

# The Middle East

## A future region without Christians?

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### Abstract

The Islamic world is undergoing a very turbulent, agonizing, barbarous, intolerant and dreadful time, hardly witnessed before in its history. Old regimes are collapsing; countries are disintegrating; sectarian, ethnic and racial conflicts are rising to the surface and are flaring up everywhere. Tribes and adherents of certain religious groups, especially the targeted native Christian population, are being forcibly deported or coerced to leave their native countries. In order to address the rather prophetic question on the future of Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa, the article identifies the roots of the crisis of Christians in the Middle East and the status quo of historic Christian Churches in the light of the “Arab Spring” by scrutinizing a sample of countries regarding religious freedom. After that the author proceeds to describe the development of human rights issues which arise. The article ends with some suggestions as to how a dependable consensus between native Christians and Muslims can be achieved.

**Keywords** Arab nationalism, Arab Spring, Arab world, cradle of Christianity, crisis of Christianity in the Middle East, conversion, deportations, emigration, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, justice, Lebanon, Muslim responsibility towards Christians of the Middle East, Palestine, political Islam, Sharia, Shiites, Sunnites, Syria, Turkey.

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## 1. Introduction

In the middle of the second decade of the 21st century the world is confronted with an Islamic world that is undergoing a very turbulent, agonizing, barbarous, intolerant and dreadful time, hardly witnessed before in its history.<sup>2</sup> It extends from the Indian subcontinent through the Middle East and across North Africa. Ancient regimes are collapsing; countries are disintegrating; sectarian, ethnic and racial conflicts are rising to the surface and are flaring up everywhere. Tribes and adherents of certain religious groups, especially the targeted native Christian population, are being forcibly deported or coerced to leave their native countries. They seem to have become shocked and dismayed at the situation.

An ISIS<sup>3</sup> video titled: "A Message Signed with Blood to the Nation of the Cross" was released on 15 February 2015 showing the beheading of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians for the first time outside Syria and Iraq. "This undeniably means," a flashpoint report said, "that the group now views Christian populations not only as targets but also part of the bigger 'Crusader plot', not separate from the US-led coalition or aggressors." "The group's message is highly intimidating and in some way challenges the Western nations to intervene to save the Christians as it intervened to save the Yazidis and others."<sup>4</sup>

Lebanese authors who underline the contributions of the Christians in the region describe the crisis bluntly: "Christians live in a twofold crisis: The first is expressed, generally speaking, in the humiliation of the Arabs. The second is the feeling of superiority of the Muslims and the lockout of Christians, an issue that threatens them specifically in their historical existence in the region."<sup>5</sup> To deal with this existential and challenging issue, Christians hurried to organize religious and societal conferences in various places. In Rome the Catholic Church summoned a synod for the Middle East from 10 - 24 October 2010 to discuss with the patriarchs, archbishops, bishops and laymen from all five continents the fate of the Christians in the Middle East. Pope Benedict XVI said: "It is one of the human rights to live in dignity in one's own home country. Freedom and justice are indispensable for a harmonious existence for all in the region."<sup>6</sup> Pope Tawadros II of the Coptic church took a similar step in February 2012 by calling upon all Christian denominations in Egypt to form

<sup>2</sup> "The responsibility of the hero for the disappearance of the peaceful solution," ash-Sharq al-awsat, 30 Dec. 2014, Ntt. 13181, <http://aawsat.com/home/article/254526/>

<sup>3</sup> Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

<sup>4</sup> Hasani Gittens, ISIS Releases Video Purportedly Showing Beheading of 21 Egyptian Christians, 15 Feb. 2015, <http://tinyurl.com/behead21>.

<sup>5</sup> The Revolution of the Arab Christians, Basil Aoun, 4 Feb. 2012, daily newspaper: an-Nahar, <http://tinyurl.com/annahar>.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriela Maria Mihlig, "opening session of the Near East Synod", 11 Oct. 2010, <http://www.zenit.org/article-21555?l=german>

a council, the presidency of which would rotate and the aims of which, according to Safwat El Bayadi, were to create a unified vision on several critical issues such as the legal personal status, the law on houses of worship and several other issues relating to citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

A rather secular one was held in 2013 in Jordan:

“On September 27, approximately 50 academics, politicians and parliamentarians met in the Jordanian capital Amman for a three-day research conference. They were united by one thing: they were all Eastern Christians. They came from the original Christian groups that remain in the region: from Egypt, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The conference was entitled ‘Eastern Christians in Light of the Arab Spring’. Yet, the few papers and recommendations that were presented were sufficient to realize the confusion in the title of the conference, for Christians are not certain that they will remain in the East.”<sup>8</sup>

For security reasons, all interviewed emphasized the importance of staying anonymous: “All parliamentarians interviewed at the conference requested that their names and countries of origin should not be made public.”<sup>9</sup>

This article will address the abovementioned difficult and rather prophetic question on the future of Christianity in the Middle East and North Africa. The article identifies the roots of the crisis of Christians in the Middle East and the *status quo* of historic Christian churches in the light of the “Arab Spring” by utilizing paradigms from some countries in the light of the issue of religious freedom<sup>10</sup> to make the exposition of the Christian issue concrete. The article proceeds to describe the development of human rights issues resulting from the description given and at the end of the article makes some suggestions as to how consensus between native Christians and Muslims can be achieved on a basis of mutual trust.

This description is taken from the perspective of a native Arab historian and theologian raised in Lebanon who, for the last 34 years of his life, has been involved in social and diaconal work among Arabic-speaking people from the whole Arab region who have immigrated to Germany. Besides that, he has shared in international conferences and visits Arab countries on a regular basis.

<sup>7</sup> “Egyptian churches to form council to unify views on critical issues”, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Sat, 3 March 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/692501>.

<sup>8</sup> Jean Aziz “Do Christians have a future In the Middle East?”, Posted 4 Oct. 2013 - Al-Monitor: the Pulse of the Middle East, 6 Feb. 2015, 22:18h. <http://tinyurl.com/xrspring2013>.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Annette Langer, Index on persecution worldwide 2015: Where Christians are being antagonized - Wo Christen angefeindet werden. <http://tinyurl.com/AL-WWL2015>, download: 8 Jan. 2015.

The author intends to use mostly European sources easily accessible to the reader. They emanate mainly from Christian bulletins and present the current situation in the Middle East and North Africa. Additionally, personal experiences and encounters will be included. However, everyone researching this subject will face difficulties due to the necessity of not endangering people, specific churches and institutions concerned in the respective countries.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond these difficulties, the author is also aware of the fact that dealing with the issue of mission means conversion from Islam to the Christian faith. This addresses the tension between historic churches and younger Protestant denominations which are active in witnessing. In a personal discussion with a high Iranian official the author was told that Protestant churches in Iran are causing problems for the rest of the churches. The Iranian government is taking measures to restrict their activities, for example, by forcing priests of historic churches not to hold their services in the Persian language but in the ancient languages of their churches, which already existed in the country and region before Islam. In an interview, an expert on multi-religious issues in Iran hints at this aspect: "The really dangerous people are those who have converted to Christianity and have joined the ever-increasing church movement. According to the specific source it is said that these house churches are stronger than the Catholic Church in Iran."<sup>12</sup>

Nowadays, this observation can be made in almost every country in the region with a Muslim majority. Therefore, Protestant churches have no choice but to approach the problem of conversion from Islam to the Christian faith in the light of freedom of belief and freedom of conscience. At the same time, it has become an issue that concerns all other Christian denominations, as seen by the current developments in the region for the last four years, due to a lack of differentiation among extremists, as Egypt, Iraq and Syria have witnessed. It is no accident that the Latin bishops of the Arab region express their fears by appealing to the regimes in the Arab world in a joint statement:

There is no peace without justice and no justice without respect for the social and religious rights of man and without respect for human dignity. Ultimately there is no peace without forgiveness and reconciliation. The churches and organizations work to make reconciliation in the Middle East a reality. Without true reconcilia-

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<sup>11</sup> At times this also makes it difficult to offer more than the skimpy use of footnotes that usually are attributed to a scholarly work.

<sup>12</sup> Michaela Koller, "Christen sind Bürger zweiter Klasse", Interview mit dem Iran-Experten Wahdat-Hagh über die Christenverfolgung in Iran, BRÜSSEL, 30. Oktober 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-18956?l=german>. The scholar of political science Wahdat-Hagh is a staff member of the "European Foundation for Democracy" in Brussels.

tion based on justice and mutual forgiveness there will be no peace because the same factors that cause the conflict will result in more hatred and wars.<sup>13</sup>

In § 2 the bishops plead with the governments to “respect the culture and traditions of the countries that receive ‘migrant workers’”.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The roots of the modern crisis of Christianity

### 2.1 The roots of the crisis of Christianity in the Middle East

The roots of the crisis facing Christians of the Middle East and North Africa, expressed in the constant decimation of their numbers, can be sought in several developments going back to the beginning of the 20th century.

