larger crisis came at the Council which met in the town of Chalcedon near Constantinople in 451. Delegates from Alexandria disagreed strongly with the majority decision about the way to express the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ. Disagreement led to a complete break between what came to be called the *Chalcedonian* and *non-Chalcedonian* (or pre-Chalcedonian) *Churches*. This cleavage clearly had regional and linguistic, as well as theological roots. Whatever modern terms - national, cultural, ethnic - we may apply (or misapply), by the year 500 the churches of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Armenia, and some in Syria, had repudiated the spiritual jurisdiction of the Church of Constantinople, Mother Church of the Empire.

For convenience, these non-Greek Churches are usually termed the *Oriental Orthodox Churches*. The Churches that stayed with Byzantine Constantinople are called Eastern Orthodox. For over fifteen hundred years the two great Families have developed their own independent life, out of communion with each other. The Council of Chalcedon may seem very far away to Western Christians; but to the Coptic, Armenian, Ethiopian and Syrian (Syriac-speaking) Orthodox, it is the beginning of an epoch.

## **Pressures from East and West**

### **Islam**

Over the next five hundred years, all Eastern Christians saw the whole face of their world drastically changed by the rise of Islam. By the year 700 the triumphant progress of the Muslim armies had carried them out of Arabia, north into Iran and west as far as Spain. In the very lands of the Bible, Christians were to become a minority.

The conquered peoples were not usually compelled to become Muslims. At first the new Islamic rulers were happy to keep local Christians in each country's Civil Service, and there were some notable Christian spokesmen to Islam, such as John of Damascus. But Christians were heavily taxed, sometimes harassed, and relegated to second-class status. Over the next two hundred years, therefore, for economic and social advantages, from fear, or because of their limited understanding of their Christian faith, as well as from conviction, very many became Muslims.

Many; but not all. In most places some Christians remained true to the Name of Christ. Over against the Unitarian faith of Islam they re-affirmed the truths of the incarnation of the Divine Word, and the reality of the Holy Spirit.

At the same time, for seven hundred years Christian scholars here and there worked to produce an amazing number of translations of the Bible into Arabic, now the language of



these lands. "From the seventh to the fifteenth centuries ... Arabic-speaking Christians were at work untiringly to keep the Word of God fresh and meaningful." (Dr. K E Bailey)

This was also a time when Eastern and Western Christians moved further apart. Many factors contributed to the division. Greek and Latin speakers lost the ability to use each other's language. Under the Papacy Rome had become the centre of Western European Christianity, and the Western Church tended to assume the right to decide all matters of faith and ecclesiastical conduct for everybody. Over the centuries the Orthodox Churches watched with deep disapproval many *heretical* innovations in Rome: a monolithic Papacy, compulsory celibacy of all clergy, an addition to the agreed wording of the Nicene Creed. With even deeper disapproval they experienced the first attempts to dictate to the Eastern Churches in these matters. Distrust increased.

The decisive breach, the beginning of the end, is usually dated from a fierce clash in 1054. It was a dramatic break, when the Papal legate sent to Constantinople laid on the High Altar of St. Sophia a sentence of excommunication of the Patriarch.

### **The Crusades**

The year 1095 brought a new unhappy episode - the Crusades. For two hundred years the West sent armies to conquer the Islamic East, in the name of Christ and the Cross. As well as giving Muslims a deep disgust towards Christianity, the Crusades caused suffering to Eastern Christians. Finally, in 1204, Crusaders, instead of going on to Jerusalem, attacked and sacked Constantinople itself. The break between the Eastern and Western Churches was now beyond repair.

### **The Ottoman Empire**

The already weak Byzantine Empire never fully recovered from the attack, and in 1453 the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople. The great Cathedral of St. Sophia became a Muslim mosque. Asia Minor, now Turkey, became, and was until 1918, the centre of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, of which Syria, Egypt, Cyprus and Mesopotamia were neglected provinces. In Persia the Assyrian Church had suffered and lost greatly in numbers and strength from the Mongol invasions. In the provinces of the Ottoman Empire the isolated churches in the four ancient Patriarchates, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Constantinople, lived on with obstinate sturdiness, maintaining themselves as socio-religious communities, guarding the Traditions of the Faith, but in general with little creative life.

### **The Millet System**

The Ottoman Empire classified all its non-Muslim citizens as separate nations or millets, each entitled to its own laws and religion. The Patriarch of Constantinople was made the civil as well as religious head of the Christian millet. Later each Christian Communion was recognised as a distinct community, a quasi-state with its own civil laws, under its own ecclesiastical head, who must be approved by the Sultan.

Second-class citizens, forbidden by law to make converts, their well-being dependent on the attitude of the current ruler, it is small wonder that each Christian community could be described as "a static, encysted minority". Very conservative, defensive, determined to preserve the Traditions, the Faith as they had received it, Christians opposed anything that might cause the break-up of their Community. Innovation was out. Community solidarity,

religious and social, was all important. This heritage of local-Church-community solidarity (whether or not all its members care about the Church's faith) is still an important factor in many aspects of life in Middle East countries.

Since Christian schools were rarely allowed, clergy could not be educated or trained. Even where the Bible was available, few could read it. Inevitably, ignorance and stagnation lay like a deadly pall almost everywhere.

## **Western Catholic Missionary Work – The Uniate Churches**

One result of the Crusades was to stimulate Catholic missionary activity towards the Eastern Churches, with members of several Orders working to bring them into union with Rome.

Over the ensuing centuries groups from each of the Orthodox Churches opted for this union. Initially a bishop or patriarch would be won, and finally a new Eastern Catholic Patriarchate set up. Thus between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries Churches such as the Armenian Catholic and Coptic Catholic came into being. The Greek Catholic Church, which broke away from the Eastern Orthodox fold, is also called the Melkite Church.

These Eastern Catholic Churches are called *Uniate*. Each one has kept its own Eastern liturgy, language and canon law, but where necessary has brought its doctrine into line with Roman Catholicism. The Uniates are younger and smaller than the Orthodox Churches; but they are a significant part of Christian life and service in most Middle East countries today.

The Maronite Church, the largest Christian community in Lebanon, is a special case: Eastern-rite Catholic but not Uniate. As early as 1180 the Maronites were in touch with Rome, and the whole Church finally came into full communion in 1580. The Maronite Church had broken with Constantinople in the seventh century, and since it became Catholic in its entirety, it is not termed Uniate.

In this century the Pontifical Institute for Oriental Studies was established in Rome. The high quality of its courses and its specialist library have brought it world-wide respect.

## **Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries – Re-enter the West**

As the nineteenth century dawned, one notable European strategist recognised the key position of Egypt for eastern trade routes, and acted to secure it. Napoleon in 1798 attempted a military invasion of Egypt. From that year Middle Eastern peoples of all religions, for better or worse, were, in the words of Dr. Charles Malik, "to experience the pros and cons of a more active Western interest in their fate".

Over the past two hundred years the Eastern Churches have seen other incursions into their homelands, incursions that have aroused bewilderment, or resentment, or enthusiasm; incursions that have differed widely in purpose and result.

Early in the nineteenth century Protestant Churches began to send missionaries, from a very different background of experience and thought. Most were ill prepared to understand the Traditional Churches of the region, or the historical reasons for the darkness of ignorance that was only too evident to their Western eyes. Sadly, the time had not yet come when

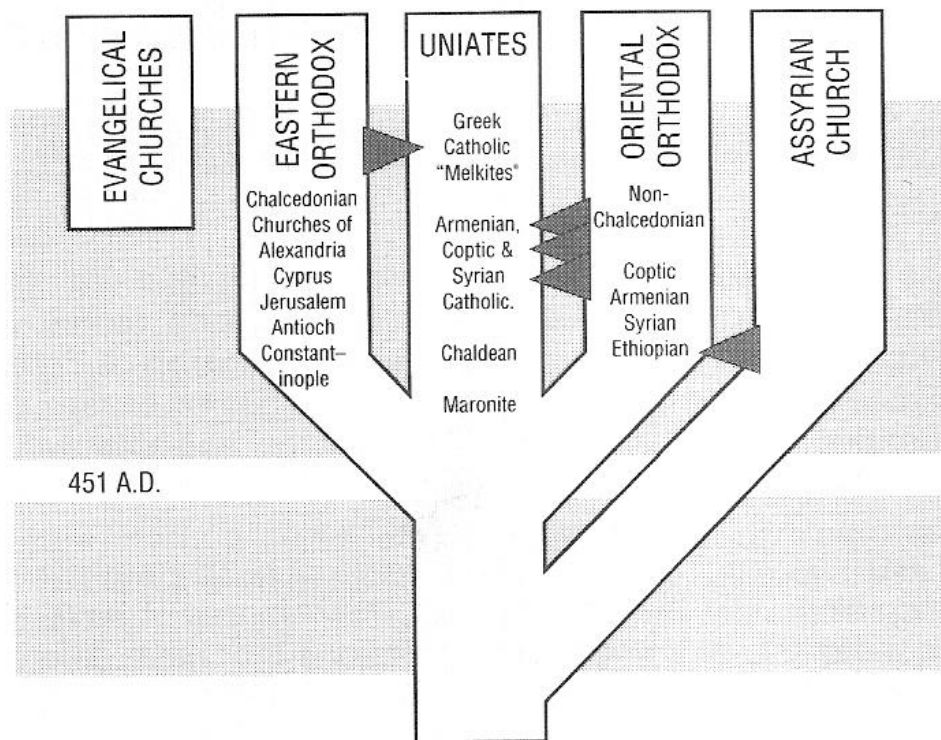
there could be trust and respect between the two very different traditions.

The missionaries taught from an open Bible, and those nominal Christians who came to a more personal faith in Christ were often threatened and finally excommunicated; others did not wish to stay in the Church of their birth. Because they needed a spiritual home, the first Evangelical Churches came into being.

In this century the State of Israel was established, backed by Western powers and with little consultation with the resident Arabs, Muslim or Christian. New forms of diplomacy, commerce, technology, advertising and education, too, have come in through Western initiatives.

All these movements have brought many changes, superficial or profound, secular and spiritual. But they have mainly been changes within the existing pattern of the Churches, rather than changes in the pattern itself. Within the Muslim majority, the Ancient, Traditional Churches still have much larger numbers than the younger Churches; and they are not only alive, but alert and on the move.

To sum up, Five Church Families are found in the Middle East: Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Assyrian (Church of the East), Eastern Catholic, and Evangelical and Episcopal. Their story can be represented thus:



We look next at the various Churches within each Family.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Who Belongs Where?

### Within a Family

As we have seen there are five Church Communion or Families among the Christians of the Middle East. The Churches within each family are independent and autocephalous - appointing their own Patriarch or Archbishop - but are in communion with each other.

These Churches are:

### **Oriental Orthodox**

- Armenian Orthodox (or Apostolic) Church of Cilicia
- Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (Egypt)
- Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and All the East

Numerically this is the largest group, Churches that have been separate from the Byzantine Greek Churches since the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Each one has a distinctive ethnic identity, as its name indicates. The Syrian Church is so called, not from modern Syria, but from its origins in the wider first century Roman province of Syria, among Aramaic-Syriac speaking Christians. Syriac is still its liturgical language. It is also called *Jacobite*, from the name of one of its early leaders.

### **Eastern Orthodox**

- Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople
- Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and All the East  
- in Lebanon and Syria; the Arab Orthodox Church
- Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem
- Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria
- Orthodox Church of Cyprus

These are the Churches of the Byzantine or Greek tradition. As well as having their own Patriarchs, all give special honour to the Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul). They are also linked with the Orthodox Churches of Russia and Eastern Europe.

### **Eastern Catholic**

- Armenian Catholic Patriarchate of Cilicia
- Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon (Assyrian Church)
- Coptic Catholic Patriarchate of Alexandria
- Maronite Patriarchate of Antioch
- Melkite (Greek) Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch
- Syrian Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch

The Maronite Church, found mainly in Lebanon, is the oldest, and numerically the largest.

### Assyrian Church of the East

Also called the East Syrian Church of Persia. It has pursued its own life in the Persian Empire since the third century. It is sometimes called the *Nestorian Church*, because of the exiles from Constantinople whom it received in the fifth century, but Assyrian Christians themselves repudiate the name. In its early years it had an impressive missionary zeal, reaching India, China and Mongolia. Today it is a scattered Church, for its people have emigrated because of persecution or economic pressures. They form small communities in many Middle East countries, and world-wide.

### Evangelical and Episcopal Churches

These, like the Catholic Churches, are the fruit of Western missionary work. The oldest, in Egypt and Lebanon, and among the Armenians, are over a hundred years old. But this is still very young by any Middle Eastern time scale. Their history, witness, and present-day life and problems make a story that is worth telling in itself. But that is outside the scope of this book.

