CHRISTIAN MISSION AND ECUMENISM

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1 Introduction

The mandate of the Church of Jesus Christ in the Arab World is to proclaim *the full counsel of God* and to live in accordance with that. This *full counsel* entails the salvation of individual souls, but it is broader as well. God's creative act entailed the concept of society: the individuality of each person cannot be described without his or her complete network of social relationships in the past and the present. Therefore, we do not only follow Christ in his love for individuals, but also in his love for the societies they form together, including the collective memories of those societies – their history.

This paper looks at one particular aspect of the Church's mandate to go into the world, namely the diaconal task of serving society.

How can we help our Arab societies to be a better reflection of the will of the Triune God as Creator and Savior for the benefit of those societies and the people in them, and to the glory of God?

2 Definition of the Problem: Islamic view of Society

2.1 Islam at the heart of Islamic society

The Arab World as a whole is not a monolith, neither are the different Arab societies uniform entities. However, Islam is the major formative elements in all of these societies. The Islamic view of the ideal structure of society stems from the politico-religious *ummah* (community) Muhammad established in Medina. He supplemented the social *mores* of pre-Islamic tribalism with a new set of rules and beliefs. All the regulating ideas remained within the structures of tribalism. The British historian Bernard Lewis described the main change:

> [Faith] replaced blood as the social bond. Already in the pre- Islamic tribe god and cult were the badge of nationality, and apostasy the outward expression of treason. The change meant […] the suppression within the Umma of the blood feud and the achievement of greater inner unity, by arbitration. Of equal importance was the new conception of authority. The Sheikh of the Umma, that is, Muhammad himself, functioned for those who were truly converted, not by a conditional and consensual authority, grudgingly granted prerogative by the

tribe and always revocable, but by an absolute religion. The source of authority was transferred from public opinion to God, who conferred it on Muhammad as His chosen Apostle. This transfer shaped the whole future history of Muslim government and Muslim political thought.[2]

In Medina, Islam came to be the militant polity that it would be for any Muslim who wanted to implement his religion in accordance with the original precepts and organizational principles.[3]

It is important to be reminded that this tribal society with its *mores* became the prototype for Islam.

2.2 Treatment of minorities

Muhammad's policy towards the Jewish and Christian tribes in Arabia was to try to convert them to Islam. If they did not comply, he was prepared to create treaties whereby these tribes wereallowed to keep their synagogues, churches and religious leaders while having to pay tribute and render some services to Muslims. The Jews of the oasis of Khaybar, in the north of the Hijaz, had to pay half of the total produce of their oasis after they were conquered in 628. The Islamic prophet told the Jews of Khaybar that he would still be entitled to drive them out of the oasis anyway.[4]

The Christians of Najran also became subject to similar, though less rigorous rules.[5]For Bedouin who were dependent on the meagre produce of an oasis, paying a tribute of 50 percent meant starvation. 'Treaties' of this sort were devastating for the minorities that did not convert to Islam. In the harsh climate of Arabia the choice was between becoming Muslim and slow starvation. It is dubious why, in spite of this, many scholars continue to speak about the Jewish and Christian tribes in Arabia as 'protected' tributaries while in reality they were subjected and exploited.[6]

In 718 'Umar II ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz became caliph of the *Ummayad* empire. Muslim historians stress his piety and justice and his pioneering role in spreading the faith.[7]The *dhimmis* were subjected to humiliating restrictions due to the rules of 'Umar II. They were officially excluded

1. For this article the author has made much good use his doctoral thesis *Gospel in the Air; 50 Years of Christian Witness through Radio in the Arab World* (Zoetermeer, 2008).

2. Bernard Lewis, *The Arabs in History* (Oxford, New York, 1993, first edition 1950), p. 40.

3. Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (Houndsmills, New York, 2002, first edition 1937), p. 117.

4. Ibn Ishaq (704-767), the earliest biographer of Muhammad, wrote this i*n al- Sirah al- Nabawiya*h (Prophetic Stories). See Wim Raven, *Ibn Ishaz, Het Leven van Mohammed: De vroegste Arabische verhalen* (Amsterdam, 1980), pp. 202-206.

5. Fred McGraw Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), p. 76.

6. For instance, see Donner, Early Islamic Conquests, p. 76.

7. 7 See for instance Hassan Ibrahim Hassan, *Islamic History and Culture* (Cairo, 1969?), pp. 96-97.
He speaks about the 'bright page' and a 'glorious period' in Muslim history, without mentioning the fate of the dhimmis under 'Umar II.

from serving in the administration and were subjected to rigid social and financial disabilities. These restrictions included having to cut their forelocks, wear distinctive clothing, ride without saddles, and they were prohibited from building churches. During the eighth century, four successive caliphs so persecuted Christians that some bishops left their see and many Christians became Muslim. During that century the Copts often rose in revolt and each time their rebellion was suppressed.[8]

At various times 'Umar II's rules were strictly implemented, but most of the time they were not. Christians continued to serve in the administration of the empire for many centuries. One reason why it was difficult to implement the rules of 'Umar was that, under the Umayyads, non-Muslims still formed the vast majority of inhabitants; Jews and Christians were needed for running the administration and the sciences of the empire. Because of this, Christians could still play an important role in public life and enjoy certain freedoms. Except in the Arabian Peninsula, Muslims formed less than ten percent of the population in the total realm they ruled in the Umayyad period.[9] It would only be under the 'Abbasid Caliph Mutawakkil (847-861) that *dhimmis* were again subjected to demeaning and strict measures.[10]

