

CHRISTIANITY IN THE ARAB WORLD

The Churches under the Cross - by Bassam Madany

Iran (Persia) is not a part of the Arab world, yet the recent cataclysmic events in that country point to a new era of tension in the Middle East. It is too early to assess the full meaning of the Islamic revolution led by Ayatullah Khomeini, but it is evident that there will be repercussions throughout the entire Arab world.

The call for a radical return to the original teachings of Islam and the application of the Quranic law (sharia) will mean less and less freedom for the non-Muslim population. Hence the need for the Christian community in the free world to be sensitive to the cross being carried by Christians living in the Arab world.

The Arabian Peninsula

The triumph of Islam thirteen hundred years ago brought the banishment of all non-Muslims from the Arabian Peninsula. Now, thanks to the oil industry, there are thousands of Egyptian, Syrian, Lebanese, Jordanian and Iraqi Christians working in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. There are likewise many Pakistani, Indian and Korean Christians. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for any of them to get permission to erect a place of worship. They can only use what remains from the pioneer mission days. Contrast the ease with which mosques appear in the free world!

Iraq

Iraq, the Mesopotamia of the Scriptures, is the home of the Assyrian churches, remnants of the Nestorians who did not subscribe to the decisions of the early ecumenical councils. They experience varying degrees and types of Islamic pressures. Thousands of them have migrated to Western Europe and North America in search of freedom.

The dominant force in Iraq is a political ideology known as the Ba'ath Party (Arab renaissance.) They will be watching neighboring Iran closely since 65% of their Muslim population are Shi'ites, and thus closely related to Iranian Muslims who are also Shi'ites. This branch of Islam goes back to Ali, the fourth Muslim Caliph and son-in-law of Mohammed. (Most Arab Muslims are Sunni, who emphasize the equal importance of the Quran and the traditional schools of interpretation of Islamic law.)

Syria

Syria is under the thumb of another branch of the Ba'ath Party. Until recently they were fiercely opposed to its counter-part in Iraq. A common resistance to President Sadat and his peace initiatives, has brought them together.

One-fifth of the Syrian population are Christian, most of them Greek Orthodox. Free to worship in their churches on the Lord's day, Syrian Christians are experiencing a restriction of their youth oriented activities. Syria's President Assad displays an avid commitment to a pan-Arab socialist ideology which dictates the indoctrination of youth to take place only within the state-owned public schools.

Jordan

Fifteen percent of the population of Jordan claim allegiance to Christianity. They enjoy a greater amount of freedom. A recent tide of Islamic pressure is felt in the schools and other institutions of the state. Needless to say evangelical mission work among the non-Christian population of the Arab Muslim countries is completely prohibited.

Lebanon

Lebanon has been in the news since the spring of 1975, when the delicate balance between the Christian and Muslim communities disintegrated due to the armed Palestinian presence. The refusal of the Christians to share more power with Muslims was due to the fact that almost every Arab country which achieved independence has succumbed to totalitarian regimes. It is not easy to catalogue all the infringements of the human rights of the people of the Arab world by military and ideological dictatorships. Sufficient to say that the Christians of Lebanon believed that Lebanon's fate would be the same, should the reins of government be handed over to the Muslims.

It is difficult to predict the future of this war-torn country but it is safe to say that the Lebanon of 1918-75 has gone forever. This has far-reaching consequences for Christian missions to the Arab world since Beirut was a center of Protestant Christian activity for the entire area. Christians of the free world must be in ardent prayer for Lebanon. More concern must be manifested for the human and political rights of the Christian population there.

Egypt

The most important part of the Arab Middle East is Egypt. Demographically speaking, this becomes evident when we consider that of the 120 million Arabs, 40 million live in North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) and half of the remaining 80 million live in Egypt. Egypt is the leading Arab country in politics, military power and the arts. Most importantly, the Copts, the largest Christian minority in the entire Muslim world, live there. As a result of Protestant mission work in Egypt in the 19th century, the Coptic evangelical church came into being.

While the regime of President Sadat has been more open to the West and has ended the Nasserite socialistic ideology, the plight of the Christians in Egypt has not improved that much. Whether one speaks to the traditional Coptic Orthodox, or the Evangelicals of Egypt, one becomes aware of the fact that there is discrimination. Few Christian Egyptians reach high government positions. Young Coptic Egyptians, feeling their rights are restricted, are opting for immigration to the Western world.

The revival within the Orthodox Coptic church, as reported in certain religious magazines seems to have been short-lived. There is no doubt that the rank and file within this church are extremely open to the liberating teachings of the Gospel. That the Hierarchy is not, has been demonstrated by the pressure put upon a vocal Coptic Orthodox priest, which led him to publicly renounce some fundamental Biblical doctrines which he had previously espoused and proclaimed.

Conclusion

As mentioned in the opening paragraph of this report, it is too soon to gauge the full implications of the Islamic takeover of Iran. However, to insure the support of their religious leaders, every Arab regime will be re-emphasizing the importance of Islam for all areas of life and the duty of citizens to reaffirm their allegiance to this theistic faith. Not only the traditional sheikhs are reading the Quran over radio and television, but even children are being featured.

Christians in the free world need to know more about this religion and its static world-and-life view. The major obstacles which separate Christianity from militant Islam are not only cultural, but profoundly religious. The church and the individual Christian in the Arab world, live in an atmosphere which loudly denies the deity of Christ, the authenticity of the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity, original sin and the crucifixion.

The churches of the Middle East are almost entirely pre-occupied with their survival because they live under various and subtle forms of persecution. Most of them have not had the benefits of the Protestant reformation. We look forward to the day when they will rediscover their Biblical roots and will proclaim lovingly and courageously Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Our part is to uphold them by our prayerful interest and sympathetic understanding.