The first major event began with the genocide of the Armenian and Aramaic Christians in Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Survivors were dispersed in the neighboring countries and beyond.<sup>16</sup> Native Aramaic Christians who fled the massacre now total 200 000 in Germany and thus exceed the number of the whole Christian population living in Turkey today.<sup>17</sup> At least half a million Armenians with Turkish origin can be found in France today.<sup>18</sup>

Then the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 caused several Arab-Israeli wars.<sup>19</sup> The defeats of the Arab states were in part due to the unconditional Western support given to Israel. Nevertheless, these wars caused existential confusion among the Arabic-speaking community of the Middle East, disregarding the Christian interests in Palestine and beyond, as will be explained below.

Alongside these events, three decisive movements arose, the impact of which would determine the crucial fate of the Christians in their native region: a secular movement, the Arab Nationalism and two Islamic movements, Sunni and Shiite Islamism, that is, *Salafism* with all its nuances and *Khoumeinism* in Iran.

Arab Nationalism was (among other factors) strongly influenced by Arab Christians as a reaction to the Turkish one colored by Islam – and started with a fervent search for a political system under which Arab states independent from the colonial and mandatory powers could be run after the end of World War II. Albert Hourani

<sup>13</sup> “Kein Friede ohne Vergebung und Versöhnung” “No Peace without conciliation”, Statement der Konferenz der Lateinischen Bischöfe der Arabischen Regionen (CELRA), Ra’s al Chaima, (source: Latin Patriarchat of Jerusalem, 9 Oct. 2014, §1, <http://tinyurl.com/CELRA2014>).

<sup>14</sup> See § 2 of the Bishops’ statement.

<sup>15</sup> “Farman” = Edict of 24 Apr. 1915 ordering the deportation of Armenians.

<sup>16</sup> See Andreas Baumann, *Der Orient für Christus. Johannes Lepsius: Biographie und Missiologie* (Gießen: Brunnen, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> ZOCD, press release 10 Nov. 2014.

<sup>18</sup> French Debate with Turkey on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-17.

<sup>19</sup> The wars waged by the neighboring countries to Israel took place in: 1949, 1956, 1967, 1973, and on Lebanese soil in 1978, 1982, 1996, 2000 and 2006.

does not conceal the disenchantment of intellectual Lebanese and Syrian Christians, who saw a problem in the hierarchical influence of the church that was recognized and supported by the state. They considered it to be an obstacle for their spiritual development and freedom of thought. Therefore, some of them represented a radical secularism.<sup>20</sup> But they also attempted to escape Islamic Sharia and to enhance a religious and ethnic pluralism. The Baath Party emerged from this movement and seized power in Syria and Iraq, with minor ideological differences. Both parties succeeded to a certain extent in imposing their secular ideologies on the major section of the population of both countries. Unfortunately, one has to admit that the left-wing oriented Christians played a significant role in the system of both countries, which deepened the roots of antagonism of the Muslim-oriented segments against Christians in both societies. Logically therefore, the elimination of Saddam Hussein in 2003 meant simultaneously the loss of political influence and privileges of that political stratum. In conjunction with this a gradual persecution took place against the Christian minority which had never been entirely free from oppression at the hands of the Shi'ite majority in Iraq and the Sunni majority in Syria. In the case of Iraq's Christians, three wars caused the decrease of the Christian presence: The Iraq-Iran War, the first Gulf War and the raid of America on Iraq in 2003.

Parallel to the abovementioned developments in the 20th century, the response on the Sunni side was the rise of political Islam. Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, Hasan al-Banna, Sayid Qutb, Sayid Abu l-Ala al-Mawdudi, among others, laid the foundations of the ideology of modern political Islam, expressed in the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafism. It found a fertile soil in the Islamic world, responding to the communist and socialist raids on the Arabic House of Islam, where they gained the upper hand in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Algeria, South Yemen, Afghanistan and partly in India. The fronts became clear: NATO had to prevent the Soviets from benefiting from the warm waters (Mediterranean and Indian oceans) and expansion in the emerging countries and established the Baghdad Pact of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan; but after the *coup d'état* of 1958 Iraq left the pact.

With idealistic, logistic and financial support from the West, as well as from Saudi Arabian *Wabbabism* and the Petro-Dollar from several oil-producing countries, the uprising began in several countries. The first climax of aggressions in Egypt in the 1970s by the Muslim Brotherhood against Christians and their properties culminated in the assassination of President Anwar as-Sadat on 6 October 1981 by Jihadists. An attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood in 1981-82 was crushed when Islamists in Algeria tried to gain power through the ballot box and although in 1990

<sup>20</sup> Albert Hourani, *Die Geschichte der arabischen Völker*, Translated from English by: Manfred Ohi and Hans Sartorius, Frankfurt am Main, Oct. 2000, p.376-382. Original: *A history of the Arab people*, London, 1st ed. 1991.

they won the first election, the army took over and suppressed the new political modernistic Islamism. In the meantime, the Mujahideen supporters, with logistic support from the West, managed to defeat the Russians in Afghanistan and forced them out of the country. The disintegration of the Soviet Union led to the addition of the Central Asian states to the number of Muslim states in the OIC.<sup>21</sup> A nationalistic and religiously motivated war (1995) was then provoked in the Balkans to destroy the last Russian vassal state. Massacres were committed against Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This aggravated the Muslims and emotions of the masses on the streets of most countries in the Arab and Muslim world leading them to retaliate for their co-religionists in the Balkans. The intense feelings against the West increased. Tourists were assaulted and, especially in Egypt, the hatred was increasingly directed against the native Christians. Political Islam was gaining confidence. In order to achieve an Islamic identity, all means were justifiable for the Islamic movements which ranged from political activism to intimidations and terror assaults against western institutions.

The terror of 11 September 2001 and the international reactions against Al Qaeda strongly affected the Muslim world. The campaign – led by the USA and NATO – created an aversion against the native Christians, because of the link between them and the West. The raid on Iraq in 2003 resulted in a new political confidence among the Shiite majority that inflamed the religious Sunni-Shiite conflict and led to severe suffering of other ethnic and religious groups. Furthermore, occurrences like caricatures of Muhammad, the speech of Pope Benedict XVI in Regensburg in 2006 and other events inflamed the antagonistic feelings towards Christians and made them vulnerable to all kinds of suppressions caused by events which they neither approved of nor were concerned with.

Are executions and the crucifixions that followed in Saudi Arabia<sup>22</sup> according to the Islamic Sharia not a defamation of the Christian faith and the seed of what happened in Libya and at the hands of ISIS in ar-Raqqa and elsewhere? Do such events contribute to confidence in the hearts of Christians to feel at ease with the situation and to remain in the Arab world? Is there a connection between the abovementioned massacre of 21 Copts (in February 2015) and the killing of 21 Copts on New Year's Eve 2011 in a church in Alexandria? Could there be a message behind the two incidents or may they even be related to the same ideological understanding and regional group? Radwan as-Sayyed suggests:

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<sup>21</sup> Organization of Islamic Cooperation, established in 1969.

<sup>22</sup> Ahmad Ash-Shamlani was executed and then crucified on 29 May 2009. Another Yemeni person met with the same fate on 27 March 2013 in the city Jizan in the Holy week, <http://www.france24.com/ar/>, 28 March 2013.

It is obvious in the Iraqi case that there is a systematic banishment of Christians there. ... The situation is in fact in Egypt different than that in Iraq but the phenomenon is the same. ... Christians in Egypt suffer from a lack of religious rights, suffer from their neighbors, and suffer from the negligence or at least slackness of the authorities in protecting them. ... Due to the dispersion of Christians in the whole country it is therefore the radical Islamists in most cases who initiate the assaults against Christians.<sup>23</sup>

After the removal of President Muhammad Mursi in July 2013 and the dismantling of the civil blockade of the Muslim Brotherhood of ar-Rabia Square in August, confusion and disturbances spread all over the country. The Christians were becoming worried because in al-Minya the possessions and homes of Christians were destroyed – which is not unusual in the history of the Muslim world. A year later the same happened to the Christians of Mosul. The International Society of Human Rights reported: “On Sunday militant Islamists attacked and burnt houses and commercial buildings of the Christian minority in Ebzet Zakariya, a village in the upper Egyptian province of Minya.”<sup>24</sup> The society reported that a number of Christian inhabitants were driven from their homes: “Some violent Islamists, named Jihadists, marked with a colored spray the houses and buildings of Christians in Upper Egypt, which a few days later were burnt down.”<sup>25</sup>

Khroumeinism is the second Islamic movement. The unexpected unique success of the Khoumeini revolution in Iran, the sixth military power in the world at that time, resulted in a Shiite revival that was soon to be noticed in the Arab and Islamic world and beyond. The religiously motivated politics found fertile soil in Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Yemen, North Africa, etcetera. The Iraq-Iran War of 1980-1988, supported by the Gulf States, was supposed to hinder the spread of the Shiite interpretation of the Quran and the political influence of the Mullahs. However, the opposite has happened as the Iraq Wars 1980-1988 against Iran, in 1991 against the World Alliance and in 2003 with America, weakened the Sunnite power to protect the Gulf Region against the overwhelming power of the movement. This was exacerbated by the population explosion of the Shiites. Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Syrian regime and Iraqi Shiites built a strategic bridge from Iran to the Mediterranean from where missionary movements were heading to North Africa. No matter how one looks at the war between Israel and Hizbollah in 2006, the masses on the streets in the Arab world in those days regarded

<sup>23</sup> Radhwan as-Sayyed, “How long will the campaign persist against the Christians and why?” 4 Jan. 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/aawsat2011>.

