

Martin Tamcke,  
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# Thinking about Christian Life in the Turmoil Times of the Middle East

## Insights and Reflections from East and West



Universitätsdrucke Göttingen



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Middle East  
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East and West

6th International Consultation of  
“Study in the Middle East” (SiMO) and  
Near East School of Theology (NEST)  
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## Preface

This year the study program “Studies in the Middle East” (SiMO) turned 20 years old. On October 21st, 1999, the founding meeting of the advisory council of SiMO took place in Stuttgart – though it was called “Working Group Studies in the Middle East” then. In autumn of 2000 the first group of students was sent to the Near East School of Theology (NEST). Except once (due to the summer war July 2006), every year a group of students went to Lebanon, willing to embark on the adventure of studying at NEST and diving into the sociocultural and religious contexts of Beirut and Lebanon. The study program offers insights into the colourful mosaic of the Eastern Churches, as well as the way of how local Christians (especially the members of the small Protestant Church) describe their identity in their Christian-Muslim neighbourhood. Furthermore, the students can set individual focus points that interest them and they would be engaged intensively in their time there.

Protestants of varying Middle Eastern countries of diverse Protestant provenience (e.g. Armenian-Protestant students, members of the Synod Church of Lebanon and Syria, the National Evangelical Church, the Anglicans from Jerusalem) live and work together at NEST, which is the only Protestant educational institute, apart from a seminar in Cairo, where young people are trained to be pastors or religious educators of the varying Protestant churches. Different state-recognized degrees can be obtained that qualify for the work in the churches. The university was founded in Beirut in 1932, when the School of Religious Workers and an educational institute in Athens merged. To the board belong presently: the National Evangelical Synod of Lebanon and Syria, the Union of Armenian Evangelicals, the Diocese of Jerusalem of the Anglicans and the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Jordan and the Holy Land. The NEST is located in the western part of Beirut, close to important educational and cultural institutions. Their library contains roughly 42.000 volumes in English, Arabic, Armenian, French and German.

Apart from sending students, the leaders of NEST and the advisory council of SiMO set a prominent focus on encountering each other and working together on mutual topics of interest. Six consultations brought teachers of NEST and teachers from the SiMO-context in Germany together for thematic exchange (Beirut 2001: What does it mean to be a Protestant in Germany and Lebanon/Middle East Today?; Neuendettelsau 2004: Interreligious Learning as a Contribution to peace; Beirut 2011: Theological Education in the Presence of the Other. Between Apologetics and Openness; Bochum 2013: Implications of a Minority Situation; Beirut 2016: The Protestant Reformation 500 Years Later in Germany and Lebanon).

The topic of the consultation in Göttingen in April 2019 was ultimately based on a suggestion from the Lebanese side, that did not wish to contemplate the war in Syria again, but rather wanted to think about the time that comes after. After the expulsion of the “Islamic State” (ISIS) from wide parts of Syria and Iraq, the hope for peace is growing, even though there are setbacks with completely different backgrounds and interests. The reconstruction of destroyed houses has begun and needs to be continued. The events of the past years have left their mark on and between the religions. Not infrequently the neighbour became the enemy and questions of the coexistence of religions are being asked on a fundamental level. But how is that to be shaped? The Protestants as a small faith community are facing a number of challenges. The NEST makes greater use of their own regional networks to think about the implications and consequences for the theological education when facing the political and social turmoil in the Middle East. Together with the Cairo Evangelical Seminary in Egypt the NEST is currently in a consultation process about the task of theological education in a changed political context.

This small volume presents those contributions that were publicly presented at the consultation. In addition to that, personal stories were shared, horizons of war discussed and hopes formulated in numerous conversations. This intense and fruitful encounter, which has grown over many years, is further documented to some extent by a few photos, which are also printed in this book. For the first time lecturers from Beirut, German students, SiMO-alumni, responsible persons of the SiMO-program, representatives from academical and ecclesiastical contexts, as well as students from Beirut took part in the consultation. This is to be expanded and deepened with thematic focus points. The contributions of the Lebanese-Syrian side are set together at the forefront with the three lectures of the public consulta-

tion opening in Göttingen, in order to include interested readers into the events. We hope to enable insights in current Protestant – ecclesiastical and theological – existence in Lebanon and invite to listen to these perspectives and to encourage and foster the mutual learning and teaching.

The days in Göttingen and Höxter with their intense encounters and discussions, as well as this small book, have been aided generously by the Protestant Church in Germany (EKD), the Protestant-Lutheran Church of Hannover, the bank of the Diocese of Essen and the Protestant Mission in Solidarity (EMS). We are very thankful for that. Thanks also to Bishop Damian, who housed and hosted us during our days in the Coptic-orthodox monastery in Höxter. He has been a wonderful host. We have been in session during the intensive festivities of the Holy Week of orthodox Christians and could express our mutual friendship. Moreover, thanks go to Daniela Barton, who essentially took care of the logistics in Göttingen, making the opening event as successful as it was. Last but not least, thanks to Dr Egbert Schlarb for the layout of this documentation.

Göttingen/Bochum

Martin Tamcke, Claudia Rammelt





*The attendants in front of the monastery in Höxter*



*Presentation of the brochure “20 Years Studies in the Middle East – Diverse Encounters between Germany and Lebanon” by the association “Friends of NEST e.V.”*



## **Spiritual Life, Theological Reflection, Humanity and a Vision of Ecumenism for a Lifeable Church in the World**

*Ralf Meister*

“What are the current times teaching us?” “Which are the challenges laying before us, and which is their signification for the role of the churches?”

Anyone who asks these questions will have to consider in which context he is speaking. The current political and social development is of big variety. In which country am I living? Am I living in a secure or in an unsecure situation? Which form of government shapes the society in which I live? Which traditions and habits, which ethos and, most important, which history mark the country and the region in which I live? Is violence threatening the peaceful cohabitation of people in my country? Are the Human Rights observed and guaranteed by the State, or is the State itself turning a blind eye to them? Many more questions are immediately connected. The answers we give to these questions will be very different. Moreover: As much as the Christian faith carries in itself a universal claim and a generally vaild perspective for viewing and dealing with human beings and the world, we do know that cultural practice, religious habits, ecclesiastical positions, yes that eccleciologies themselves are very diverse. In spite of all the ecumenical efforts we are not only seeing a world in diversity and difference before us, even the ways in which we interpret the Gospel are impressed by different cultures and often do not seem to be in harmony with each other. As far as our view of the world and of the human being is concerned there can be no talk of the Unity of the Church, but still we are all invoking the same God: the father of Jesus, the liberator of the people of Israel, the saviour of the world.

