

Twenty-First Century Dhimmitude

Author : Jacob Thomas on Aug 25, 2007 - 02:42 PM

One of the earliest measures the Arabs took after their conquest of the Middle East and North Africa was to institute the social class of **Dhimmitude**.* This term, derived from the Arabic word **dhimma**, . means “protection.” Christians and Jews who surrendered to the invading Muslim armies were called **dhimmis**. They were allowed to remain within their respective religious communities, provided they agreed to the terms of surrender. They were to pay the **Jizya** tax, recognize the sovereignty of the invaders, and refrain from any action that was deemed critical of Islam, its prophet, and its institutions. They were forbidden build new houses of worship, and had to wear special clothes distinguishing them from their new masters. In case of a dispute with a Muslim, a **dhimmi's** testimony at the courts hardly had any weight.

Dhimmitude began in earnest in the days of the **Rightly-Guided Caliphs**. (632-661 A.D.) and continued throughout the successive regimes of the **Umayyads**. (661-750), the **Abbasids**. (750-1252) as well as during more than the 500 years of the **Ottoman Caliphate**. that ended in 1924. After the defeat of Germany, Austria, and Ottoman Turkey in WWI, Britain and France presided over the birth of several Middle Eastern states that had large Christian minorities. These were in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt. For all practical purposes, the institution of **Dhimmitude** came to an end, and the Christians of the Middle East enjoyed freedoms that had been denied their ancestors for almost 1300 years.

With the end of WWII, the British and the French began their retreat from the Middle East, and Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt gained their independence. Unfortunately, the semi-democratic regimes that were instituted by the departing European colonialists were soon to be overthrown. Military dictatorships were established in Syria (1949), in Egypt (1952), and in Iraq (1958.) These military regimes adopted a strong combination of Socialism and Arab nationalism with disastrous results. Add to that, the military adventures of Syria and Egypt against Israel with their humiliating defeat in the June 1967 war. Arab nationalism proved its impotence, giving rise to a resurgent Islamist ideology that captivated the minds of young Arab men. Unfortunately, the ferment and upheavals in Mideastern societies brought about a worsening in the lives of the Christian minorities. Recently, their plight was featured in an article published in the Arabic-language online daily, www.Elaph.com. It was written by a Syrian human-rights activist now living in Paris, France. I would like to quote portions of his article, adding as usual, my analysis and comments.

*“It is well known that the **Arab Awakening**** that spread democratic and liberal ideas in Syria and Egypt at the end of the 19th Century, was spearheaded by Christian intellectuals who were open to European culture. This movement led to the rise of political parties that sought independence from the Ottoman Empire.*

*“Having achieved independence, the Christian elites realized the importance of the modern secular government as a guarantee to achieve a better status for Eastern Christians, who are the original inhabitants of the area. However, the project for the establishment of a modern secular government encountered several challenges; the most powerful one came from **Traditional Islam**. It rejects modernity and secularism, and any separation of religion from the state. This conservative Islam insists on regarding the Shari’a Law as the basic source of legislation, thus constituting a distinction among the citizens, based on religion and ethnicity. Practically, a Muslim enjoys more privileges than a non-Muslim, especially in the area of government, where the ruler must always be of the Muslim faith.*

*“More than a century has passed since the rise of the **Arab Awakening**, and now the peoples of the Middle East are facing concerted efforts for the establishment of an **Islamic State**. It is being offered by political Islam under the slogan of, “**Al-Islam hua’l Hall**,” (Islam is the Solution.) It is being offered as a substitute for the crisis-ridden National State that has been controlled for a long time, by corrupt and oppressive regimes.*

*“Due to Lebanon’s special background, and the historical psychology of the Maronites, it refused to accept the Arab-Islamic recipe in the writing of its Constitution. Its political system was crafted in an agreement known as the 1943 **National Pact**, [where the President is a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister, is a Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament, is a Shi’ite Muslim.] This modus operandi continued until the Civil War of 1975. The **Taif Charter** of 1989, that brought to an end the civil war, diminished at the same time, the political influence of the Maronites, giving more power to the Islamic communities, by shrinking the powers of the president of the Lebanese Republic.*

*“A new era in the history of the Middle East in general, and of the Christian minorities in particular, was ushered in with the beginning of the American campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The plight of the Christians has worsened, as a result of these military campaigns. They fanned the flames of the historic enmity that remains latent in the Islamic Arab world vis-à-vis the United States and the West. A struggle is going on between the United States and its European allies on the one hand, and the radical Islamic organizations such as al-Qaida, as a defender of Islam, on the other hand. **As a result, it is the Eastern Christians who pay dearly, not because they have done anything wrong themselves, but simply and uniquely because they happen to be Christian!** [Emphasis mine]*

“For example, in the backlash from the Danish Cartoons, and the recent lecture of Pope Benedict XVI, several terrorist attacks have taken place on the lives and belongings of Middle East Christians. A priest in Turkey, a nun in Somalia, and several priests in Iraq, have been assassinated. Church buildings and monasteries have been burned by radical Islamic groups in more than one Arab and Islamic capital.