<sup>24</sup> Internationale Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte = International Society for Human Rights.

<sup>25</sup> “Zahlreiche Häuser der christlichen Minderheit angezündet, Kopten vertrieben. IGFM: Dschihadisten geben Häuser von Christen zur Brandschatzung frei”, 30 Sept. 2013, <http://www.igfm.de/laender/aegypten/>.



the war against Israel as a restoration of the lost Arab dignity and identity. The sad result is a gradual evacuation of Christians from South Lebanon and their emigration from the country because the Hizbollah with its sophisticated weapons has neutralized the politics of the country. It is only a matter of time until the last Christian multi-ethnic and multi-religious state on the continent disappears. Simon Faddoul, president of “Caritas” in Lebanon summarizes the situation saying:

I should just confirm that we Christians are the largest losers and scapegoats for the development in the Near East. ... The Western engagement in the Middle East is full of contradictions. On the one side the West wants to enhance democracies and on the other hand it supports theocracies. It preaches on the one hand laicism and separation of state and religion while on the other it supports countries in which Islam alone is the state religion.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 The present situation

Up to this point, the uprisings have revealed an evident struggle for power between four major adversaries in the Arab societies: political Islam, Islamism, ancient regimes defending the *status quo*, and liberals and youth striving for freedom and change. Besides all this we are witnessing a major trend to ethnic and religious sectarianism between Sunnites and Shiites that is governing the behavior of many conflicting fractions in the region. Due to the distress caused by the Islamists in several countries, no matter which affiliation they belong to, liberals and the youth have mainly sided with the military power. The director of Al-Arabia TV-Channel drastically puts it to the point: “From Syria to Mauritania and South Sudan, Arab republics are the outcome of the religious and militant institutions. As long as these two institutions maintain the grip on power, the region will never advance into an era of civilized democracy. The Arab democracy crisis, whether real or assumed, will often lead to repressive regimes led by religious men or militants.”<sup>27</sup>

These uprisings have been greatly influenced by globalization and modern technology. Mobilization and communication have played a major role in the latest developments taking place in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>28</sup> Modernity was never so far away, yet so close to the people in the remotest areas of the Arab world. It is defined by the perspective with which people look at the situation today.

<sup>26</sup> “We Christians are the losers of the Arab Spring”, André Stiefenhofer interviewed the Lebanese Caritas-President, Simon Faddoul, Rome, 26 Apr. 2013, ZENIT.org

<sup>27</sup> Abd Al-Rahman Al-Rashed, website of Alarabiya TV, 26 April 2014, Translation of a special dispatch of memri, No. 5722.

<sup>28</sup> See mainly the role of the TV-channel al-Jazeera in first supporting and fuelling the uprisings, then in presenting the news in a very one-sided manner.

One can say that the cradle of the Christian faith in the second decade of the 21st century is witnessing the most horrific incidents: confusion, chaos, excessive coercion, use of chemical weapons, abductions and public executions, deportations and massacres in the “House of Islam.” This volcanic eruption in the Arab world has shaken the feelings of the Muslims and compelled them to reconsider what is happening within their own house.<sup>29</sup> These outrageous developments have also deeply stirred the civilized world. The mass media are kept busy pouring out daily news and images of executions of “apostates” that are being disseminated through the electronic media around the world. What was supposed to be “the Arab Spring” left us with over 300 000 victims in Syria alone, and a great number of casualties, and wounded and physically disabled people from every denomination and affiliation. “The Arab Spring” resulted in millions of displaced people, whose fate is changing the present demography of the Middle East and North Africa.

Nevertheless, some talked of “the Arab Spring” because for the very first time in their history people could to a certain extent – at least at the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” – express their opinions frankly, openly and freely without fear of death. They were able to demonstrate in some countries and speak out loud on social and political issues. However, does this “Arabic Glasnost Era” apply likewise to the Christian religion? What has happened to those Christians throughout history, who criticized religious institutions and practices?

### **3. The cradle of Christianity at stake**

The above description of the developments endangering the Christians in the Middle East<sup>30</sup> shows the extent of the chaotic events leading to a massive exodus of native Christians from the region to Western countries, which has become irreversible. Even in the Kurdish region, Christians are not willing to stay any longer for fear of the Islamic State. The vicar of the Syrian town of Qamishly, Abd al-Masih Yusuf, commented on the situation: “Before the crisis 5 000 Syrian Orthodox families lived in Qamishly. ... Since then more than every second person has left and emigrated.”<sup>31</sup>

#### **3.1 Christianity on the eve of the “Arab Spring”**

Already before the beginning of the “Arab Spring”, the European Parliament expressed its concerns in the resolution of 20 January 2011 regarding the critical

<sup>29</sup> See the letter of 126 Muslim clerics and intellectuals against the leader of IS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, 27 Sept. 2014: <http://lettertobaghdadi.com/>

<sup>30</sup> Prince Charles uttered his concern about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East at a Christmas meeting with other religious authorities on 17 Dec. 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Rainer Hermann, “Die letzten Christen von Qamischli”, 24 Nov. 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/RH-FAZ2014>.

situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion in several countries of the Middle East. § 1 reads:

The EU condemns the recent attacks on Christian communities in various countries and expresses its solidarity with the families of the victims; expresses its deep concerns about the proliferation of episodes of intolerance, repression and violent events directed against Christian communities, particularly in the countries of Africa, Asia and the Middle East.<sup>32</sup>

And in § 4: “The EU is concerned about the exodus of Christians from various countries, especially Middle Eastern countries, in recent years.”<sup>33</sup>

Historic Oriental Christian churches and individual Christians and families in the Middle East and North Africa have become a target of this ongoing tragedy and their destiny is at stake. Former Jordanian information minister, Salah al-Qallab, already warned the public in 2008, saying: “If the harassment of Christians in the region continues, we will soon become like a dying tree. The multicultural [Middle] East, with its variety of possibilities for man to connect to God, will become a large, unyielding, and lifeless rock.”<sup>34</sup>

In the face of this the Kuwaiti columnist Ahmad al-Sarraf resorts to bitter sarcasm: he demands that Christians leave the region immediately so that the Muslims can massacre each other. In the newspaper *Al-Qabas* he wrote: “Get out, we hate you, we don’t want you any more amongst us. We are tired of it all – advancement, civilization, openness, tolerance, love, brotherhood, living friendly together and being considerate. Get out at last!”<sup>35</sup>

This calamity shows that social structures and infrastructures are evidently breaking down on all levels in some key countries of the Middle East and North Africa. New political Islamic classes are emerging and trying to gain the upper hand in most countries of the Arab world and are calling for a traditional conservative and literal interpretation of the Qur’an. It is indeed a momentous time in the history of the Arab world that caused the influential writer in the Gulf Region, Jamal Khashoggi, to ask:

What has gone wrong? ... All those who babble about the foreign conspiracy suppress the truth and close their eyes to our own mistakes. ... They have mistaken tyranny for stability, they have ignored social impoverishment of peoples, believing

<sup>32</sup> Situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion. <http://tinyurl.com/Europarl2011>.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Al-Rai Jordanian Daily Newspaper, 4 June 2008.

<sup>35</sup> Martin Gehlen, ‘Muslimische Intellektuelle begehren auf’, Kairo, 30 Aug. 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/MG-Z-2014>.

religious life is to be passive and inactive; and religion in general to serve to legitimize authority. Yet no one will admit their mistake. Thus the flood of extremism is the only thing that is moving forward.<sup>36</sup>

A short description of the situation in some countries serves to illustrate the awkward situation of the historic and the Protestant churches in the Middle East. In the countries that were chosen, Christianity had existed since its birth. The countries represent the Arab, Turkish and Persian worlds and the endurance of Christianity there.

### 3.2 Iraq

The process of the migration of Christians from Iraq began many decades ago, but was accelerated due to the war of 2003 and the subsequent intimidations, culminating in a shocking terrorist attack in 2010. It is said that the largest wave of Christian migration from Iraq in modern times began after the terror attack on the Sayyidat an-Najat church in 2010. According to some sources over 4 000 families left Baghdad within three weeks.<sup>37</sup> Car explosions, economic pressure, the displacement of ethnic and religious groups within the country, led to insecurity and are to be regarded as factors that robbed the Christians of their resolve to remain in the country. Tom Holland, an author and historian of antiquity, says that “religious diversity in Iraq and the region is at risk from the extreme interpretations of Sunni Islam espoused by groups such as ISIL. Along with Christians, Shia Muslims and ancient sects tracing their history back to Babylonian times, such as the Yazidis and Mandaeans, have become subject to persecution and been pressured to flee their native lands.”<sup>38</sup> Holland refers to the tragedy of the Iraqi Christians, saying: “The problem for Christians, though, was that they had no homeland. Now, as the inadequacies of the Western model of the nation-state in the Middle East are brutally exposed, they find themselves with nowhere to hide.”<sup>39</sup>