## 1 My Perspective

I am living in a country in which peace has prevailed for almost 75 years. This country looks back on two World Wars of which Germany was the cause or one of the causes. In these wars incredible suffering was inflicted on other countries by Germany, and Germany itself was heavily destroyed. At present, in Central Europe, the third generation of people is growing up which has only heard of war as a personal experience of their grandparents or their great grandparents. But nevertheless the devastating experiences of the war and the holocaust have been impressed in the German history. My view of the world, even if I am able to have a differentiated understanding of other regions of the world, is firmly established in this history of peace which I experienced. As a consequence I have always grappled with the historical analysis of National Socialism, and I learnt from history that a blind nationalism can never serve peace. Or I understood that the democratic form of government which grants individual liberty and at the same time respects the dignity of every human being is for me the best form of government. For me the history of Germany provides distinctive lessons which seem important to me for describing the world and for understanding the role of the church.

In these years we remember the beginning of two world wars. In the year 2014 it was the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, and this year it was 80 years since World War II began. Both wars had immediate impact also on the Middle East.

One of the key questions during these commemorations was the question how the churches in Germany positioned themselves in the face of the state's authority in the German history of the 20th century, because the future of the churches will always also depend on their position towards the policy and the different forms of government. The Theological Declaration of the Confessional Synod in Barmen from the 31st of May 1934 is the central theological statement of the Confessing Church under the National Socialist regime and turned against the false theology and the church leadership of the so called "German Christians". For those had started to assimilate the protestant church to the dictatorship of the "Führer". For the Barmen Theological Declaration, of all the forms of government, it is the secular state which is founded in the Word of God. The Word of God calls for a state which "according to the measure of human judgment and human ability, by means of the threat and exercise of force, [...] has the task of providing for justice and peace", says the Declaration.

"Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Pt 2:17)

Scripture tells us that, in the as yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. [It fulfills this task] by means of the threat and exercise of force, according to the measure of human judgment and human ability. The Church acknowledges the benefit of this

divine appointment in gratitude and reverence before him. It calls to mind the Kingdom of God, God's commandment and righteousness, and thereby the responsibility both of rulers and of the ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word by which God upholds all things. We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the Church's vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church, over and beyond its special commission, should and could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State."

Therefore the Barmen Theses advocate the positive ideological neutrality of the state. They explicitly reject an elevation of the state which would make it "the single and totalitarian order of human life". State, Economy, and every other human order need to respect their own boundaries in order to be useful.

Almost all of the Protestant Churches in Germany have included a reference to this Theological Declaration in their constitutions. In this context we are also recognizing the great sin of the churches in Germany in the time of National Socialism in Germany. There was only little opposition. The attempts to oppose the state's disdain for human beings out of a Christian motivation were rather exceptional. The protest against the regime of terror remained weak. It is also these insights that determine the view of the state by the protestant church in Germany until today.

I am aware how far away these ideas about the "secular states" and their relationship to the religious communities are from the reality in Lebanon and Syria – But they are the basic experiences of the protestant churches in Germany, determining elements which continue to have an effect in the way the churches define their relationship to the state.

I look at my limited experiences and at the initiatives which my Regional Church has undertaken in the Middle East during the last years. One and a half year ago, my visit to the Near East brought me also for 28 hours to Syria, into the destroyed city of Homs. There I visited the school which we supported during the past winters. I saw images of destruction and war as my parents had seen them during their childhood after 1945, and which they never forgot.

What shall we do? It would be my wish that we continue the work which we have been doing. From the beginning the idea was to stand by Christians in a hard-pressed situation, and to show solidarity. We prayed, we collected offerings and donations, we invited visitors, and I travelled twice to the Middle East in order to show our solidarity to the people.

We are envisioning school partnerships with the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon (NESSL). I am hoping to find protestant schools in Germany which are willing to engage in partnerships with schools in Lebanon and Syria. For the time being we cannot yet plan for visits of teachers and the exchange of groups

of students, but we should aim for that. A common reunion with school principals from Lebanon and Syria will take place in my Regional Church in September.

Twice delegations of university students from Hildesheim, Göttingen, and Osnabrück had the chance to become acquainted with the school work of NESSL in the refugee camps in Lebanon. The humanitarian (winter-)help, being of limited extent, has an exemplary character. Here we know that Diakonie-Katastrophenhilfe and others are also active, but we are helping according to our possibilities anyway. We want to seek and find other actors, among others the University of Hildesheim working on the topic of trauma healing, or others within our Regional Church who can have useful contacts with people in the region. The ministry we have begun is being perceived as a visible sign of solidarity between our churches. Let us continue with it.

I am thankful that this humanitarian help and the encounter between the churches are strengthened by a second pillar in our church, and that is the work of the Syria Conferences of the Evangelische Akademie Loccum.

## 2 Syria II

“In the previous years we have had to do tough learning: We have no friends.” This is a central statement of a female negotiator in Geneva and leading opposition figure in exile in Washington who participated in the fourth Syria Conference in Loccum. The war in Syria is going on. No end is in sight.

What can be an adequate mandate for religious communities in the political situation of the region? And how can German political and civil forces contribute to the settlement of the conflict in the region? Those were the two leading questions during the four Syria Conferences in Loccum since 2013. The Evangelische Akademie Loccum has also become important for people from Syria because it opens a room for a critical change of perspective on one’s own commitment. Spiritual leaders who are still holding out in Syria said it was an elementary step of learning when they started a critical reflection of their own understanding of the ministry of the Bishop, the Sheikh.

What was becoming apparent?

During the conference in September 2017 in Loccum and Berlin around 60 religious political representatives and intellectual heads of the Syrian opposition came from Europe, the US and, at the risk of their lives, from Syria itself. This is exceptional in the constellation: Loccum: brings prominent opposition leaders together around one table who are an enmity with each other, who have great distance or also some proximity to the regime, and who are negotiating peace at the most different places. One important thing is that the younger generation and above all women are involved in the negotiations in Loccum.

We realise:



1. It is cynical to offer humanitarian help without becoming also politically active. This is also the reason why most of the refugees have never given up the hope that they can return to their country.

2. Hardly anything in this war is still Syrian – soon only the victims will be Syrian. The population has been disempowered and incapacitated by international forces to a dramatic extent. This poses also serious problems in view of perspectives for peace.

3. The forces of opposition are losing ground. The participants of the conference in Loccum had to overcome strong internal resistance in order to concede that a settlement of the conflict without Assad is unthinkable. On the other hand if the opposition forces are not involved in a settlement that finishes the war, that will only lead to an apparent peace, and to a continuing inner revolt of the population.

4. If there is any humanitarian duty the actors of the civil society in Europe have it is to break the silence about the situation in the prisons, above all those of the Assad regime. There is not less need to denounce that every day people are disappearing.

5. Besides the humanitarian support for people in and around Syria I would like to mention two goals which are of immediate concern for our work: We must come to a point where all violations, damages and crimes, since the beginning of the conflict, are documented. And the other goal is the request that in the field of religious politics people say good bye to religiously motivated racism, to all kinds of generalizations, and promote religious tolerance.