2.3 Limiting societal development and the Christian witness

The first two centuries of the 'Abbasid rule from Baghdad (750- 1258) was the brightest period in Arab history because of the cosmopolitan attitude of the rulers during those years. It entailed the acceptance of an important role for non-Arabic and non- Islamic influences in Baghdad. Islamic law was not upheld tightly and Christians played important roles in administration, economic and cultural life. The disappearance of this multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious society, due to successful Islamization and Arabization, inaugurated a long period of Arab isolationism from developments in neighboring lands. Christians and Jews were important for being able to propound radically liberal, nonconformist ideas. For revitalizing society, these new ideas and the information were a necessity, but for orthodox Arab Muslims, non-conformism and liberal thought became evermore *haram.*

By the 12th century CE, the foremost Islamic theologians had agreed that in religion *ijtihad* (the exercising of independent juristic reasoning to provide answers when the *Quran* and the *sunnah* are unclear) was no longer acceptable. That decision meant that anything the early Islamic theologians had said about the interpretation of the *Quran* and the *hadiths* in order to create rules for society was the only acceptable norm. As those laws were not formally codified, this decision of the conservative religious leaders gave them great powers in society as

the only interpreters of law.[11] It also tended to stifle intellectual life in general and was therefore detrimental to the revitalization of Arab society.

The remarkably rapid spread of Islam among the non-Arabs in the 'Abbasid Empire was a result of the complete assimilation of all members of the Muslim community.[12] This also meant that society became even more strictly divided into Muslims and non- Muslims. Jews and Christians were also driven to Islam because they suffered from many restrictions. During the 'Abbasid period they were second-class citizens subject to fiscal and social disabilities, and occasionally to open persecution.[13]

Consequently the situation of Christians and their Christian witness under the rule of Islam has always been precarious. In the course of Arab history the discriminatory laws were seldom implemented very strictly, but Christians knew that at any time these laws could be used against them. Moreover, the popular anti-Christian persecutions that occurred regularly throughout Arab history underlined that they could never be sure of equal treatment.

3 Renewal of Society

3.1 Influence of colonialism

The Arab World lacked the ability to revitalize itself until the Renaissance *(al-Nahdah)* of the 19th century. The increasing role of Europeans, including their colonial rule in the Arab World, and the growing realization of Arab backwardness by many Arab intellectuals led to a desire for a renaissance. This desire developed parallel with the growth of Western-style nationalism in the Arab World. The initial thesis of Arab nationalism was that all Arabic speaking peoples were one nation. It developed as an Arab reaction to Turkish domination in the first place, but also to the increasing Western presence. One of the first results of the nationalists' desire for a renewal of the Arab World was an interest in the history of the early 'Abbasid period and in the Arabic language. Arab nationalism was especially strong among the Christian Arabs who were the least susceptible to ideals of Muslim unity and the most open to new Western ideas of nation building based on a shared language.

3.2 Role of Christians and missionaries

The thesis that the malaise of almost 1000 years in the Arab World was related to the processes of Islamization, with its rule against *ijtihad,* seems to be confirmed by the fact that the Renaissance was most vibrant in Lebanon where Christians formed a majority. This created a rather liberal atmosphere in the country. Christian Lebanese were well placed in the Arab World to mediate

8. Kenneth S. Latourette, A History of the Expansion of Christianity Vol. 2: The Thousand Years of Uncertainty - 500 AD to 1500 AD (Grand Rapids, 1976, first edition 1956), p. 303.

9. Albert Hourani, A History of the Arab Peoples (London, 2002, first edition 1991), pp. 29, 43.

10. Lewis, Arabs in History, pp. 79-80. Hitti, History of the Arabs, pp. 232-234.

11 Heribert Busse, 'Grundzüge der islamischen Theologie unter der Geschichte des islamischen Raumes' in Werner Ende und Udo Steinbach (eds), *Der Islam in der Gegenwart: Entwicklung und Ausbreitung Staat, Politik und Recht, Kultur und Religion* (München, 1984), p. 36.

12 M. A. Shaban, *The 'Abbasid Revolution* (Cambridge, 1979, first edition 1970), p. 168.

13 Wadi Z. Haddad, 'Continuity and Change in Religious Adherence: Ninth- Century Baghdad,' in Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhari (eds), *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands Eight to Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto, 1990), pp. 33-4.

modern European thinking into the heart of Arab culture, especially after Lebanon became practically independent from Syrian and Ottoman rule in 1861. This process was encouraged by the presence of European and North American Protestant and Roman-Catholic missionaries who, through their churches and schools, often instilled a desire for renewal in the minds of their Christian and Muslim students.