Therefore, what happened in Mosul and the plain of Nineveh was to be expected. In the summer of 2014, all over the plain of Niniveh and Mosul in Iraq, the Christian residences were marked with the Arabic letter *NOON*, resembling Nazarene, that is, the name for Christians in the Qur’an, in order to identify them for destruction. Two weeks later, a swift raid of ISIS against the region brought the Sunnite districts of Iraq under their control. The Christians were given an ultimatum and had three

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> <http://alhayat.com/Articles/6182410/>, 11 Dec. 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Nigel O’Connor, “Iraq’s Christian refugees linger in Jordan”, <http://tinyurl.com/NOC-AJ2014>, Last updated: 6 Dec. 2014.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*

choices: the embracement of Islam, the payment of jizya (the special tax for the people of the book) or death. Nual Ibrahim, a former resident of Mosul, told Al-Jazeera: "They said, 'convert to Islam or die', and they gave us one day to decide, so we fled."<sup>40</sup> Before the deadline was reached, about 1 200 families fled from their home-town Mosul, leaving behind them all their assets and possessions.<sup>41</sup> They were even robbed of their belongings, documents and money. These terrifying events, together with the attempted annihilation of the Yazidi religious community through ISIS showed that religious minorities are not wanted in the region.<sup>42</sup> An Iraqi refugee in Amman, Najem Handaniyeh, said in an interview to Al-Jazeera: "Any Christian still in our home city is now either a Muslim or dead."<sup>43</sup> The report of Al-Jazeera continues: "Mosul, which was seized by ISIL this summer, and surrounding towns on the Nineveh Plain were the heartland of Christianity in Iraq and home to a host of liturgical traditions, ancient monasteries and churches. That history is quickly being eradicated. Qaraqosh, which was the largest Christian city in Iraq and home to 40 000 people, fell to ISIL in August (2014)."<sup>44</sup>

According to Archbishop Warda it obviously became easy for the majority of the Sunnite population to collaborate with ISIS<sup>45</sup> in order to expel their undesired and alienated neighbors and take over their possessions.<sup>46</sup> Archbishop Warda commented: "The expulsion of Christians from Mosul and the Nineveh Plain was not only a shock: it was genocide. It was a crime against humanity." It disturbed him that Iraqi Muslims did not distance themselves from "the Islamic State." They seemed to be more concerned that the attacks had damaged the international prestige of Islam.<sup>47</sup>

Due to this situation Christians are lacking confidence and courage and it is almost impossible for them and other minorities to return to their original places and claim back what they have lost through their abrupt exodus from the region. Jamie Merrill writes:

Father Yako recalls that "before Qaraqosh was taken by Daesh [Arabic acronym, i.e. IS Islamic State] there were many slogans by the KRG saying they would fight as hard for Qaraqosh as they would for Irbil. But when the town was attacked, there

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "Christians after Mosul: The Middle East is no longer an appropriate place to live in". In Arabic Language, 23 Aug. 2014, <http://alhayat.com/Articles/4255410/>

<sup>42</sup> Patriarchen der Ostkirchen: "Christen und andere sind Minderheiten in Gefahr: Beendet die Gewalt", Fides News, 28 Aug. 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Nigel O'Connor, "Iraq's Christian refugees ...".

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> "Wir Christen wurden von Bagdad im Stich gelassen", zenit.org, 6 Oct. 2014.

<sup>46</sup> This is an example of hundreds of articles on the issue of sectarianism: "In a back-and-forth battle, an Iraqi town splits on ethnic lines". 16 Nov. 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/NPR2014-Blog>.

<sup>47</sup> "Wir Christen wurden von Bagdad im Stich gelassen", zenit.org, 6 Oct. 2014.

was nobody to support us.” He says that the Christian society in Iraq is still shocked by the way in which the Iraqi and Kurdish Governments failed to defend them. . . . Mounting persecution since 2003 and now the final calamity of ISIS taking Mosul and the Nineveh Plain has convinced many that they can no longer stay there. The Archbishop suspects that even if ISIS can be driven back and Christians can return to their homes, half of them will only stay long enough to sell their property. Almost exactly a hundred years after the Armenian Christians in Turkey were slaughtered or driven into exile, the end has come for the Christian community of Iraq. “Have no doubt,” Archbishop Warda concludes, “that the IS massacre is a tragedy.”<sup>48</sup>

The Syrian Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Ignatius Youssef III Younan said in an interview with the English edition of Zenit:

The challenges of the Christian families in Iraq and Syria are in the first place not carrying out their Christian calling, but the question how they will survive.” In conclusion Younan said he was concerned about the situation of the people in Iraq and Syria and appealed to the nearest, especially the Western, countries. He had to continually encourage the people not to give up their hope for democracy, true peace and religious freedom.<sup>49</sup>

In an open letter to the “Muslim brothers and sisters” during an international conference organized by Saudi King Abdullah b. Abd al-Aziz for a religious and intercultural dialogue in November 2014 in Vienna, the Chaldaic Patriarch Raphael I called on the leading representatives of the Islamic community “to take over the responsibility to take over the fight against a grim Islamic extremism, which was a deadly danger for all Christians in the Middle East and no less dangerous also for Muslims.”<sup>50</sup>

### 3.3 Turkey

The Christian history in Turkey has witnessed similar deportations. The French consul in Diyarbakir informed his ambassador on 2 November 1895 of the three days of bloodshed in the city. It was ordered by Abdulhamid II and known by his name. “Hawar! Hawar!” (Rescue! Rescue!) the Christians shouted in Kurdish. 30 000 were dead or missing, 119 villages were turned to ashes. Thousands of stores

<sup>48</sup> Jamie Merrill, Independent, 23 Nov. 2014, <http://tinyurl.com/JM-I2014>.

<sup>49</sup> Patriarch Younan: “Middle East families are facing a great challenge”, Rome, 21 Oct. 2014, <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/patriarch-younan-middle-east-families-are-facing-a-great-challenge>.

<sup>50</sup> “Irak: Barbarei im Namen des Islam erinnert an tödliche Ideologien des 20. Jahrhunderts” - Chaldäischer Patriarch fordert Stellungnahme muslimischer Religionsvertreter. Zenit.org, 20 Nov. 2014.

and private houses of Christians were plundered. Diken is being quoted as having said in this article:

It is the final rehearsal of what happened in 1915... On 12 August 1915 the governor of the province Diyarbakir, Vali Dr. Mehmed Reshid Bey, received the order from Istanbul to drive out the Christian population to Syria. ... The Tsherkessic doctor sent a telegraph on 18 August communicating that he had succeeded in expelling 126 000 people within three days. ... There are some reports that tossed people were robbed of their clothes and jewelry outside the walls of the city. Everyone could come and do with the people what he wanted. Some took girls and women and married or raped them. ... According to official statistics dating back to 1914, 72 926 Armenians lived alone in Diyarbekir, 9 660 Catholics, 7 376 Protestants and the rest being Gregorian-apostolic Armenians.<sup>51</sup>

This tragedy occurred in 1915 to both Armenians and oriental churches in Turkey due to a governmental decree – Farman – legitimizing assaults against Christians all over the country. Ursula August, the present German female pastor in Istanbul writes:

Today there are hardly any Christians in Turkey. Altogether there are 0.14% in the whole population. The reasons for this are the pan-Islamic as well as the national Turkish powers and movements. To be more specific it was the genocide of the Armenians during World War I as well as the exchange of people between Greece and Turkey after the Lausanne Agreement of 1923, by which almost half a million Orthodox Christians had to leave Asia Minor.<sup>52</sup>

The successive Turkish governments have suppressed the recognition of this Christian tragedy. They have neither recognized this dark chapter of their history till now, nor reconciled themselves with the small minority of Christians left in the country. The country of “the seven churches” of the book of Revelation has consequently become almost void of its native Christian community. The Turkish government is trying to change historical Christian monuments, transforming former churches into mosques.<sup>53</sup> Even the demonstrations at Taksim Square because of Gezi-Park showed this. The demonstrations were about removing trees, and they did not know that in former times there had been Armenian ruins that were transformed into a

<sup>51</sup> Mely Kiyak, “Die fehlenden Armenier von Diyarbakir”, <http://tinyurl.com/MK-Z2013>, 9 Aug. 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Ursula August, “Toleranz auf Türkisch”, *Mitteilungen aus Ökumene und Auslandsarbeit* 2013, pp.10-12, <http://www.ekd.de/international/berichte/90953.html>.

<sup>53</sup> *Idea-online.de*, 29 Aug. 2012.

park<sup>54</sup> in an attempt to eradicate Christian history in Turkey. The legal struggle for regaining Christian monasteries like Mor Gabriel in South East Turkey is a clear indication of the subtle method of making life uncomfortable for Christians in the country so that they will leave.