### **3 Where are we going?**

If, out of this national history which is also the history of the church, I try to draw conclusions for the challenges which the churches face, not only as an individual or as a German, not as a European but with a vision for the whole world. Christianity is a faith that faces the world, as a catholic theologian once put it. I will only make remarks concerning the first two of the questions. I ask what do we have to do? As churches?

You will be surprised, but my first answer is quite simple. Our church has become much more spiritual, both in the way of actively practised faith, and in the way of theologically reflected life and action. German Protestantism and the EKD draw on resources our non-church-partners in political and social fields do not have. This is useful, again, for common goals in the fields of society. But spiritual life is more; it is a valuable, precious, beautiful part of life in itself, a garden whose fruits do nourish believers throughout any activity in life. At the same time there is still in the most countries a high demand of religious orientation in society, for individuals as well as for various communities. Church is called to provide this orientation – both in a practical and lived way, and in rationally communicated concepts. Church is able to give that life, and theology is able to give these con-

cepts – both are guided by the Holy Spirit and rely on the Word revealed in scripture. Spirituality and theology are no antipodes, but they form, they are part of one body like spirit and mind. I envision a church that does live spirituality and draws on the resource of theology, in this way self-confident and held by her confidence in God. Such a church is ready to encounter the dialogue with Islam and agnosticism. A church spiritually and theologically well grounded will also bring current discussions about the structure of ministry, of parish life, of theological studies and other fields to a positive end.

The church, firmly grounded in a vivid spiritual life and a theological reflexion, would be able to carry the message into society. Therefore we need faculties, universities of course. I hope for effective mission in a sense compatible to the 21st century. But for the years to come I would expect that the most necessary part of the message would be, besides peace and education, the call to honesty and humanity. I guess this could resemble the task set even for the Churches in Lebanon and Syria. Politicians do promise a lot. Are these promises honest ones? We remember in this Easter week Pontius Pilate: “What is truth?” I remember that the nationalist promises are en vogue. Also those responsible for health care, for new technologies, for economic relations – could be obliged to honesty by the gospel to as far an extent as man can. Jesus said: “The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth!”

The second term is humanity. Here we stand together with all other religions, with NGOs, with agnostic players in the social field. Maybe we would call the major part of humanity rather “love of thy neighbour”. But humanity is to be remembered on theological reasons in the field of global economy, of technological development, of artificial intelligence and digitalization and in violence terror, war. The latter ones might be the most prominent fields where we can by no means let go of humanity. Maybe in both the meanings of this word: humane acting, and mankind.

Laying a both solid and lively foundation in spirituality and theology may help to avoid a mistake that has made church less attractive in recent decades. Church very often preaches herself instead of the gospel reflection of the protestant church. In 1965 Emanuel Hirsch, a highly disputed, but very learned and keen-witted theologian, wrote:

“19th century history of Protestant theology and church does display the strange fact that church herself, her nature, function, shape and order, her relation towards state and towards society and life in general has become an object, if not even the centre, of judgement and action of theology and church. This happened to an extent that was unknown in any previous time, not even at Reformation times. This movement started slowly, spread and increased more and more. In the 20th century it led to the even more strange fact of a church who meant to best serve God and Christ in the way that she taught about herself, her dig-

nity, her authority, and in the way that she did upbuild herself – in every sense of the word – and gave thanks and praise to God for herself.”<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, even decades, members of church councils have spent hundreds of hours in every single parish in Germany to discuss questions of structure, of fusions with their neighbour parish, of joint posts for deacons and church caretakers. The solutions found were praised by church officials. Then the next wave of restructuring and cutbacks closed in. Much too often these matters of structure found their way into sermons, church statements and media. I know of many who turned away from their posts in parish councils, or who turned down the offer to work in these councils, because they wanted to work for the spreading of the gospel. This is not meant to despise in any way of good administration; this is part of the duty of those engaged in church matters. But as was said before thinking about structures has taken too much time and space. God has to be praised, God’s dignity, love and authority must be the focus, upbuilding has to focus on people and their faith.

Finally I come to the theological vision that is at hand and rightly expected here. The churches have to follow the path of ecumenism – sometimes it is a wide road, sometimes tunnels have to be blasted into mountains of mistrust, – the path of ecumenism is our obligation. Churches all over the world will be “more” ecumenical. From the outside nagging questions are raised: You’re all Christians, what is it that divides you? From the inside the main message to spread the gospel, to speak about Jesus Christ, to baptise whoever has been touched by the Spirit and likes to go the way with God – both powers, from the inside and the outside lead to intensified ecumenism. In the first place it will be realised in a personal and local perspective, among neighbours and colleagues, inside families, villages, neighbourhoods. I may quote Ingolf Dalferth: “The field of ecumenism must not be yielded to experts and professional ecumenists<sup>2</sup> of churches and denominations. It should be on the focus of every Christian in any place. [...] Everyone has to deal with ecumenical questions, because at any place where there are Christians ecumenism is lived or not lived locally, in practice, at any place, with those who are ‘the other ones’ at this place. [...] ecumenical problems have to be solved where they arise; each ecumenical problem neither is present at any place nor demands the same solution everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> Dalferth appreciates talks about the great traditional controversies, but he does see the need and priority to tackle current questions like Pentecostal churches, secular tendencies<sup>4</sup> and I may add: indifference towards religion and ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie* 5, Gütersloh 1965, 145.

<sup>2</sup> Das Wort ist umstritten, scheint sich aber einzubürgern.

<sup>3</sup> Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Auf dem Weg der Ökumene. Die Gemeinschaft evangelischer und anglikanischer Kirchen nach der Meissener Erklärung*, Leipzig 2002, 6 (own translation).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

There are strong and legitimate voices inside the EKD who say: This is not enough. We do need more unity, especially in theology, structures, and liturgy. They envision an even more unified Protestant church, maybe some kind of global church with one consistent structure. They call any friction and diversity among Christians a shame and sin. If I think about theological visions for German Protestantism and the EKD and even worldwide I realise: this kind of absolute unity is not my vision. Not in Germany, not in a worldwide perspective. From the New Testament onwards there have been different kinds of churches, providing different ways of teaching about Jesus Christ – in short: different theologies –, though delivering the same message, developing different structures often due to the local situation, especially to the persons addressed and involved. Always there has been the call to unity in this diversity, but always there has been plurality and diversity, especially during the spread of the gospel around the globe. Do we not face the same plurality of people whom we have to preach the gospel? Is not this variety and plurality – though it does raise problems – very much of a treasure? A treasure we can draw from, when resources, new ideas, a vivid exchange e. g. about styles of piety and worship is needed? And another aspect: We live in a world where globalisation and its effects do unsettle and worry large parts of society, better phrased: many women, men, and children? Is it not good if churches offer traditions and formats of worship that are home, “Heimat”, a safe haven for many? Both in traditional forms, and in newly developed ones which allow identity? Couldn't be plurality the best way to reach the plurality of people, communities, nations, and peoples who do need the gospel? I may lay open an answer to a question some of you might have in mind now: Even the highly esteemed Roman Catholic Church with her worldwide structure does have both recognisable elements worldwide, and regional differences.

