Christian Churches of the Middle East and Islam

“Standing Together before God and History”

Michel Andraos

Middle Eastern Christians find themselves in a situation of external and internal tension. How are some of the Middle Eastern churches trying to rethink their vocation and mission in this context, particularly to and with Islam?

We [Christians and Muslims in the Middle East] drink from one cultural heritage that we share. . . God, exalted be his wisdom, willed us to be together in this part of the world. We accept his will wholeheartedly and hope that his will expands our hearts to encompass everyone however varied their affiliation may be.

—Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East

The Church has a mission in the Arab world, which is in its vast majority the world of Islam. The Church constitutes fifteen million out of three hundred million people. This Church of the Arabs, that is of the Arab world, culture and society, is a Church of Islam; it is in constant interaction with Muslims, suffers and rejoices with them, builds hope and grows with them, and loves and serves together with them.¹

—Melkite Patriarch Gregorius III

Christians in the Middle East, who are mostly Arabs, are often interpreted through the western lens of reading the tension between the presumably Muslim Middle East and the West. Newspaper or magazine articles about

Michel Andraos, a native of Lebanon, is associate professor of intercultural studies and ministry at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.
Christians in the Middle East often portray Arab Christians using sensational and romantic images and titles such as “The Forgotten Faithful: Followers of Jesus for nearly 2,000 years, native Christians today are disappearing from the land where their faith was born” (National Geographic, June 2009); or “Fighting for Their Survival: A Christian Exodus from the Arab World” (Spiegel Online International, 1/10/2007). Such images of the region as a world of Islam and a place where no religious communities other than “Islam” can exist without being threatened—and if they do, they must be persecuted and desperately waiting to immigrate—seem to appeal to the western imagination of the Middle East. Many people in the West are surprised to know that several million indigenous Christians live in the Middle East, that their communities have been there before Islam, and that they continue to be an integral part of the region’s civilizations, societies, cultures, and religions. Moreover, many people are also surprised to know that there are many diverse Muslim communities that coexist together in the region and that vary a great deal in their religious beliefs and practices as well as their ethnic roots. What we call the Middle East is a very diverse region that has been and continues to be misrepresented in the West today.

This article is a reflection on the new articulation of the Catholic churches of the Middle East of their Arab identity and relation to Islam as these are expressed in recent official teaching. This reflection is written from the perspective of a Catholic Middle-Eastern Christian living in the West, who looks at the situation primarily—but not only—through this lens. After an introductory historical note, part two will present a brief socio-political contextual synopsis. In part three I will summarize some of the theological debates from the 1980s on the question of cultural identity of churches of the Middle East, and part four will outline some of the recent teachings of the Council of the Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the Middle East on this topic as they rethink the vocation and role of their churches in that part of the world today. The conclusion will offer some reflection on the section in the Lineamenta of the upcoming Synod of the Bishops of the Middle East in Rome that relates to the topic of this article and point to some of the challenges facing the churches of the region at this important historical moment.