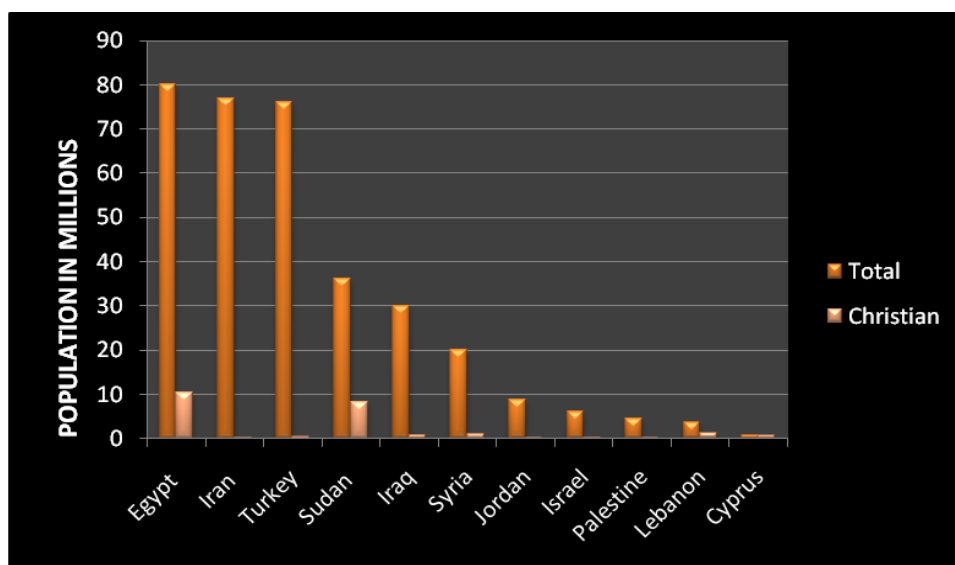
A newcomer to the region feels quite lost in such a maze of names. But look again. Most of them belong to one country, or to one ethnic community, which helps to account for the number. And compare this with the bewildering multiplicity of denominations and independent groups in most Western countries...?

### How many?

It is impossible to give exact numbers of Middle Eastern Christians, so we must use the best estimates available. They are reckoned to be about seventeen million, living in the Middle East and North Africa. There are also sizeable communities in other parts of the world.

From the graph below, however, one thing shows clearly, with certain exceptions, they are minorities; one in ten, one in four, of their country's population. The exceptions are special cases. Cyprus is in many respects more European than Middle Eastern. Lebanon is a very mountainous land, with sheltered valleys that provided refuge for Christian communities in the early centuries of Muslim advance.

Total numbers:



The graph also draws attention to the question, four percent, ten percent of what? Egypt, for example, has such a large population that Egyptian Christians, thirteen percent of the total, number eight to nine million (according to who does the reckoning). This makes the Coptic Orthodox Church by far the largest in the Middle East. The Coptic Evangelical Church, likewise, though very much smaller, is still the largest and one of the most active Protestant bodies in the region. Cyprus, Jordan and Lebanon, at the other end of the scale, are so much smaller that total numbers do not add up to anything impressive, though they are significant within their own countries.

### **Within a Country**

Each Middle East country, therefore, has its own distinctive situation, with variables such as:

- **Size** of the Christian community relative to the total population.
- **Total Number** of Christians.
- **Church Mix**, whether one dominant Church or several Churches.
- **Openness/Rigidity**, the attitude of each Church to the others, and to Western Christians.
- **Political Situation**, the amount of real freedom Christians have, and the degree to which, officially or unofficially, nationalism is equated with Islam, with pressure on all nationals to become Muslims.
- **Evangelical Communion**s, their size, spiritual vigour and attitude to other churches.

The following country-by-country survey gives total population, percentage of Christians within that total, and the main Christian groups, with their relative size.

*Percentage* can be a cold figure. Let us try to see it as a people; one in every hundred, four in every hundred, one in every ten, bearing Christ's name; some in true faith, others simply as a classification on an Identity Card, as part of a socio-religious community.

### **Armenian Communities**

Established Armenian communities are found in many countries of the region, families who have chosen to migrate, or refugees, particularly from the massacres in Turkey in the early twentieth century. There are reckoned to be about eleven million Armenians scattered throughout the world, a large proportion of them in the Middle East.

**Cyprus** - Total population 840,000; Christians 74%.

The Orthodox Church of Cyprus has been an autocephalous church within Eastern Orthodoxy, with its own Archbishop, since the fifth century, claiming St. Barnabas as its apostolic founder. The majority of Greek-speaking Cypriots are Orthodox; indeed, in the eyes of the Church, to be Greek Cypriot is to be Orthodox. The Church therefore has wealth and political power. There are small minority communities, Armenian Orthodox, Latin and Maronite. Each has a representative in Parliament.

**Egypt** - Total population 80 million; Christians 13%.

Egyptian Christians, numbering about six million, are the largest Christian community in the Middle East. The Coptic Orthodox Church is predominant, some 89% of all Christians. By tradition, it was founded by St. Mark in Alexandria in 42 AD. Certainly, by the late second century a famous Catechetical School existed in Alexandria, an important centre of Christian thinking and teaching. Coptic means Egyptian, and today's Copts

value their identity as the native Christians of Egypt, and claim descent from the ancient Egyptians.

The Coptic Orthodox Seminary in Cairo was founded in 1893 and the Institute of Higher Coptic Studies in 1954. It was in Egypt that monasticism began, and one feature of Coptic life today is the increase in numbers of those concerned to serve God through the monastic life, in the many kinds of service the monks perform.

The Coptic Evangelical Church came into being in 1863 and the Coptic Catholic in 1899. Each has about 300,000 affiliates, and has its own Theological Seminary.

The *Greek* Orthodox Church of Alexandria has shrunk markedly in numbers in recent years, as people of Greek-speaking origin have emigrated from Egypt. The Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai is Greek Orthodox with its own administration.

**Iran** - Total population 77 million; Christians are less than 1%.

Of these, about 77% are Armenian Orthodox, that is, not ethnic Iranians. The Assyrian Church of the East has about eleven thousand affiliates and the Chaldeans (Uniate) seven thousand. The total number of Protestants is similar, mainly in the Evangelical (Presbyterian) and Episcopal Churches.

**Iraq** - Total population 30 million; Christians 2% to 3%.

Uniate Catholics make up approximately 70% of all Christians, mainly Chaldeans, with some Syrian Catholics. Some 14% belong to the Assyrian Church of the East, and 10% are Armenian and Syrian Orthodox. Evangelicals number less than 5%.

### **Israel and Palestine**

**Palestine** has a total population 4.6 million. Christians 2%

The majority of Christians are Catholics 63% and Orthodox 27%. There is also a bewildering array of protestant churches. Because of the importance of the Holy Land to the Christian faith, many churches maintain small communities of expatriates in Jerusalem and significant sites. Some of these are in the Israeli section of Jerusalem, and some are in the Palestinian section of the city.

**Israel** has a total population of 6 million. Only 2.25% are Christians

Again the Catholics form the majority, almost 70% and Orthodox almost 20%. About 6.5% are Messianic Christians from Jewish backgrounds and slightly small community of Protestants, mostly Arabs.

**Jordan** - Total population 8.8 million; Christians 2.5%.

At one time the Jerusalem Patriarchate of the Eastern Orthodox Church claimed about 200,000 members, more than half the total. But the number has now shrunk to about half that. The Church is still under Greek leadership, with the Patriarch and Bishop appointed from outside the country. This is because of rights given to the Byzantine Church in the past to protect the Holy Places. However, local churches now have Arab parish priests, who are concerned to build up youth and Sunday School work and a better trained laity.

There are about 100,000 Catholic Christians, and the rest Armenian, Syrian Orthodox, or

Protestant. Jordan is unusual in having a larger number of Latin-rite Catholics than Melkite, or Eastern-rite, arising from early Latin concern for the Holy Places.

In Jordan the Christians are found in Amman and other towns; the villages are solidly Muslim.

**Lebanon** - Total population 3.7 million.

32% Christian, 60% Muslims and 7% Druze

The largest Church is the Maronite, and Eastern Catholic Church. (see Chapter two and the note at the end of this chapter.) With this and smaller Uniates, the Catholic communities are about 76% of all Christians. The largest Orthodox Church is the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (150,000). There are a significant number of Armenian Orthodox (120,000) and a small community of Syrian Orthodox. These together made up 31%. Evangelicals, Arab and Armenian, are still only about 2.5% of the Christian community.

Para-church agencies such as the Bible Society find that the Uniate, Syrian Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Churches are eager for co-operation and use the Scriptures.

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate included both Syria and Lebanon. The Patriarch lives in Damascus, and Lebanon has its own Bishop. This Church has had an Arab Patriarch since 1899, and lays great stress on its Arab-ness. The Orthodox Youth Movement has been the instrument of significant reform within the Patriarchate. It was born in 1942, out of the deep concern of a group of university students in Lebanon for their Church. Two of these students were Albert Lahham, a noted lay theologian, and Bishop George Khodr, The Church's Theological Institute, in Lebanon, has been upgraded into an important training centre.

In 1995, Archbishop Aram Keshishian, the Primate of the Armenian Church in Lebanon, was elected Catholicos of Cilicia with jurisdiction over the Armenian Orthodox Churches in Lebanon, Syria and Cyprus.

**Sudan** - Total population 36 million. Christian 23%

Sudan is very much a transition country, having affinities with both Africa and the Middle East. It is North Sudan which belongs to the Arab world, being almost totally Sunni Muslim, and Arabic speaking. Figures for the whole country are 65% Muslim, 10% Animist, 23% Christian. The majority of Christians and Animists are of Southern origin, wherever they are now living. Christians from the North and the Nuba Mountains form only a small minority of the population, including people of Egyptian origin who have taken Sudanese citizenship.

**Syria** - Total population 20 million; Christians 5%.

Syria is an interesting mixture of about a third Eastern and a third Oriental Orthodox, with smaller numbers of Eastern Catholic and other Uniates, and some Evangelicals.

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch (see notes on Lebanon), with Patriarchal seat in Damascus has about 250000 affiliates. Its priests are trained in the Seminary in Lebanon.



Oriental Orthodoxy is of significant size because of the large numbers of Armenian and Syrian Orthodox refugees who fled from Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (For the same reason, the Armenian Evangelical Union is a significant element in the Evangelical numbers, as it is in Lebanon). The Syrian Orthodox Patriarch for all the East has his seat in Damascus.

Christians are not evenly distributed over the country. Some towns in Northern Syria have a proportion of Christians markedly above the national average.

**Turkey** - Total population 76 million; Christians less than half a percent.

In Turkey, to be a Turk has always meant to be Muslim; Christians were of different ethnic groups: Armenian, Greek or Syriac speakers. In theory, the present Turkish Constitution allows religious freedom, but in practice Turkish Moslem converts usually meet serious persecution.

The main Traditional Churches are the Armenian and Syrian Orthodox, with a few thousand Eastern Orthodox and Uniate Christians.

The Eastern Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople: Over recent years the number of Greek Orthodox in Turkey has shrunk very considerably because of emigration. But within world Orthodoxy the importance of Patriarch is quite unconnected to this small number. When Constantinople, now Istanbul, was capital of the Byzantine Empire, the Patriarch of the Church of the Empire had as senior position in Eastern Christianity. He is still honoured as 'first among equals' within the Orthodox family, and is called the Ecumenical (Universal) Patriarch. Though he has no authority over the other autonomous Churches he is able to perform certain functions, such as convening Pan-Orthodox Councils.

The Ecumenical Patriarchate takes responsibility for the faithful in Europe, Australia and New Zealand. The Church in 1966 set up an Ecumenical Orthodox Centre in Geneva, which is equipped to function as the Ecumenical Patriarchate, were the present one in Istanbul to be closed.

### **U.A.E. and Other Parts of Arabia**

The Churches in the Gulf States are those of various expatriate communities. The rulers of Kuwait, UAE, Qatar and Oman have granted land on which church buildings and community centres could be built, usually to be shared by all Christian groups. These include the Eastern Orthodox Church of Antioch, the Armenian and Coptic Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican Churches and the Reformed Church of America. More recently the Syrian Orthodox Church, the Mar Thoma Church of India, the Church of South India and the (Urdu) Church of Pakistan have begun work in several places to meet the needs of their nationals.

The Protestant churches in Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman date from the work of the Arabian Mission in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These cater mostly for expatriate Arab Christians. In Yemen there is a small expatriate community, using a building erected originally as the garrison church by the British in 1863. Similarly there are Orthodox and Catholic congregations catering for expatriates in most of these countries.

The situation thus varies markedly from country to country. So, therefore, do opportunities for building bridges of mutual understanding between Christians; and possible ways of doing this will depend on each local situation.

### **The Maronite Church**

With Lebanon often in the world's headlines, Maronite has become a familiar word to many people, vaguely aware that Maronites are a factor in the present strife there.