Theological visions of a church less focused on politics itself though still speaking up when needed, especially in the fields of peace and education, calling for honesty and humanity, an active spiritual and theologically grounded church. No longer teaching and talking about herself, but about God, the gospel, and Jesus Christ, an ecumenical church both to the inside and the outside, maybe with an understanding of ecumenism that accepts, even appreciates plurality and does use it as a means for evangelisation. And we still stand together in the word, which is given to us in Psalm 85:

“Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest. Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.”



## Spiritual Re-building in the Middle East Today

*George Sabra*

I would like to begin by offering thanks, on behalf of the Near East School of Theology and in my name, to the German Board of the Studies in the Middle East Program (SiMO) for inviting us to this now biannual event of a joint Consultation between our two bodies. Special thanks to Prof. Dr. Martin Tamcke, Director of the Institute of Ecumenical Theology, Oriental Churches and History of Mission, and the Chairperson of the Studies in the Middle East Program (SiMO) Board, but also to Prof. Dr. Bernd Schröder, Dean of the Protestant Faculty of Theology for hosting us in this university, and thanks also to Bishop Ralf Meister, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hannover, in whose church district we are meeting and who have made this meeting possible; and also to Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) who also supported this event; special thanks to the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity (EMS), in the person of Rev. Dr. Uwe Gräbe, and to the “Association Friends of NEST” in Germany, especially Dr. Claudia Rammelt. We are very happy to be with you in this august institution, with which our Near East School of Theology has a formal agreement in the program of Intercultural Theology. It is quite an achievement that a program like the SiMO program has now been running for almost 2 decades without any serious interruption between a small and voluntary association in Germany (SiMO Board) and a small theological

institution in Lebanon (NEST), despite all the upheavals and disruptions which Lebanon and the region have gone through.

When we first began planning this conference together, some two years ago, we eventually came up with the current title. I distinctly remember that the German side suggested the first part: “The Impact of the Current Political and Social Developments on the Witness of the Churches”, and NEST inserted the subtitle, “A Time for Spiritual Rebuilding?” with a question mark. We had hoped, at the time, that the war in Syria would be over by April 2019, and we could talk about spiritual rebuilding, as other sectors of society in our region are beginning to talk about the material, political, economic, and social rebuilding of that war-torn nation. Of course, our concern was not only with Syria but with Lebanon and the neighboring countries as well, for the whole region has been and continues to be affected by political and social developments impacting the witness of the churches. As we can all see, although many things have changed militarily and politically over the past two years, the crisis in Syria is not yet over, and this makes our discussions here more difficult. We are still in the midst of it, and so it is not easy to draw lessons or make sense of it all and to analyze and come up with ideas for the future, for the outcome is not yet at hand. Nevertheless, we are not completely in the dark, and we can still say some things about it which, hopefully, would lay out the impact on the churches and contribute ideas and insights to spiritual rebuilding.

Allow me to begin by briefly stating facts about the impact of the recent political events on the Christians of the region:

1. Christian presence has been drastically affected in the countries of Syria and Iraq. It is estimated that at least half of Syria’s Christian population has left the country; two thirds of Iraq’s Christian population have left. Lebanon and Palestine are not faring much better, where the situation may be compared to the slow bleeding of a wound, compared to massive loss of blood in the cases of Syria and Iraq. Christian physical and numerical presence has been severely reduced.

2. Christians who leave do not, on the whole, come back. Those who left did not plan a temporary absence; they pulled out everything and left. Once you settle in countries that accept you and offer you better conditions of life, you do not normally want to come back and reverse your better situation. The absolute majority of Syrian Christians are not *refugees* in Lebanon, Turkey or Jordan. They are mainly in

western countries and Australia, and it has not been our experience that such emigrants reverse their movement. Lebanon, a country of continuous and long experience in emigration, is a witness to that.

3. Those Christians who have stayed – whether in Syria or Iraq - are on the whole frustrated and deeply disappointed; they were living under what they had believed to be the strong and firm reality of one cohesive society bound together by nationalism and Arab identity that united them with everybody else in the country, only to discover that this cohesion and common identity quickly evaporated when religious passions surged.

4. Wounds won't heal quickly at all. The experience of one's life-long neighbors and supposedly co-citizens turning against one because of religious and ethnic differences – experienced in some parts of Iraq and some places in Syria, shocked many Christians, in many cases, beyond repair and reconciliation! The inability of the region to embrace true pluralism; the perception of the different Other – especially the religiously different Other (and this does not apply to Christians and Muslims only, but also to Muslim versus Muslim) as the enemy reawakened the old fears that the region has not been able to deal adequately with the problem of minorities. Whether one likes the designation 'minorities' or not, the events and developments in the region are proving once again that the problem of minorities has reasserted itself as the main problem. It is now put in terms of accepting the Other. What have been destroyed are the attempts at pluralism, and this is what needs rebuilding. I will come back to this later.

5. What has also emerged very clearly in these events, although not something new, but it has become more manifest and even dangerous, is that Christian communities in the region have had different historical experiences in their different political states, and they have interpreted their being Christian in those states in different and often conflicting ways. To date, there is no agreement among the Christians and churches of the region on the main roots(s) of their problems and, consequently, no consensus on solutions to their predicament.

6. The future of Christians – Christian communities and individuals – is inextricably linked to the future of Islam. There is no need to dwell on the fact that the Middle East is a region of the world where religion plays a central role in the whole of life. Islam, the religion of the overwhelming majority, is not just a religion in the narrow sense of the word, namely, revolving around, and restricted to, spiritual precepts and worship instructions and relation to God of the soul and the community; Islam is a total outlook on life which includes the spiritual, the political, cultural, social and even economic aspects of life. Islam, whether in its Arab, Persian or Turkish versions, is a total outlook that shapes all aspects of peoples' lives. The future of the region depends on the future of Islam in its different forms. This is not new, for it has been the case for centuries, but it is again clear and manifest today precisely because there is an Islamic religious resurgence in the region – Turkish, Persian and Arab.

7. The future of Islam in the region is not yet clear. “Where to Islam?” is not yet visible, but what is clear is that there is at present a twofold battle over Islam in the region today which is not only affecting the Middle East but also the rest of the world. There is a battle over the *body* of Islam and a battle over the *soul* of Islam.