During the 19th century newspapers and magazines became two crucial means of spreading new thinking in the Arab World.[14] A small but influential generation of Arabs had grown up accustomed to reading books. Many of these elite Arab families were bilingual. French or English was used as the vernacular in their homes in cities such as Cairo, Alexandria and Beirut. Lewis underlined the important role of the missionaries in the literary Arab development:

> [The missionaries were] restoring to the Arabs their halfforgotten classics and translating for them some of the sources of Western knowledge. They trained a new generation of Arabs, at once more conscious of their Arab heritage and more affected by Western influence […] The new local middle class of traders and intellectuals came largely from the minorities […] But this new class spoke and wrote in Arabic. Mission-educated Syrian Christians established newspapers and periodicals in Egypt as well as Syria, and reached a wider public as more and more of the population were affected by economic and social change. It was in this period that Arab nationalism was born.[15]

One of the Lebanese converts to Protestantism, Butrus al-Bustani, began the first Syrian political magazine after the bloody religious upheavals in Syria in 1860. His goal was to create harmony among the different creeds by together pursuing knowledge. During that same period another Protestant, Nasif al-Yaziji, began publishing a magazine for political and literary review. Its motto was that 'patriotism is an article of faith', a totally new idea in the Arab World. The Syrian Protestant College, founded in 1866 by missionaries from the USA and later renamed American University of Beirut (AUB), became a bulwark of Arab nationalism.[16]

3.3 Muslims asking for ijtihad to be allowed

The backwardness of the Arab World could not be denied any longer. Some Muslims, who wanted to modernize society through renewing religion, began proposing that the gates of *ijtihad* be reopened as the prerequisite for societal change. One of the earliest and most influential advocates for pan-Islamic unity and for Islamic revitalization was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897). His political career began in Afghanistan and India, but he came to Cairo in 1870. In 1876 he founded a Masonic lodge, which included many of the later politicians of Egypt. When he was involved in the circulation of a Nationalist Manifesto in 1879 he was deported from Egypt. He settled in Paris for a while, but eventually ended up in Istanbul.[17]

One of the followers of al-Afghani who visited him in Paris was Muhammad 'Abdu. He was to become one of Egypt's most respected reformers, especially as he became *mufti* of Egypt in 1899. 'Abdu and other Muslim modernists demanded the right to personally interpret the sources of Islam for modern life. In that respect, during the past century, they have been better able to speak to the needs of Arabs than the vast majority of conservative religious leaders who rejected *ijtihad as haram.*

During the latter parts of the 20th century a small minority wanted to go much further than most modernizers. Some, like the Sudanese Muslim scholar, 'Abdullahi Ahmad Al-Na'im, desired to liberate Arab society from its shackles: they were not interested in tying their opinions to the paradigms as set by the *Shari'ah* (Islamic Law) but to the *Quran* or parts of that only. This means a radical diversion from Islam as traditionally understood. Those who propagate the idea that the *Quran* should be the only source of inspired knowledge often end up in prison in the Arab World.[18]

4 Present Situation of Christian Freedom

4.1 Pan-Arabism and the Church

During the 1950s and 1960s, Egypt's president Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir envisioned a central role for Egypt in the pan-Arab movement while in Syria and Iraq, the other potential centers of power in the Arab World, different forms of Pan-Arabism developed. The *Ba'th* (resurrection) ideology and *Ba'th* parties of these countries were inspired by Michel 'Aflaq (1910-1989), a Greek-Orthodox Christian from Damascus. 'Aflaq

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14. Lewis, *Arabs in History*, p. 189. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 746-747. Hassan, *Islamic History and Culture*, does not mention a word about the role of missionaries and Lebanese or any other Arab Christians playing a major role in reviving the Arabic language and developing nationalist ideas.

15. Lewis, *Arabs in History*, pp. 189-190. The Arabs saw the first clear example of the European concept of nationalism in the Greek uprising that began in 1821. In 1833 Greece became an independent kingdom, with the military and diplomatic aid of the European powers.

16. George Antonius, himself a Protestant from Alexandria, described this history of the involvement of Protestant missionaries and their converts in the development of Arab nationalism in his classic work on Arab nationalism, George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening* (Beirut, 1969, first edition 1938), pp. 35-60. Antonius was a Greek-Orthodox Lebanese-Egyptian writer and politician and graduated from Cambridge University in 1913. He came to Palestine in 1921 as a British civil servant. He resigned in 1930 in protest over British policies against Palestinians. He appeared before the Peel Commission (1936-37) and was secretary to the Palestinian delegation and secretary-general to the united Arab delegation at the London Conference (February 1939).

17. Joan Wucher King, *Historical Dictionary of Egypt* (Cairo, 1989, first edition 1984), pp. 108-109.

18. Ruud Peters, 'Het Recht: recente ontwikkelingen' in Jacques Waardenburg (ed), *Islam: Norm, ideaal en werkelijkheid* (Weesp, 1984), p. 295. Rudolph Peters, 'Erneuerungs-bewegungen im Islam vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert und die Rolle des Islams in der neueren Geschichte: Antikolonialismus und Nationalismus', in Werner Ende und Udo Steinbach (eds), *Der Islam in der Gegenwart: Entwicklung und Ausbreitung Staat, Politik und Recht, Kultur und Religion* (München, 1984), p. 93. Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Cairo, 1992, first edition 1990), pp. ix-x, pleaded for basing contemporary Islamic thinking on the early chapters of the *Qur'ân* only. Some websites like www.progressivemuslims.org (16 June 2006) www.free-minds.org (16 June 2006) argue that only the *Qur'an* should guide Muslims. This is a radical renewal within Islam.

studied in the 1930s at the Sorbonne in Paris. He was impressed by the nationalism and socialism he saw in Europe, especially in Germany whose political philosophy he considered an important bulwark against the main enemy which 'Aflaq saw in Communism with its antinationalist overtones.[19]

