The Syrian War and the Christians of the Middle East

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The so-called Arab Spring that emerged in 2010–11 looked quite different by the year 2013. It was a prolonged season, extending far beyond a spring in duration. While spring as a season brings beauty and hope for new life, the Arab Spring has been a dark and stormy one. Instead of the blooming of flowers and hope for renewal, all we have witnessed is violence, killing, destruction, and chaos. While I focus here on the Syrian situation and how the Christian community is being affected, I first give some background on aspects of the Middle East situation that may have caused this spring to be so different from the hopefulness of the natural spring.

We must understand that the story of the Middle East is not only a story of people now in struggle but also a story of geography and its history. I write here—not as a historian, but as a participant on the ground—about facts as they are known to common citizens living in the Middle East, people who are very conscious of the issues that affect their lives.

Geographically, the Middle East is the connecting point between the East and the West. Ancient powers sought control of the Middle East so they could have easy access to both East and West. The Middle East has always been an area of diverse ethnicities and religions, and more recently, also of extreme disparities of wealth, especially after the discovery of oil. No wonder every power in modern days has coveted control of it, in part or entirely. The history of this area thus has been shaped by its geography, especially by what the land contains.

Politically, in 1948 Israel was established—or as many would say, “planted” like a foreign plant in Palestine. In general, Israel seeks to affirm control of the geography, with strong religious claims based on ancient history. In this process, millions of Palestinians lost their home country and became refugees. They have been living in camps in neighboring countries as humans of a forgotten class, yet they still hold on to the keys of their homes, wanting to return as soon as possible—or so they thought. A further issue has been all the oppression and discrimination against those who stayed. The result has been that, ever since the establishment of the State of Israel, the entire Middle East has been in tension. At times this tension has risen to the point of violence and war.

In such a situation of tension, of conflict and violence, and of fear that the outbreak of war will lead to the occupation of land and to loss of power, the race to acquire arms became paramount. This goal in turn promoted the rise of dictatorial regimes on all sides. Even countries that claim to be democracies and to respect human rights have been encouraging dictators to rise up and have sustained them in power for long periods. In this way, the concepts of freedom, justice, and human rights have all been pushed aside. When countries are in a state of conflict, war, and fear, all that matters is power and control of the race for armaments. Although Middle Eastern countries largely share related languages and similar cultures, in fact each one deals with different influences and pressures and has its own ideology. The region is a mosaic, not a monolith.

This, I believe, is a fair description of the situation until 2010, when the Arab Spring began in Tunisia. In 2011 it spread to Libya and Egypt. Regrettably, these countries continue to struggle with the storms brought by their “springs,” and the future remains under a big question mark, something unknown.

The Case of Syria

I turn here to focus on Syria and the situation of its Christian community. Syria in fact has a history, a geography, and a culture that go back for thousands of years. Syria is also a country containing many ethnic and religious communities, all sharing this common history and a similar way of life.

While Islam as a religion is characteristic of all Arab countries, Syria has been considered a secular country that respects all religions. One article in the Syrian constitution declares that Islam must be the religion of the president of the republic, but all other rules and regulations are defined without mention of religious orientation.

It is legitimate to refer to Syria as the cradle of Christianity, for Christianity had its beginnings in Palestine, which, as part of the Levant, is considered a part of greater Syria. And the followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch, which was then a Syrian city. Archaeology, the many ancient Christian sites, and Damascus, with its place in the life of the apostle Paul, all witness to the fact that the roots of Syria’s present-day Christians go back over two thousand years.

While Syria never claimed to have full democracy or perfect social justice, people lived side by side in peace. They enjoyed security and relative freedom. Syria provided free education and hospitalization and many services that everyone could afford. The Christian community thus felt safe and secure, and it went about its own business, enjoying what all others enjoyed. Religion was never used as an instrument for coloring people’s identity or for separating communities. Christians felt that they belonged to Syria—past, present, and future. This was the situation until the Arab Spring began.