August sees the problem of the Christian denominations deeply rooted in the Lausanne Agreement of 1923:

According to the Turkish definition of the Lausanne Agreement, however, the only minority groups were those living in Turkey at the time when the Agreement was signed i.e. the Armenians, Bulgarians, Greeks and Jews. Not recognized as religious minority groups were the Syrian Orthodox and Catholic United Churches and the Protestant Churches, planted after 1923. Recent foreign Christian churches are in the same way not recognized as falling under the clauses of Lausanne Agreement.<sup>55</sup>

Therefore, it seems logical and consequent for policy makers in Turkey, when the sedentary process against the criminals after the killing of three Christians in Malatya in the year 2007 shows the obvious unwillingness to punish the transgressors. “The five perpetrators arrested at the crime scene had already been released from prison in March 2014 and have since been allowed to live at home with their families. ... During the trial, it became clear that a shadowy nationalistic organization, known as ‘Ergenekon’ was associated with the attack on the Zirve Publishing House.”<sup>56</sup> August continues in her report saying: “All non-Muslim minorities in Turkey have a common problem: that many of the rights formulated by the Agreement are not carried out and that people belonging to these minorities are not recognized by law.”<sup>57</sup>

In order to feel secure in a surrounding, one has to experience a genuine equilibrium. In this connection Kamal Sido describes the injustice committed against the Christians in most Muslim states: “Crimes against Christians must be punished just like all other crimes.”<sup>58</sup> The EU made recommendations to the countries of the third world, demanding this right for the Christians in § 2:

<sup>54</sup> Fiken Shitirian, “Another secret under the Park of Gizi in Istanbul”, <http://alhayat.com/Details/529612>, 5 July 2013.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, Ursula August, p.10-11.

<sup>56</sup> [www.MEConcern.org](http://www.MEConcern.org) 22 Jan. 2015.

<sup>57</sup> Ursula August, p.12.

<sup>58</sup> Kamal Sido, Tonja Klausmann, *Threatened by changes: Christian minorities in the Middle East*, Published by the Society for Threatened Peoples, March 2014, p.19. Dr. Radwan as-Sayyed analyses the injustice against Christians in Iraq and Egypt after the attack on a church in Alexandria 31 Dec. 2010. He further complains that there has been no real punishment for the committed crimes against Christians in both countries. Radwan as-Sayyed, “How long will the campaign persist against the Christians and why?” 4 Jan. 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/aawsat2011>.



...welcomes the efforts made by the authorities of the countries concerned to identify the authors and perpetrators of the attacks on Christian communities; urges the governments to ensure that perpetrators of these crimes and all persons responsible for the attacks, as well as for other violent acts against Christians or other religious or other minorities, are brought to justice and tried by due process.<sup>59</sup>

Also Amnesty International has criticized the lack of basic human rights in Turkey, and describes the situation as an unacceptable status.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, mission agencies have not given up the hope that the situation may change: "The New Life Church in Gaziantep has now become a legal entity through registration as an association."<sup>61</sup> These positive signals have been put into the right perspective in a prayer request that: "those in authority will respect the freedom and rights of Protestant Christians, churches and workers in Turkey."<sup>62</sup>

### 3.4 Israel / Palestine / Jordan

The Holy Land has also experienced a tragic exodus of Christians. On the official website of Pope Francis' visit to the Holy Land the media published this statement: "The Holy Land is the home of 80 000 Christians who are by their culture and history Palestinian Arabs . . . In 1948 the Christians were about 10% of the Palestinian population. Today they are less than 2%."<sup>63</sup> Christians began to emigrate involuntarily from the Holy Land with the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948, the Intifada, the annexation of the West Bank in 1967, the Intifadas, and the erection of the wall. "The present radicalization of Muslims has weakened the Christians, especially among the youth, in their desire to remain in the country."<sup>64</sup>

Gaza Christians have suffered mostly because of the Islamic radicalization. According to research done by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Berlin, about 10 000 Christians lived in Gaza in 1967. Presently, their number does not exceed 1 300. "If the emigration of Gaza Christians continues, the 1 700-year-old Christian fellowship in Gaza will soon become history." The research proceeds to describe the importance of Gaza by saying: "In the 5th century Gaza was an important Christian center and constituted after Jerusalem the largest conglomeration of monastic

<sup>59</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/Europarl2011>.

<sup>60</sup> "Amnesty International: Türkei missbraucht Anti-Terror-Gesetze als Maulkorb", Zeit-online.de, 27 March 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/AI-Z-2014>.

<sup>61</sup> MEConcern.org, 4 Dec. 2014.

<sup>62</sup> www.MEConcern.org, 4 Dec. 2014.

<sup>63</sup> Lateinisches Patriarchat von Jerusalem, 4 Nov. 2014.

<sup>64</sup> Firas Abedrabbo, zenit.org 4 Nov. 2014.

life in Palestine.”<sup>65</sup> Spiritual care can only be sustained through foreign help. The study declares: “Already all the Catholic and Orthodox priests and Protestant clergy come from abroad.”<sup>66</sup>

It is an open secret that Christians are a casualty of the military operations between the Egyptian army and the radicals in Rafah:

Several Christian families in Rafah near the border with the Gaza Strip found leaflets left on the doorsteps of their homes or shops in September 2012 that asserted that the area was “an Islamic Emirate” and demanded that all Christians leave within 48 hours. ... In response several Christian families left the town. Other Christian residents who worked in the public sector approached their employers and asked to be transferred to another town. ... This development follows an arson attack against a church in the same town on 2 January 2011, which also prompted some Christians to leave the town.<sup>67</sup>

It is however, necessary to point out a specific problem for Protestant Christians: that “although evangelical churches have been active in the Holy Land for many years, they are neither recognized as denominations by the Palestinian Authorities nor by the Israeli government.” The former Secretary General of the World Evangelical Alliance, Geoff Tunnicliffe, in March 2014, drew attention to this issue:

It is more than time that this recognition should be granted. I call upon the government of Israel and the Palestinian Authorities to grant this recognition. This is not only a call for justice and democracy but it will also create a more stable context. ... Treating them as third class citizens does not empower them to reach such a shared goal or even remain in the land.<sup>68</sup>

In the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan the Sunnites have become the dominant population, despite the tolerant attitude of the Hashemite Dynasty towards the historic churches. The reasons for the decrease of Christians down to 5% in the Jordanian population<sup>69</sup> correlate to a large extent with those mentioned for Israel and the West Bank, due to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the year 2014 “the Protestant Grace Church in Amman has been under regular scrutiny because of its extensive work amongst

<sup>65</sup> [www.idea.de](http://www.idea.de) 20 Dec. 2014.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> MEConcern.com, 4 Oct. 2012.

<sup>68</sup> MEConcern.org, 23 Oct. 2014.

<sup>69</sup> Rula Samain, “Christian emigration: mildest in Jordan vis-à-vis region, but worrying enough economic pressures to blame, but other reasons not ruled out”, 9 Jan. 2012 | 00:39 <http://jordantimes.com/christian-emigration-mildest-in-jordan-vis--vis-region-but-worrying-enough>

Iraqi and Syrian refugees. ... In response to questions from intelligence officers as to why so many Muslims attend their church center, church leaders emphasized that they serve all who are in need, regardless of their religious background.”<sup>70</sup>

### 3.5 Iran

We need to differentiate between the traditional ethnic Christians and the new Christian movements in Iran. The Armenian and Syrian Christian churches have more or less adjusted to the situation even if their members are not able to live as they wish: they are systematically discriminated against in education and at the workplace and the women have to comply with the laws of compulsory use of the veil. The Christians and members of other recognized religions such as the Jews and Zoroastrians are considered “Dhimmis,” second class citizens, because they do not possess the same rights as the Shiites.<sup>71</sup>

Protestant churches and house-churches are raided and believers who are willing to take the risk of accommodating converts and accept the social challenge of welcoming Muslims interested in the Christian faith into their communities are being imprisoned. Out of several hundred examples, it is sufficient to recall the harassment of the church in 1994 after the assassination of Mehdi Dibaj and the imprisonment of Haik Hovsepian-Mehr. Another recent incident illustrates the point more vividly “Seven believers were arrested in Shiraz on 8 February 2012 when their fellowship meeting was raided. An associate was also arrested at the same time in his home. In June 2012 the seven were found guilty of ‘attending a house-church, spreading Christianity, having contact with foreign ministries, propaganda against the regime and disrupting national security.’”<sup>72</sup> The authorities could utilize any of these stigmatizing accusations against anyone at any given time in order to forbid him and his group to be religiously active. This psycho-terror obviously impacts Christians all over the country. This is why the Syro-Aramaic Iraqi human rights activist, Kamal Sido, appeals to the Pope to defend the Christians of the region “to ensure that the Christians have a future in the Middle East, Pope Francis should advocate for unrestricted freedom of belief and equality for all religious and ethnic groups before the law and in the constitutions of the respective countries.”<sup>73</sup> The article quoted at the beginning of this article<sup>74</sup> comes to the same conclusion and asks: “Who is in the position of charging the religious and political Arab leaders who are

<sup>70</sup> MEConcern.org, 27 Nov. 2014.

<sup>71</sup> Michaela Koller, “Christen sind Bürger zweiter Klasse”, Interview mit dem Iran-Experten Wahdat-Hagh über die Christenverfolgung in Iran, Brussels, 30 Oct. 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-18956?l=german>.

<sup>72</sup> www.meconcern.org, 17 Nov. 2014.

<sup>73</sup> Kamal Sido, Tonja Klausmann, Threatened by changes: Christian minorities in the Middle East, Published by the Society for Threatened Peoples, March 2014, p.19.

<sup>74</sup> Ash-Sharq al-Awsat, 30 Dec. 2014.

responsible for the tragedies occurring in the Arab world today?" The article ends with the question: "Where are the scientific centers which offer the objective political analysis for the young generation about what has happened in the last 50 years of our history?"