In Syria and Iraq, the *Ba'th* ideology became preponderant in the politics of the 1970s, up to the present.. *Ba'th* nationalism believed in one single Arab nation that should live in one state. The *Ba'th* ideology was much more clearly defined than Nasir's Pan-Arabism which pivoted around him personally. *Ba'thism* was rigidly socialist and secular and had a strong following among the many minorities of the Middle East, including the Christians. In contrast Nasir's dreams included the language of reformist Islam and used Islam as a rallying point for the Arab World.[20]

Under Nasir's government, the position of Christians in Egypt was undermined through his policies of nationalization and sequestrations. The Copts were overrepresented among the large landowners and therefore they suffered more from Nasir's policies than Muslims did. Christian Egyptians were able to play a role in Egyptian politics but they were always underrepresented in government and were only able to hold minor posts. This policy was exemplified in Butrus Butrus Ghali, a Coptic-Orthodox Christian. After the 1960s he played a leading role in the ruling Egyptian political party and institutes of the state, and from 1977 to 1991 was the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs. That was a position *under* the foreign minister. Ghali could never be promoted beyond this as the general political opinion in Egypt was that a Christian could not be a foreign minister of Egypt. His abilities were later recognized by the United Nations when they elected him as their secretary-general.[21] In this context it is of interest to note that Butrus Butrus Ghali's grandfather, Butrus Ghali *Pasha,* was prime minister of Egypt from 1908 to 1910, reflecting the climate of secular nationalism of that time.[22]

In Syria and Iraq, as well as in the Palestinian liberation movement, Christians could play a major role in national politics. They were usually overrepresented in government and bureaucracy. In Syria and Iraq this was related to the fact that their governments depended on religious minorities. For example Tariq 'Aziz, a Chaldean Christian, was able to hold the important position of foreign minister in Iraq. That would be impossible in Egypt where the government, for fear of being criticized by radical Muslims, has kept Christians out of the most important political roles.

4.2 Islamic fundamentalism

The emergence of militant Islamic opposition movements and the general Islamization of society has been the most remarkable phenomenon throughout the Arab region since the 1970s. It resulted from the thwarted hopes of secular ideologies to achieve both socio-economic progress and a strong international role for the Arab nations. Millions of young people adopted radical, politicized forms of Islam and began to call the Arab authorities to adopt and implement the *Shari'ah* as the main source for legislation. For the Christians in the Arab World, that would mean a return to *dhimmitude*. For these militant Muslims, not the 'Abbasid period but the time of Muhammad and his successors is the ideal.

It has been a major setback for the Christian witness in the public domain that many countries, including Egypt, adopted constitutions that stipulate that the *Shari'ah* is one of the pillars of national law. Egyptian law stipulates that 'Islam is the religion of the state *(din al-dawlah)* [and] the principles of the Islamic Shria'ah are the principal source *(al-masdar al-raisi)* for the legislation'.[23] Though the constitutions of most Arab countries also guarantee freedom of expression and the freedom of religion, the *Shari'ah* and its manifold interpretations can always be invoked against Christians.

The increase of Islamic radicalism in most Arab societies made many Christians feel threatened. From Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, Jordan and the Palestinian Territories, many Christians immigrated to the USA, Canada and Australia, so the percentage of Christians in those countries further decreased. The civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990) convinced hundreds of thousands of Maronite Christians to immigrate. Muslims also emigrated but not to the same extent. Christians formed a majority in Lebanon in 1946; by 2006 their numbers had dwindled to 25-30 percent.[24]

One result of the Islamization of society by the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups is that, generally speaking, the Churchsides with the authorities against the Islamic radicals, preferring the lesser evil of enlightened dictatorship over Islamization. Whereas Christians often played a public role in the anti-colonial struggles before independence, a Christian witness in regard to the lack of democracy and the weak adherence to basic human rights by the dictatorial regimes on the one hand and the Islamic radicalization of society on the other hand, is notably absent.

Only a radical re-interpretation of Islam and a dramatic change in social *mores* among Arab Muslims will enable Christians in the Arab World to enjoy true liberty and equality, which is a prerequisite for their full Christian witness. In spite of the fact that most Arab countries have inherited rather liberal legislation from their colonial powers, and that the Pan-Arab views of many Arab

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19. Maxime Rodinson, *Israel and the Arabs* (New York, 1982, first edition 1968), p. 74.

20. Hourani, *History of the Arab Peoples*, pp. 404-406.

21. United Nations Press Release: Biographical Note SG/2015/ Rev.7-BIO/2936/ Rev.7 (15 November 1996).

22. Wucher King, *Historical Dictionary of Egypt*, pp. 217-218.

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23. Article 2 of the Egyptian Constitution.

24. There are no official figures for the number of Christians in Lebanon in 2006; the figure given here is based on estimates of different Lebanese Christian Churches in interviews in February 2007 in Lebanon. The author of this study received these interviews on 24 February 2007.

countries after independence seemed to give the Church hope, Christians in the Arab World continue to be treated as less than equal citizens.

4.3 Uniformity vs. pluriformity

4.3.1 Opposite trends in the Arab World

After the successful struggle for independence of the Arab World during the 20th century, the educational levels of most countries increased rapidly. This added in more than one way to the unification of the Arab societies.

1. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) was adopted in all Arab countries as the medium of literary communication. This was related to the strong sense of belonging together as Arabs in a unifying Arab World.

2. The higher educational levels combined with the introduction of newspapers, books, radio and television have enabled the religious authorities of the Arab World to standardize the Islamic religious expressions to an extent that was never previously reached.

3. The increased educational levels combined with the modern media have allowed a strong Fundamentalist movement since the 1970s to add to the uniformity of Islam.

4. At the beginning of the 21st century, individual satellite television programs are being watched all over the Arab World at the same time and by vast audiences. This also reinforces uniformity.

5. Since their independence most Arab countries have been organized as one-party states under dictatorial presidents and kings.

The 20th century has also witnessed a strong trend toward pluriformity; this trend is growing in the same soil that feeds the trend to uniformity. Language, education, media and religion are its basis in the Arab World.

1. The Imazighen and the Kurds are stressing their own languages more than before, and in that context their cultural differences as well. Among the Arabs, the usage of the colloquial languages is as widespread as ever, in spite of the general usage of MSA for literary expressions.

2. The modern media, and presently especially satellite television and the Internet, are offering the Arab World a multitude of worldviews and choices, even in the realm of religions. Not only is the Christian faith presenting itself more publicly in the Arab World than ever before but secularist views are also shared widely.

3. The increased educational levels and the socio economic development of important segments of the population have amplified the desire to not let others dictate what to think and believe. An increasing number of Arabs are able and

prepared to oppose long-held views, even in the realms of politics and religion.

4. There is such variety of media and satellite television programs available all over the Arab World that this leads to leads to a fragmentation of audiences and to more pluriformity.

5. At the beginning of the 21st century, the demand for multi-party representative political systems is also heard more than ever before. In the years ahead, perhaps the most important contributing factor to pluriformity amongst Arabs will be the increased tension between *Sunni* and *Shiite* Islam.

4.3.2 Response of religious and political leaders

For Islam and its leaders it is not easy to resolve the tension between the opposing trends of uniformity and pluriformity, as Islam is clearly a participant in the conflict. From the beginnings of Islamic history, the 'ulama decided that the door to ijtihad should be closed. They do not allow a liberal re-evaluation of the sources of Islam for developing society along modern lines. Most Fundamentalists are prepared to reinterpret Islam for modernity but, like the conservative 'ulama, they aim at uniformity in Islam and society: they consider that pluriformity is the result of insufficient Islamization and Arabization.

Arab societies' struggle to accept pluriformity may require a reinterpretation of their historical understanding of tawhid (unity). Given that its views of societal unity and uniformity are linked to their views of the tawhid of God, it is yet to be seen whether Islam will be able to allow this transformation to occur. This change, however, is urgently needed in the Arab World and, if a change in societal views occurs, that may also have far reaching ramifications for the view of the tawhid of God.

The political authorities in the Arab World have, overall, tried to balance both tendencies; they have allowed a modicum of freedom of political, social, cultural and religious expression in order not to become estranged from the modernizing segments in society and from international developments including economic ones. At the same time, in order to accommodate the growing masses of Fundamentalist Muslims, the Arab governments have set strict boundaries on what is religiously allowed in their societies.

The Churches of the Arab World have often been the victims of these balancing acts by the authorities, as most Fundamentalist Muslims want to keep the role of the Church in society as marginal as the *Shari'ah* prescribes. This means, among other things, that the Churches are severely curtailed in their public witness to the Gospel. There is hardly any space for Christian mass media in the Arab World. Most radio and television broadcasters beam their programs into the Arab World from external transmitters. If present trends continue, it is unlikely that the Churches of the Arab World will receive more space in the public domain for their public witness.

4.3.3 Attitude of the Church

In general, most Churches have also become more fundamentalist but, vis-à-vis Islam, the Church has responded to the trend of fundamentalism in different ways. The Maronites in Lebanon for example have opted for *militant 'ghettoization'*.[25] They can afford militancy, as they are a large minority in Lebanon with political majority rights.

Though the fundamentalist trend in Islam tends to marginalize the Church, it is also true that many Christians in the Arab World opt for *self-marginalization.* This is both due to pressure from Islam and to the trends of fundamentalism among the Christian Arabs themselves. The Coptic-Orthodox Church exemplifies this trend. They have chosen isolation from society in a quiet manner. In 1993, Patriarch Shenuda III opposed the idea of the Copts organizing themselves politically into a Coptic party, 'in order not to increase the isolation of Copts in the society'. He appealed to the Copts to participate in political life through the existent parties and criticized the government for isolating the Copts by 'keeping them away from political activity'.[26] As the Copts are only a small minority in Egypt, their chance to be represented in

the existent political parties is small in the present socio-religious climate. By asking the Copts to not organize themselves politically, their Patriarch chose in fact for a continued distancing of the Copts from political life.

