

ARAB CHRISTIAN: A HISTORY IN THE MIDDLE EAST by Kenneth Cragg Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991. Pp. ix - 336. Hardcover \$29.95

reviewed by Bassam M. Madany

The English-speaking world has at its disposal a great body of literature dealing with the Arab world and its dominant religion, Islam. However, books about Arab Christians are rather scarce. Kenneth Cragg's latest book, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, is therefore a very welcome contribution to the literature on this subject. This work deals with the history of Arab Christians from before the rise of Islam to the present day. But it is much more than a historical account of a minority group as it covers a variety of theological and missiological subjects.

After the Muslim conquest of Syria, Mesopotamia and Egypt, Christians continued to be the majority of the population well into the ninth century. Their survival required total submission to Islam. Actually, they became "noncitizens," a fact often overlooked by Muslim historians.

Chapter 4, *Christian and Muslim in the Early Centuries*, traces the encounter between the conquerors and the conquered and the gradual "legal and spiritual inferiorization" of the latter. Cragg describes the meeting of the two theistic faiths in these words:

It is clear that Muslims had their frame of reference fully in place. If we accept the traditional view of the finalizing of the Qur'an in the first quarter century, its supreme court of appeal was in control of its stance, with the steadily growing complementary authority of Tradition deriving from Muhammad by criteria of authenticity developing with it.

By warrant of these, Muslims were equipped to teach Christians what thoughts about God were thinkable and what were not. The Nicene Creed and its subsequent elaborations ... were in the latter category, once that creed got beyond the unity of God and the fact of creation. The divinity acknowledged in Jesus by Christians ... was unthinkable. God had made His word a Book from heaven. Books were all that prophets had, and they were only means to guidance and direction.

The author could not avoid discussing briefly the Christological controversies and their future impact on the Christian-Muslim encounter.

Monophysites were ready to risk [a certain] artificiality in the humanity of Jesus in the interests, as they saw it, of safeguarding the dignity of the divine. But this very fact disqualified them from commending the faith of the Incarnation intelligibly to Muslims when the conquest brought them together. To be sure, the complexities of Chalcedon were not conducive to ready comprehension by adherents of a faith so bound over as Islam was to assertive simplicity about God and transcendence. By its implicit Docetism (or the threat of it), Monophysite Christianity in Egypt and elsewhere seemed to admit the Qur'anic premise that somehow a human dimension was derogatory to the divine.

During the Ottoman period (1516 - 1918), converts to Islam from Christian groups in the Balkans were a constant reminder to Arab Christians of their option to Islamize and be done with their inferior status. So, many Arab Christians, finding themselves in difficult situations, opted for Islam. Others sought the protection of European powers. Foreign protection of Eastern Christianity brought during this period the "Uniate" phenomenon and added to the divisions of the Eastern Churches. The pope and his emissaries succeeded in the creation of such churches as the Greek Catholic, the Coptic Catholic, and the Nestorian Catholic (known as the Chaldean.) The entire Maronite Church of Lebanon came under the banner of Roman Catholicism.

Early in the nineteenth century, Protestant missionaries arrived in the Middle East. Their impact went beyond the organization of evangelical churches. They built schools, hospitals and orphanages. The most prominent educational institution was the Syrian Protestant College (1866) which came to be known early in this century as the American University of Beirut. It is to their great credit that they produced in 1860, with the help of Lebanese Christian scholars, a new translation of the Bible known as the Smith-Van Dyck Version.

Secularism entered the Middle East at the same time as Protestant missions. As a by-product of this Western world view, Arab nationalism was born. Arab Christians played a major role in its spread among the educated people. Some crucial questions are raised by Cragg regarding the participation of Arab Christians in the political life of their respective countries in the Middle East on a basis other than the "dhimmi" [i.e. protected] tradition.

The notion implicit here of a non-Muslim sharing or belonging with Muslims would seem, initially at least, to be an uncongenial Islamic proceeding. It implies a motive other than that of outright "submission" and approves a kind of Muslim-Christian duality very different from the contractual dhimmi relationship as historically understood - a relationship for which there was no expectation of faith (which could not be other than entire if it was to be "Muslim") and no thought of shared belief or common community.

Chapters 8, 9 and 10 are devoted to such specific areas as Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. Under the title of Perspectives of Egypt, Cragg offers some insights which enable us to understand both the genius and the plight of the Copts. This is extremely important for Western Christians as they watch the rise of Islamic "Fundamentalism" and its vision of a totally Islamized Egypt. The Tragedy of Lebanon enables the reader to take into consideration the various factors which led to the civil war in what used to be called the Switzerland of the Middle East. It also leaves us with a strong feeling of the hopelessness of reconstituting Lebanon as it was during its modern history. The author attributes the tragedy to the unwillingness or inability of the Maronites to view the world from a realistic point of view.

Chapter 10 which deals with the Palestinian Arabs is entitled Arab Christianity and Israel. Due to the impact of Dispensational hermeneutics on many evangelical groups, an extremely one-sided attitude has developed among Western Christians vis-a-vis the Palestinians. This reading of the Bible quite often gave Israel a carte blanche in its treatment of the Arabs of Palestine. Bishop Cragg's analysis and insights offer a much needed corrective to this one-sidedness. His emphasis on the great prophets of ancient Israel not sanctioning the expansionism of Israel today is very

much in place. However, more could have been said regarding the New Testament concept of the new era which was inaugurated by the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of the Son of God. The classical New Testament passage concerning the status of the Jews (Romans 9 - 11) prior the return of Christ is silent about the re-birth of a Jewish state. Furthermore, when we take the unity of the Bible into consideration, one cannot but take exception to Cragg's suggestion that "Arab Christianity has somehow to detach itself from the more menacing parts of its Old Testament heritage. This must be so both in its theological focus and its liturgical usages." In any liturgical reading of Old Testament passages, and this is specifically necessary in the Arabic speaking world, it is the responsibility of the reader to place the specific passage within the larger context of God's plan of redemption. The particularism of the Old Testament era was for that specific time. The problem does not reside in certain parts of the Old Testament scriptures, but in their exposition. The role of Biblical Theology becomes very concrete in enabling the Arab Christian to properly "read" the Bible and remain within the tradition of the "One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church."

The plight of Arab Christians is described in Chapter 12 under the heading of A Future with Islam? It begins with these solemn words: "The question mark can be removed, for there is no future for Arab Christianity except with Islam. Yet the interrogative remains. It is the quality of that future which is in perpetual question." In this respect, Kenneth Cragg's message becomes difficult to grasp. We are told that there are points of commonality between Christians and Muslims, for example "in the unity and the sovereignty of God and the due stature of the human in surrender." On a highly theoretical level, this may be true. But in the real life as lived by Arab Christians today, they find little comfort in such musings. They feel betrayed by their former "protectors" in the West and rejected by their Muslim compatriots. But thanks to the globalization of world civilization, Arab Christians do expect other Christians to manifest a genuine ecumenicity by declaring their solidarity with them. In an era which seems to recognize the human rights of all minorities, it is only proper and just to speak to the conscience of the Muslim majorities to properly respect the rights of Arab Christians.

Two misprints appear in the book: on page 210, the name of a former president of Lebanon should be spelled: Amin; and on page 237, the Israeli intelligence organization is known as "Shin Beth" and not "Beth Shin."

We owe a great debt to Kenneth Cragg for his timely study of Arab Christianity. A word of thanks is also due to the Westminster/John Knox Press, for making this book available to the public. We trust that more books on this subject will appear in the final decade of this century.