Briefly, the Maronite Church is an Eastern Catholic Church that chose to unite *in toto* with the Roman Catholic Church. The Maronites are the largest Christian community in Lebanon, and in some parts of the country they are the majority, controlling, community.

The story of the Maronites can be traced from the fourth century, from people of the northern plains of Syria. They were then members of the Church of Constantinople, Greek speaking townspeople and Syriac speaking villagers. Somewhere in the early part of the fifth century one of them, a hermit monk, Maron, became an outstanding spiritual leader. Little is known about him, but a letter exists, written to him by John Chrysostom in 404. According to a contemporary, he was an ascetic, deeply spiritual, a miracle worker and missionary preacher.

Through Maron and his disciples many pagans became Christians. One monastery was founded by him, and others through his influence. By 536 these had formed a confederation, described by the Maronite historian P. Dau as the "origin of the Maronite community and nation".

A century later, in 686, the whole community, people, clergy and monks, broke away from the Patriarch in Constantinople, tired of being neglected by the Church there. They elected a monk of the monastery of St. Maron, St. John Maron, as their Patriarch and became a separate communion, the Maron-ites.

Over the same period and on into the ninth century they moved from around Aleppo to the mountains of Lebanon (then part of the wider province of Syria). Most historians say this was for safety, to avoid becoming Muslims, which makes good sense. Dau claims it was to evangelise the mountain pagans. Perhaps both? In any case, the region known as Mount Lebanon certainly became the heartland of a distinct Maronite nation-community.

When the Crusaders came in the twelfth century, the Maronites sided with them against both Muslims and the Byzantine Church. From that time on the Maronite Church forged links with Rome, and in 1215 was recognised by the Pope as the 'Church of Antioch'. Formal moves towards actual union with Rome did not begin, however, until 1515. These were finalised in 1580 and a College for Maronites of Mt. Lebanon was set up in Rome.

In 1860, after massacres of Maronite Christians in Lebanon and Syria by the Druze, the Ottoman Sultan was persuaded by the European governments to make Mt. Lebanon an autonomous region, with a Maronite governor under French protection. The Maronite community has for many years sought strong relationships with France, relationships which have been very significant in the history of the later Republic of Lebanon, its politics, finance, education and religious balance.

The Maronite Church today numbers about 700,000 in Lebanon and up to three million world wide. The Church has four minor Seminaries in Lebanon, and a Faculty of Theology at its University at Kaslik, Jounieh.

### **Renewal Movements**

When we consider how adamant the Maronite Church has been in opposing anything branded as Evangelical, we can praise God for the renewal movements coming into being in Lebanon. There are Charismatic and non-Charismatic, some wholly within the Maronite Church and others drawing people from across Church boundaries. All are lay movements and have meetings for prayer and Bible Study. Other Christians can probably best serve these movements by praying that they will be solidly grounded in the Scriptures.

### ***Statistics: Editors comment***

Population figures and Church statistics are taken from *Operation World* 2005 edition. This gives population figures for 2000 and estimates for the population in 2010 and 2025. We have taken their estimate for 2010 as being the current population.

The compilers of *Operation World* make a distinction between church membership and affiliation. We have taken the figures for church affiliation. These numbers are based on the data collected in 2000 to 2005 and not on the estimate populations for 2010. This will result in some inconsistency, as the estimates for different religious groups are based on data which is now five to ten years out of date. The numbers are somewhat conservative. For example *Wikipedia* cites a report from 2007 which estimates the number of Maronites in Lebanon to be 930,000, whereas the figure given by *Operation World* is 570,000. Percentage figures are probably a better guide, but my impression is that proportion of Christians migrating out of the region is greater than that of the majority population.

However as the purpose of this book is give a broad overview, we did not think it necessary to give precise data. Anyone who seriously wants to know should consult one of the contemporary databases. But bear in mind that in the Middle East all numbers are approximations.

The total figures quoted in the section 'Some Basic Facts' in Chapter One are for the Middle East including Iran, Sudan and Cyprus, but not North Africa. The estimate of the world-wide Armenian Population is taken from [www.armeniadiaspora.com/population.html](http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/population.html).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **The Divine Liturgy, Worship in the Orthodox Church**

It was nearly half past seven on a clear morning in the old city of Aleppo, away in the north of Syria. At the warm invitation of the Syrian Orthodox priest, whom I had met at a Seminar, I was attending the weekly service of the Divine Liturgy. It was not Sunday but Friday, the day off for everyone, including Christians, in a largely Muslim land.

The children from the church's primary school were already in their places. Their fathers and grandfathers were filling the men's rows, coming in from the narrow twisting lands of this old Christian Quarter of the city.

Being a visitor I had been given a front seat, so it was only by some discreet craning of the neck that I could see my fellow worshippers. The women were the last to arrive. As they came in their faces seemed to reflect a certain relaxation, relief at having got the rest of the family off, all in their Friday-best.

The service was partly in the Church's old Syriac, but much was in Arabic, particularly the Scripture portions and sermon. The school children had books from which they sang - unaccompanied, of course - hymns, responses and Creed. Many of the adults sang too, without books. Clearly, the service was familiar to them. When we stood for the Greeting of Peace I felt a touch on my shoulder, and turned to find black-scarfed grannies smiling and holding out their hands. Putting my hands together I extended my arms towards them, and each in turn touched my clasped hands with her open ones or held her hands together for me to clasp. They were welcoming this visitor into their community's worship.

Some months later and eight hundred kilometres to the south-east, I was in a different kind of church service. It was Easter, and in a modern middle class suburb of Cairo the local Coptic Orthodox congregation were gathering. As the custom is, the service began a little before midnight in order to celebrate Christ's resurrection at the very beginning of Easter Day. This particular church has regular Bible studies, and with many of its people well grounded in their faith, the congregation, especially the young people, were entering intelligently and purposefully into the service.

The Gospel narratives had been chanted. At midnight the building was darkened, except for one or two candles. The Liturgy moved towards the resurrection moments. Suddenly, in a blaze of light and colour all the lights were switched on again. "Christ is risen from the dead. By death He has trodden down death." We sang the Easter Anthem triumphantly, as the empty cross and the Resurrection Icon were paraded around the building and down the aisles.

"The Orthodox approach to religion," writes Bishop Ware, "is fundamentally a liturgical approach which understands doctrine in the context of divine worship".

Of all the regular services of the Orthodox Churches, the most important, indeed the essential one, is called The Divine Liturgy, (not Mass, which is a Roman Catholic term). It is also called the Eucharist (thanksgiving) or the Anaphora (offering). The Greek word

Anaphora means literally a carrying forward or upward; the people's prayers are lifted up to Christ, ascended and interceding for us.

The celebration of the Divine Liturgy is not just one service among many. It is the centre of life of the Church, for in it Orthodox Christians celebrate the presence of the Crucified and Risen Christ amongst them, and all the great acts of redemption that have bought God's Church into being. For Christians brought up in a very different tradition, may it not sometimes be part of our calling to try to feel from the inside something of the awe and joy of this which is holy ground for our brothers and sisters in Christ, as they stand before God in worship?

Attending an Orthodox service alone can be rather bewildering. It is an advantage to go in company with worshippers who really care about what they are doing. Our attitude is important, too. Some of the congregation seem to be inattentive or irreverent? Then let us remind ourselves that all churches (including even our own) have problems of less-than-ideal conditions and members. Inevitably, some people are present with minds distracted from the job in hand, or too ignorant or casual to enter into the liturgy as it demands. In all fairness let us judge others as we would wish to be judged, by the underlying purposes and aspirations, and by what the service means to sincere worshippers.

It most certainly helps to have some idea of the pattern, or shape, of the Liturgy; of what is happening, and why.

### **Liturgy**

The word is commonly used to mean the pattern of a service of public worship (and every kind of church service does have a pattern, whether planned or not), or the written text of the service. In Orthodox usage, it is Divine or Holy because God himself is the real initiator of, and actor in, the drama,

The Greek root of liturgy means public work done by the people. Unfortunately, probably because of low levels of literacy in the past, it has become customary for chanters to sing the people's part, but even so they do it as the people's representatives. Nowadays, one of the new trends is towards teaching the congregation to take part. In the Easter Liturgy above, for example, the page numbers were displayed for those who had books; in English language congregations in Canada, Australia, for example, Service Books are used. During the service, the deacon is a link between priest and people. At various points he tells the congregation, "Stand to listen", "Let us attend", and the like.

### **Language**

The original languages of worship were Greek, Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian, then the common tongues of the people. It is one of the signs of new life that the present language, Arabic is used more and more, and that people are encouraged to learn Coptic or Syriac also.

### **Pointers**

It is not easy for Western Protestants to step outside all that has shaped our thinking and feeling about the church services of our own various sub-cultures. Here are some clues about concepts that have shaped Orthodox views.

1. Essentially, the Liturgy is a kind of drama, or journey. It is a re-tracing with the Lord Jesus

Christ of His whole earthly life from birth to resurrection. It is not just a remembering, but a re-living with our Lord of what he has done for us. The congregation take part in this drama; for example when the Gospel is announced they express their gratitude for God's word before and after it is read, "Glory to Thee, O Lord, glory to Thee"; when the bread and wine are brought in, remembering that Christ suffered and died for our sins, they stand with heads bowed in awe, make the sign of the Cross, and pray, "Lord remember me in Thy Kingdom".

2. It is a truly Eastern rite: unhurried, lengthy, two or two-and-a-half hours - no Western clock-watching. There is meant to be time to relax, receiving God's love. What are the reasons for the length?

- As in Eastern daily life, all greetings, and statements must be given their correct response; there is an exchange between leader and people.
- The rite is more like a cycle or ascending spiral, than a linear movement; so a later section may repeat an earlier one, with some variations, especially in the intercessions.
- Phrases or sentences are longer than in, for example, the Roman Catholic Mass. In times past, if the Emperor must be given lofty titles of honour, how much more - it was thought - the King of Kings should be so honoured. Hymns therefore include ascriptions of deep reverence: "for Thou art the Source of Light for our souls O Christ our God, and to Thee we ascribe glory together with Thine Eternal Father and Thine all-Holy, Good and Life-Giving Spirit, now and forever, from ages to ages."
- Since the whole Church is one, present worshippers are in the unseen company of Fathers, Martyrs, and all the believing dead; some of these must be commemorated by name each day.
- Each important event in the Liturgy is framed, for example before and after it there is a call to attention, a response, then a sung verse or prayer, sometimes fairly lengthy.

3. Related actions may take place simultaneously. The priest may be praying silently while the choir is singing; deacon or priest may be reading while the other is censuring part of the building or people.

### **Liturgies**

More than one is used, depending on the Church, the Church Season, or a special feast. The most usual in the Byzantine Churches is the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. Churches overseas have now made English translations for their congregations.

Different liturgies have the same general pattern:

Preliminary: Preparation of the Gifts,(the bread and wine)

Part 1: The Preparation; main events include the Little Entrance, the Great Entrance, the Confession of Faith.

Part 2: The Sacred Mystery; main events include the Consecration, the Communion, the Dismissal.

Antidoron:

### **The Preliminary** preparation of the Offertory.

This is done by the priest in an earlier service, Matins. People do not need to be present, but may be. The priest prepares the Elements for consecration, using leavened bread, circular loaves often baked by one family from the congregation. He cuts pieces from a loaf in a prescribed way, and arranges them on a Paten, or small tray. He pours wine and water into the Chalice (cup) and covers Paten and Chalice with special cloths. The service includes prayers and ends with a series of Doxologies. After this, the Divine Liturgy proper begins.

### **Part 1-** celebrates the Public Ministry of our Lord.

It begins with prayers and intercessions, and leads up to:

- The Little Entrance. With ceremony and processional hymns the Gospel, the Scripture, is carried from the side door of the Sanctuary. This is the Coming of Christ to the world. Candles are carried because He is the Light of the World. The set portions for the day are read, first from the Epistles or Acts; then, with suitable framing, the Gospel portion. This expresses Christ's teaching work, and may be followed by a sermon.
- The Great Entrance is the carrying in of the bread and wine. The priest prays for himself and for all present, that they may worship God and take part in the Holy Mysteries in fear and love, and "not unto condemnation". In great solemnity the Elements are carried from the side table of the Sanctuary, where they were prepared, into the Church and back through the central door into the Sanctuary to the Holy Table, while the chanters sing the soaring words of the Hymn of the Cherubim. It is as if we are taking part in the funeral of the Lord and awaiting his resurrection. There are supplications in which the people pray for themselves and each other. The Elements are covered with a cloth, as if in burial.
- The Confession of Faith. The Nicene Creed is introduced with the exhortation "Let us love one another, that with one mind we may confess," for without love how can Christians bear united witness? During the Creed the priest takes the covering off the Paten and Chalice, representing the resurrection and the open tomb.