Another approach among Christians is the most ultimate form of isolationism, namely emigration. The stream of Christians leaving the Arab World continues unabated: it increases each time there is a major political or military confrontation. This, combined with a continued leakage of Christians to Islam and the reduction in the size of Christian families, has lead to an ongoing decrease in the relative size of the Christian populations in the Arab World. In 1989, the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) suggested that the Church in the Arab World might also respond differently to the trend of fundamentalism:

> They can become a militant ghetto, they can become a docile ghetto, or they can seek to adopt an open Christianity which acknowledges the legitimacy of the Islamic revival, but which also searches for its own role in current events.[27]

To 'seek the legitimacy of the Islamic revival' focuses on the root causes of that revival. Many Christians in the Arab World see the foreign policies of Europe and especially the USA as the main cause of Islamic anger and the rise of fundamentalism in the Arab World. Western support for Israel is one major issue. This approach of MECC is exemplified in the Palestinian Liberation Theology as proposed by *al-Sabil* in Jerusalem. This organization, led by the Anglican priest Na'im 'Atiq,

endeavors to create a Christian theology that is contextual for the Arab World, in particular for Palestine; it wants the Church to stand in the forefront of the efforts to create an independent Palestinian state.[28] It must also be said that this organization, in its efforts to play that role, mostly speaks to its own Christian constituency and to its Western supporters and not to all of society.

Most Christians in the Arab World are so fearful of the Islamic majority that they prefer the ghetto or emigration above participation in Arab society.[29] This attitude of fear and hopelessness is unlikely to change if the Muslims of the Arab World do not unequivocally pronounce, both legally and socially, that they regard Christians as fully equal citizens: they must be allowed to witness to their Christian hope, not only in the secure *koinonia* of their Church, or through their *diaconal* acts in Church and society, but also by the *kerygmatic* witness to Christ in the public domain.

If the Christian Church in the Arab World wants to be free to witness to Jesus Christ through its *koinonia, diakonia* and *kerygma*, it is necessary that the Arab societies and their governments allow their countries to develop more towards pluriformity. The Church has an important role to play in witnessing to its Christian *koinonia* as a model that supersedes the dilemma of uniformity and pluriformity: the Church moves toward unity in spite of its pluriformity. Unity, not uniformity, is what allows Christians to be one, in spite of a multiplicity of expressions of the Christians faith.

5 Pluriformity and Unity of the Church

5.1 Pluriformity of the Arab Church

As participants in their Arab societies, the many Churches of the contemporary Arab World are familiar with the opposing trends of uniformity and pluriformity *within* their own Church communities. Most Churches have adopted MSA as their liturgical language, though they stress the need to maintain elements of their historic languages in their worship. The higher educational levels of the clergy and their Church members, and the availability of the mass media have helped the Churches to standardize their teachings. This has led to more uniformity within the Church communities. At the same time, however, pluriformity is being illustrated by educated Christians who can read their Scriptures, who watch a variety of Christian and non-Christian uncensored media and who are more critical when assessing the views of their Church leaders.

The Churches of the Arab World have historically resolved their linguistic, cultural and liturgical pluriformity by agreeing to a geographic division to define their spheres of influence, as evidenced in the agreements of the Ecumenical Councils concerning the patriarchates. These geographic arrangements became outdated when Creedal

25. Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen, 1995), p. 225.

26. Ibid., p. 226.

27. Quoted in Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East,* p. 227.

28. For more on *al-Sabīl*, see J.M. Strengholt, 'Naim Ateek and the Activities of Sabeel', in William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Karkkainen (eds), *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, 2008), pp. 539-542.

29. Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East,* pp. 227-228.

differences became unresolved bones of contention, and different denominations came to exist side by side in the same geographic realms. These Councils were important for the formulation of theology but they did not heal the divisions; they rather underlined the differences as they excluded those with different views.

The Eighth Ecumenical Council in Ferrara-Florence (1438- 1445) brought leaders from all Churches together once again, but it ended in failure. According to Jean Corbon, a Greek-Catholic who teaches Ecumenism at the University of the Holy Spirit in Kaslik (Lebanon) and at the University of St. Joseph in Beirut, Ferrara-Florence did not succeed because:

> [The] Churches had lived too long with the disparity of their growth without getting to know each other; the diversity of their cultures and canonic disciplines rendered them strangers to one another; and the general blocking among ethnicity, political power and ecclesiastical communion made the necessary recognition of legitimate differences incompatible with the receiving of the divine gift of unity.[30]

After the failure of Ferrara-Florence, the Roman-Catholic Church changed its approach. It began to invite individuals and dioceses that were part of Middle Eastern Churches into the Roman- Catholic fold; these Christian Arabs were allowed to maintain their liturgical languages and practices, with some adaptations, but they had to accept the primacy of the patriarch of Rome. This did not bring unity to the Churches in the Arab World; it created more division. Protestant mission work that began in the early 19th century added to that division. Whereas the Churches of the Arab World are still not satisfied with the growth of those Churches in 'their' lands, they have done likewise during the 20th century. The mass emigration of Christians from the Arab World has led to the growth of hundreds of their Churches in the West.

5.2 Unity of the Arab Church

In 1902 in Istanbul the Greek-Orthodox Patriarch Joachim III made the first serious call to unity of the Churches during the 20th century. He was, in the words of Corbon, 'stripped of the pomp of Byzantium and persecuted'. It was in those circumstances that he sent an encyclical letter to all Greek-Orthodox Churches, asking them to search for common ground with the other Churches to form a *koinonia* of Churches, without suggesting that they do away with their pluriformity.[31] In the decades to come there was an increasing tendency toward an informal Ecumenism in the Churches of the Arab World, but on a formal level not much was accomplished.

