

“Why Don’t Christians Learn from the Jewish Experience?”

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“Limadha la Yastafid al-Masihyyun min Tajribat al-Yahud ?”

Lately, several articles have appeared in the online Arabic daily *Elaph*, dealing with the plight of the Christians living in the Arab world. Western media don’t focus their attention on this topic when they report on the Middle East, since they are preoccupied with the war in Iraq, and Iran’s attempt to develop nuclear weapons. Without minimizing the importance of these subjects, the status of Middle East Christians deserves the attention of the world. So, I was very pleased with the fact that some Arab writers have turned their attention to the worsening conditions of Mideastern Christians who are the remnants of the original inhabitants of the area.

On Friday, 26 October, 2007, I noticed an article in *Elaph*, with this intriguing title, **“Why Don’t Christians Learn from the Jewish Experience?”** Let me share with you excerpts from the article, followed by my analysis and comments.

The author began with these introductory remarks:

“In a previous article, I discussed the difficulties facing the life of Christians in the Arab world. I suggested that a realistic solution to their problem would require a mass migration of these Christians to Western countries. Several Christians objected to my proposal, but offered no realistic alternative toward the solution of the problem. They expressed the hope that somehow, coexistence between Muslims and Christian in the Arab world, would someday materialize.

“In this article, I would like to pose this question: ‘Why don’t Christians learn from the experience of the Jews who lived in the Arab world?’ They patiently endured religious persecution and racial discrimination; without expecting a change in their political situation, or the rise of a spirit of tolerance and coexistence. The Jews paid a heavy price for their patience: they were persecuted, oppressed, lost their properties and their citizenship in the Arab countries.

“When we consider the prevailing social, political, and religious conditions in the Arab world, how can Christians expect, in the near future, a complete change in their situation? Do they really look forward to the time when some of them would get nominated for high office in the Arab world, or be elected to such positions as prime minister, or president of the republic, with Muslim citizens voting for them?!

“Do Christians expect Shi’ites and Sunnis to be reconciled; thus reflecting the emergence of a new spirit of inter-communal tolerance?! Do they anticipate a change in the Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence) which is the source of the doctrinal and psychological barriers

between Muslims and followers of other religions?!

“Unfortunately, there are no indications of the possibility of liberating Arab societies from their inherited backwardness. Discrimination exists even within members of the same family; fanaticism and intolerance begin at the tribal level, and then proceed to the ethnic, regional, and confessional levels. Religious extremism and fanaticism result from these perverted societal and psychological structures that have produced an irrational religious mind, marked by a lack of openness to the “Other.”

“How unfortunate then that many Christians, when they attack Irhab (terrorism) and fanaticism, attack at the same time, the very source of Islamic doctrines by denying their divine origin, considering them merely the human thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad. They fall into the same trap of fanaticism by assailing the beliefs of others.”

Analysis

The author described the difficulties that attend the lives of Christians in the Arab world, and proceeded to ask, **“Why Don’t Christians Learn from the Jewish Experience?”**

This experience has been marked by religious persecution, ending with the Jews losing their properties, and their citizenship. He refrained from telling the whole story that after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, almost the entire Jewish population in the Middle East had to leave their ancestral homes, and find refuge in Israel, Europe, and the Americas.

Comments

At first, I was very intrigued by the title of the article. I thought the author must have had in mind a worthwhile lesson that Christians living in the Arab world would learn from the experience of the Jewish people. So, what was that lesson that Christians should learn? Is it that the Jews of the Arab world had suffered a great deal since the rise of Islam? But so did the Christians. Both were labeled as **“dhimmis”** by the Islamic conquerors; they were tolerated within the Islamic Umma as long as they behaved properly, and paid the Jizya tax according to the Qur’anic prescription, **‘an yaden wahum saghirun.***

Actually, the lesson our author wanted Christians to learn was to pick up and leave their homelands or convert to Islam. It’s a recipe for a voluntary ethnic and religious cleansing. Why this drastic solution? Well, Arab Christians should not be naïve and expect Muslims to change their minds, and accept them as equals in rights and responsibilities. As he put it, **“a realistic solution to their problem would require a mass migration of these Christians to Western countries.”** What a solution! To uproot around 15 million people whose roots in Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt, go back to more than three millennia? While I appreciate the author’s honest description of the awful plight of the Christians in the Arab world, I am terribly shocked by his surrealistic proposal!

Another disappointing part of the article was the last paragraph, where the author blamed some Christians for their intolerance. **“How unfortunate it is that many Christians, who**

attack Irhab and fanaticism, attack at the same time the very source of Islamic doctrines by denying their divine origin, and consider them as merely the human thoughts of the Prophet Muhammad. Thus, they fall in the same trap of fanaticism by assailing the beliefs of others.

I am not aware that Christians living in the Arab world openly engage in polemics against Islam. They know better than to do that. On the other hand, does he expect these Christian communities, after enduring 1400 years of marginalization and persecution, to forsake their allegiance to their Christian faith? To accede to his advice and accept the ***“sources of Islamic doctrine”*** as being of ***“divine origin,”*** would amount to becoming Muslims?! All that remains for them to formalize their conversion would be to utter the ***“Shahada.”***

As a Levantine Christian, I have always keenly felt that what bothers our fellow Arabic-speaking Muslims is the fact that, even after fourteen centuries, we still cling tenaciously to our faith. It’s hard for them to comprehend that while our ancestors finally Arabized, nevertheless, we did not Islamize. Arabic-speaking Christians must be terribly stubborn, unwilling to accept Islam as God’s last message to mankind! It is too bad that Muslims cannot understand the reason for our “stubbornness!”

So, my response to the advice of the author of the article is: ***“No thanks, we will stay in our homelands; and while some of our people have reluctantly settled in the West, we will never contemplate a mass exodus from the lands of our fathers.”***

* In Surah 9:29 of the *Qur’an*, we read the following about the *Jizya* tax:
“Fight those who believe not in Allah, nor the Last Day, nor hold forbidden that which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizyah with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued”

The Arabic original of ***“with willing submission and feel themselves subdued”*** is: ***‘an yaden wahum saghirun.’*** ***“saghirun”*** literally means ***“diminishing themselves”*** or ***“acting with utter submissiveness”*** vis-à-vis their Muslim masters!