### **Part 2 -** This is the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, itself.

- *Consecration.* The service moves through Benediction and responses to the prayer which includes the New Testament words of the Institution of the Supper.
- Then comes the *Epiclesis*, the prayer that the Holy Spirit will come down upon the Gifts "and make this bread the Precious Body of your Christ... and what is in this cup the Precious Blood of Your Christ." This is the high point of the service. It is followed by prayers of intercession and praise.
- *Communion.* The priest breaks the cut-out portions of bread, puts them in the Chalice, partakes himself, and invites the faithful to partake. Those who communicate do so standing, receiving the Bread and Wine together from a spoon. In most services each communicant is announced by name, "The servant of God, ..., partakes of the most precious Body and Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ".

- This is followed by prayers of thanksgiving, a final benediction and the prayer of Dismissal.

### **The Antidoron** - (instead of the Gift).

The remainder of the loaves, which were cut in pieces but not consecrated, are distributed after the service to all who did not communicate (most Orthodox actually receive Communion only a few times a year). Non-Orthodox visitors may take a piece if they wish.

### **Music**

The Orthodox Liturgy is always sung or chanted, not spoken.

Eastern Church music is a whole study in itself, with its own scales, rhythms and notations. Except among the Armenians, singing is not usually accompanied by melodic instruments. The Copts, Syrian Orthodox, and some others use cymbals, triangles or tambourines, especially after the Communion itself, giving the singing a delightfully joyous ring.

### **The Priest**

Only an ordained priest can celebrate the Liturgy, helped by a Deacon. Some people must be present; in some Churches some must intend to receive Communion. The priest's prayers show that he is not "above" the people in holiness; for example; "us" is used constantly, "accept from the mouth of us sinners...", "upon me Your sinful and unworthy servant". At one point he asks forgiveness if he has wronged anyone.

### **Silent Prayers**

The priests pray some prayers inaudibly, more so in the Byzantine than the Oriental communions. There is today a strong move, especially among the Orthodox in USA and other Western countries, to have these prayed audibly.

### **Sanctuary**

This part of the building has been referred to several times. In a church building the large space where the people sit or stand is called the Nave. At the eastern end most churches have a screen called the *Iconostasion* or *Iconostasis*, on which the icons are arranged in a specific order. The *Iconostasis* has three doorways, a main central one with double doors, the 'Royal Doors', and two side doors. These lead into the *Sanctuary* in which are the Holy Table and other furnishings used in the celebration of the Divine Liturgy. The older custom was to close the central doors during the Liturgy but many churches now keep the Sanctuary open to the sight of the congregation.

### **The Uniate Churches**

The Uniate Churches are Eastern-rite, also; that is they use an adaptation of the rites, or patterns, of their Orthodox origin, not a Latin-rite Liturgy.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Orthodox Theology

The Armenian Orthodox bishop spoke excellent English, and was happy to talk about the churches in his region. "After all," he said cheerfully, "we all agree on the basics." "And what would you say are the basics?" "Oh, as in the Nicene Creed, of course."

"Of course, the Nicene Creed." The Orthodox Churches of the Middle East are not an odd Sect, or a heretical breakaway. The declaration of Faith that we call the Nicene Creed is our common heritage. It was in the East that it was formulated, sixteen hundred years ago, by representatives of Eastern and Western Christians, at a time when certain Biblical truths needed to be defined and defended.

We could, to be sure, draw up a catalogue of 'What Orthodox Christians now Believe', or 'How They Differ from...'. But catalogues have a habit of failing to convey the relative importance of their listed items, and often do not show how the living organism is more than the sum of its parts. Perhaps it is better to ask first, what is the essence of Orthodoxy? Where do Orthodox speakers and writers put the emphasis?

Briefly the emphasis would be on *Orthe-doxia*, right belief, the Divine Liturgy, the Church as an Eucharistic Community, and the Tradition.

*(Quotations in the following paragraphs are from Orthodox writings or lectures.)*

#### **Orthe-Doxia**

Whenever we visit and Orthodontist or sing a Doxology the Greek roots of our English are apparent. *Orthos* means straight, right; *doxa* is glory, opinion, and thence belief. Orthodox therefore means both true glory and right belief. The Orthodox Churches set great store by correctness of doctrine, which thus gives true glory to God, and by their defence of right doctrine against unscriptural heresy in the early Christian centuries. We later Christians are both heirs and debtors of those who recognised deviations, thought hard, stood firm - often at great cost - and formulated the scripture truths embodied in the Creeds. This is particularly so in the basic doctrines of God as personal and triune, the full deity and humanity of Christ and his bodily resurrection, and the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.

Today, theologically literate Orthodox and Evangelical Christians often find they have more in common with each other than they have with the vague fogs of non-supernatural liberalism. Both share a belief in the given-ness of revealed truth in the Bible, although there are differences of interpretation. It is worth noting that at the time of the Reformation the great statements of the Creeds were not in question; differences centred on the doctrines of the means of grace, how we may enter into the benefits of Christ's atoning death. Luther, Calvin, Cranmer and others, knew the writings of the Fathers well, and were greatly enriched by them, as their own writings show.

#### **The Church, A Eucharistic Community**

The Divine Liturgy is the centre of the life of the Church; and the heart of the Liturgy is the

Eucharist (Thanksgiving) or Holy Communion. This joyous celebration of the death and resurrection of Christ is “the supreme act of communal worship”. In the Eucharist “the power of the Holy Spirit has changed the Precious Gifts into Christ’s Precious Body and All-Holy Blood in a manner that the senses cannot perceive and created intelligence cannot understand”. To the believing, devout Orthodox Christian this is indeed holy ground, where we should tread sensitively, even where we may disagree.

From this centrality of the Communion flow other understandings:

- The Church as the Body of which Christ is the Head. “We become one body in Christ, dwellings of the Holy Spirit, and all the faithful become one spiritual body”.
- The closed, exclusive Communion Table. There can be communion only between local churches which have a unity of faith, ministry and sacraments. Inter-communion with other denominations may be a goal towards which to work, but not a means by which we reach an understanding of each other.
- The concept of the local See or Diocese, as opposed to a centralised Papacy with world-wide jurisdiction. A Bishop’s authority coincides with the area in which he, himself or through the local priest, celebrates the Eucharist and has pastoral responsibility.
- Community. Christians of one Communion in one locality are members of one another, because they are partakers of Christ. The Divine Liturgy is a communal act, and the Church which administers the Sacraments to you, from birth to death, gives you a sense of identity and security. Those whom a Westerner might think of simply as individual friends or neighbours may well see themselves as integral parts of a socio-religious clan.

One criticism the Orthodox level at Protestant observers is that they think first in terms of local social community, and see the Church as cement holding it together. More correctly, they should think of the Church first, for it has an existence in the divine plan before its historic origin. “In its mystical being it expresses the eternal in time, after the pattern of the oneness of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity.” If this seems to some Christians too high a view of the Church, let us least make sure that our own view is not too low!

### **The Tradition**

This term is the very concept that gives the adjective Traditional to the Orthodox Churches. The Traditional Churches is a useful general term, and one which they often use to describe themselves. It is important, therefore that we try to grasp what it does and does not mean.

It does not mean “we have always done it this way”, hallowed by custom, with a backward look. It is a technical term, implying also a forward look. Tradition, or transmission, describes the Church’s total activity of receiving and handing on the Faith. The concept is taken from the New Testament where two Greek words are used: *paradosis*, that which is handed on, or the act of handing on, and *paralambano*, to receive from another. The words occur, for example, in Luke 1:2, 2 Thes 2:15, Jude 3, and 1 Cor 15:1,3 “I deliver to you... what I also received”.

The Tradition therefore is both the act of handing on, and the thing-delivered; both the sacred trust of Christian Truth, and the receiving of it, to be guarded and then handed on to the next generation. It does not mean imitating the past; even though it may sometimes degenerate into this. It is the continuous living stream of the Church's life, from the apostles to the present day.

So when we say the Traditional Churches, we should mean those with this sense of responsibility for the "Faith once delivered", to be handed on by formal teaching, by the Liturgy and by patterns of spirituality.

In Chapter Two we saw that conditions for the Christian communities in the Muslim Empire were such that innovation was out; faithfulness to the Sacred Trust was all important. This sense of obligation largely accounts for the extreme conservatism of the Historic Churches of the Middle East. Other factors have compounded the situation, but Orthodoxy glories in "its sense of living continuity with the Church of ancient times". Any practice that does not appear to rest on Scripture is said to go back to oral unrecorded teaching given by Christ to the apostles.

### **Infallibility and Authority in the Church**

Since 1870 the Roman Catholic position has been that Papal pronouncements, made officially *ex cathedra*, are inerrant and authoritative. The Orthodox Churches condemn this as grave heresy. They hold that not one man, but the Church when it meets in Ecumenical Council, is kept in the Truth, by the presence and working of the Holy Spirit. Orthodox writers such as Ware spell out details of this view of an infallible Church. On the other hand, some interesting comments on the problems inherent in the doctrine are given in *Across the Divide*, by evangelical Anglican scholars.

### **The Nicene Creed**

This historic Creed of the Christian Church has been mentioned several times. It dates from the fourth and fifth centuries, from times of intense Christological turbulence. For convenient reference it is given here, translated from the Greek:

We believe in one God,  
the Father, the almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth,  
of all this is,  
seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
Through him all things were made.  
For us men and for our salvation  
he came down from heaven;  
by the power of the Holy Spirit

he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.  
For our sake was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again  
in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven  
and is seated on the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory  
to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son\*.  
With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified.  
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins;  
We look for the resurrection of the dead,  
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

*\*The phrase 'and the Son' was added by the Western Church at a later date [editor].*

### **But What About...?**

...icons, the Virgin Mary, transubstantiation, and things like that?

"Things like that", probably means that we have seen or heard of practices and beliefs that stir up a range of feelings from queries all the way to open antagonism. Before looking at them, two general comments:

1. Fuller accounts of Orthodox theology can be found in books in English by modern writers from English or American immigrant Orthodoxy. Two other useful references are *Across the Divide* and *Justification and the Eastern Churches* which is Chapter Five in *Here We Stand*; both books are written by respected evangelical scholars. For a balanced diet try some of each.

2. Eastern Christianity is distinctly less dogmatic in the formulations of its theology than the West. The Western Church mind has found it helpful and necessary to formulate clear-cut statements of faith. Within Protestantism we find such formulations as the Westminster and Augsburg Confessions and the Thirty-nine Articles. In Orthodoxy, however, things are left unsaid; indeed the very attempt to define has been felt to be a provocation, akin to David's presumption in numbering Israel. Until recently, the last drawing together of doctrinal statements was done by John of Damascus (c.675-749), who also wrote, "About God we can say only what God has revealed in the Scriptures."

### **Transubstantiation**

Transubstantiation is an example of this view. As a precise technical term this word belongs

to Roman Catholicism. In Orthodox belief the bread and wine become truly the Body and Blood of Christ, but it is not for us to define how, as transubstantiation does. It is enough to know, says John of Damascus, "that it is through the Holy Spirit; we know nothing more than this, that the word of God is active and omnipotent, but in its manner of operation unsearchable." It is interesting to note a resemblance here to the later *bila kayf* doctrine in Islamic theology.

### **Theosis – Partakers of the Divine Nature**

This is a distinctly Orthodox term. In 2 Pet 1:4 we read that divine gifts are given to us so that we may "become partakers of the divine nature" (RSV). The ultimate goal of salvation is *theosis* or to change from Greek to Latin roots, divinisation, deification, becoming like God. Since man was originally created in the image of God he can now be transformed in Christ, the Second Adam. This is not for special saints, nor is it a sudden overnight transformation; it is by God's grace, not our own nature.

Though the language may be unfamiliar to evangelicals, it is a salutary reminder of the too often neglected Biblical call to true holiness; to be "conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom 8:29), "created after the likeness of God in true righteous and holiness" (Eph. 4:24). To what extent Orthodox teachers mean by *theosis* this maturing in holiness, and by what means; or to what extent they mean something more, is a matter for us to find out from those whom we know, or from further reading. Orthodox teachers tend to differ in their emphasis, particularly on the place of faith, the means of grace, and good works, in this transforming work. The authors of *Across the Divide* refer to divinisation, as that which "the Orthodox riskily but beautifully say."

### **The Virgin Mary**

The English expression *Mother of God* tends to provoke a sharp reaction from most Protestants. The Eastern Churches use the term *Theotokos*, meaning literally *God Bearer*, coined at a time of intense Christological controversy. The term was originally linked, not so much with the person of Mary herself, but with a desire to make clear that the one whom she bore was fully God, as well as fully man. Most of the ascriptions given to her in hymns, likewise, point beyond her to the person of Christ: the lamp that held the Light; the good soil from which grew the Corn that saves the world; the shell for the Spiritual Pearl.