The first steps to formal Ecumenism were taken in the context of Protestant mission. In 1927 in Hilwan (Egypt) missionaries formed the *Christian Council for Western Asia and Northern Africa.* In 1930 it was renamed *Near East Christian Council* (NECC) and in 1962 the meaning

of the abbreviation was changed to *Near East Council of Churches.* This change was prompted by the desire of the Protestant Churches of the Arab World to free themselves from the preponderant role of foreign mission agencies in NECC. This change also enabled NECC to enlist the Syriac-Orthodox Church among its members.[32]

In 1974 the organization's name changed to *Middle East Council of Churches* (MECC). Whereas NECC was a mostly Protestant organization, MECC also encompassed all Miaphysite Churches and the Greek-Orthodox Church. The first general secretary was the Presbyterian Albirt Istiru. In 1977, the Greek-Orthodox Jubrail 'Gaby' Habib, who had played a major role in Ecumenical forums in Lebanon, took over.[33] Matters that had been important in the route towards the formation of MECC were the annual *Week of Prayer for Unity,* the formation of a regional theology and the Christian Arab response to the war of June 1967 between Israel and the Arabs.[34] These would continue to be important themes in MECC. In 1990, the Catholic Churches joined MECC as full members.[35] In 1994, the Presbyterian Riyad Jarjour was elected general secretary. He was succeeded in 2003, after two terms, by Jirjis Salih, a Coptic-Orthodox theologian.

During this period of Ecumenicity, the Churches of the Arab World have made remarkable progress toward a witness of *koinonia.* Not only has that been made visible in communal *diaconal* projects, inside and outside of the structures of MECC, but also through a striking progress toward a unified theology, especially in those areas that led to separation during early Church history.

In 1965, the Roman-Catholic and the Greek-Orthodox Churches mutually withdrew the *anathemas* pronounced against each other in 1054. This was an important step in renewing the *koinonia* of the Church as it led to better relationships between these Churches in the Arab World.

While re-affirming their rejection of the Chalcedonian decisions, the Coptic-Orthodox and Syriac-Orthodox Churches became members of MECC in 1974, asserting that they would 'engage as a family of Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East in any theological dialogue with other Churches and Christian world communions'.[36] The Coptic-Orthodox Church presently enjoys good relations with the Roman-Catholic Church. The two Churches signed a common declaration in 1973 which stipulated that they would search for unity.[37] Patriarch

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30. Jean Corbon, 'Ecumenism in the Middle East: History', in Habib Badr (ed), *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut, 2005), p. 874

31. Ibid., p. 875.

32. Ibid., p. 876.

33. Gabriel H!ab Īb describes his own first steps in ecumenism in Gabriel Habib, 'Ecumenism in the Middle East: A personal Experience', in Habib Badr (ed), *Christianity: A History in the Middle East* (Beirut, 2005), p. 887: '[In] the days of my youth […] I was member of a group of students under the Orthodox Youth Movement, which called for spiritual revival in the Church and, through it, the search for lost Christian unity. [The] agenda of our group contained, in addition to studies from the Bible and the writings of the fathers of the Church and current social issues, the question of the unity of the Church and its witness in today's world.'

34. Corbon, 'Ecumenism in the Middle East: History', p. 877.

35. Manfred Lundgren, *Proclaiming Christ to His World; The Experience of Radio Voice of the Gospel: 1957-1977* (Geneva, 1983), pp. 12-13.

36. Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 78

37. Ibid. p. 74.

Shenudah III participated personally in the Assembly of the WCC in Canberra (Australia) in 1991, where he was elected as one of its presidents. In 1994 he was also chosen as one of the presidents of MECC.[38]

An important milestone in the relations of the Anglicans in the Arab World with the other Churches was that, on 1 October 1987, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, and Shenudah III reached an agreement on the *filioque.* (Arabic: *wa al- Ibn*). The Anglican Communion was the first Chalcedonian Church to agree that the *filioque* should not be read as part of the Creeds. Agreement was also reached on the Christological formula of Kyrollos on the *mia physis*.[39]

Between the Greek-Orthodox and the Miaphysite Orthodox Churches, a fundamental accord on the Christological faith was reached in Chambesy (Switzerland) in 1990. Some questions are still to be resolved before full communion is reached but, in the meantime, the Greek-Orthodox and Syriac-Orthodox patriarchates of Antioch have agreed to a pastoral protocol.

In 1994, the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV and the Roman Pope John Paul II signed a Common Christological Declaration in the Vatican which states:

> The controversies of the past led to anathemas, bearing on persons and on formulas. The Lord's Spirit permits us to understand better today that the divisions brought about in this way were due in large part to misunderstandings. […] We experience ourselves united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace.[40]

The Church leaders also decided to cooperate in the areas of catechesis and the formation of future priests. In the same year, MECC invited the Assyrians to become full members but the Assyrian Church declined. In 1997, the Assyrians signed a Joint Synodal Decree for Promoting Unity with the Chaldean Church.[41] In 1997, Mar Dinkha IV entered into negotiations with the Syriac-Orthodox Church and as a result the two Churches stopped 'anathemizing' each other.[42] The importance of these and other agreements between the Churches of the historic patriarchates cannot be overestimated when considering the impact on their Christian witness.