#### 4. Religious freedom for Christians?

The spiritual development of the individual and free choice of conscience both belong to the human rights in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These are "irrevocable values that cannot be subject to decisions. Among them are the sanctity of human life, human dignity... and freedom of religion, for which the Christians of our time pay the highest price through discrimination, persecution, and elimination."<sup>75</sup> The tragic consequences for indigenous Christians have already been illustrated in this paper. Excerpts from the following report indicate the urgent necessity of permitting non-Muslims to enjoy freedom of faith and conscience. The Ecumenical Report on the Persecution of Christians 2013 complains about the excessive restrictions of the freedom of self-expression for Christians.

It is evident that the restrictions in religious freedom since 2007 have increased, especially in the countries in the area of Saudi-Arabia ... many countries with a bad evaluation can be found in the Middle East and Asia, that means in regions where one religion has privileges and others are excluded. The examples of these countries lead to the conclusion that the restrictions come from the government hand in hand with the social circumstances and are often strengthened by their interaction. Christians are particularly pressured when they represent a minority in authoritarian states.<sup>76</sup>

This is exemplified looking at Iran where "liberal Muslims say that there is no compulsion in Islam. But according to Islamic law, it is not allowed for a Muslim to defect from the religion, because the Quran is the last valid Word of Allah. This means for Iran that there is neither religious freedom nor freedom of conscience. Consequently, every other kind of freedom is missing: rights for women cannot exist in the Islamic Republic of Iran, nor can there be freedom of the press. The right to meet together and form an organization is affected too. Even more so the right for an apostate to live at all is annulled. Since the time when all laws in Iran were derived from the Islamic Law the freedom of faith and of conscience are forbidden by the constitution."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup> ZENIT, online-service 22 Dec. 2011.

<sup>76</sup> "Ökumenischer Bericht zur Lage der Religionsfreiheit von Christen 2013", p.53. The report was presented by bishop Martin Schindehütte and archbishop Dr. Ludwig Schick in Berlin on 1 July 2013.

<sup>77</sup> Michaela Koller, "Christen sind Bürger zweiter Klasse", Interview Mit dem Iran-Experte Wahdat-Hagh über die Christenverfolgung in Iran, Brussels, 30 Oct. 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-18956?l=german>.

This applies to almost every Islamic state in the region. Until 2010 Egyptian Christians were forced to abide by these legal restrictions although some remarked that they “do not want to cope with old tradition anymore that says they have to apply for permission from the president of the state to install a new church building or renovate an old one.”<sup>78</sup> The European Parliament, being informed about all these cases, called attention to the necessity of granting the minorities in the Islamic world freedom of faith and conscience. In its resolution of 20 January 2011 on the situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion, one can read in § 3 that the European Parliament “strongly condemns all acts of violence against Christians and other religious communities as well as all kinds of discrimination and intolerance based on religion and belief against religious people, apostates and non-believers; and stresses once again that the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is a fundamental human right.”<sup>79</sup> Christians ought to remind the European Parliament continuously of its promised resolutions and demands made in 2011. It committed itself to the support of Christian affairs through its institutions: according to § 12 it “Invites the forthcoming External Affairs Council on 31 January 2011 to discuss the question of the persecution of Christians and respect for religious freedom or belief, which discussion should give rise to concrete results, especially as regards the instruments that can be used to provide security and protection for Christian communities under threat, wherever in the world they may be.”<sup>80</sup>

Günter Nooke, the German Chancellor’s personal representative for Africa in the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, writes in an article on the persecution of Christians:

Religious freedom is a very special human right: one of the oldest and most fundamental rights of all. It was forgotten for a long time, but now it is in great demand: especially in view of the terrible acts of the IS terrorists that flicker over the TV screens into our living rooms. Freedom of faith and conscience offer the most possibilities in the political context to terminate misunderstandings. In Germany at this time a factual discussion with the majority of the population is made difficult by the fact that “the people have forgotten that they have forgotten God.” Unlike most other states therefore people in political and administrative authority here understand freedom of religion as a freedom from religious connections.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Radhwan as-Sayyed, “How long will the campaign persist against the Christians and why?” 4 Jan. 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/aawsat2011>.

<sup>79</sup> Situation of Christians in the context of freedom of religion, § 3, <http://tinyurl.com/Europarl2011>.

<sup>80</sup> § 12, *ibid.* <http://tinyurl.com/Europarl2011>.

<sup>81</sup> Günter Nooke, “Verfolgte Christen sind eine Mahnung an uns!”, <http://tinyurl.com/GN-idea2014>, 23 Oct. 2014 (translation mine).

The prohibition or restriction on financial aid other than money that accrues to the state poses serious difficulties to civil and religious societies in the Arab world, affecting non-governmental organizations. In post-revolutionary Egypt, 44 persons were charged with illegal “foreign financing” and “missing permissions,” among them various foreigners and the head of the German Konrad-Adenauer Foundation’s office.<sup>82</sup> The arbitrariness of state permissions creates a climate of insecurity and fear. In Bahrain, the Indian Anglican congregations and Pentecostal churches had to obtain an official permit in 2007 and were threatened with forceful eviction.<sup>83</sup> The arbitrary detention of clergymen and lay members of congregations and house-searches also create a climate of fear and intimidation.<sup>84</sup>

Sometimes the entire Christian population is held responsible, for example, when in Egypt a Christian attracts the wrath of the Muslim majority, because of the picture of a Muslim woman on his mobile phone, or for other “offenses”. Often all Christian families are cast out of the village.<sup>85</sup> The times for Sunday services are also restricted: in order to restrict the attendance of church services, the Iranian government outlawed services on Fridays, the public holiday.<sup>86</sup> Accusations of immoral behavior are also made: in Saudi- Arabia, the police frequently break up home congregations of Christian foreign workers under the pretext of “illicit mingling of men and women”<sup>87</sup> or of holding a dance party.<sup>88</sup>

#### 4.1 Conversions to the Christian faith

The plea for freedom leads us to reflect upon one of the most awkward issues for Muslims in Christian-Muslim-Dialogues. It is also a point of disagreement between the churches, because of their differing understanding of mission. One thing is certain today: Muslims are becoming Christians! This challenge has exposed many historic Oriental churches to serious problems with Protestant churches. The reasons are plausible: the historical churches have been increasingly pressurized by the government to stop the activities of the younger churches because the historical churches have for centuries been the natural addressees of the governments in the

<sup>82</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/Zeit-2012>, 7 Feb. 2012.

<sup>83</sup> “Kirchen droht Zwangsräumung – Gemeinden sollen binnen zwei Wochen Genehmigung nachweisen”, in: idea-online, 29 Nov. 2007.

<sup>84</sup> For example, the imprisonment of the pastor of the Assyrian Evangelical Church of Kermanshah / Iran, mec-online, 23.2.2010.

<sup>85</sup> In 2012, a Christian laundry owner burned a Muslim’s shirt in Dahshur. For the first time, the government assisted the evicted Christian families upon their return. <http://tinyurl.com/Dahshur2012>, 8 Aug. 2012.

<sup>86</sup> MEC-online, 16.11.2009.

<sup>87</sup> MEC-online, 10.2.2012.

<sup>88</sup> idea-online, 5.8.2008.

Arab world. The Oriental and Catholic Churches want to maintain certain privileges and their assets.

There have also been protests against a strict interpretation of the Islamic Sharia on apostasy and defection from Islam. Although it is forbidden from an Islamic point of view for Christians to do missionary work among Muslims, it is rather Muslims who want to become Christians, led by their own independent convictions. Since the last decade of the 20th century, due to the globalization, churches and states are confronted with the phenomenon of conversion and with a new understanding of freedom of conscience and freedom of belief.<sup>89</sup>

Therefore, all Oriental churches are facing the inescapable decision to redefine their position regarding mission among Muslims. The ruling Anti-Mission-Codex in most of the Christian-Islamic roundtables, that is categorically separating mission from dialogue and seeing mission as religious intolerance, has to be removed in the East and the West. A taboo on Christian mission – for whatever reason – means the abandonment of the Christian core values. Thereby, the dialogue degenerates in the West into monologues and the assignment of demands on Muslim behalf, while in the East the Christians are urged to obey and abide by the Sharia law. An affirmation of the conversion serves as a touchstone for a real and honest dialogue. If the dialogue aims at an understanding among religions and a pacification of the world, it must be held in mutual respect. However, respect for every person also means that everybody should have the freedom to decide his/her own affairs.

Missionary activities and public Christian events are generally prohibited in Islamic countries, especially when those activities touch upon Islamic matters. This means that it is forbidden for Christians to defend themselves against false accusations made against their faith, while they have to keep silent, fearing the blasphemy law that has become a sharp weapon causing many conflicts.

Laws against blasphemy are often used as a fig leaf to hinder the activity of academics, dissidents, reformers, and human rights activists. They restrict the freedom of thought and seek to build a closed mentality regarding religion.<sup>90</sup> For example the Algerian penal code punishes “insulting the Prophet and other messengers of Allah or the defamation of the faith or the principles of Islam.”<sup>91</sup> The charge of insulting Islam or the prophet Muhammad is extremely subjective and can be brought

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<sup>89</sup> C. Schirmacher, Defection from Islam: A Disturbing Human Rights Dilemma, *IJR* 3/1, 2010, p. 13-38.