Every church service includes a *theotokion*, a hymn to the Virgin, though hymns to Christ and the Trinity are more numerous. All church buildings have an icon of Mary in a place of honour on the iconostasis, but we should note that true icons show her holding Jesus full-face forward, since her work, like that of the Church, is to present Christ to the world. She is not a co-redeemer with Christ, and is not to be worshipped. Inevitably, within folk religion Mary usually looms larger than among those who are better taught; but a strong Cult of Mary is not typical of Orthodox Churches as it is of Western Catholicism.

### **Icons**

Meeting an icon for the first time can leave the average Westerner rather bewildered. It is 'quaint'; the people look unnatural; so does the perspective. Pictures in church go against our grain, and they do smack of idolatry. Why are they there?

Icon is the Greek word for image, or picture. Man in Genesis is described as the icon of God. An Orthodox icon is not simply a religious picture. It is a window. It requires, not a viewer

looking at it, but a worshipper looking *through* it to eternal realities. An icon of Christ or a saint is not meant to represent literally what he or she looked like on earth. The gold background speaks of the glory of heaven, where they now are, in God's presence; the eyes are large because they are looking, not out at the world, but towards God. Perspective would lead a viewer into the picture, as would natural highlighting. They would be a hindrance to the worshipper, who needs to look *through* the icon.

In a church building the icons are on the Icon Screen, or *Iconostasis*, and on the walls. For the worshippers they are meant to represent the oneness of the whole company of believers of all ages. The local congregation on earth is joining with all the saints and angels in heaven's worship of God. The worshipper touches or kisses an icon. Is this superstition? Yes, with some it obviously is. But it can be a reverent way of identifying with the Church Triumphant, in God's presence.

Icons are also theological statements. In one sense they are the Teaching Aids of those long Islamic centuries of illiteracy and booklessness, when the Faith was expressed and preserved in song and picture. The Church building and Liturgy were, among other things, both picture book and drama. Some features of the Traditional Churches that seem strange or questionable to Evangelical Christians today often make better sense against this background.

If the building has a dome, you look up inside into an icon of Christ the Almighty, enthroned in glory, Head of the Church. Icons of Christ often show him holding a Bible; the Incarnate Word presents the written word to his people. An icon of the resurrection portrays the Risen Lord lifting Adam and Eve from the place of death. Around them stand Old Testament characters, rejoicing that the efficacy of Christ's death reaches backwards in time as well as forwards. It is a visual parallel to the Resurrection anthem: "Christ is risen from the dead. By death he has trodden down death." Icons of the crucifixion have one fairly constant feature; below the cross is a skull, and from Christ's pierced feet blood drops onto this thing of death.

### **Hymns of the Feast Days**

These can be found in English translations of the liturgies, and repay reading. Each service has its own special hymns, called Troparia and Kontakia. You will notice that they are not necessarily in poetic form, and that most of them are wonderfully robust theological statements. Dating from times of theological controversy, they speak about God's nature and Kingdom, or about Christ's work for mankind. They are objective, rather than subjective. Although they lift the worshippers emotions, they do not talk about those feelings, as some Protestant hymns do.

### **Some Examples of Feast Day Hymns**

Palm Sunday

Sitting on your throne in Heaven, carried on a foal on earth,  
O Christ God!

Accept the praise of angels, and songs of children who sing  
Blessed is He who comes to recall Adam.

Good Friday (one among many)

Today is hanged on the tree  
He who hanged the earth in the midst of the waters;  
A Crown of thorns crowns Him  
who is king of the angels.  
He who wraps the heavens in clouds  
is wrapped about with the purple of mockery...  
On his cheek He receives blows  
from hands that he formed...

Easter Day

Christ is risen from the dead.  
By death He has trodden down death.  
To those in the tomb he has given life.

The Scripture readings for Passion Week and Easter, and the lesser Feasts are likewise richly instructive, and the amount of Scripture used is impressive. With the Hymns, they can be interesting jumping off points for discussion with Orthodox friends.

### **The Church Calendar**

Because the whole world is God's, and because God became flesh in Christ, all human activities can be a vehicle for praise to Him. The seasons, likewise, can be an expression of the history of salvation. The Church Year begins on 1st September, and "is divided into periods of asceticism and joy, of fasting and celebrating".

Easter of course, is The Great Feast; there are eleven other main Feasts and varying number of minor ones according to the denomination or locality. The main periods of fasting are:

the Great Fast, for seven weeks before Easter;  
the Fast of the Apostles, from eight days after Pentecost to 28th June;  
the Fast of the Assumption, or Dormition, of Mary 1 -14 August;  
the Christmas Fast, forty days, 15th November - 24th December

### **The Dating of Easter**

Most people know that Eastern and Western Christendom celebrate Easter on different dates. The two feasts may coincide, or be anything from one to five weeks apart. This is because two different calendars are used.

Back in 325 AD the Council of Nicaea, the first of the Great Church Councils, agreed that Easter Day should be on the Sunday after the first full moon after the March Equinox, arbitrarily fixed at 21st March. This means that Easter Day can vary between 22nd March and 25th April, by the present Western Calendar. This decision was made by Eastern and Western Churches alike.

At that time the calendar used in Europe and Asia Minor was that devised by Julius Caesar in 46 BC. Because it did not correspond accurately with the period of the earth's rotation around the sun, an error of ten days had accumulated by the Sixteenth Century, and Pope

Gregory XIII had the calendar revised. The Eastern Orthodox Churches, however, continued to use the Julian Calendar for their Ecclesiastical Year.

It is this difference of about ten to thirteen days between the Gregorian and Julian Calendars in reckoning the Equinox, and therefore the date of the full moon, that accounts for the varying period of time between the two Easter dates, each year.



## CHAPTER SIX

### East and West – The Eastern Churches and the Reformation

You are quite welcome to skip this chapter if you are more interested in what is happening now, than in history and doctrine.

It is clear from Chapter five that there are some divergences between Evangelical and Orthodox and Uniate interpretations of Scripture, and in what is emphasised concerning spirituality. One key area about which people often ask is that of justification by faith. For Evangelical Christians this is a vital element in belief and experience, dealing as it does with the question of how God establishes a living relationship between Himself and estranged, sinful men and women. The phrase was also a trumpet call in the sixteenth and seventeenth century events that we call the Reformation.

- In 1517 Martin Luther, German miner's son, monk, Doctor of Theology, University lecturer and parish priest, nailed to his church door a list of ninety five theses which he was prepared to defend by debate.
- In 1520 Ulrich Zwingli, a parish priest in Zurich, Switzerland, surrendered the Papal pension which he could no longer in good conscience accept, and began preaching freely against whatever in the Church's teaching was not warranted by Scripture.
- In 1525 William Tyndale, working in exile in Europe, completed his translation of the New Testament from Greek into English.
- In 1534 John Calvin, scholar of the University of Paris, fled from France to Basel in Switzerland, and there published a book on which he had been working, the tremendously influential *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.
- In 1552 the English parliament sanctioned the use of Thomas Cranmer's revised edition of the Book of Common Prayer, "an order for Prayer and for the reading of the Holy Scripture ... in the English tongue, to the end that the congregation may be edified".

These events are useful landmarks in that gradual, wide-spread awakening which we call the Protestant Reformation. It was a time when men and women re-discovered the great truths of the authority of the Scriptures and of justification made possible by Christ's death and received by faith in him.

It is important to note that this was a movement within Northern and Western Europe. The Reformers were concerned to cleanse their Latin Church of what they saw as errors, and to affirm what they had found to be the New Testament message of salvation as the free gift of God's grace through Christ alone. The Eastern Churches were untouched by events in a Europe, and a Christian tradition, that seemed far removed from their lives.

For the people of Europe these sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were also a time of

general upsurge of life, with geographical exploration and discovery, and expanding mental horizons. Eastern Christians, in marked contrast, were struggling with further limitations and isolation, within a new Empire, one whose activities contributed indirectly to that European expansion.

In 1453 Constantinople, for so long a *Christian* capital, had finally been conquered by Muslim invaders under the Othman, or Ottoman, dynasty of Turks from Central Asia. The Turkish Ottoman Empire which they founded was to rule the people of the Middle East for almost five hundred years. In the fifteenth century, therefore, many Greek speaking Christians from Constantinople fled to Italy. The refugees came at a time when Italian scholars were reviving the study of the classical languages, so these refugees were welcomed as teachers of Greek. It was this new learning that enabled people to read the New Testament in its original Greek, and to translate it into the vernaculars.

The new, vigorous Turkish Empire soon extended its rule into Egypt, Syria and beyond, effectively blocking Europe's land routes to Asia. The consequent need to find sea routes to India then spurred on Europeans to further exploration and discovery.

While Western Europe was thus riding high, Eastern Christians were on the opposite end of the see-saw. Constantinople was now a Muslim capital. Since the Turks ruled religious minorities through their own clergy, the Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople had to be a man whose appointment the Turkish Sultan would ratify. Sadly, perhaps inevitably, the office became a matter for bribery and politics. In every province of the Empire neglect and isolation became such that for the Christian communities survival, not intellectual adventuring, had priority.

Some of the German reformers of the sixteenth century tried to establish dialogue with the Orthodox Church in Constantinople. A Lutheran delegation, for example, took a Greek translation of the Augsburg Confession to Patriarch Jeremias II. Existing letters show that neither side had enough knowledge of the other, or of the assumptions out of which they wrote, for the visit to accomplish anything. Exchanges were courteous, but the Patriarch's reply was not encouraging, and ruled out further dialogue.

In the seventeenth century, one exceptional Patriarch did come in contact with Protestants. He was Cyril Lucaris (1572-1637), a man of ability, and real spiritual life. Because his family lived in Crete, under Venetian rule, Cyril travelled in Europe, where he met and learned from Protestant friends. Later, as Patriarch of Alexandria and then Patriarch Cyril I of Constantinople he worked strenuously for the spiritual life of his Church. He endorsed, and may partly have written, a Confession of Faith, in which he enunciated a doctrine of the authority of Scripture and of justification by faith in Christ's righteousness. During his time in Constantinople Cyril had many enemies, and was finally killed on the Turkish Sultan's orders. Shortly afterwards a Church Synod condemned him and rejected the Confession.

### **Justification**

Justification by faith was a central issue of the Reformation, and is a truth which we still believe to be a vital part of the Gospel message. When we meet the Eastern Churches we probably want to ask what place they give to this teaching. However, there are perhaps other questions to ask as well. Is the doctrine there, but expressed in other terms? Is it in fact just a Western emphasis, related to Western theological concepts or controversies, and

irrelevant to Eastern questions?

In answer, we find that the term itself is not usually stressed in Orthodoxy. There is a deep appreciation of Christ's incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, that these were for fallen mankind, that through Christ's cross salvation has been made possible, and that a man cannot merit salvation.

In most Orthodox discussion the Fall and its consequences, however, we find an emphasis on mortality and the reign of death; the cross as the means of defeating death, more than of dealing with sin. The fact of Adam's fall by disobedience is certainly present in Orthodox theology, but the Fall seems less severe. There is no doctrine of inherited guilt, nor of what Luther called the "Bondage of the Will", or that "fatal twist" away from God within human nature. Bishop Ware claims that this is because Orthodoxy holds a "less exalted idea of man's state before he fell" (Ware p228).

John Meyendorff, one of the leading modern Orthodox writers, speaks of Byzantine traditions, "identifying the inheritance of the Fall as an inheritance essentially of mortality rather than of sinfulness, sinfulness being merely a consequence of mortality". (*Byzantine Theology*, London 1974). Orthodox theology does teach righteousness by faith, but not a doctrine of original sin through our solidarity in Adam's guilt. "Byzantine theology did not produce any significant elaboration of the Pauline doctrine of justification", says Meyendorff.

Teaching on justification, therefore, does not seem so important. In practice the distinction between justification and sanctification tends to be blurred, since Christ through his death has made possible man's re-creation, so that he can be bought back to the road towards *theosis*, or likeness of God. This lack of clear teaching on justification as the objective work of God, on the basis of Christ's substitutionary death, may be one reason why an Orthodox Christian often lacks that sense of assurance of salvation which is his birthright, even though he is truly a child of God by faith in Christ.

This does not mean that it is not possible for an evangelical Christian to enjoy spiritual fellowship with Orthodox believer; nor can we doubt the reality of their faith, or their daily walk with God. Nevertheless the question still stands, whether justification by faith in Christ alone, however it may be phrased, is just a Western idea, or a Biblical truth valid for all people everywhere. Having settled this question, we must then be true to our own conviction in the matter.

It seems, then, that there are now differences between the truths stressed in Orthodox and Evangelical teaching. Yet in the early centuries that Eastern and Western Churches met as part of one family in the first Great Church Councils. When did they part company in their theological categories?

The watershed can be traced back to the fifth century, when different kinds of concerns faced the two wings of the Church. Different questions were being asked and grappled with. Knowing something of our differing heritage could help us today in accepting ourselves, and Middle Eastern Christians, and recognising our call, perhaps, to complement each other in our common sonship in Christ.