The battle over the *body* of Islam is manifest in the inter-Islamic political, military, and economic struggle in the Middle Eastern – a struggle for power between states and political and militant groupings. It is represented in the rivalry and polarization between Iran and Saudi Arabia, in the ambitions of Turkey and Iran to be the superpowers of the region; in the projects of militant and extremist organizations and projects such as al-Qaeda and its descendants and ancestors: ISIS, Muslim Brotherhood, and all that falls under militant, political Islam. This is a struggle for power and control of states and territories. It is a struggle between Sunnis and Shi'is, but also among Sunni's themselves. This is still going on, of course, and it is apparent, for example, in the war in Syria, in Iraq, in the Saudi and Arabian Gulf States versus Qatar, in Bahrain itself, in Yemen, in Egypt, in the political tensions in Lebanon, among the Palestinians themselves (between Hamas and the Palestinian authority), and in the split among Arab and Islamic countries concerning the attitude to and perception of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.



The battle for the *soul* of Islam, however, is of a spiritual, theological, intellectual and cultural nature. It is between conservative, fundamentalist political Islam on the one side, and reformist, revisionist, renewed or transformed Islam on the other. One hears less about this battle perhaps because it is overshadowed and threatened by the noisier and physically more destructive political, military and economic battle over the body of Islam.

In light of the facts stated above, what can we say about the witness of the churches and about spiritual re-building?

Our role as Christians and churches has a lot to do with re-building, but it is on the level of spiritual re-building. Spiritual re-building involves many things, but I would here like to focus on two most essential things:

First, to have a role in spiritual re-building, we must be able to remain and persevere. There can be no spiritual rebuilding if there are no Christians left to participate in it, to have a role. This is an obvious fact and prerequisite, but it needs to be said and underlined because the drastic decline in the number and abilities of Christians in the region threatens their very survival and mere existence. Christians in the Middle East cannot remain and persevere without the understanding and support of the worldwide Christian communities and churches. It would not be too difficult to demonstrate, though we don't have time for it here, that, historically, the Christians of the Middle East, have never been unrelated to Christian churches and institutions outside the region, and that, notwithstanding some negative effects of that relationship, much good and many benefits have accrued to Middle Eastern Christians as a result of this relationship beyond the region: ecclesiastically, spiritually, theologically, socially, educationally, culturally, and materially. The same remains true today. Spiritual rebuilding in the Middle East today and in the future cannot be undertaken by the Christians of the region alone without the partnership and support of our sisters and brothers worldwide. The whole SiMO program and our presence here today, if I may add at this point, falls under this concern.

Second, survival and spiritual rebuilding involve and depend on the ability and willingness of the Christians of the Middle East to participate in the battle for the soul of Islam. Clearly, Christian communities and churches in the region cannot and should not get directly involved in the battle over the body of Islam. To be sure, Christians, as communities and as individuals, suffer great collateral damage because of the inter-Islamic struggle, but Christians have no role there as Christian communities. There are no Christian states in the region and churches are not

political parties; their role and witness are not directly in the political arena of the struggle for power and the struggle for the body of Islam. Christians are, as I said, definitely adversely affected by this struggle, but they have no role as churches. In the battle over the body of Islam we have no place; we have no business; we have no mission. We ought, however, to be able to participate in the battle over the soul of Islam, *but: with* Muslims, not against them; *with* their consent, not in spite of them; and out of genuine concern for the future of Islam, and therefore our future. The events which have occurred in the Islamic world of the Middle East since the last two decades of the 20th century – beginning with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the assassination of President Sadat by militant Jihadis in 1981, the participation of the Jihadis in the fight to oust the Soviet Union from Afghanistan (and the rise of Bin Laden and Al-Qa’eda) up until ISIS and all that took place in between – all these developments have gradually awakened some Muslim thinkers and religious leaders to the need for a radical critique of these developments and prompted them to call for a reconstruction of “a new Islamic religious and cultural narrative”<sup>1</sup>, to quote the words of Radwan el-Sayyed. El Sayyed, a prominent Muslim Sunni scholar, well-respected in many part of the Islamic world, to mention but one example, calls for precisely this critical and radical campaign to build a new religious and cultural narrative on three bases, which he elaborated in a lecture held at N.E.S.T. earlier this academic year: 1. Regaining religious tranquility by abandoning that deadly duality of Islam as both a religion and a political state; 2. Renewal of the experiment of the national state, the state of good governance in order to pull away the youth from the illusions of an Islamic religious state; and 3. Correcting the relation of Islam to the world by not treading the road of terrorizing the world or being afraid of it, but by hoping and working to enter into its order and interact within its norms and rules so as to safeguard the stability and interests of Islamic nations and peoples and states that are a positive and constructive part of the world order.<sup>2</sup> I mention this not in order to go into the details of a current discussion in Islam, but to highlight that in that very lecture, Prof. El-Sayyed said that in order to achieve these three things, Muslims need the cooperation and the experience of their fellow Christians, for they have been through this and are still going through it. And this is not just a lone voice that we hear, although such voices are not always heard loudly. In this regard, I would like to mention a very interesting lecture that was given by a Lebanese Muslim (Shi’ite) journalist and intellec-

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<sup>1</sup> Radwan el-Sayyed, *Ad-Din wal Dawla wal Ihya’at al Islamiyyah*. Paper presented at the “Forum of Christian-Muslim Thought” at the Near East School of Theology, Nov. 13, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2s.

tual in the Kingdom of Bahrain some weeks ago entitled: “Beyond Fundamentalist Islam: The Reforming Role of Islam of the West.” Jihad el-Zein expressed his disappointment that a whole century of attempted reforms in Middle Eastern/Arab Islam have failed, which has led to a profound crisis. None of those attempts were able to stop the onward march of fundamentalist Sunni and Shi’ite Islam. Therefore, says el-Zein, it is a legitimate, practical and effective project to look to the Muslims of the west – those who are living in western countries and under western civilization – in hope for reform and renewal. The Islamic East has exhausted itself, and it cannot achieve the requisite change. “The liberating oxygen comes today from the western academic experience ... Will the Muslim elites who are involved in western culture be able to lift Islam out of its present crisis? That is the decisive question today.”<sup>3</sup> Here is a possible role for Christians in the West to participate, along with their Muslim compatriots, in this project of reform and renewal, but again, with Muslims, not against them, with their consent, not in spite of them. I would like to point out here that these are courageous voices that are speaking *in the region*, not in the relative security of the West by what may be labeled Muslim dissidents.

