

## The Plight of Eastern Christianity Under Islam - The Christian in a Muslim Society

Bassam M. Madany, April 8, 2001

The subject of human rights has dominated the news media during the second half of the twentieth century. In the West many people were deeply concerned about the fate of Soviet citizens who had dared to challenge the authorities and who suffered the consequences in internal exile in a gulag. In the Free World, our attention was riveted on South Africa where tensions rose to a high level between the blacks and the whites due to the racial policies of the white dominated authorities. Pressures were brought upon the government of South Africa, through economic sanctions, in order to liberalize its policies vis-à-vis the non-whites.

While interest in human rights is still a live issue at the beginning of the twenty first century, we seem to be oblivious of those situations that come under the same classification of human rights violations, but which existed for centuries. Specifically, if these infractions occur in the Muslim world. I am referring specifically to the plight of national Christians within Muslim societies. Early in the previous century, these large minorities had hoped to see better days under the banner of nationalism. But these hopes were dashed by the rise of radical Islamic movements in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war of June 1967.

At the beginning of this new century, the subject of The Christian in a Muslim Society should be of concern to all Western peoples, and more specifically to Western Christians. On the one hand, we witness the rising presence of millions of Muslims living in Europe and in North America. They enjoy equal rights with the citizens of their host countries. They build mosques, cultural centers, and schools, publish newspapers, magazines, and broadcast in Arabic on local radio stations. On the other hand, the situation is quite the opposite, when it comes to the national Christians living under Muslim rule. Throughout history, they have seldom enjoyed the rights that should be theirs; since they are the original inhabitants of their lands. They were conquered by the Arab/Islamic forces that invaded their homelands in seventh century.

To speak about the predicament of Christians living in Muslim lands is very difficult. For the problem does not exist --- as far as Muslims are concerned. Rarely does one notice any mention of the subject of the human rights of minorities in Arabic publications. For decades during the previous century, Western nations were exclusively preoccupied with the global challenge of Marxism, so they did not focus their attention on the infractions of human rights that were occurring for centuries in Muslim lands. To criticize Islamic governments would bring instant retaliation. Arab oil has been very essential for the health of Western economies. Thus, silence became the best policy vis-à-vis the Islamic countries. Some Americans may still remember the big fracas that took place when the docudrama, THE DEATH OF A PRINCESS, was shown on television in the U.K. and the USA around twenty-five years ago. Saudi Arabia did its utmost to stop the telecasting of this show fearing that it would give it a bad image in the English-speaking world. And when it was shown in certain parts of America, care was taken to invite Muslim commentators who did their best to "salvage" the reputation of the strict Saudi regime.

This is why Christians living in the free world ought to be very concerned about the status of Christians in the Muslim world. They must do their utmost to help these brothers and sisters who have almost been completely forgotten. The concerns of Western Christians should not be limited to those subjects that are on the agenda of the secular news media. We shall proceed to treat the subject of The Christian in a Muslim Society under five headings.

### **1. An examination of certain passages of the Quran that deal with the status of Christians.**

The Quranic teachings about pagans, Jews and Christians have had a tremendous influence on the Muslim attitude towards the minorities living within the household of Islam. The Quran teaches that Islam is the final revelation of God to mankind. Paganism is utterly wrong, and must not be tolerated in the lands conquered by Islam. Witness the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and their attempts to eradicate all traces of Buddhism in their land. But since Judaism and Christianity were revealed religions and thus were valid for a specific period of time, the followers of these faiths may continue to practice their religions within certain limits. Muhammad's views on the "heavenly religions" (theistic faiths) may be summed up in these words: Moses received God's revelation, the Torah, as guidance for the people of Israel. Jesus received another revelation, the Gospel or Injeel, as guidance for his contemporaries. But Muhammad received God's final and complete revelation, the Quran, intended for all mankind and for all time. The continued allegiance of Jews and Christians to their older faiths demonstrates their unwillingness to submit to the authority of God's final revelation, Islam.