An Introductory Historical Note

What is referred to as “The Middle East” in the West today is not only or primarily a geographical location. Rather, it is a representation of political, economic, religious, and cultural imaginations that are constantly shifting, which makes what we mean when we say “The Middle East” difficult to understand. For some, the Middle East is the part of the world that has the largest oil reserves that continue to be a vital source of energy for the West and, therefore, needs to be under western domination. For others it is the land of radical and fundamental
Islam that threatens western civilization, world democracy, and freedom; is incapable of reform or self-government; and, therefore, needs to be occupied and reformed. For some the region extends geographically from Morocco at the western coast of Africa to Pakistan and the border of India in the east, and from Turkey in the north to Somalia in the south including the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf countries in the southeast. For others, it is a smaller geographical area that begins on the east coast of the Mediterranean, including the Arab Peninsula and the Gulf countries, and goes as far east as Iran. Getting into the debates on the history of the construction of these imaginations and definitions in relation to politics, religion, culture, and geography as well as colonial relation past and present, is beyond the scope of this article. As a working definition for the purpose of this reflection, Middle-Eastern Christians are the Christian communities that live in the Arabic-speaking countries between Egypt in the west and Iran in the east. There are today in all these countries Arabic-speaking Christian communities who belong to different Orthodox, Catholic, and more recently, Protestant groups. The majority of the fifteen million Christians who live in the region belong to six Oriental Orthodox churches, which include the Coptic (mostly in Egypt), Greek (Byzantine), Armenian, Syriac, and Assyrian families. Out of the same Oriental Orthodox churches emerged Catholic branches that, for complex historical, social, and political reasons, separated from their mother churches and entered in communion with Rome beginning in the early eighteenth century. These are the Greek Catholic (or Melkite), Coptic Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Chaldean, and Syriac Catholic churches, which, with the Maronite and the Latin (or Roman Catholic), form the seven Catholic churches of the Middle East. The Latin church of the Middle East was founded with the coming of the Crusades and continues to exist today as a small community that has its Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The members of this church are mostly local, Arabic-speaking, indigenous Christians. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, several Protestant churches were founded in the region and more recently many Evangelical groups also started new churches, but both communities are small in numbers. As a result of immigration to the West beginning in the late nineteenth century, all Middle Eastern native churches established branches in the diaspora. As immigration intensified in the
The origins of the configuration of the churches of the Middle East into different cultural and ethnic families are both cultural and doctrinal. Culturally, different languages were spoken in the ancient metropolitan areas of the region that also became centers for the development of Christianity in the early centuries such as Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, Edessa, etc. In the coastal cities, Greek was the language of communication and the dominant culture until the eighth century, and in the inner parts different dialects of Syriac or Aramaic and Arabic were spoken. Some cities like Antioch were a meeting point of Greek and Aramaic cultures and languages. There are several Eastern churches today from the Byzantine and Syriac families that claim Antiochene roots. With the coming of Islam in the later part of the seventh century, the Arabic language and culture became more widespread across the region and eventually Arabic became the main language, which continues to the present day. 

Doctrinally, the Christological controversies in the fourth and fifth centuries, which, according to many theologians and church historians, were mostly cultural and linguistic misunderstandings entangled with regional political struggles, contributed to separate the churches from each other. However, due to the continuous internal migration movements in the region, for both political and religious reasons, churches from different cultural and doctrinal families exist today almost in every country side by side. Even though the doctrinal controversies of the past do not make sense anymore to today’s Christians and churches, the divisions continue to exist, mostly because over time the churches developed into ethnic and political entities and their cultural and linguistic roots became part of their identity and way of life.

It would be important to mention that most communities in the Middle East, regardless of their religion, have experienced a traumatic history due to the constant political instability in the region. A sequence of empires invaded and occupied the region since ancient times and continues to do so to the present day, for example, the recent U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq and the ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestine. Around the time when Christianity started, the Roman Empire was the dominant power and this has strongly marked the formative period of early Christian communities. This was followed by the rise of Islam as of the seventh century and the rule of a sequence of Muslim caliphates, which...
transformed the Middle East in a permanent way. Then came the invasion of the Crusades in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which also left a permanent mark on the relations between the Middle East and (Christian) Europe that continues to the present day. The recent book by Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*, recounts the violence and brutality experienced by the Muslim and Christian population at the hand of the Christian European armies along their way to conquer Jerusalem. After the Crusades came the Mongols and then the Mamluks, whose rule lasted until the early sixteenth century when the Ottomans took over. The Ottoman Empire, which lasted until the end of the First World War, shaped in significant ways the relations between religion, ethnicity, and politics as we know them today.