<sup>90</sup> “Religionsfreiheit droht Erstickungsgefahr”, review of: Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, “Silenced: How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide” (Oxford University Press); the authors direct the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, zenit online, 16.1.2012.

<sup>91</sup> Similarly in Kuwait: Stoyan Zaimov: “Offending” God, Quran or Muhammad Could Mean Death for Kuwait’s Muslims, in: *Christian Post*, 4 May 2012 <http://tinyurl.com/SZ-CP2012>.

forward arbitrarily. In 2009, a man was imprisoned in Egypt because he had published links on his blog that Muslims found offensive.<sup>92</sup> The religious institution Dar al-Ifta announced in 2014 that eating in public during the fasting month of Ramadan would be considered an insult to Islam (“a form of chaos and an attack on the sanctity of Islam, a clear violation of the sanctity of the community and respect for religious freedoms”).<sup>93</sup> In Algeria, the distribution of a Christian CD was deemed as an insult to Islam.<sup>94</sup>

In some countries, such as Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia, not only blasphemy but also conversion automatically entails capital punishment. When migration to another country is allowed, as in the case of the Afghan convert Abdurrahman in 2006, it is not because of human rights concerns, but due to exceptions regulated by Sharia, such as declaring the convert insane.<sup>95</sup>

In Algeria, imprisonment between 2 and 5 years awaits anyone who

incites, constrains or utilizes means of seduction tending to convert a Muslim to another religion, or by using to this end establishments for teaching, for education, for health, of a social or cultural nature, or training institutions, or any other establishment, or any financial means... and makes, stores, or distributes printed documents or audio-visual productions or by any other aid or means, which has as its goal to shake the faith of a Muslim.<sup>96</sup>

Frequently, the charge of apostasy is connected with the accusation of spreading Christianity and acting against the state, and in Turkey also for insulting “Turkishness.”<sup>97</sup>

A sentence from a Middle Eastern country exemplifies the judicial procedure and its societal consequences:

... based on the accusation and the request and the confession and the insistency of the accused in his apostasy in spite of giving him time and according to articles, we judge that proven apostasy is the crime of the accused, therefore we strip him of all his rights. Therefore his marriage with any women, Muslims or of the “People of the Book,” is annulled since the date of his apostasy and all documents signed

<sup>92</sup> MEC-online, 17 Nov. 2009.

<sup>93</sup> Dar al-Ifta: No eating, drinking in public during Ramadan, <http://tinyurl.com/AMAY2012>, 2 Aug. 2012.

<sup>94</sup> www.MEConcern.com, online-service, 9 Dec. 2011.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.afghantimes.com/AbdulRahman.wmv>

<sup>96</sup> “New regulations concerning the conditions and rules for the exercise of religious worship other than Muslim,” Algeria, 2006, Ruling number 06-03 of 29 Moharram 1427 / 28 Feb. 2006.

<sup>97</sup> MEC-online, 19 Oct. 2009.



by him including his marriage certificate are annulled for he is considered a backslider with no religion and he cannot follow any other religion whatsoever, but he can return back to Islam. He has no right to inherit from anyone while he is still a backslider, and has no rights as a husband as he has been separated from his wife, and if he wishes to be married to her he needs to have a new marriage document, providing he returns to Islam first.<sup>98</sup>

In addition to annulling marriage, Islamic courts order the removal of child custody.

Furthermore, Muslims who become Christians are as a matter of principle not able to register their new religious denomination in their identification papers. Egypt's most famous convert to Christianity, the journalist Muhammad Hegazy, who became a Christian at the age of 16, has been fighting for this in public for years.<sup>99</sup>

Only when conversion is not merely reluctantly tolerated but explicitly allowed as part of the indispensable human rights, can we speak of a free society and a culture of tolerance. The baptism of the prominent Egyptian journalist Magdy Cristiano Allam, who was baptized by Pope Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Basilica on Easter morning 2008,<sup>100</sup> brought about furious reactions in the Muslim World,<sup>101</sup> but it was a clear sign by a Christian church in the West that baptism of converts should no longer be performed in secret but as a public act also in the Arab world.

There is nowadays a new definition of ethics concerning "apostates" and "people of the book." On the one hand the Qur'an praises Christians because of their high ethical standard, and Muslims recognize faithful Christians because of their good moral life-style. At the same time, every Muslim, no matter how lukewarm his religious life is or no matter to what extent his behavior conforms with the Sharia, will be regarded as a Muslim and the punishment for his trespasses – apart from certain *budud*<sup>102</sup> in Islam – does not weigh heavier than that of a pious Christian who happens to have left Islam to become a Christian.

Basically the categorization of Muslim and non-Muslim, believer and unbeliever, creates a climate of intolerance in a society that ought to treat its citizens equally in order to avoid a dual class society. Apostates are shaking this dualistic world view by

<sup>98</sup> The author has the verdict in the original language, signed on 25 Jan. 2005. Data is being withheld due to security reasons since the convert is still living in his home country.

<sup>99</sup> ZENIT, 27 Apr. 2010, <http://www.zenit.org/article-20399?l=german>; idea-online 30 Aug. 2007. The former minister for religion Zakzouk declared at a church congress 2007 in Cologne that the change of religion was under protection as a matter of principle. However, the turning back from Islam may not become public; this would be a danger for the public order equatable with high treason.

<sup>100</sup> "Osternacht im Petersdom: Benedikt XVI. tauft bekannten muslimischen Konvertiten Magdi Allam, 'Il Corriere della Sera", 23 March 2008, <http://www.zenit.org/article-14780?l=german>

<sup>101</sup> "Muslim involved in Vatican talks slams Pope's baptism of convert from Islam", 25 March 2008, <http://tinyurl.com/bapt2008>.

<sup>102</sup> Hudud = boundaries, meaning capital punishment.

daring to express their religious opinions openly. An evaluation of non-Muslims – who are not part of the Islamic *umma* – concerning their civil rights and state affiliation should be re-considered. Shortly after the revolution in January 2011 al-Azhar, the highest Sunni authority, based in Cairo, issued a document titled “Renewal” with extensive suggestions for reform, including the equal treatment of Muslims and non-Muslims, but it was met with widespread disapproval.<sup>103</sup> In most interpretations a position is accepted which is at least a step forward. Since the Qur’an does not speak in detail about the worldly punishment but more about the transcendent punishment, this is left to God. This interpretation does not abolish rejection of apostasy in principle but leaves room for a different handling of apostates.

The classification of apostates as traitors cannot be accepted. The person who is not a Muslim cannot claim the full rights of citizenship. The person who actively turns away from Islam has, in the eyes of many Muslim theologians and Muslim citizens, thereby renounced his loyalty to the state and is guilty of treason or betrayal of his country.<sup>104</sup> This serious accusation ought to be vividly addressed by the church, when defending converts before the courts in the West, but also taken up as a political issue that must be regulated in the centers of power in the Islamic world.

Converts from Christianity to Islam are celebrated and viewed as proof of the superiority of Islam. But converts from Islam to Christianity cause hysterical reactions.<sup>105</sup> This provokes the question: Do Muslims consider their *umma* so vulnerable and endangered that a few apostates are feared so much? It appears they are seen as an “instrument of sedition” that “opens the door for the impious to attack Islam and sow doubt among Muslims” so that they are “in open warfare against Islam, even if they do not raise the sword against Muslims.”<sup>106</sup>

The Catholic “Aid for the Church in Need” published a general analysis on “Religious Freedom in the World 2014,”<sup>107</sup> which describes the events between 2012 and the summer of 2014 and comes to the following conclusions:

That there has been deterioration everywhere where there have been changes with regard to religious freedom.<sup>108</sup> One can speak of an improvement in only 6 of the 196

<sup>103</sup> [www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=343007](http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=343007).

<sup>104</sup> Christine Schirmacher: Defection from Islam: A disturbing human rights dilemma, in: IJRF, 3/2, 2010, 15.

<sup>105</sup> The greatest hype can be observed when a priest’s wife in Egypt allegedly converts to Islam and is being brought back by the Coptic Church. Often just the rumor of such an incident is enough to mobilise thousands of demonstrators or to torch churches. See the cases of Camilia, or the unrests of Imbaba, a Cairo suburb (<http://tinyurl.com/Cairo-Cam>).

<sup>106</sup> Former sheikh of al-Azhar, Muhammad Shalabi, cited in: Khalil Samir, Apostasy in the Qur’an.