Upon examining the texts of the Quran, one finds certain ambivalence about our subject.

"Lo! those who believe (in that which is revealed unto thee, Muhammad), and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabaeans -- whoever believeth in Allah and the Last Day and doeth right --- surely their reward is with the Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them neither shall they grieve." Surah 2: 62

"There is no compulsion in religion..." Surah 2: 256a

"And unto thee have We revealed the Scriptures with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it. So judge between them by that which Allah hath revealed, and follow not their desires away from the truth which hath come unto thee. For each We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He would have made you one community..." Surah 5: 48a

The reason I quote these verses is that they have often been used as a proof for the tolerance of Islam. And indeed, taken by themselves, in isolation from other Quranic texts, and from Islamic tradition and history, one may think that they do teach tolerance of people who espouse theistic religions. The Quran declares that Jews, Christians and Sabaeans believe in one God, the Last Day, and in doing that which is right. And since God has declared "there is no compulsion in religion," one may presume that followers of these heavenly or theistic religions may continue to practice their faith without fear of persecution or discrimination.

In the last quotation mentioned above, Allah says to Muhammad (according to the Quran) that the revelation he was receiving was in harmony with the previous revelations. In other words, the Torah of Moses and the Injeel of Jesus are held in high esteem by Allah. Unfortunately, while Muhammad seemed to believe strongly that there was no conflict between the message he was receiving (the Quran) and the previous revelations, yet he realized that both Jews and Christians did not welcome his teachings. They based their lack of enthusiasm for his message on the teachings of their own scriptures. This led Muhammad, and later on Muslim theologians, to claim that the Scriptures of the Jews and the Christians had been corrupted. And yet even in this text which alludes to a conflict with Jews and Christians, the Quran teaches that the sovereign God had permitted the rise of many theistic religions: "Had Allah willed He would have made you one community."

Muhammad's intolerance of the Jews and the Christians appears clearly in various parts of the Quran. Here are some examples:

"Because of the wrongdoing of the Jews We forbade them good things which were (before) made lawful unto them and because of their much hindering from Allah's way." Surah 4: 160

"O people of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word which He conveyed unto Mary, and a spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not 'Three' --- Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One God. Far it is removed from His transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His is all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender." Surah 4: 171

While the Jews are more criticized in the Quran than the Christians, the latter are often charged with grievous doctrinal sins such as ascribing deity to the Messiah as well as teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. The Quran does not admit that these are revealed teachings. Rather, they are innovations made by Christians in the days which preceded Islam. Such Quranic texts have left a strong impression upon the Muslim mind. Christians are judged to be guilty of gross doctrinal errors; and they continue to cling to them in spite of the clear revelations of the Quran! We must remember that the Quran does not claim to bring any new teachings about God and his will, neither does it claim to contradict the previous scriptures. If the current books of the Jews and the Christians do not harmonize with the Quran, it follows that they have been altered. And this is exactly what is affirmed in Islam: the followers of the heavenly religions of Moses and Jesus have actually corrupted the books of Allah.

"And when Allah saith: O Jesus, son of Mary! Didst thou say unto mankind: Take me and my mother for two gods beside Allah? he saith: Be glorified! It was not mine to utter that to which I had no right. If I used to say it, then Thou knewest it. Thou knowest what is in my mind, and I know not what is in Thy mind. Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Knower of Things Hidden." Surah 5:116

"Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (this is) a statement of the truth concerning which they doubt. It befitteth not (the Majesty of) Allah that He should take unto Himself a son. Glory be to Him! When He decreeth a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! and it is." Surah 19: 34,35

"And they say: The Beneficent hath taken unto Himself a son. Assuredly ye utter a disastrous thing. Whereby almost the heavens are torn, and the earth is split asunder and the mountains fall in ruins, that ye ascribe unto the Beneficent a son, when it is not meet for (the Majesty of) the Beneficent that He should choose a son." Surah 19: 88-92

Perhaps no other passage of the Quran has exerted as much influence upon the Muslim mind as the following. It has sanctioned, for as long as Islam dominates a community, the inferior of all non-Muslims.

"Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low... And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah, that is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah (Himself) fighteth against them. How perverse are they! They have taken as lords beside Allah their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were bidden to worship only one God. There is no God save Him. Be He glorified from all that they ascribe as partner (unto Him)! Surah 9: 29,31

It is quite clear from these vehement words of the Chapter of Repentance that those who persist in their corrupt beliefs about the Messiah and their religious leaders, may only be tolerated, and must pay the special tax that marks them as inferior subjects within the Muslim society.

## **2. A brief overview of the history of the Christian minorities living under Islam.**

Most of the early conquests of Islam took place at the expense of Christian lands. When the Arab armies burst out of Arabia, soon after the death of Muhammad, they conquered Syria, Mesopotamia, Egypt, North Africa and Spain. Their conquests in the East took place in Zoroastrian and pagan lands such as Persia, Central Asia and India. When we follow the spread of Islam in its early days, we learn about the formula they used vis-à-vis the conquered peoples: aslem, taslam! Convert (to Islam) in order to have peace. However, Jews and Christians were allowed to retain their old faiths as long as they surrendered and paid the poll tax. They were regarded as dhimmis, i.e., the protected ones. Practically, this "protected" status, marginalized their existence, and imposed severe hardships that became part and parcel of the their dhimmitude.

Prior to the rise of Islam, the Orthodox Church persecuted the non-Chalcedonian churches using the arm of the Byzantine Empire to suppress their "heresies." This explains why many members of these communities welcomed at first the Arab armies, not being fully aware of the true nature of Islamic teachings. The first Arab/Islamic Empire under the Umayyads had its capital in

Damascus, Syria. Since the Arabs were not capable of running the affairs of the state, they needed the fullest cooperation of the Aramaic speaking people of Syria. Thus they were inclined to be more tolerant to the native population of the Middle East than the Muslims of later times. But even in those early days of Islam, there were so many inducements to attract Christians to the religion of their conquerors. The number of converts to Islam grew steadily, and Christians ceased to be a majority in their homelands, and became a "lonely minority."

In the middle of the eighth century, after a violent and bloody destruction of the Umayyads by their distant cousins, the Abbasids, the capital of the Arab/Muslim Empire moved to Baghdad, Iraq. The largest Christian community there was the Nestorian Church. The caliphs in Baghdad employed many of these Christians in the civil service and entrusted them with important positions such as the court physicians. But often, the well being of the Christian community was totally dependent on the good will of the ruling caliph. Should the supreme head of the Islamic "church-state" decide that Christians must be persecuted, it was very easy for the populace to follow his instructions. On the whole, however, Christian minorities fared better during the ascendancy of the Arabs within the Muslim empire than later on when the power shifted to the newly converted Turks of Central Asia who had been slowly moving in the direction of the Middle East.

Even before the fall of the Abbasid Empire in the middle of the 13th century, the Muslim world had become very fragmented. Early in the 16th century, the Ottoman Turks conquered the lands of the Middle East. The plight of the minorities became worse. Christians suffered many persecutions and were reduced to small groups of illiterate people and their churches were weakened. The accounts of the pioneer missionaries who went to Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia early in the 19th century, document the tragic plight of the Christian minorities living under the rule of Islam.

The Christians of the Middle East welcomed the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1918 and benefited from a relatively long breathing spell during the period of Western influence and colonialism. Already during the nineteenth century, many Christians were among the pioneers in the cause of Arab nationalism and the renewal of the Arabic language and culture. One example of the special role played by Middle East Christians in the literary movement could still be noticed in Egypt as late as the middle of the twentieth century. Most of the newspapers and magazines in Egypt revealed their Syrian and Lebanese Christian background through the names of their publishers!