Georges Corm, historian of culture and religion in the Middle East, among many other things, informs us in his seminal work *Le Proche-Orient Éclaté* that for understanding the Middle East today one needs to know the history of the relations between the communities in the region since the time before Islam. Knowing that period of history, he argues, is important for understanding the particularities of local communities that many empires, including the religious and ideological power of Islam, have not been able to erase. These particularities, according to Corm, explain the presence of distinct Eastern churches and many Islamic groups and trends we see today (277–292). However, in the modern period, in order to understand the origins of the sectarian tension that exists between the different religious and ethnic communities, Christians as well as Muslims, it would be crucial to understand how the Ottoman Empire handled the question of religion and politics in relation to religious communities. The common historical pattern used by imperial powers, which continues to the present day, is founded on pitting religious and ethnic communities against each other, and on strengthening and using religious and political elites to rule their community on behalf of the dominant power. This pattern of external dominance, also used by the Ottomans and by the western powers since the nineteenth century, affected not only the relations within and between Christian communities, but all other ethnic and religious communities as well. Both the internal and external patterns of imperial/colonial/neocolonial domination, have been, and continue to be, a source of systemic violence that deeply impacts the peoples of the region in the structures of daily life, regardless of their religious or ethnic affiliation. One needs to “understand and study manifestations of religious identity within specific local and historical contexts,” notes historian Ussama Makdisi, who studied the relation between foreign intervention and sectarianism in the Middle East under Ottoman rule. From the nineteenth century, Mount Lebanon to Mandatory Palestine to American-occupied Iraq, argues Makdisi, sectarianism was always at the intersection between western intervention and local aspirations. “Sectarianism in the modern Middle East,” he notes, “reflects a set of unequal choices made by unequal players. It is this unequal relationship that has so often created the problem we seek to study” (Makdisi, 560).
The Present Socio-Political Context

In their recent tenth pastoral letter (2009), *Le chrétien arabe face aux défis contemporains* (The Arab Christian and Contemporary Challenges), the Catholic patriarchs of the Middle East outline a historical and socio-political analysis of the situation in which Arab Christians live today. In a section on the modern historical failures, the patriarchs name three periods, which, they argue, have lead to the present situation of chaos and violence (no. 5). The first period extends from the nineteenth century to the end of the First World War. The main feature of this period is the instability that accompanied the end of the long Ottoman rule and the new struggle of the European powers over the region, which lead to dividing it into small nation states they were able to control. This division, notes the letter, contributed to the already existing fragmentation of the region. The second period of historical failure, the pastoral argues, is from 1920 to 1967, the date of the main Arab-Israeli war, which started a period of western military domination and militarization of the region. The foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, and the incapacity of the Arab states and the world to resolve the conflict it created, left the region in a situation of permanent conflict and political uncertainty that continues to the present. The third period, argue the heads of the Catholic churches of the Middle East, is from 1976 to the present. The main failure of this period is the creation by subsequent U.S. administrations of the so-called “New Middle East,” which intensified fragmentation, underdevelopment, poverty, and sectarian violence. Today, the reaction of the Arab world as it faces western modernity and globalization is ambivalent, adds the pastoral. On the one hand, there is a reaction of fear and rejection because of a perceived threat to cultural and religious values and identity by western modernity, and on the other hand, the reaction of wanting to be part of this modernity because it is tied to development and scientific progress. As a result of the external and internal tensions mentioned above, the situation in which Arab Christians find themselves today, argues the pastoral, is historically the most difficult. The following two parts will look at how some of the Middle-Eastern churches are trying to rethink their vocation and mission in this context, particularly in relation to and with Islam.

L’Eglise des Arabes: A Failed Dream?