Missionaries played an important role in aiding the Churches of the Arab World in their search for more unity. Even among those missionaries whose sending churches or agencies avoid involvement with the Ecumenical movement, there seems to be a growing awareness that the historic Churches of the Arab World are a valid expression of the Body of Christ; some advocate cooperation with those Churches. This position is illustrated by an affirmation of mission agencies like Interserve in 1992, 'As Evangelical Protestants we affirm that the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East, too, belong to God Almighty and that they have a vital role to play in God's mission to the region'.[43]

For a Christian witness that recognizes the importance of *koinonia,* the Ecumenical work toward the unity of the Churches in the Arab World is the *sine-qua-non* of Christian mission.

6 Forward

The Churches in the Arab World are presently as pluralistic as the societies of which they are part. At the same time, the Ecumenical movement of the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) shows that this pluriformity does not need to break the *koinonia* of the Church. This is not to say that the Ecumenical movement has been able to resolve all matters that separate the Churches of the Arab World. Nevertheless, the very fact that these Churches are talking at all and have been able to find ways to express their *koinonia* in spite of their differences of opinion is in itself a testimony to the Gospel.

The Churches can show Arab society that *unity* and *uniformity* are not equivalent and that differences in religious expression do not need to break the *ummah* (community). They must seek for concrete ways of making this issue clear, in the first place in their Church life but also in more theoretical ways.

The witness of the *koinonial* unity of the different Churches of the Arab World is not only a direct witness to Jesus Christ, but it is also a witness that helps Arab society to come to grips with radical societal changes. For the Church to help Arab society adopt pluriformity as a mode of organizing societal life, it is not only in the interest of Arab society as a whole but it would also directly benefit the Church. It would create more space for its *koinonial*, *kerygmatic* and *diaconal* witness to Jesus Christ in the public domain of the Arab World where it presently cannot even be sure of its continued existence.

We must uphold unity with all Churches, in line with Jesus' prayer for the unity of His flock. Jesus links this unity strongly with a Trinitarian view of God and with mission in the world. This is the mandate for the Church in the Arab World: Jesus prayed for the believers,

> …that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to

38. Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Two Thousand Years of Coptic Christianity* (Cairo, New York, 2004, first edition 1999), p. 7.

39. Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Christians in Egypt: Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Communities Past and Present* (Cairo, 2006), p. 104. In the Anglican Church in Egypt, the filoque was manually erased from the Arabic prayerbooks.

40. Bailey and Bailey, *Who are the Christians in the Middle East?*, p. 131-132.

41. Ibid.

42. Www.cired.org (28 March 2008).

43. David P. Teague (ed), *Turning Over a New Leaf: Protestant Mission and the Orthodox Churches of the Middle East. Final Report of a Multi-Mission Study Group on Orthodoxy* (London, 1992), p. 116. This booklet was a publication by three mission agencies in the Arab World, namely Interserve, Middle East Christian Outreach (MECO) and Middle East Media (MEM). In 2006 an updated edition was published on www.stfrancismagazine.info (1 June 2006).

let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.[44]

Church unity is not something exclusively *spiritual* as an attribute of the *invisible* church. *Visible* unity is a non negotiable theological premise and it is this witness that the Arab World is in need of. The Christian witness to Jesus Christ must testify to the unity of all parts of the Body of Christ. Missionary methods that do not do this are questionable for the Churches of the Arab World: the Coptic-Orthodox, Greek-Orthodox, Maronite, Presbyterian, the Pentecostal Church and others all participate in the one Body of Christ in their lands.

The Churches of the Arab World must cooperate closely in proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and focus on supporting the development toward more pluriformity in the Arab World. Time is running out for the Church; Christians continue to emigrate from all Arab countries to the West fearing the uniformity that Fundamentalist Muslims want to impose on society. Without drastic societal and political changes, it must be feared that the cradle of the Christian faith will, in the decades ahead, lose most of its public witness by the Church both because of the emigration of Christians and because of the shrinking public space for the witness to Jesus Christ.

Some suggestions:

1. For the Church and Christian workers to focus only on individual salvation is a denial of God's act in creating society. In the context of Islam this is even worse as Islam is to a large extent a tribal societal view.

2. In countries where Islam is a dominant formative element, the Islamic-based treatment of minorities will not change if the views of Islam do not change.

3. An important problem in Islamic societies presently, is that they are not able to easily accommodate different religious and social views. What makes it hard for Islamic societies to do so is their view of perfect society, that is, a monolithic and unified Islamic society.

4. The Church has its own views of unity, uniformity and pluriformity, and is able to offer Muslim societies a better and more effective way to deal with these issues than what Islam offers.

5. It is important to show the Arab World that the beauty of the early 'Abbasid period was related to the pluriformity of society. Good historical studies can be useful for this.

6. Expat Church workers must play a role in helping the churches of the Arab World to propose their views of society as an alternative manner to develop society.

7. The unity of the Church is intricately related to mission and its testimony to Christ.

8. Expat Christians workers in the Arab World must be extremely careful that they do not divide the Church further, but that they participate in the movement to unify the Church.

9. The witness to Jesus Christ is only a complete witness if the *kerygma* (what we believe), the *diakonia* (our life of service for one another and for society) and the *koinonia* (our communion with the Trinity and with one another) of the Church are all spoken of and made visible.

10. A strong society can be defined as one where people can freely communicate, where serving one another is normative, and where people form a community around certain core views. This is the secular reflection of the triad of *kerygma, diakonia and koinonia.*

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44. John 17.