Middle East Christians benefited a great deal from the presence of France and Britain in the aftermath World War I. That gave them an opportunity to be themselves and to enjoy freedoms denied them for centuries. This does not mean that they became stooges of the colonial powers. An impartial study of the role they played in the rise of nationalism points to the fact that they worked diligently for the realization of an impossible dream: the laicization of politics, i.e., the separation of church and state. Many of the leaders of the political parties in the Middle East were Christians, i.e., ethnic Christians. (The word Christian in the Middle East does not necessarily imply that such individual is a practicing Christian). But soon after independence, Christians became very disappointed. For notwithstanding all their struggles for the revival of

the Arabic culture and for independence, they discovered that they were being treated as second-class citizens.

### **3. The plight of the largest native Christian minority in the Muslim World: the Copts of Egypt.**

The Copts are the native Christians of Egypt. They are the descendants of the peoples who had lived in that land prior to the Arab conquest in the 7th century. Since they form the largest Christian minority within the Muslim World, it is very instructive to pay a special attention to their status within Egypt. In many ways they typify the plight of most Christian communities living under Islam. My sources are threefold, 1: Private communications received from Egyptian Christians. All such documents were unsolicited, and came to me as responses to my daily ministry of the Word of God over international radio stations that beamed their programs in the direction of the Middle East. 2. References made to the status of Egyptian Christians in the international press; and 3: A scholarly research published in 1963: A LONELY MINORITY: THE MODERN STORY OF EGYPT'S COPTS. The author, Edward Wakin, was a journalist who showed unusual sympathy to the Copts. Even though more than three decades have passed since the appearance of the book, yet its findings are just as accurate at the beginning of the twenty first century as when they were first appeared in the early 1960s.

While Copts have always had their difficult times under the various regimes that ruled Egypt since the Arab conquest, yet the advent of the republican regime in 1952 marked the beginning of a new phase of subtle and unrelenting persecution. Even though Naser was perceived by many Arabs as a great nationalistic hero, yet he was at heart a strong Pan-Islamist leader and did very little to make the Christians of Egypt feel at ease.

One must look hard in Arabic newspapers and magazines to find a reference to the national Christians be they Copts or otherwise. Recently, I was surprised by the frank discussion of the problem in an international weekly magazine published in Paris, Al-Mostakbal (The Future). The writer was commenting on the dilemma that faces Middle East Christians who, no matter how hard they try, are not fully accepted by the Muslim majority. As an example, he cited the case of Dr. Butros Butros Ghali. At the time, he was the only Copt with an important position in the Egyptian government. He was serving as under-secretary in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Egypt. After the late President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem and the accord of Camp David, both the prime minister and the foreign minister of Egypt resigned. President Sadat appointed Dr. Ghali as acting foreign minister. The writer asked the rhetorical question why not a full foreign minister? Well, Dr. Ghali was a Copt. How could he be fully entrusted with the foreign affairs of Egypt? Later on, during the 1990s, he did serve as Secretary General of the Security Council of the United Nations!

The columnist remembered a similar incident that had taken place during the Naser regime. Between 1958 and 1961, Syria and Egypt merged to form the United Arab Republic. During one of Naser's visits to the northern province of the UAR (Syria), he attended the maneuvers of some Syrian army units. He noticed that several officers had names like Michael, George and John. He asked: "How come you have so many Copts holding key positions in the army?" "Your excellency,"

replied a local senior army officer, "we have no Copts in Syria. These men are native Syrian Christians."

Such references to discrimination that Christians suffer in the Middle East are important and they remind us that the problem is not simply a thing of the past. It is a bitter present reality. According to Edward Wakin, the study of the status of the Copts today is extremely important, for as he puts it:

Viewed today from the West, the Copts are a major test of modern coexistence between a large Christian minority and a Moslem majority. In the Middle East, the Copts constitute the largest body of Christians in that part of the world where Christianity was born. For Egypt which is trying to mobilize all its human resources into a modern state, the test may be decisive. For a mosaic of minorities in the Middle Eastern countries of Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey, the Coptic story can be read as handwriting on the wall. For the Christians of Lebanon, who are maintaining an uneasy dominance in a country evenly divided between Christians and Moslems, their prospects in Moslem Arab hegemony can be deciphered from the Coptic situation in Egypt. It is a problem echoed nearby in the tenuous Greek-Turkish partnership of Christian and Moslem in the island republic of Cyprus. Involved, besides the Western values for which the Copts stand, is the fate of tolerance and respect for the individual in the vast self-centered world community of 400 million Moslems. On an even larger stage, the Copts share the dream of the world's minorities, ranging from the recent sufferings of Jews and Armenians to such current problems as Jews in Russia, Protestants in Spain." P. 4

How prophetic these words have become. July 1974 witnessed the invasion of Cyprus by the Turkish army using NATO supplied arms paid for by the American taxpayer! Two hundred thousand Greek Cypriots were made homeless overnight. No one seemed to care for the human rights of these natives of Cyprus. They had been living in their island for more than two millennia. Turkey must be appeased at any cost, since it occupied such a strategic position near the borders of the USSR! It is a very sad fact that in the analysis of the problems of the Christian in a Muslim society today, no emphasis is placed on the religious nature of his plight. Christians are described in ethnic or hard to recognize terms such as: Armenians, Assyrians, Copts, Maronites, etc. While this classification is valid up to a certain extent, the true nature of the problems that these ethnic groups face is not due to their ethnicity but to the faith of their community. This is why Wakin's book is so important. Coming from a secularized culture in the USA, yet he did not allow that factor to forget or minimize the religious nature of the plight of minorities living under Islam. In the final analysis, Middle East Christians are considered as second-class citizens, and sometimes persecuted, because they belong to a community that in Arabic is known as the Messianic minority.

Many things have happened in Egypt since the death of president Naser in the early seventies. Under president Sadat, socialism was completely discarded; a new policy was adopted allowing many international companies to compete openly in bidding for projects related to the renewal of the economy of Egypt. The terrible defeat in the war of 1967 was avenged by the partial victory of the October 1973 (Yom Kippur) war that resulted in the eventual withdrawal of Israel from

Sinai. But one thing has not changed: the Muslim's attitude to the Copt. The latter is still despised, persecuted, and at times brutally murdered by radical Islamists. Whether the Copt is an ordinary layman or Pope Shenudah, the head of the Orthodox Coptic Church, Muslims look upon him with derision or suspicion. This is why the Copt has identified with the cross, a symbol of suffering more than any other Christian community. Edward Wakin described this facet of the Copt's life in a chapter entitled: THE PEOPLE'S CHURCH.

The cross suits this cruel culture of poverty and persecution, both as identification and an outlet for the Copts. It is their brand and their balm; it gives a meaning to life when there are only blind nature and inexplicable misfortune. If Western Christianity gives prime glory to Easter, the day of Resurrection, deliverance and confirmation of Christ's divinity - -- Good Friday is more appropriate psychologically to the Copts. On this day when the cross was born as a universal Christian symbol, modern Copts say "Kyrie elesison" (Lord, have mercy upon us) 400 times at home, 100 times in each direction, and flock to their churches.P. 136

While the Copts share the cross with the rest of Christianity, with no other group is its presence so obsessive. This ranges from the Patriarch, who holds the cross in front of himself as though it were both a shield and a weapon, to the ragged village children who run after strangers, with crude blue tattoos of the cross on the inside of their right wrists and crosses around their necks. Whenever the Patriarch appears, Copts rush forward to kiss his cross. The fixation is symbolized at baptism when the infant is anointed 36 times all over his body. P. 137

Crosses are painted over the doors of Coptic houses in towns and villages or formed in bas-relief in mud over the openings of mud homes. Sometimes the house and cross are brick. The Copts, who are fond of reading the family Bible at home, are aware of Exodus 12:13 and the significance of a sign in order to escape the wrath of the Lord: "And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt.P.138