There have been several periods of tension around the question of Arab identity among Christians and churches of the Middle East, particularly in the recent period because of the confusion between Arab identity and Islam. For many people, in the West as well as in the Arab world, the words Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern are synonymous. However, not all Arabs are Muslims, and most Muslims by far are not Arabs. Historically, the Arabic identity and language existed long
The questions articulated then by Corbon continue to be a topic of debate and reflection.

before Islam and was the language of other religions, including Jews and Christians, before the Qur’an was revealed in Arabic. Arabic-speaking Christian communities existed several centuries before Islam, and there were Jewish Arabic-speaking communities even long before that time. When Islam emerged in the seventh century CE, that Arabic culture was already well recognized and had a developed language, literature, poetry, and calligraphy. Arabic was also a “business language” in the region; the trading caravans that went through Mecca and Medina, where the Prophet Mohammed lived and where the Qur’an was revealed, spoke Arabic. However, it is also historically true that the fast spread of Islam around the Mediterranean after the seventh century contributed to the expansion of the Arabic culture and language, which gradually took over the different dialects of Aramaic and Greek. Since that time, Arabic became the language of the dominant culture in the Middle East and was closely associated with Muslim religion. Yet, during the last fourteen centuries, that is, since the beginning of Islam, all peoples of the region contributed to the development of the Arabic language and to making the pluralist Arabic culture we have today. Since the early centuries of Islam, Christian theologians debated Muslim theologians and wrote theological treatises in Arabic. The Christian Arabic theological heritage from the eighth century has been recently rediscovered and is generating a great interest among many theologians and scholars. There is currently a significant scholarly movement, in the West as well as in the Arab world, focusing on exploring the relevance of Arab Christian heritage of the Middle Ages for the Islamo-Christian dialogue today.

In the late 1970s, L’Eglise des Arabes (The Church of the Arabs), a book by the late French Dominican theologian Jean Corbon (who was incardinated in the Melkite diocese of Beirut, Lebanon from 1941 until his untimely death in 2001), proposed a vision of the churches in the Arab world. Corbon was not a dreamer, but rather a respected theologian—both in the East and West—who was doing a reading of the signs of the times. The book articulated well the questions many church leaders, theologians, as well as ordinary Christians, had been asking for some time. The book tried to respond to questions such as: Do the multiple small Christian communities of the Middle East, which claim connection to and rootedness in the faith and cultures of early Christian communities, not also have in common as Arabic-Christian churches a cultural and ecclesial identity that they have been sharing for many centuries? What is the vocation of the church (as a church of churches) that lives in this part of the world? Is there an Arabic church
that, through its faith in the Gospel of Jesus and witness to the Spirit, and together with believers of other faiths, can be a sign of hope and witness to a life of service (diakonia) in this part of the world that is torn by violence, occupation, wars, militarism, poverty, political and religious corruption, fundamentalisms, and more? Corbon was not proposing to unify all Middle Eastern churches into one Arabic church. Rather his vision was fundamentally theological concerning the shared faith, identity, and mission of the churches and not their physical unification. Shortly after its publication in French, and as recognition of its importance to both Catholic and Orthodox Christians in the Middle East, L’Eglise des Arabes was translated into Arabic by Ignatius Hazim, then bishop of Latakiah, Syria, and later patriarch of the Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch.

The questions articulated then by Corbon continue to be a topic of debate and reflection among Middle Eastern Christians today. More so today than forty years ago, these questions continue to be central to the discussion on the mission and vocation of the churches of the Middle East in the Arab world today. What is preventing Middle Eastern Christians from seeing a church that is greater than the sum total of its various fragmented ethnic denominations is a complex question that would be difficult to tackle in such a short article. However, this unfulfilled vision of a church of the Arabs is emerging again today as a theological and spiritual inspiration for ecclesial leader, as we will learn below from the recent pastoral letters of the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the Middle East.