As we have seen, the controversies that troubled Eastern Christians in the fourth to seventh

centuries were about Christ's nature, and the relation of the human and divine in Christ. It was the attempts to express these truths that led to the breaks between the Greek Chalcedonian and Oriental non-Chalcedonian Communion, well before the Islamisation of the region.

In the fifth century the Latin West, on the other hand, began to be preoccupied with its own questions; in particular, about the nature of man and of grace, and how God through Christ rescues fallen man. The great thinker of the period was Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa from 396 to 430. Latourette says of Augustine, "No other Christian after Paul was to have so deep and prolonged an influence upon the Christianity of Western Europe." This is not the place to go into the doctrines on which Augustine has moulded Western Christian thinking. But it is important to recognise that Augustine's significance is for Western Christianity. The doctrinal concerns and categories of East and West have to a marked degree developed separately for many centuries.

Similarly, at the time of the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation the same questions were being asked by everyone in Europe, even though very different sets of answers were being worked out. The Eastern Churches were not asking the questions, and therefore not formulating answers.

The point is sometimes made that the medieval corruptions that crystallised the opposition of the Reformers to the Latin Church in the sixteenth century were not found in the Eastern Churches, and therefore the same sort of protest movement was not needed among them. While this is true regarding such extreme departures from revealed Truth as the sale of indulgences, there is evidence more recently, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of deep concern among educated lay people of the Traditional Churches about conditions within their own Churches. Written accounts of the Armenian Orthodox in Turkey, and of the Coptic Orthodox, show this dissatisfaction. Members of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Lebanon, too, have described with deep feeling the conditions in their Church before the reform work of the initiators of the Orthodox Youth Movement, who have done so much for their Church. All people of good will can rejoice in the changes that sincere and enlightened men have been able to effect in their own denominations.

This century has seen new Orthodox theological initiatives, mainly in France and USA, among the Dispersion. Outstandingly, Lossky and Bulgakov, Russian Orthodox theologians living in exile in Paris, set themselves the task of reviving truly Orthodox theological writing, and their systems are very important in Eastern Orthodox thinking today. It is noted that in Lossky's writings justification is overshadowed in importance by *theosis*.

### **In Conclusion We Can Say That:**

- Some theological differences between East and West are matters of history, and so not necessarily blameworthy; they are matters for exploration, not confrontation. Recognising our common desire for God's glory and concern for people's spiritual welfare, we can be open-hearted in seeking areas where we have a common identity in Christ. Being individually reconciled to God in Christ, we can value efforts towards reconciliation and mutual understanding with all whom He is Lord.
- Our differences, however, must not be lightly ignored or dismissed. It has been well said that "the bonhomie, which grows when good men who would like to agree

meet together, can reduce their exchanges to gestures of mutual accommodation, fudging issues and forgetting the claims of truth". Such a forgetting insults both our friends and ourselves.

- A further task is that of trying to understand Orthodox viewpoints; especially, in this context, the reasons for their emphasis on salvation as a process as well as an event. This we can return to in a later chapter.
- Missionary Fellowships working in the Middle East probably need one or two members who are trained to think theologically, who can be called upon to help their colleagues to sort out what beliefs and practices are of basic importance and what is secondary. They should be able to advise on useful reading matter, and on Conference speakers, when necessary, who could help all workers to sharpen their understanding of their own doctrinal position, in the light of situations they may be meeting.
- It seems a great pity that so little is known in the Middle East of Luther and Calvin, even among the Evangelical Churches, including those of Presbyterian foundation. No Arabic translations of their writings seem to have been made. The Reformers' knowledge of, and indebtedness to, the Church Fathers, could be a study worth encouraging or pursuing. In today's more open climate of ecumenicity it could well be of interest to some within Orthodoxy and Eastern Catholicism, and thus be a valuable piece of bridge-building.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Life and Witness Today

Visiting the Traditional Churches of the Middle East today is rather like being in the Lebanon mountains in early spring. Almond trees are blossoming; the ground is beginning to spread its carpet of wild flowers; the doors and shutters of the stone houses are being opened to the new light and warmth. But in higher and less sunlit places there are still snow-covered slopes or brown earth, bare trees, houses closely shuttered. Everything is winter-bound.

Looking at the Christian communities, it is at times only too easy to see the nominal church membership, indifference to spiritual realities or shuttered ignorance, and to feel overwhelmed by it all. But it has been my joyful privilege to meet many people who are true living members of the Christian Churches, in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria:

- A doctor left his practice twenty years ago, to serve the young people of Cairo. What made him do it? "A burning love for Jesus."
- A group of young people meet once a fortnight to learn an "inductive method" of Bible study. "What will you do with today's material?" "Use it in my church youth group."
- The man who came to meet us was gentle in manner, deeply earnest, and very unconventionally dressed. He wore a monk-like long gown made, literally, of sackcloth; although it looked new and was lined. This is his way of protesting against the rampant materialism among the 'Christians' of his country. His preaching, on repentance and personal faith, was filling once empty churches and inspiring young people to public protest against the increase in pornography and gambling. "We are using Christian videos and films, too. And there are many of our young people who are ready to go and tell others of Christ. They know it could be dangerous. But isn't it better to die for Christ than for the soil of the country?"
- The priest of a pleasant middle-class Cairo suburb had an active congregation, a Sunday School of three hundred and a lending library of books and tapes. "But my most important work is in these home Nurture Groups where people can be built up in their faith."
- A young university graduate in Jordan was leading the church Bible Study, using Search the Scriptures. His priest attended "so that there are two of us to answer people's questions."
- The Catholic Bishop in Damascus leaned out from his pulpit, holding high a bible. "This is our glorying," he told his congregation, "every family must have one."
- "We try to take in the old people who are handicapped as well; the ones that nobody else wants," the leader of a Coptic Sisterhood said. This is the Sisters' way of expressing what true Christian service is.

- The priest with the eager eyes looked out over the bare dusty ground outside the simple Community Centre near his church. It was a depressed, crowded neighbourhood. "We need money to add a volleyball and football ground. The people here are so poor that Muslim offers to help for their children tempt them to convert to Islam".
- The five hundred people gathered for a Retreat listened intently while the priest led them in a study of Nehemiah. He was drawing out the lesson of giving time to prayer, and not exhausting ourselves with undirected activity.

It is tempting to paint a picture that is over bright, or too dark and negative. From Aleppo in the far north of Syria to Aswan in Upper Egypt, the region is no more homogenous spiritually than it is physically or politically. There are still many winter-bound places where you can be depressed by the ignorance, apathy or materialism. It is hard to generalise without oversimplifying. But when we compare the Christian Middle East of 1820, or even 1920, with the situation today we can praise God for the changes that have taken place.

Everyone recognises that changes have come. We began in Chapter One with Dr. Aziz Atiya's picture of the Coptic Orthodox Church, "weathering sandstorms until it became submerged", yet "in the last few decades ... its sons have started removing the sands from around it."

We have seen something of the reasons why the sand accumulated over the centuries. What about the process of emerging? What is happening, and to what extent, not only in Egypt, but in all the Eastern Churches?

### **Forces for Making Change**

"The wind blows where it chooses," our Lord said, and we cannot explain where it comes from or dictate where it will go. Contact with a rapidly changing world has accelerated the pace of change in the Middle East, for good and ill, especially in the cities. In this present awakening God has used ordinary movements of recent history as well as the direct breath of His Spirit.

### **Educational Levels**

Just over one hundred years ago, a modern Arab Renaissance movement began. Its source was in the then Syria-Lebanon province of the Ottoman Empire, and mainly through Christian Arab contacts with Europe. It became a literary, secular and political movement, of lay people, not Church leaders, and need not concern us here. One spin-off, however, has been a marked rise in the education and training of clergy. Under Patriarchs and Bishops of vision, Theological Seminars have been established, notably in Egypt and Lebanon. We can grasp something of the importance of this when we realise that less than one hundred years ago an Egyptian village priest's position was often hereditary, and the priest little less illiterate than his people.

The Coptic Patriarch Kyrillos IV (1854-61), for example, was so appalled by the standard of his Cairo priests that he began compulsory Saturday classes for them. Compare that step with the present requirement that in order to become a priest, university graduates must do four years and those who have not completed High School, seven years, at the Coptic Orthodox Seminary.

The Eastern Orthodox Seminary at Balamond in Lebanon has been upgraded in recent years, to train men for the Patriarchate of Antioch, that is Syria and Lebanon. "The earlier generations of parish priests were often illiterate and untrained, so the Seminary is very important, and we are working towards having all our priests doing five years training after High School." The Syrian Orthodox Seminary in Damascus will take students with Elementary School only, but then requires ten years training for the priesthood.

Education does not of itself guarantee spiritual life, of course. But there is a link between education and spiritual growth. More priests and lay people could discover the Bible for themselves and gain a better understanding of their Church's teaching and worship. Many began to feel an interest in going back to the roots, to the Bible and the writings of the Fathers. Some can read Bible Commentaries in other languages.

### **Increased Travel**

With easier travel, communications and education, Eastern Christians have got to know the Churches of the West. Church leaders in touch with the Ecumenical Movements have found themselves accepted and working on equal terms with others, which helps towards more relaxed, open relationships. Monks, priests, and lay theologians have done post-graduate studies overseas. Inevitably, some of them have been in seminaries with a liberal theology, but others have brought back a deeper love and reverence for the scriptures.

### **Protestant Missions**

We must acknowledge with embarrassment and with shame mistakes that have been made, and still are made, by foreigners. There are a few Orthodox churchmen who insist that the whole Protestant Evangelical movement was a mistake that should still be put right, even now, a century later. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence of changes within the Historic Churches in response to the work of nineteenth century missionaries. Men of the calibre of Dr. Charles Malik of Lebanon and Dr. Aziz Atiya acknowledge this. In *Religion in the Middle East*, Dr. Malik speaks of "the utter disorder, decay and corruption in the Orthodox Church" in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. "The Catholic Shock [the Uniate movement] helped to awaken the Orthodox Church", he says. "Greek Orthodox existence in the Middle East cannot be fully understood apart from the total impact, both direct and indirect, of the great American and European Protestant missionary movement of the past century and a half." Without these we "might have slept and decayed still further". (Vol 1. pp 314,317,321)

Dr. Atiya in *A History of Eastern Christianity* speaks of the Coptic Orthodox Church taking a sort of defensive action, opening schools and hospitals because the Evangelicals were doing so. The biography of John Hogg of Egypt cites examples of such action in the nineteenth century. When people were giving eager attention to the new teaching, the Patriarch gave instructions to his priests about schools and Bible study groups to counterbalance it.

On the individual level, we find men and women doing fine work within their own Orthodox or Catholic Church, having been helped to a fuller understanding of Christ's person and work through their contacts with Evangelical Schools or individual Christians. Back in 1907 Dr. Henry Jessup wrote about the Orthodox Bishop in Homs who had been in an Evangelical school as a boy, and was now using the New Testament in his own school. (*Fifty Three Years in Syria*). In our own day, too, there are people like that, doing quiet, faithful Bible teaching among their neighbours or in the Sunday Schools of their own churches.



## Fresh Vitality

God's *Springtime* is showing itself in a variety of ways, in both Orthodox and Uniate Churches.

- Increased church attendance. If you ask about signs of life anywhere, this is usually the first answer you get. One result of personal faith in Christ is a new loyalty to the Church. Increasingly the Liturgy is in Arabic, particularly the Bible reading and sermon. It is quite possible for people to understand the service and to follow it from a Service Book if they wish. In American Orthodoxy, at least, and probably in Europe, there are moves to have all the prayers audible to the congregation. But young people do not want a shorter service. They want the Liturgy as it is, to be the vehicle of their worship.
- Lay participation. In some places it was ordinary church members who spearheaded changes, against entrenched conservatism or suspicion. In most countries there is now a purposeful move to teach church members and build up lay involvement. "We want them to realise that they are the Church, not just the bishops and priests." Summer conferences, retreats and nurture groups are held to this end.
- Youth activities. Church leaders everywhere are setting great store by the fact that their young people, with better educational opportunities can come to a more *thinking* faith than their parents who were accustomed to accept blindly what they were told. They recognise also that their young people need help in coping with the special problems with which today's world assails them; living their faith in a rat-race society, or meeting the apparent clash between the Faith and Science or Philosophy.
- Sunday Schools. More often they are on Fridays, or Thursday afternoons. Some Churches, like the Melkite parish in Damascus, have club or play centre activities as well. In Jordan, the Eastern Orthodox Church has young men who have trained in Romanian or United States Orthodox seminaries doing School Religious Education and Sunday School teaching. They produce some of their own materials, and were getting some from Lebanon. In Egypt the Coptic Orthodox Sunday School movement grew from the recognition, some fifty years ago, that the drift to the cities was breaking up the traditional family pattern, and the Church could no longer expect the father to be the one who taught his children the Faith.
- Bible Study. In one Orthodox Church in a provincial city in Egypt some eighty people of all ages sit with bibles open at a chapter in Acts. It is Friday afternoon and the priest is conducting the weekly Bible Study. In another a monk who works in the church, leads weekly studies for the lay workers there. One monastery, at least, was thrilled to find someone to take a Hebrew class, to help some of the monks with their Old Testament studies.