Spiritual rebuilding of the Middle East, and not just of the churches in the lands of crisis, requires a change in the spiritual, intellectual and cultural climate of the region. The main task and initiative are to be undertaken by the religious majority, the Muslims, but there is also a role for their Christian co-citizens in their relationship with Muslims and their positive attitude to efforts for reform and renewal. There are calls for “renewal” and re-presentation among some Muslim leaders and thinkers, as we have seen. The term “reform” may not be acceptable to many Muslim thinkers and leaders today, though some do not shy away from it. Acceptance of the Other as Other is the main problem. Recognition of pluralism and equality and freedom of belief and conscience are the heart of the matter. Thus, all efforts working towards that goal contribute to spiritual re-building. What we witnessed in the United Arab Emirates last February – the encounter between Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, in the presence of a host of Christian and Islamic leaders, and the declaration of a joint statement on “Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together”, is precisely what is needed. That encounter and the declaration that it produced is an excellent illustration of the kind of Christian participation with Islam on the journey of spiritual re-building in the Middle East, as well as the rest of the world. This is not the place to

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<sup>3</sup> J. el-Zein, “Beyond Fundamentalist Islam”, in: *An-Nahar*, Feb. 28, 2019, 9.

go through that document in detail, but suffice it to say that in its form and content, it provides grounds for hope, if it is heeded and followed up. It was not simply a major Christian leader and a major Islamic leader coming together to speak about, and to, Muslims and Christians about Christian-Muslim relations. It was a statement by high-ranking officials in those two religions addressed to all peoples – an invitation to all “who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity” to unite and work together, to advance a culture of mutual respect, tolerance, pluralism and dialogue. It spoke, not primarily in the name of a Pope and an Imam, but in the name of the poor, the marginalized, the downtrodden, the refugees, the victims, and it highlighted situations of injustice and exploitation and discrimination, and called for the promotion of peace, freedom, justice, acceptance of others, full citizenship, human rights, freedom of conscience, etc. If the region of the Middle East walks on that road, we are definitely on the path of spiritual re-building.

That is precisely what I had in mind when I said that Christians must be able and willing to participate in the battle for the soul of Islam, assuming of course that we remain true to the soul of Christianity.



*Saint Georg Greek Orthodox Cathedrale in Beirut, seat of the Archdiocese, the oldest church in the city; on the background the Mohammed Al-Amin Mosque*



**“Not to deny the terrible old, but sets the past aside for the benefit of a new beginning.” A Western Perspective for Rebuilding in the Middle East**

*Martin Tamcke*

When my teacher Wolfgang Hage first introduced me to the SiMO programme 20 years ago and asked me to participate, my workload at the time kept me from accepting his invitation. He suggested, as was his usual way, to become involved himself so that I could take over once I saw an opening. The programme deviated too much from its own interests. I agreed to this proposal and that is where this story begins.

Standing here today, I near the end of my professional career and find myself in a time of farewells and I am ruminating about the things I have done at the university over the past 40 years, particularly with regard to the Orient. So let me first of all take this opportunity to thank my colleagues for the years of cooperation and mutual trust. I never took it for granted and I consider it an unwarranted gift. I also want to thank the EMS who took care of management for all these years, as well as everyone who supported the programme. My grateful thanks go out to the staff of the scholarship programme of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) which now belongs to “Brot für die Welt” (Bread for the World), without whom this programme would not have stood a chance.

For the most part, I was involved in setting up study programmes like Euroculture and Intercultural Theology, but the beginning of my work also marked the end of certain enterprises. It was impossible to keep up all the activities that the professors from Göttingen had set up for Christians in the Orient over the decades. Three professors worked with a focus on Christians in the Orient from the faculty of theology alone – Werner Strothmann, Gernot Wießner, and Wolfgang Hage. They were accompanied by colleagues from other departments with research in the same field: Heinrich Hussmann who studies liturgy particularly in the Syriac Orthodox Church, Guntram Koch whose research concerns aspects of Christian archaeology, and Ulrich Berner who is interested in syncretism in this region. When I started my work here in Göttingen it transpired that I would be doing it alone. Inevitably some of the projects we had established and build up for decades came to an end. From then on I was the only professor of theology with a job description that officially included the Christian Orient, which meant I could and should spend a third of my time on this responsibility. I had to learn what it meant to be the remnant of a great tradition – an epigone so to speak – of previous generations of researchers. But such personal parallels should not pull our attention away from the serious topic we were given by our Lebanese friends.

Can something truly be rebuilt after it has been destroyed? Buildings can be reconstructed, of course, but are they the same as they have been before? Can things return to the way they were, as if nothing happened? If we consider human relationships, we usually observe that a failed marriage, a broken-up family, or a friendship that has drifted apart often causes a tear that cannot be fixed. When things fall apart it does not necessarily translate to simple destruction. In many cases, destruction indicates that the conditions have not been ideal to begin with. So it might not be such a good idea to erase any sign of destruction, because this would also take away any chance for future generations to learn from the relics of previous failures. Whenever there is a need to fix and rebuild there are also people who prefer easy solutions and would rather cover up the unbearable aspects of the past. They want to avoid painful reminders of a time of destruction that could stir things up again. But it is part of the harsh reality that separates the "before and after" that some things are irretrievably lost. Will this apply to Syria and the fact that a majority of the Christian population has left the country? In Iraq it seems likely that only a minority of the Christian population will return. In Turkey the case is already clear: the Christians who fled 50 years ago during the war between the Turkish government and the PKK have not returned to the region, except for a few individuals. This has dire consequences for the Christian minority that stayed in Tur Abdin. The situation changes for a community that is no longer significant

in numbers with reference to the overall population. And it affects the entire diaspora, which is notably larger than the remaining Christians in the Orient. The situation holds painful consequences for both sides: one side feels abandoned by those who left and never returned, the other side feels cut off from the homeland that shaped them.

Under these circumstances, how can church be revived instead of just tending to its remnants? How can we apply a forward-looking approach to all these destructive forces of ignorance and distrust, these attempts at reducing the suffering or one's own guilt with explanations for these outbursts of brutal violence?

Each semester I talk to my students about the current situation Christians face in the Orient. We have turned to literature, read authors from the region – predominantly texts that have been translated to German. The student tried to grasp the piety these authors showed in the face of chaos. In Egypt we can observe a significant rise in martyr theology, particularly after the execution of 21 young Copts in Libya. Theologians who support this approach as an adequate way of dealing with current events state that this was the only way of making sure that love rather than destruction had the last word. This love should include the perpetrator as well. These are big thoughts and they evoke strong feeling. But do they really contribute to rebuilding and recovery?

About two years ago the EKD and the Oriental Orthodox Churches started a dialogue here in Germany. Whenever we have such an exchange with Eastern European partners, we like to include representatives of our associated Protestant Churches. Not, however, on this occasion. Maybe it was due to the variety of geographical locations they would have had to cover, or it was due to the fact these partners were primarily affiliated to the Protestant Church in the United States and not so much to the EKD. Whatever the case might have been, when the chairman of the EKD council expressed his delight at welcoming the patriarchs to Germany for the anniversary of the Reformation, the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church reacted quite strongly: if he had known this, he would not have come. He thought they had gathered for prayers of intercession on behalf of persecuted and oppressed Christians in the Near East. According to him, the Reformation had only brought schisms and disagreements to their homelands. “Naturally”, this difficult phase of the meeting – and it was not the only one – is not included in the official publications of the EKD. Hence, the awkward silence that followed this moment was never recorded either. At our conference on the Reformation at the Near Eastern School of Theology in Beirut our Orthodox representatives showed a more positive reaction. Essentially, they acknowledged the existence of Protestants as an established historical fact. Such oppositions are innocuous compared to vio-

lent conflicts of war. But war does not only give vent to oppositions, it can also create them and in turn exclude people from a community. The individual is no longer in focus, but instead becomes a representative of something alienating, which again, opens a door for violence.