An Arabic Middle-Eastern Church with Islam

In recent years, the leaders of the Catholic churches in the Middle East articulated in a new way the vocation of Christian churches among Muslims. The new articulation highlights commonality rather than difference between Muslims and Christians and emphasizes collaboration with the Muslim communities for the common good of the region. Founded in 1991, the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East, which includes the heads of the seven Oriental churches that are in communion with the Roman Catholic Church (Coptic, Melkite, Syriac, Maronite, Chaldean, Armenian, and Latin), dedicated their second and third pastoral letters, in 1992 and 1994 respectively, to the question of relations between Christians and Muslim. These two letters, in my opinion, inaugurate a significant development in the teaching to Catholic Christians of the Middle East about their relation to Muslims and open a new horizon for a better future of interreligious dialogue and collaboration. In the current global context, this is certainly a welcome development and affirmation. In their second pastoral letter, “The Christian Presence in the Middle East: Witness and Ministry,” issued on Easter 1992, the Catholic Patriarchs said on behalf of Middle Eastern Catholic Christians—and this is a position that several Orthodox churches also share—that the main mission of their churches...
is not to convert Muslims to Christianity, but rather, as communities of faith who share a long history and many centuries of life together, to collaborate together for the well-being of all. Christians believe, notes the pastoral, that it is God’s will for them to be together with Muslims in that region. The pastoral letter is presented as a document for theological reflection in the context of the new challenges the Arab world is facing. The challenges mentioned in the document include the tension between tradition and modernity; political instability; social and economic (under)development and poverty; religion and society; freedom of religion and of conscience; issues of justice, peace, and human rights; and the urgent political problem of the Palestinian situation, which the Catholic Patriarchs say has an international dimension and has deeply troubled the region, “while the Palestinian people continue to be victims of injustice, humiliation and suffering.” The pastoral also mentions concern for the situation in Iraq in the aftermath of the First Gulf War and for other conflicts in the region. These are concerns for all people of the region, not only for Christians, affirms the pastoral. If the letter were written in 2010 instead of 1991, I believe the list of challenges would be in many ways similar or even longer. None of the major issues of concern mentioned in the letter has been resolved. On the contrary, there have been more war, occupation, refugees and migration, and poverty and less hope for peace.

The most important affirmation in the letter that in my opinion also captures its core message is paragraph 48. It is probably the most quoted section and is particularly relevant to the theme of this article. Entitled “Dialogue with our Muslim Brothers,” this section states that

at a time in our world when Christianity and Islam are together searching for new ways for communication, encounter and dialogue, our churches’ experience has something to offer in this domain; our churches could become a bridge of dialogue between East and West, between Christianity and Islam, because we share a similar faith with the Christian West and a similar culture with the Muslim East. . . . We and the Muslims drink from the same cultural tradition that we share and that we built together, each contributing to it out of their own richness. . . . The Christians of the East are part and parcel of the Muslim cultural identity as the Muslims in the East are an inseparable part of the Eastern Christian cultural identity. In this sense, we are both responsible for each other before God and history (my emphasis).

Other sections of the pastoral letter emphasize the cultural dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims over many centuries in the bosom of the Arabic culture (nos. 29–30). Sections 34–38 call for a renewal of the vision of Christian service to others as part of the main identity of the church, following the example of Jesus Christ. The churches in the Middle East do not exist for their own sake; they are called to be a sign of witness and service.
A follow-up letter was issued two years later on Christmas 1994 entitled “Together before God for the Well-being of the Human Person and Society: Living Together as Muslims and Christians in the Arab World,” which affirms the same historical analysis and vision for a shared future and includes some concrete pastoral recommendations for collaboration in areas of common concern in social and public life. The core message of the letters that the patriarchs repeatedly affirm is that the Christian churches in the Middle East are not communities coming from outside with a mission to the Muslim world, rather they are an integral part of the region’s history and cultures, and they share responsibility with the other religious communities for building its future and working for the common good.