“Should we forget Hrant Dink, the Turkish journalist of Armenian background, who was

assassinated by a young Muslim Turk on 19 January, 2007? This event cannot be isolated from the terror that is being directed against Eastern Christians by radical Islamic organizations. It is no exaggeration to say that this crime points to the condition not only of the small Christian minority that is left in Turkey, but to the plight of the entire Eastern Christian minorities that remain in the Islamic Arab world.

*“Going back to Hrant Dink, it is important to remember that in spite of his great love for Turkey as his country, and his unending call to both Turks and Armenians to be reconciled, and to transcend the historic enmity between them; he was once convicted of defaming the Turkish identity according to Article 301 of the Turkish Criminal Code. In his last article, he wrote: ‘I shall keep on fighting [for reconciliation] regardless of the threats.’ This article appeared in the Lebanese newspaper, **Al-Nahar**. Several Turkish newspapers began a campaign of vilification claiming that he manifested enmity towards the Turks. In this article, he had expressed his doubts about the integrity of the Turkish judicial system, as he referred to several cases of Islamist Turkish writers who had been charged with the same offense, but whose cases were dismissed! What is rather disturbing in Dink’s case is that his assassin’s picture surfaced in a video showing him draped with the Turkish flag. He was treated by the Turkish policemen as a national hero. It is reported that his mother said, ‘My son did his duty, he is a hero like Ali Aca, **** the one who attempted to kill Pope John Paul II in 1981.*

“The governments of the Arab and Islamic states have not been supportive of their religious minorities. Otherwise how can we explain that they marshal all their forces to combat radical Islamists when they attack governmental agencies, but they act slowly and hesitantly against these terrorists when they murder innocent Christian citizens in their homes or their churches? Furthermore, the government-controlled media often deceive the public by offering lame excuses for attacks on Christians, claiming that these Irhabis were mentally deranged, or had some previous unresolved issues with the murdered Christians! These discriminatory policies spread despair and anxiety among the Christian minorities. So, instead of the governments doing their utmost to strengthen the minorities’ national loyalties by treating them on par with the majority population, they spread doubts about the minority’s national loyalty, thus justifying their marginalization.”

Analysis

The brief period in the life of Middle Eastern Christians that began in the 1920s, and that brought them freedom and equality with the Muslim majorities, began to erode soon after WWII. In the early years of the Twenty-First Century, it seems that the institution of Dhimmitude is reborn. Christians no longer feel at home in the lands of their ancestors are migrating in great numbers to various parts of the West.

Comments

The author of the **Elaph**. article points to a shocking anomaly. Christians don’t feel welcome in their own homelands due to the discriminatory policies of their governments.

At the same time, millions of Muslims have come to reside permanently in the West, and enjoy freedoms not even accorded to them in their homelands. Western political leaders don't seem to be concerned about the plight of the Christian minorities in the Middle East. For example, recently President Bush visited the Islamic Center in Washington, D.C., and congratulated it on its 50th anniversary. In his speech, he could have reminded the Muslim leaders who were present at the Center, that the Western culture that grants Muslims equal rights with other citizens, expects a *quid pro quo*. treatment of the Christian minorities in Islam. I wonder whether he is even aware of the fact that when Americans go to work in Saudi Arabia, their Bibles are confiscated at the ports of entry. What a shocking commentary on a culture that parades under the banner of the ***Religion of Peace!*** .

****Dhimmitude:*** . The status of being a ***Dhimmi***, . an Arabic term that refers to Jews and Christians who live under Islamic rule, subject to strict laws defining their limited rights.

*****The Arab Awakening:*** . The cultural renaissance that began in Egypt and the Levant in the aftermath of Napoleon's brief military campaign in the closing years of the 18th Century. It introduced Arabic-speaking intellectuals (both Muslim and Eastern Christian) to the European civilization, and its accomplishments in the arts and sciences.

******Aca.:*** The name of the man who attempted to kill Pope John Paul II. In the Turkish Latinized alphabet, the letter "C" is pronounced as "J" ; so ***Aca.*** is pronounced ***Aja.***