Now, how can we restore trust? I am not sure such a trust ever truly existed between the religious groups before. In the past, the relationship between these groups usually took the shape of a mere acquaintance. In practice, this often amounted to simply accepting the reality of each other's existence but this did not suffice as a basis for potential cooperation. How often have I listened to troubling and sweeping remarks about Muslims in Christian circles in the Orient, and how often have I been likewise astounded by the lack of knowledge about Christian communities among Muslims.

On occasion, it was a third level – the secular, political level – that brought Christians and Muslims together; be it for the renewal of the Arabic language, culture, and literature or in order to organise a secular state system. For centuries, a judicial framework was provided by the treaties of protection, followed by the millet system, which governed the contact between Christians and the Sunni majority population. This mentality still influences decisions, as can be seen for instance in the words of Pope Shenouda, who kept issuing warnings not to join the Muslim protestors in their attempt to overthrow the president. It is not just in Egypt that young Christians could be seen pushing their way forwards further than their real circumstances would allow. These historical circumstances have established roots, but there are other roots to be considered alongside them, such as the knowledge of centuries when Christians and Muslims worked side by side on Arabic renewal, socialism, Arabism, and Secularism. Renewal must entail regeneration on both the inside and the outside. If the churches cannot restore their vigour and vitality for the remaining Christian community, they cannot expect to play a pivotal role in the region considering their small numbers.

It is not important which of the numbers given by Oehring is actually correct – whether there are 300,000 or 700,000 Christians left in the country. Both numbers show only too clearly how significantly the number of Christians has dropped. Protestants have experience in being a minority. Others could learn from them. In some regions of Syria, which have been under ISIS rule for a long time, the continued existence of many churches is at stake. For instance, the Apostolic Church of the East, particularly the congregation south of Khabur, realised how vulnerable their situation was and still is.

It transpires today that the church in Germany was too eager to return to old ideals when they started to rebuild after the Second World War and they stayed on



that path until the early 1960s. It seemed to them that everything was better that came before the disastrous events of violence and the extermination of minorities, especially Jews. Everything that had been fought and disparaged for over 12 years now seemed to be the right direction for the future. There is a reason why we call this phase of rebuilding our church "restoration". In the East this was only possible rudimentary, because the church soon came under pressure from the state. In the West on the other hand, the plan seemed to work. Although the church bore its own share of guilt under the Nazi regime, it suddenly became an institution of moral guidance and political influence again. But the sons and daughters of the next generation soon put an end to this fiction in the 1960s. They exposed sympathisers and proved that followers of the regime stayed in their offices or returned to their positions by indirect means. There was another impelling force that brought new life to the church: peace movements, ecological efforts, and aspirations for worldwide justice grew inside church circles. Slowly but surely old values were replaced by new ones, particularly with regard to the way of life. Finally even the last Lutheran Church had introduced the ordination of women and crucial changes in law had been imposed with the support of people involved in the church. This change, however, was also accompanied by more people leaving the church. People felt there was a rift between the appealing aspects of the church and the institutional framework that was necessary to ensure its survival. More and more often they took the liberty to withdraw from this community of faith and solidarity. Yet two things have contributed to the survival of the church to this day: on the one hand, the sensible use of traditional practices, like church music or established forms of meditation or bible studies; on the other hand, the participation in processes of social change, be it the welcoming culture towards migrants or World-shops. It requires both: a connection to passed millennia as well as a complete devotion to current issues. The Christian communities in Syria will only have a chance at a public future if they also consider the future of their Muslim neighbours. The German Christians will likewise have to consider the future of their fellow citizens without religious affiliations. Any universal success also serves to strengthen the churches that contributed to it. The peaceful revolution in the former GDR with its prayers for peace is just one example, the anti-nuclear movement and its sympathisers in the church is another. *These activities bear the risk of dissolving externally which makes devoted care for the internal foundation all the more necessary.* It is among the challenges of a new beginning to further the knowledge of the soul, which has been ruined by destruction and violence or the spiritless devotion to a mechanical life that weakens the individual instead of strengthening them. *To help the individual find wealth against all internal and external constraints, to support them*

*in their perceptions and their sociality, to exercise them in a way of life that strives for what is above (spoken according to the Epistle to the Colossians): so joining in the original Christian experience of dying and being born again every day seems to me a way in which the new does not deny the terrible old, but sets the past aside for the benefit of a new beginning, thus setting out on a path to a future that is yet unknown.*



*Opening session in Göttingen*



*For the first time students of NEST participate in one of the consultations in Germany*



## Christians in the Middle East – Major Themes Today<sup>1</sup>

*Rima Nasrallah van Saane*

February 2015, we arrive in a couple of cars to the Bishopric of the Assyrian Church in Beirut. Behind us there is a pickup truck loaded with mattresses and food parcels as well as used clothing. We are immediately met by the local priest, Father Sargon, who was in complete and total shock. With his limited Arabic, he could barely string together some sentences to describe what had happened. A week before, ISIS had invaded and destroyed 35 Assyrian villages in the North East of Syria known as the Khabour area. Those who could flee with whatever they could carry into Lebanon leaving behind 240 abducted friends and relatives. Father Sargon – whose relatives were also abducted – had suddenly thousands of refugees at his doorstep with no way to help them.

The June of the year before, ISIS had attacked Mosul and the Nineveh valley driving few thousand Iraqi Assyrians his way. The local Lebanese Assyrian community, of which he is the priest, is itself an old refugee community that had arrived in Lebanon in the 1930s after the Semele massacres. Though they had acquired the Lebanese nationality, and had rather integrated in the society, they re-

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<sup>1</sup> Instead of the original lecture of the consultation, one of the lectures of Rima Nasrallah is printed that she gave in the context of her visiting professorship 2019 in Göttingen on January 25.

mained somehow in a Ghetto. They try to maintain their language: East Syriac, and their tradition, distinguishing themselves from the other Lebanese citizens. Yet as a small underprivileged *minority* – the only Christian community outside the Middle East Council of Churches – they could barely survive themselves. And yet on that February day, they had few thousand Syrian Assyrians and another few thousand Iraqi Assyrians who depended on them for survival and the Church was the only official body that could play this role.