One of the most outspoken and articulate ecclesial voices on the topic of the vocation of the churches of the Middle East in relation to Islam has been Gregorius III Laham, the Melkite patriarch of Antioch, whom I quote at the beginning of this article. The quotation is from a lecture Patriarch Laham delivered at a conference at the University of Cambridge, October 12–15, 2008, in commemoration of the first anniversary of the publication of *A Common Word Between Us and You*—the letter from 138 Islamic scholars, clerics, and intellectuals addressed to Pope Benedict XVI after his Regensburg lecture. Patriarch Laham, along with other Melkite bishops, has been publicly engaging *A Common Word* in the Arab world and internationally. The concept of a “church of Islam,” or a “church with Islam,” however, is not totally new to the Melkite patriarch. In several of his early pastoral letters and public interviews, shortly after he was elected patriarch in 2000, he often used the term “church of Islam” as a way for talking about the vocation of the Eastern Arabic churches among the Muslim communities in the Middle East. For Patriarch Laham, the church of Islam simply means a church fully incarnated in the Arabic culture with Muslims and called to witness to hope as it shares the region’s concrete, historic challenges, pains, and struggles.

**Pastoral Challenges Ahead**

In September 2009, following his visit to Israel and Palestine in May 2009, Pope Benedict announced that a synod of the bishops of the Middle East will take place in Rome, October 10–24, 2010. The theme of the synod is, “The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness.” In December 2009, the Vatican issued the *Lineamenta* for the synod, which has a section on Christian-Muslim relations. Although the challenges listed in the *Lineamenta* include many of the issues already articulated in the pastoral letters of the Patriarchs, such as political instability, migration, religious freedom, poverty and unemployment, etc., the tone of the *Lineamenta* is strongly critiqued by many church leaders and theologians in the Middle East, including bishops who are part of the Commission on Islamo-Christian Dialogue of the Conference of Catholic Bishops and Patriarchs.
of the Middle East. As articulated in the patriarchs’ letters above, many Christians in the Middle East today reject the thesis and language of persecuted minorities that are in constant need for help from the “Christian” West in order to defend their rights and identity in a fundamentalist Muslim majority world. What the churches of the Middle East seem to be repeatedly saying, and what is not clearly articulated in the Lineamenta, is that Arab Christians demand and expect mutuality and not more misrepresentation. Their pastoral challenges, in addition to the need for communion among themselves in order to become a church of witness and service in the Middle East, are concrete issues such as ending wars and occupations, a just resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that guarantees the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people, ending colonial interventions in the internal affairs of Middle Eastern countries, respect for the new political movement that demands autonomy and self-determination, etc. The main challenge of Middle Eastern Christians, the churches say, is not fear of Islam but rather working for a just political relationship with the West. Middle Eastern Christians are asking the universal church for support to the initiative of Palestinian Christians, “A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope, and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering,” which is known as Kairos Palestine, 2009 (www.kairosPalestine.ps).

The information on the reactions of ordinary Christians in the Middle East to the Lineamenta and the preparation process for the synod, which I gathered recently through phone interviews with theologians and church leaders in Lebanon, indicate that there is no big enthusiasm for the synod. The main reason for the lack of enthusiasm, explains one of my interviewees, is the loss of confidence among ordinary Christians in their churches’ commitment to putting teaching into action. Several similar meetings and documents, both from Rome and local churches, were produced over the past years that did not lead to concrete results. Instead of more synods and documents, in order to stand together and with others “before God and history” in these very challenging times and respond to the prophetic call to communion and witness, commented a Lebanese theologian, Middle Eastern churches need clear commitments, pastoral planning, and effective, transformative pastoral action committed to justice and peace.

It would not be true or accurate to say that the majority of Christians and Muslims in the Middle East share the above mentioned positive views and attitude toward each other or toward other religions. The situation in many places in the
region remains very precarious and incidents of ethnic and religious violence are reported daily in the news. The new positive teaching and attitude of church leaders, however, is helping create a better climate for renewing the vision of the churches and making peace, but, as mentioned above, teaching alone is never enough for transforming societies, especially where there are deep historical wounds and suffering from structural violence combined with ongoing injustice. Whether the new synod will help the churches of the Middle East to develop and commit to a regional pastoral plan of action is yet to be seen.

Note

1 All translations from the Arabic and French languages are mine, unless indicated otherwise.

References