<sup>107</sup> John Pontifex, Chief Editor of the Report, [www.religionsfreiheit-weltweit.at](http://www.religionsfreiheit-weltweit.at)

<sup>108</sup> Religionsfreiheit in vielen Ländern der Welt bedroht, 4 Nov. 2014.

countries: in Iran, the United Emirates, Qatar, Zimbabwe, and Taiwan. Nevertheless, the degree of persecution in these countries is reckoned to be “high” or “medium”.<sup>109</sup>

The constitutions of three out of six countries declare Islam the state religion. In addition, a 32-page extract of the report has been published in English which describes religious intolerance and persecution in 20 of these countries as “high”. In 14 of the countries the religious persecution is related to Islamic extremism: in Afghanistan, the Central African Republic, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, the Maldives, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi-Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.<sup>110</sup>

## 5. Dependable measures

At a conference about the Middle East Jean Aziz asked: “What are the possible ways of dealing with what has become one of the greatest humanitarian catastrophes of our time?”<sup>111</sup>

### 5.1 The role of the Muslims

A female Christian parliamentarian at the same conference commented on injustice towards Christians in the Sharia: “Inequality in divorce and inheritance rights is absolute: Women are entitled to half of what is given to men. In the absence of a clear heir, the property of a deceased person goes to the Islamic *waqf*. Yet, for deceased Christians, it goes to the state and not to the Christian *waqf*.”<sup>112</sup>

A Jordanian priest, Rifat Bader, of the Catholic Center for Studies and Media comments: “The school curriculum ignores completely the indigenous Christians who have been living in the region since the time of the Apostles. How can children learn to respect each other when the other is not even mentioned in the schoolbooks?”<sup>113</sup> In their annual synod in December 2014 the Syrian Catholic bishops formulated demands towards the Arabic countries, “that places of education should revise their curricula to delete discriminating contents with regard to non-Muslims.”<sup>114</sup> An initiative taken by the al-Azhar University is truly a positive sign. Here a high authority proclaims that terror in the name of religion does not belong to the Muslim identity. We can only hope that concrete actions follow this proclamation, for example to call on all the states to fight against the terror and to carry out an educational pro-

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Zenit.org, 4 Nov. 2014. These figures are based upon the research of Open Doors.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, Zenit.org, 4 Nov. 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Jean Aziz “Do Christians have a future In the Middle East?”, Posted 4 Oct. 2013 - Al-Monitor: the Pulse of the Middle East, 6 Feb. 2015, 22:18h, <http://tinyurl.com/JA-AM-2015>.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Fides News Service: 24 Nov. 2014.

<sup>114</sup> “Libanon: Prinzipien der ‘Erklärung von al-Azhar’ umsetzen”, zenit.org, 11 Dec. 2014.

gram of tolerance in all the mosques and schools.<sup>115</sup> In this context Pope Francis appeals to the Islamic world to examine and take measures against the misdeeds of the radical Islamists by pointing out: “Before religious fundamentalism destroys people and terrible massacres occur, it rejects God himself, in that it makes him into a mere ideological excuse.”<sup>116</sup> He then continues to express his hopes to the diplomatic corps “that the political, religious and spiritual leaders, in particular the Muslim, should condemn every fundamentalist and extremist interpretation of religion which leads to the justification of such acts of violence.”<sup>117</sup>

Could the Pope’s hope stop the massive emigration from the Middle East and shake up those in charge of the political decisions? Pope Francis tried to encourage Christians by showing them how to play a positive role in their own home countries, appealing to them by saying: “Most of you live among a Muslim majority. With your ability to differentiate you can help your Muslim fellow citizens to show an authentic picture of Islam, that many of them wish for, who continually say that Islam is a religion of peace and is in accordance with respect for human rights and demand that everyone can live together. That will be useful to them and to the whole society.”<sup>118</sup>

To the diplomats the Pope said: “I wanted with my Christmas letter to express to the Christian Churches and organizations in the Middle East my personal concern and assurance of prayer. They are giving a valuable testimony of faith and courage and are playing an important role as peacemakers and assisting to further reconciliation and development in the respective civil societies to which they belong. A Middle East without Christians would be a distorted and mutilated Middle East.”<sup>119</sup>

As a response to the abovementioned al-Azhar initiative, Christians came from all over the Arab world to the meeting held in Cairo. “The Moroccan Archbishop of Beirut, Paul Youssef Matar, was attending, then the Catholic Coptic Bishop Mina said that Archbishop Matar had spoken freely and concentrated on a few but very important aspects. He asked all Muslims of today to give every Christian the same respect that Mohamed gave them. For every Muslim the Christians and the Jews are ‘the People of the Book’ and therefore should not be considered a minority that

<sup>115</sup> Robert Cheaib, “Nur Gott allein weiß, ob und wann sie heimkehren werden”. Der Patriarch der syrisch-katholischen Kirche von Antiochien erzählt vom tragischen Exodus von 120 000 christlichen Familien, (ZENIT.org), Rome, 15 Dec. 2015.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Ein Naher Osten ohne Christen wäre ein entstellter und verstümmelter Naher Osten!’ - Neujahrsempfang im Vatikan für das Diplomatische Korps’, Zenit.org, 12 Jan. 2015.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> “Aus dem Vatikan, am 21. Dezember 2014, dem vierten Adventssonntag. FRANZISKUS”, www.Zenit.org 23.12.2014 (translation HJ).

<sup>119</sup> “Ein Naher Osten ohne Christen wäre ein entstellter und verstümmelter Naher Osten!” - Neujahrsempfang im Vatikan für das Diplomatische Korps’, Zenit.org, 12 Jan. 2015 (my translation).

could be oppressed or mistreated. Anyway all Muslims had the duty to pay their indispensable contribution to a harmonious living together."<sup>120</sup>

Will there be a real perspective for the disadvantaged Christian community to persist in the Arab world when its members experience unequal disadvantages to Muslims in daily life? These disadvantages include under-representation in political life, lack of jobs for highly qualified people, social and religious laws that frustrate the aspirations for positions in public life, fear of being accused of violating the blasphemy laws and of radical movements imposing their religious outlook in life and behavior upon Christians within the same environment. Under such conditions, Christians are unable to express themselves religiously and miss a secular society that grants all citizens equal opportunities to develop their abilities.

Aoun, the Lebanese author, comments on the issue of equilibrium in dealing with the citizens:

Arabic Christians never ceased to seek the defense of their independent safeguard of their human freedom outside the Islamic Sharia that wants to guarantee this freedom for them. It is rather the inherent human dignity upon which the human being is created and relies.<sup>121</sup> He continues: "It is not the economic power but the indispensable Arab Christians who will help the Muslim world to interact with the other cultures globally, because Islamists have only one perspective with which they want to govern."<sup>122</sup>

These fundamental expectations can neither be realized without an active engagement of the Muslim majority in the Arab countries nor without an authentic Muslim understanding that the Christian community has always been a genuine enrichment for the Islamic society. Only by reckoning that there is a desperate need for a social change and by carrying out courageous amendments in the conventional thinking of the religious establishment in the Muslim societies would there be any motivation for Christians to endure for the sake of a promising future for them and the following generations.

## 5.2 Consequences for the church

The attitude of the churches in the West should be a twofold "yes" to religious freedom as a universal human rights issue, on the one hand to enhance unhindered

<sup>120</sup> Fides News Service, 4 Dec. 2014, cited in the article: "Ägypten: Ein epochales Ereignis" 4.12.2014.

This is the comment of the coptic-catholic Bishop of Guizeh, Msgr. Antonios Aziz Mina, on the conference of the Al-Azhar-University.

<sup>121</sup> Aoun, 'The revolution of the Arab Christians', <http://tinyurl.com/Aoun-2012>, 4 Feb. 2012.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*

practice of religion of Muslims in the West, and on the other at the same time to further the rights of Christians in the Muslim world, including conversion in both directions.<sup>123</sup> This applies to society also: “Sadly, American politicians and diplomats persist in ignoring the profound relationship between these two ideals. Quite apart from humanitarian considerations, there is mounting evidence that religious liberty is necessary for the stability and longevity of democracy in highly religious societies, and for the defeat of religion-based terrorism. Yet the United States, for the most part, has not encouraged or assisted other countries in reforming their repressive institutions and habits.”<sup>124</sup>

The church must preserve and sharpen its Christian profile. Only a church that is self-confident and strong in its foundation can face the challenges of Islam, withstand and act in an inviting manner to outsiders. It should listen to an Oriental church leader, the Melkite patriarch of Antioch: “We should be rooted deeper in our faith and present and live it in a shining manner.”<sup>125</sup> This means also that the church, whether in the West or in an Islamic context, should be clearly recognizable as Christian.

From oriental churches we can see what perseverance means and that faith is something precious. The readiness to remain steadfast and to pay the ultimate price for their faith in martyrdom distinguishes oriental churches and in particular congregations of converts. The afflictions cause them to close their ranks across denominational boundaries and become focused on the priorities.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Cf. the speech of Bishop Huber at the EKD synod in Dresden on 4 Nov. 2007, in: *Christen und Muslime: Beide brauchen Glaubensfreiheit*, idea online, 13 Nov. 2007.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Marshall and Nina Shea: *Silenced. How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide*, 2011, <http://tinyurl.com/PMNS2012>.

<sup>125</sup> Interview with the head of the Melkite-Catholic Church in the Middle East, Patriarch Gregor III. Laham of Antioch, “*Christen im Nahen Osten: Salz, Licht und Sauerteig*”, ZENIT 20.12.2011.

<sup>126</sup> Facing an Islamic government, leading to uncertainty and emigration, the churches in Egypt became closer to each other developing a plan to form a council of churches with a unified vision for all churches. “*Egyptian churches to form council to unify views on critical issues*”, Al-Masry Al-Youm, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/692501> 3 March 2012.