The Syrian Spring

The Arab Spring reached Syria in mid-March 2011, beginning with a high school in a town near the border with Jordan. Some...
students wrote on a wall the slogan that was then appearing in other countries of the Arab Spring: Ash-sha‘b yurid islām an-nizām (“The people demand the removal of the regime”). Regrettably, the town’s authorities overreacted and treated the students harshly. Their response caused the students’ parents to go into the streets, demonstrating and objecting to the treatment the students had received. They demanded reform, change, and more freedom. Demonstrations were repeated every Friday after midday prayers in mosques and then began to spread from city to city. At first all seemed peaceful and legal. Requests for change, reform, end of corruption, social justice, and freedom were demands that the majority of Syrians could support. Then a new request was added: to overthrow the regime.

Suddenly, side by side with the demonstrations, counter-demonstrations in support of the regime emerged. Little by little, violence began to appear and then escalated to the point that people were stunned. Stories circulated of criminal acts, such as beheadings and dismemberment, with corpses and body parts found thrown into rivers.

The Syrian Spring thus took a surprising direction, different from that of other countries. As in no other country, slogans such as “Syria is the land of the Prophet!” or “Syria is the land of jihad” filled the air. These slogans used by the groups doing the fighting were directed against Christians and other minorities. Institutions such as schools and governmental centers were destroyed, and the country’s water, electricity, and fuel infrastructure all came under attack. Violence and violence and more violence was all there was.

Indeed, the Syrian Spring has become a human tragedy. It has afflicted the country as a calamity of unprecedented proportion. We will certainly never know the number of those who were displaced internally, were kidnapped for ransom (many of whom were executed), or in many other ways lost their lives. Beyond such human loss was the destruction wreaked on the history, culture, and ways of life of the Syrian people, all of which created fear and caused many to flee their homes. Total disruption and chaos engulfed virtually the whole country.

What of the Christian Community?

What about the present and future of the Christian community? This community clearly feels the pain of the country, one it has loved and where its history and traditions are deeply rooted. Like all other Syrian communities, the Christian community has lost its sense of security. More specifically, in all the areas controlled by ISIS, slogans against the Christians are circulated. Accusations that all Christians are supporting the regime makes their fate one with that of the regime, namely, death. In areas controlled by ISIS, especially along the borders of Iraq and Turkey, Christians have been forced to leave. They have been given three choices: convert to Islam, leave, or be killed. In other areas Christians were told that if they stayed, they would have to pay jizya, that is, a special “protection” tax. Also, they would not be allowed to rebuild their destroyed churches or to show any signs or symbols that might indicate their religion. Many Christians, quite naturally, have left those areas for safer areas either within Syria or in neighboring countries, mostly in Lebanon. Others have immigrated to other countries, probably never to come back.

Since their safety cannot be guaranteed, Syrian Christians have been leaving the country and thus are experiencing the loss of a future. Already Christians of the Middle East, particularly from Iraq, Palestine, and Egypt, as well as Syria, have been seeking refuge in other countries so as to secure a good future for their children. In January 2014 Cyril S. Bustros, a Lebanese Catholic bishop, metropolitan of Beirut and Jbeil, addressed a group of representatives of churches in the United States and Europe. In his remarks, he quoted a journalist to the effect that “two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, across the entire Middle East, Christianity is under assault more than at any time in the past century, prompting some to speculate that one of the world’s three great religions could vanish entirely from the region within a generation or two.” He added, citing the same source, “From Iraq, which has lost half of its Christians over the past decade, to Egypt, which saw the worst spate of anti-Christian violence in 700 years this summer, to Syria, where Jihadists are killing Christians and burying them in mass graves, the followers of Jesus face violence and vitriol as well as declining churches and ecumenical divides. Christians now make up 5 percent of the population of the Middle East, down from 20 percent a century ago.”

Seen in the light of the Arab Spring, it may seem that Christians in the Middle East have no future there. But we cannot ignore or forget that the future lies in the hands of God, who created all the seasons. The church in fact is built on the Rock of Ages, “and the powers of death shall not prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18 RSV).

Indeed churches, councils of churches, and seminaries are all concerned, and they continue to speak out in seminars, public lectures, and conferences, all addressing the same topic. This is probably the healthiest time to nurture faith and keep hope. The church must maintain a clear focus by staying involved in witnessing to the love of God. It must keep serving the needy, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and spreading hope, even in hopeless situations. The church must keep examining itself in the light of the Word of God. Our future surely is in the hands of God, who is the God of history—past, present, and future. Indeed, the Christian community will continue to have a future with God in the Middle East and everywhere else in the world.

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