The saddest thing about the lack of tolerance which the Copts of Egypt experience, generation after generation, is that their own homeland is robbing itself of one of its greatest resources: a purposeful and energetic community of nationals. We must keep reminding ourselves of this often forgotten fact: the Copts have been in Egypt long before the Arabs. Unfortunately, while it can be said that in the past the Copts' attachment to Egypt was so great that it kept them from leaving it, today it is no longer so. Thousands of Copts are to be found in Canada, the United States, Australia and several other areas of the Western world. Usually, they are highly educated people whose skills Egypt has lost forever. Before this migration wave became as strong as it is today, Edward Wakin wrote these moving words at the end of his book:

Both Egypt and Islam, like all other countries and ways of life in the modern world, must meet the test of toleration. For Islam it is a moral challenge spread over its proverbial range from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans. Citing its theoretical toleration does not silence the cry of its minorities. For a Moslem nation, it is the practical problem of using

human resources. The Copts themselves, within the microcosm of their history and its manifestations in church, community, nation and minority, present everyman's tale of dream and nightmare, fulfillment and frustration in a world not of their making. Insofar as the Copts have received their due -- without ignoring their blemishes -- this modern story of Egypt's Copts is an account of the human condition.

At the end of this intimate rendezvous with the Copts, a concluding moral note is unavoidable. The obligation to oppose tyranny wherever it stands, even when the tyranny is elusive and unannounced, even unintended. It begins with labeling injustice long before shop windows are smashed, icons broken, and families torn apart. This labeling is an antidote to the danger of dulled sensibilities in our time and while the Copts can be accused of hypersensitivity, their problem is by no means imaginary. They are feeling pressures that inflict suffering without mutilating, that intimidate relentlessly without exploding sporadically that wound without bloodshed.

The Copts are numbed and helpless as well as anxious as their historic cycles of acceptance and rejection, their recurring stages of toleration, discrimination, and persecution move inexorably in the direction of rejection. Persecution is still the nightmare, discrimination the reality in the latest chapter of a long story of a people. They are there in Egypt and there they remain, the "true Egyptians," the "original Christians," the four million Copts of the Nile Valley, that troubled, enduring, lonely minority. Pp. 175 and 176

#### **4. The Tragedy of Modern Lebanon.**

We have dwelt at length with the story of the Christian community in Egypt. The Copts typify one way in which an Eastern Christian community chose to live within a land dominated by Islam. The Lebanese Christians chose, at least since 1918, a different way of coexistence with their Muslim neighbors. Aided by the French presence in Lebanon between 1918 and 1946, the Lebanese Christians sought to create a Western type democratic society in an arrangement of power sharing between the various Christian and Muslim groups. For example, an unwritten agreement between the various groups called for the president to be a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of the parliament, a Shiite Muslim. In a house that numbered 99 deputies, 55% of the seats were allocated to the various Christian communions, while 45% went to the Muslims consisting mainly of Sunnis, Shiites and Druze.

The last census was held in Lebanon in 1932 and it reflected the above-mentioned percentage of Christians and Muslims. However, due to various factors, both internal and external, the number of Muslims living in Lebanon since the end of World War II increased rapidly. They began to ask for a bigger share in the government and wanted an end to the pro-Western policies of the Christian-led regime. The first violent explosion took place in 1958 and pointed to the growing cleavage between the two communities in Lebanon. The situation became more critical in the early seventies. After the suppression of the PLO in Jordan, thousands of Palestinian fighters moved to southern Lebanon and to camps around Beirut and sought to continue their struggle against Israel. Some parts of Lebanon that were no longer under the control of the central

government in Beirut. Several areas of South Lebanon were referred to as Fatahland, Fatah being the largest of the Palestinian movements under the leadership of Yasser Arafat. This situation could not continue unchallenged. The Phalange, the largest militia group of the Maronite Christian community, got involved in a violent clash with the Palestinian fighters on Easter Monday, 1975. That marked the beginning of the civil-international war that raged in Lebanon for over seventeen years, leading to the destruction of most parts of Beirut, and the Syrian occupation of Lebanon has not ended to this very day.