An appetite for Bible reading is widespread. In every denomination there are some leaders who are encouraging families to own and read the Bible. Some local churches have weekly Bible studies led by the priest or a layman. The Bible Society in Lebanon finds the Syrian Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches the ones most eager to use bibles. From them, and from others, there are requests for books to help

people to study the Bible.

- Food for Growth. Books and cassettes on aspects of discipleship, the Bible and Church teaching, most written and produced locally, are fairly easy to find, and large churches often have their own library or bookshop, especially in Egypt.
- Full-time Service. The young deacon who welcomed visitors to the Orthodox Patriarchate in Damascus was a doctor before he trained as priest. The Syrian Orthodox Seminary in the same city had thirty seven men in training and would have welcomed a residential English language teacher. In one of the monasteries of the Egyptian desert a large new accommodation block stands gleaming in the clear dry air. Fifty years ago a handful of monks lived there. Now there are over one hundred, many of them professional men. Their work includes times of corporate and private prayer, and the efficient running of a large experimental farm that is benefitting the whole nation.

Lay men and woman, also, are coming into God's service. *Bait at-Takrīs* (The House of Dedication) in Cairo, for example, is an Orthodox day community of *mukarrasīn* (dedicated men) working among young people. Begun some twenty five years ago, the movement now includes *mukarrasāt* (dedicated women). Some of them live in small groups, perhaps three to five, doing deaconess type work with a local church.

- Welfare Programmes. Neglected villages; old city slums with entrenched poverty and illiteracy, lack of hygiene and medical care, and a steady drift of village people to the cities; in Lebanon, refugees from the fighting. In conditions like this many Churches are working to develop new social services for their people. They are battling against lack of resources and of trained workers, and with no Government resources to draw on. The situation is made more urgent by the knowledge that economic benefits are used to persuade Christian families to convert to Islam, with in some regions a present conversion rate of many hundreds each year.
- Renewal Groups. These are found particularly in Lebanon and Egypt. Those in Egypt are within the Orthodox Church. In Lebanon there are groups whose leaders tend to be from one Church, particularly Maronite, but they draw young people from a wide range of Orthodox and Catholic backgrounds. One group has up to one thousand attending the central meeting. From this smaller nurture groups are formed, with regular house meetings.
- Drawing together. In recent years some Christians have become concerned about relationships between the Churches, and in the 1960's two new movements began, in both of which the participants had a sense of making history.

One was a Conference in Addis Ababa in 1965. It was attended by leaders of the five ancient Oriental Churches, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopian, Indian and Syrian Orthodox; the first such formal meeting since the fifth century. They met to become better acquainted, and to find ways of co-operating and encouraging each other.

The second was a rapprochement between the Oriental and Eastern Families. Beginning in 1964 four Unofficial Consultations have been held, in which

representatives have come together to examine the original theological differences and their present understanding of them, and possible ways by which the fifteen hundred year schism might be overcome. Their Agreed Statements, and the most recent Papers and Discussions, have been published in *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?* (WCC. 1981)

In country after country, then we find evidence of new life and vigour; personal faith in Christ, Bible study, joy in serving God, and serving others in His Name. The new life moves within local patterns, and is expressed in Eastern ways.

One afternoon we were guests in a small flat in a crowded high rise block. Our hostesses were four young women, members of a lay Sisterhood, warmly welcoming and friendly. We drank tea and talked - about their work, and mine and how God had called them into His service. Then it was six o'clock, and time for Evening Prayer. We read a Bible passage, sang the day's set hymns, and then prayed. The informality of that praying was in quite delightful contrast to the little formalities preceding it. We stood up and turned to face the east wall, on which hung an icon. Each one covered her head with the scarf that lay around her neck (what a good thing I had one, too). As the visitor I was invited to pray first - a doubtful honour, since my Arabic was not only rusty, but a different dialect from theirs! Then each of the girls prayed, extempore, with spontaneous, warm-hearted fervour.

This is not an isolated example. God does not seem to be interested in producing copies of Western Evangelical ways. Apparently He wants people who know Him and His saving grace, who can point others to Him because they belong within the same culture and tradition.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The View from the Inside

Patriarch, primate, bishop, monk; those in positions of leadership carry heavy responsibilities and are busy men. Yet they very graciously made time to talk about their Churches and people. It may be of interest to know their answers to specific questions put them. As far as possible the questions were put in the same way each time, though it was usually a matter of working them into conversation as opportunity arose.

Putting the answers together, it is interesting to find how similar they were, over four countries and several denominations.

Here, then, is what the Christians themselves are saying. The answers are recorded in their own words, allowing, of course, for translation into English where needed. It has been judged wiser to omit specific names and locations.

#### **What are the Signs of Vitality in Your Church at Present?**

- more education for clergy and lay people; active young people's groups in many parishes.
- work amongst young people, including Bible Study, studying the history and worship of the Church.
- retreats in small groups, thirty to forty rather than one or two hundred, because you can't build up a relationship with God except by being alone with Him.
- the young people are seeking for something real; the Liturgy is now mainly in Arabic; women are involved in social welfare work in the parishes.
- there is revival and life, especially among young people, with a keen interest in preserving Syriac; good church attendance.
- the large number of young people attending church and other church activities.
- signs of spiritual life are particularly noticeable among the young people; they are active in organisations for children, and for young men and young women, including those that encourage social welfare.
- better attendance at church. When I came here I found the church to be little more than a kind of social club; so I concentrated on two things; making the services attractive, with a clean building and correct Liturgy, and on good messages in the sermon.
- we have eighty-nine students in the Theological Seminary this year, the greatest number in its history; all are training as parish priests.
- there is much more Bible reading than before; church attendance on the whole is

higher than before the troubles [in Lebanon].

Some people are saying that Christianity is on the way out here in the Middle East, because of the increasing pressure from Islam. Do you think this is a real danger?

### **Have the Christian Churches a Future Here?**

#### **On What Do You Base Your View?**

- A future? Yes; This is God's work, not ours.
- Yes. Christ is with His Church. The present Khumayni-type Islamic revival is dangerous for Muslims as well as Christians; but the Church has survived attacks by Islam and by Western Christendom in the past, and it will survive, because Christ is with us.
- To some extent, fears are justified, particularly because of what events in Lebanon have shown. However, it is not Muslims as such that we fear, but the extremist groups, and these are now deliberately working against the existence of Christian communities in the Middle East.
- No, fear is not justified. The present Christian faith is the result of fourteen hundred years under Islam. But we have survived all this time, and at present we have active life and witness, because Christ is the Head of His Church and He is with us.
- Yes, the Church will survive. Muslim opposition is no new thing. The current upsurge of Islam will tire in the end. The Church will not.
- Christ's Church die? Never! The Church is God's Church. "If God is for us. . ." During a time of trial under our last Patriarch, he was offered a ship to take all his flock to North America. But he said, "the responsibility of the Church is evangelism. If you took us all away, we would have to return to do this."
- Yes. Didn't Christ say, "The gospel must be preached in all the world before the end?" It is God's Church that will survive, not other religions. And Western Europe could not allow a Muslim take-over [of Lebanon], for the Muslim plan is that Europe would be subjugated next.

### **What Would You Say is the Main Job of the Church and the Parish Priest?**

- The most important responsibility of the Church is to show God's love, which is Christ's grace to us. Service done in sincere love is the best way to reach out in witness to non-Christians.
- Building ecumenical relationships is an important part of our work.
- The priority for bishops should be pastoral care of all their people by watching over their spiritual needs and social welfare and being in contact with the government. For the parish priest, the spiritual welfare of his own people, with whom he is in closer touch, is all important. The priest must have a parish council and committees

of lay people to help care for the many different aspects of people lives.

- The most important responsibility of Church leaders and priests is the new generation, lest the Church become weaker as the older ones go on. The young people need help with their problems of faith and modern living.
- The priests main work is to foster the spiritual life of their people. They must visit, and must talk of spiritual matters.
- They must preach and teach, and visit the families as families, for family life is so important.
- Just occasionally in each country a churchman spoke in terms that reached out beyond the bounds of his own church flock.

### **What about Bible Reading?**

- A number of our churches have regular Bible Studies; larger ones have a separate one for young people, or even cater for High School and university ages separately.
- We have a bookshop, and a lending library of books and tapes, including exposition of Scripture. Some of these are written here by our own Spiritual Fathers, and some are translated from English.
- In this church we have weekly meetings for young men one day and young women another. As we go through a book of the New Testament, each one has a bible and notebook and must take notes.
- Our families are encouraged to own a bible and to have family devotions; the Bible must be Arabic because they know it better than their old Syriac tongue.
- How can Christ come to us just as it were out of the air? He comes to us through the Scriptures. Every household should have its bible and read it, for this is the way to know God. .
- Here [in The Bible Society shop in Aleppo] we can scarcely keep up with the present [1985] demand; mainly because the Melkite Patriarch says each family should have one. Whether they read it or not we don't know.
- Literacy? You must distinguish between the city and the village people. In the city, yes; the men in particular of the last generation can read; the women, not all of them, but they can hear it read. And where the parents of the family are not strong in reading, the children are. Christians have wanted the children to be educated. There was a time when they would go into debt to pay school fees. And now that education is free, there would be no family without someone who could read the Bible.
- There is more Bible reading than there was; our Church is encouraging it. Only a minority of priests are enthusiastic, but those who can lead studies in the villages can

become centres of real life.

- Eastern Catholic leaders are often asking us [The Bible Society] for books outside our range: commentaries, books about the Bible and about Bible reading.
- We are encouraging the study of the Bible as much as we can in homes and in groups, and we have a three year training course for those who want to be lay leaders and help other people understand what they read.
- Our Youth meetings include a Bible Study and often a sermon, and discussion of subjects relevant to their lives. Each family should have a Bible and read it at home.

### **How Can Western Christians Help the Christians of the Middle East?**

- By prayer; praying that we will witness by love.
- Prayer is the most important; that we will continue firm. The Church has always had trouble and oppression and things are going to get worse, not better, in the near future. In times of ease a church loses its muscle tone. We must follow the example of Christ. I tell people, didn't Christ say we must love our enemies? Didn't he pray for those who crucified him? So we must be loving those who ill-treat us. Pray too that people will stay here and not emigrate away from trouble.
- Firstly, through their governments, to persuade our government to give high priority to encouraging Christians to stay here, where they belong. Secondly, by helping Christians, not just non-Christians, with welfare projects.
- Pray that Christians will stick to their own countries, and that they will be more closely linked with the Church, coming to the services and contributing to its life.
- Help the West to understand that Christians in the Middle East are not foreigners but brother Arabs with the Muslims, and were here before Islam. Many westerners think that all the Christians here are Vatican converts, and foreigners, not true Arabs.
- Pray that we will stand firm.
- Recognise and respect the existing Churches and their leaders. When our Government sees that Western Churches are acknowledging and honouring the Churches, it gives us moral support and strengthens our position. Know about us, pray for us. If Western Christians come here, and try to do things on their own, apart from the Churches, it does more harm than good.
- Let them pray that our people will be steadfast in their faith.
- If they really want to help, they must learn about Middle Eastern Christians as they really are. They must stop looking down at us as if from above us.

## **In General Then**

There is a most encouraging emphasis on reading the Bible, and a desire to know how to study it, individually and in groups.

The problems that seemed to be uppermost in the minds of churchmen are those to do with the continued existence and witness of the Christian communities.

They recognise that it is sometimes takes courage for Christians to remain here, in the lands of their fathers, where they belong, and yet where they often denied full citizenship rights.

They know that they need steadfastness and love, which only God can give, because of the upsurge in fundamentalist Islamic movements. The history of these movements, and the reasons for their existence, are stories in themselves. But the Fundamentalists tend to be intolerant of other Faiths, and to equate patriotism with Islam.

Under these pressures, and the fears they can generate, it is not easy for Christians to hear the voices that remind them that God's love must be demonstrated by actions and attitudes, so that non-Christians can get some glimpse of what God is really like.

Christian voices express also a sincere desire that the West might recognise their existence and that Western Christians might try to understand them and help to strengthen and not weaken them.

Everyone we met during these visits, with one exception, expressed genuine appreciation that a Western Christian was wanting to know about them, and was visiting them on behalf of Western Churches, and asking about praying for them. So it is over to us to do as they ask.



# CHAPTER NINE

## A Call to Action

Information is a resource; and resources are meant to be used, to reach set goals. These chapters have presented information about the Christians of the Middle East, with the hope that it can be used as resource material.