It is not my intention to give a catalog of the sad events that have resulted in the destruction of what used to be called the Switzerland of the Middle East. I will attempt to explain some reasons that caused a sizable section of the Christian population of Lebanon to refuse the demands of the Muslims for a greater share in the running of the affairs of the state. They knew quite well that to give more power to Muslims would have inevitably led to the eventual disappearance of the democratic country they have struggled so hard to build. Lebanon had become, and that especially since 1918, a haven for persecuted minorities and a refuge for political dissidents coming from every part of the Middle East, both Christian and Muslim. It may not be possible for Western people to appreciate the different logic of the Lebanese Christians. For their assessment of their particular situation was not made in the comfort of Western academic institutions, but from the bitter memories of persecutions and massacres that they had suffered in the 1860s, and during the horrible famine caused by the Ottoman Turks during 1914-1918 war. Most of all, the refusal of the Lebanese Christians to share more power with the Muslims was due to the fact that almost every Arab country that had achieved independence from colonial powers, had succumbed to totalitarian regimes, some lasting even to the dawn of the twenty first century! Sufficient to say that the Christians of Lebanon were convinced, rightly or wrongly, that Lebanon's fate would be the same, should they yield more power to the Muslims. Throughout 1400 years of history, Islam has never practiced anything that might be called democratic, its very worldview being authoritarian. All the signals received from the contemporary history of Arab countries pointed to the loss of freedom --- should Muslims take over the government of the land. Consciously and unconsciously, the Christians of Lebanon opted for the defense of their way of life through an armed response to the forces that threatened them. Since no major world power was interested or willing to come to their aid, the destruction of modern Lebanon was assured.

##### **5. How can Western Christians help their brothers and sisters living under Muslim rule?**

As we reflect on the plight of the Christian minorities within the household of Islam, we face a very old and complex problem. Thus, we must not offer any simplistic answer. To begin with, we must not ignore the existence of the problem. Politically, Western governments have been very reluctant to deal with this sad lack of human rights within the Muslim world. Witness the great involvement of the USA and Western European countries in the affairs of Yugoslavia, where Muslim minorities in Bosnia and Kosovo, were threatened by the Serbs. At the same time, for almost two decades, millions of Sudanese Christians and animists have been killed by the radical Islamic government in Khartoum. And yet, nothing but silence has met this ongoing tragedy.

Let me offer these points that might be of help as we further reflect on the plight of the Christian minorities living under Islam:

A. The Bible has no direct teaching or reference to Islam. This is obvious since this religion is post-Biblical. The Bible does prepare us to deal with Islam by stressing the uniqueness, finality, and superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

B. The great emphasis that the Bible places on the redemptive character of the Christian faith and the deity of Jesus Christ must be upheld at any cost as we face the challenge of Islam, not only in far away lands, but right here in the Western world. Most of our Christian brothers and sisters in the East have not enjoyed, on the whole, the benefits of the Reformation. Their churches need to rediscover the fundamental evangelical teachings of the Bible concerning our salvation. But it is to their credit that for centuries and under the most difficult circumstances, they have borne testimony, to the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ.

C. By helping the Eastern Churches within the lands of Islam to rediscover the totality of the Biblical faith, we enable them to see their unique place in the evangelization of the Muslims of their homelands.

The Christian mission to Muslims will go on until the end of time. No power can stop it, since it is undertaken under the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of his Church. Christians living in the Muslim world and Western missionaries, hold the key to the conversion of Muslims. As Raymond Lull, the first Western missionary to Islam put it long ago:

"I see many knights going to the Holy Land and to other lands of the Infidel, seeking to acquire them by force of arms. But they never attain that. As for me, the only way of conquest is the old, old apostolic way, namely by love and prayer and the pouring out tears and blood."

**The quotations are from:**

THE MEANING OF THE GLORIOUS KORAN, An Explanatory Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, A Mentor Religious Classic

A LONELY MINORITY: The Modern Story of Egypt's Copts by Edward Wakin, William Morrow & Company, New York, 1963.