Material for whom? It is offered to Christians who have a burden for the world's people who are without Christ, in particular for those in the countries of the Middle East. Some will know that God is calling them to go to serve there in some way. Others may be members of councils that are recruiting, assessing and sending workers; those who are training the people who might go; or workers in Home ministries that touch immigrants.

To what end? We look for resources when we have a job to do or a goal to reach. In its broadest terms our Christian job could be defined as getting into the flow of God's purposes and working with Him towards their fulfilment. His purpose is the saving of fallen men and women and their incorporation into Christ as functioning members of his Church. Serving the peoples of the Middle East then, is ultimately so that they might have the opportunity to know about Jesus Christ, in order to turn to him.

Drawing people to Christ is work that only God can do. Yet He graciously chooses to work through His people; indeed He commands us to be doing something definite, "that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations." (Luke 24:47) In this enterprise all Christians of the Middle East are significant, for good or ill, and it is surely not reasonable to ignore those Churches to which the majority of them belong. Nor can we ignore the instructions for effective witness that Christ himself gave. He said, "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 17:21). If our Master says that this is one way by which people can recognise his reality, we must take his command seriously.

### **How will loving work out in practice?**

Loving means, first of all, accepting each other because we are all in the Triune God, by His grace, and all need his cleansing, as the context of the verses in John 13 and 17 remind us.

We can accept with thankfulness that there are Christians who belong in these countries. We have seen that through long centuries they have held to the deity of Christ and the centrality of his cross and resurrection; that they want to be seen as truly Middle Eastern, and recognised as part of today's world, not just museum pieces; and that God is opening fresh springs of life in many places among them, with renewed use of the Bible.

But acceptance is more than recognising the fact of their existence. It means accepting the Traditional Churches as being within the purposes of God and part of His witness in the Middle East; seeing them as part of His Universal Church, with their own ways of expressing their love and obedience to Him.

Dr. Michael Griffiths has suggested that "as in recent years we have emphasised the importance of the local church, so now the time has come to look afresh at the doctrine of

the *Universal Church*. . . a more careful theological definition of the nature of the local church in relation to other local churches of differing Church order within the one Universal Church is an urgent need." (*How to Plant Churches*, Marc Europe p 130; for more detail see Griffiths, *Get Your Act Together, Cinderella*, IVP/STL, 1989).

This is not a foregone conclusion for all Evangelicals. Some Christians in the Middle East, expatriate and national, assume that they should work for conversions out of dead churches and into a body of *believers*. Is it time to re-think this attitude, and consider the possibility of linking awakened Christians to a live group within their own Church, helping them to become, or remain, practising members within it? Where this is clearly not possible, can we still encourage them to believe, pray and work for new life within their Church?

### **Habits of the Heart.**

The call to love sets us also the task of trying to see the view from the inside, as the people of the Orthodox Churches feel it to be. This task however is complicated by the habits of thought we carry with us. Having a particular cultural heritage is inevitable, for nobody, not even a future missionary, can arrange to grow up in a vacuum. Unconscious assumptions do keep cropping up. It is a useful exercise to recognise them as such.

Individualism is one of the most pervasive. *Habits of the Heart* is the name of a recent book sub-titled "Individualism and Commitment in American Life". The authors' thesis is that "Individualism lies at the very core of [our] culture", the idea that the individual self is almost sacred, "the only or main form of reality".

For a Western Christian this individualism tends to colour attitudes to a local church. If my church does not offer me the personal satisfaction I think is my right, I look elsewhere. The fact that people change jobs more than they once did, often moving house for the new job, encourages the individual-church-member thought pattern. Community loyalty becomes an alien notion.

We tend to assume, also, that a new Christian will join the Church through whose help he trusted Christ, even if he had nominal membership elsewhere; or that the way to deal with disagreement or discontent is to leave the existing body and begin a new Church Fellowship. Dr. Griffiths' words about the Corinthian Church may be relevant: "full of factions, puffed up against each other, contained immoral-living people, was called both immature and carnal, greedy at church meals and unsound on the doctrine of the resurrection. Paul nowhere suggests the option of seceding, but rather says 'If anyone destroys God's temple, him will God destroy.' (1 Cor 3:17)" (*How to Plant Churches*, p129).

Coupled with this cult of the individual is the secularisation of Western society. Religion is a private, personal matter, not connected with one's civil status or family relationships. It is easy to take this attitude with us, unrecognised, and judge other traditions by it. Most of us are unfamiliar with the idea of a national Church. We have probably come from a church which explicitly or implicitly stands in the tradition of *The Gathered Church*. (In *The Armenian Evangelical Awakening*, Chopourian gives an interesting analysis of the history of this tradition as it related to the early American missionaries to the Armenians of Turkey.) This separatist tradition seems to contrast strongly with that of the Middle East Churches, with their different view of "regenerate membership".

All in all, we Westerners are disadvantaged; ill equipped for a situation in which it is taken for granted that membership of a family, a religion, and a State, are interlocked; We have never had to plan evangelism or discipling in strongly family-centred society; or in the political Church-State relationship that exists in Muslim or Communist countries, where so-called proselytisation is forbidden and punishable by law.

### **Language Problems?**

Not the other person's mother tongue. That can be learnt. But we can run up against a different sort of language problem, for we all have a fondness for the familiar, comfortable phrases. If a Christian expresses his experience of God's grace or preaches the Gospel in different words from ours, our emotions begin to put up question marks. Is he truly converted?

The different vocabulary needs to be taken in its setting; a situation where Church membership takes in all members of Christian families whose children have been brought into the sphere of the Church's responsibility by baptism. Many within the Orthodox Churches are well aware of the need to tackle the problem of nominal members - "the Christian who is not a Christian", Ion Bria calls them. He goes on to say, "There are many who have been baptised, and yet have put off Christ, either deliberately or through indifference . . . . The re-Christianisation of Christians is an important task of the Church's evangelistic witness." (*Go Forth in Peace: Orthodox Perspectives on Mission*, I. Bria, Geneva, 1986).

An Orthodox Church, trying to show its nominal members the difference between being a Christian by family and by personal transaction, often uses the term "first repentance" to mean that turning to God for oneself in personal trust which marks the beginning of true spiritual life. The importance of "the fruits of repentance" are emphasised: amending one's ways, attending the Liturgy, spiritual appetite, prayer. This is not in order to make these good works the basis of salvation, but as evidence of true conversion, for if Christ is truly there, he will be making a difference. "Become in reality what you are by baptism", and "learning to live our faith" are other expressions heard.

Orthodox teaching makes much of going on in a state repentance, and the need of God's grace, now that one has turned from a state of rebelling against God. This gives meaning to the phrase "Lord have mercy", so frequently occurring in the Liturgy. The aspect of repentance and salvation as a continuing process of becoming like Christ is emphasised, whereas Evangelical teaching stresses their one-point-in-time nature. In the New Testament both can be found; for example, 1 Cor 1:18, 2 Cor 3:18, Eph 2:8, 1 Thes 5:23, 2 Tim 1:9, 2 Pet 1:10,

"Born again" is a phrase the Evangelicals find very useful; indeed, it becomes a kind of shorthand. Perhaps partly for this reason, it gives offence to many Traditional Christians, or brings out their defensive prickles. Could we show the gracious generosity of God by looking for alternative terms? What other picture language did they use, and to express what truths? A limited vocabulary is not necessarily a virtue. Here is another opportunity to take action, by cultivating sensitivity.

## **Traditional-Evangelical Relationships; What is Practicable?**

Accepting, respecting, being sensitive; willing to serve by friendship, unobtrusive support and bridge building; making particular expertise available if it is wanted. Experience shows that we can do this most usefully by being ourselves (as long as it is the best possible selves). Inter-communion is not offered to the non-Orthodox, and we serve neither love nor truth by glossing over our differences or thinking they will go away.

Sir Norman Anderson's words about inter-faith dialogue are relevant here. "It is a profound mistake to imagine that to engage in fruitful dialogue both parties must do all they can do to suppress their own convictions and come with a blank mind. . . . This is impossible, for we all, inevitably, and instinctively, start from some 'frame of reference'. . . . The presupposition of genuine dialogue is that all parties . . . accept one another as persons. I put myself at his disposal with all that I am." "All that we are" includes above all our own experience of Christ, and our conviction that he can be heard and known through the Scriptures.

As Evangelicals working in the Middle East we naturally have a special relationship with Christians in the local Evangelical Churches. Eastern or Western, we are all heirs of the Reformation. These Evangelical Churches have often helped and advised us, and today one of God's good gifts to us is their respect and trust, and requests for seconded workers.

The attitudes of Orthodox and Catholic Christians towards Evangelicals vary markedly from one place and person to another. So that St. Paul's advice "as much as lies in you" may need to be the guide in any particular locality, when missionaries try to reach out in friendship. Where ill-feeling exists, it is made up of several components; resentments of past losses, suspicion of present intentions, misunderstandings or ignorance about Evangelical teaching and public worship.

One often hears the accusation that Protestant missionaries of the nineteenth century came intending to convert Muslims, but finding this too difficult they began to preach to the Christians, in order to draw them away from their own Churches and form Protestant bodies. The accounts of the period, however, show that this is not a fair representation of the facts; for example, the biographies of John Hogg, *Master Builder on the Nile* (R. Hogg, Revell 1910), or *Temple Gairdner of Cairo* (C. Padwick, SPCK 1929). These nineteenth century men came with a deep longing to see Muslims turn to Christ, yet recognised the human impossibility of the task. They saw that the existing local churches could be the potential key to evangelisation, and this helped to shape their strategies of Bible teaching to everyone.

There are many differences between what would have been possible then, and conditions now, that cannot be detailed here, but one thing we can note. Men like Hogg may have been a little naive in their idea of the time it would take for changes to be accepted, but they saw the potential and prayed for the reviving of the existing Churches. They accepted the need for new, Protestant Congregations only when those who had come to a living faith were refused Communion and put out of their own Churches.

Many Orthodox and Catholics today understand little that is positive about the Evangelical position. Protestants tend to be seen in negatives. They don't (poor ones) have a clearly constructed liturgy, they appear to lay little stress on the Holy Communion and have no great reverence for it. They believe that anyone can interpret the Bible as he wishes (which

is not, of course, what the Reformers taught). The many small fragmented groups bewilder them. Positively, the open ecumenical Orthodox says, "We agree on the basics of the Creed", and he respects Evangelicals so long as he sees they respect his Church and are concerned for it to be strengthened, and are not bent on 'sheep stealing'.

### **Praying**

If the previous sections seem to apply rather narrowly to go-ers and senders, this response is for everyone.

One day, the Lord Jesus Christ drew his disciples' attention to something about which he himself felt deeply. "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few" (Matthew 9:37). In view of the need, he went on to say "Pray therefore." Here is greatly needed action that all can take.

We can praise God that in His sovereign mercy there are millions who bear Christ's name in these Muslim heartlands, and who belong within the local cultural patterns; for sincere and able leaders; for the varied expressions today of the new life that He is generating in many places.

We can pray that increasing numbers will come into personal faith and obedience to Christ. Who is to say that the present developments are not in part the outcome of the prayers of people like Gairdner and Hogg, and others of like faith and vision over the past one hundred and sixty years?

We can ask along the lines of Ephesians 4:11-13, that God will give gifts to His Church in the Middle East: spiritually wise leaders, with pastor-hearts; teachers with a deep knowledge of God and of His Scriptures, able to teach others, and thus equip them for service and witness and growth into "mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

We can pray, as churchmen have asked us to, that Christians will meet opposition and discrimination with courage, love, and wisdom. Whether the injustice be petty or major, they need grace to look to God to make his strength perfect in their weakness; and readiness to stay in their own land, as His witnesses.

If we are involved in preparing and sending out workers from Western Churches we can pray that we, and they, will be able to recognise our cultural disadvantaged-ness and be willing to learn. Above all, that we will be able to recruit those with servant attitudes, followers of Christ who himself came as the Servant-Son.

### **"The glorification of Christ"**

Earlier we met Dr. Charles Malik of Lebanon. In 1968 he was asked by the Oriental Orthodox Churches to write a foreword to the account of their historic "rediscovery" meetings in Addis Ababa. In his closing paragraphs Dr. Malik appeals for understanding and appreciation among the various Families of Christ's Church, and concludes:

"The end is not the glory of man or this or that culture or this or that Christian community. The end is the glorification by us sinners of Jesus Christ before all men. The end is, as Christ himself prayed, that all who believe in him may be one, to the end that the world - this fallen, miserable, struggling, groping, drifting, proud, disintegrating world - may believe that God

the Father had sent him. I find reconciliation and unity the simplest thing in the world if only men love Jesus Christ above everything else, and fix only on his Cross and his Resurrection. " (*The Witness of the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, K. Sarkissian 1970, p 13).

"The glorification of Jesus Christ before all men. " If this is our common goal as Christ's people, then we will recognise our need of all other Christians, so that we can strengthen each other in this great and wonderful task.

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