October 2016, I give a phonecall to Father Sargon, to plan our yearly visit to the Assyrian church as part of our SIMO program. Father Sargon's phone is out of order. A contact in the Assyrian community informs me that Father Sargon and his family emigrated to Australia. In fact, the great majority of those who had fled Syria and Iraq are now in Sweden, Australia or other parts of the world. Though the abducted were released and relative stability has come back in parts of Syria and Iraq, even if in some places under Kurdish YPG, only a miniscule group went back. Out of the 15,000 Assyrian villagers, only few hundred remain in the Khabour today.

“We are victims”, told me the replacing priest, “our history is a history of massacres and oppression and no one cares about us. If we would disappear today would anyone even notice?”

This episode with the Assyrians illustrates a myriad of themes that are part and parcel of the situation of most Christians in the Middle East today. In this paper I will present some of those themes such as identity, minority, sectarianism, demographic change and diaspora. Some of these themes have been researched at length and some are just emerging as new themes to be tackled in an interdisciplinary way as we look from the perspective of history, politics, anthropology and theology.

As a start, this episode reminds us of the difficulty in finding adequate terminology when referring to these and other Christians who live in the same regions. Despite the growing interest in Middle Eastern Christianity in the past twenty years in Academia, in literature and in the media, there is no consensus on how to refer to the diversity of churches when grouped together and whether *they should* be grouped together. Can we speak about the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in the same way we speak about the Chaldean Church? Are they the same people? Should we divide the Christians of the Middle East under Ecclesial lines? Under rite/tradition lines? Or under nation state, such as the Christians of Lebanon or the Christians of Palestine? This remains a dilemma, one that we faced clearly before our eyes as we met three communities of Assyrians: the Iraqis, the Syrians and

the Lebanese and notices how on the one hand *they are one community and the other they are three very distinct groups.*

However, for the sake of research we do need to be able to refer to the whole lot of Christians who live in the area extending from Egypt to Iraq. To do so, some have opted for the label *Arab Christians*.<sup>2</sup>

The term “Arab” itself is a by no means uncontested. Bernhard Heyberger reminds us for example that in the 18th century, the people of Aleppo would have been shocked to be referred to as Arabs. The term Arab was used to refer to ex-nomadic communities at the fringes of the Ottoman Empire. Arab and Arabism are terms that became more common in the context of modernity and nationalism. The connection between the term Arab, Arab nations, and becoming Arab is today heavily researched,<sup>3</sup> particularly in the context of the first half of the 20th century and the formation of nation states. Many locals would strongly object to this term. The first among those objecting would be the Assyrians. What is an Arab?

If Arab is used today to refer to those whose language is Arabic then the Armenians and the Assyrians would be the first to disqualify as neither of them uses the Arabic language except to communicate with those outside their community.

If Arab is an ethnicity, 80% per cent of the Christians of the Middle East would disqualify since most trace – rightly or not – their genealogies to ancient Egyptians, Arameans or even the Phoenicians distancing themselves from this ethnicity.

If Arab is connected to religion, i.e. Islam would that exclude all other religions from full citizenship in Arab countries. And on what ground would then non-Muslims participate in these nations?<sup>4</sup>

This dilemma, which for Academics is a terminology problem, is for many local Christians both an identity question and a political question.

In our recent history and particularly at the beginning of the 20th century, some Christian communities were tempted to embrace Arabness, particularly in the face of foreign powers such as colonial and Mandate presence and in the wake of nationalism and the formation of nation states. Those who did, such as the Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholics and Chaldean communities did so inspired either by ideological reasoning or for pragmatic reasons. Yet, in both cases their Arabness

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<sup>2</sup> See Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian. A History in the Middle East*, Westminster 1991; Jean Corbon, *L'Église des Arabes*, Paris 1977.

<sup>3</sup> James Jankowski/Israel Gershouni (ed.), *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, New York 1997; Yasir Suleiman, *The Arabic Language and National Identity*, Washington DC 2003; Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism. Authoritarian, Totalitarian and pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932–1941* (SOAS/Routledge Studies in the Middle East 4), London-New York 2006, among others.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Habib Malek, *Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East*, Stanford 2010.

was never fully acknowledged by the others. And we witness today the failure of these ideologies of participation that transcend religious affiliation or can include diversity.

If we are to tread carefully or even refuse the name Arab Christian, could we then speak as many would of the *Christians of the Arab world*? As Heyberger calls them: *Chrétien du monde Arab*?<sup>5</sup> “Le Monde Arab” is itself a very modern term as well and many Academics are favouring this terminology in order to frame the discussion about these Christians within and together with other studies on the Arab World so as not to isolate the study of the Christian communities from its environment. Noble as it is in its intention, it does however contain an implicit claim, namely that this world, the world where these Christians live, is an Arab world, a world that belongs to a majority of Arabs.

Which brings us to the second point raised by our Assyrian example, the issue of *minority*. In a book published in 2016, entitled “Modernity, Minority and the Public Sphere”, Murre-van den Berg discusses the problematic usage of the term minority to designate the Christians of the Middle East and links it as well to the formation of nation states when different identities were “vying for prominence”.<sup>6</sup> Those relegated to the status of minority – originally a mandate term used for communities in need of protection – would automatically experience restrictions to their economic and political rights.

The Assyrian community of the Khabur and of Lebanon admitted to accepting this externally imposed term. Under the current circumstances of war, persecution and crimes against humanity, being referred to as minority grants them a certain status vis-à-vis humanitarian agencies and international empathies. They can claim help and protection as minorities and they can use the term on application forms when trying for resettlement in European countries. Minority becomes their currency. However, their Assyrian brothers and sisters in Iraq have tried to invert this situation by attempting yet again to demand a geographical area where they could exist not as a minority but as a community of great proportion. Maybe the choice to relocate their patriarchal see from the United States (Chicago) to the Middle East, to Ankawa near Erbil in North Iraq, and electing a patriarch deeply rooted in the region, Patriarch Catholicos Giwargis III. Sliwa, were steps to reinforce their position further. Yet, all the attempts and promises for an autonomous region that

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<sup>5</sup> Bernard Heyberger, *Chrétien du Monde Arabe. Un Archipel en Terre d’Islam*, Paris 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Hendrika L. Murre-van den Berg/Sasha R. Goldstein-Sabbah (ed.), *Modernity, Minority and the Public Sphere. Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, Leiden-Boston 2016.

developed into a possibility of a new province in the Nineveh Valley have failed. *Maybe minority is all they could be.*

Many other communities have experienced this same trajectory. The Copts, who for a long time have resisted the term minority, are now claiming it themselves in the face of the sequence of attacks and violence that they are experiencing. While their pride in their tradition and their sense of self and desire to be major players in their nation had made them reject and resist this positioning, they turn today to a term that might secure their protection.

The Syriac Orthodox bishop of Mount Lebanon expressed this frustration and double feeling about this term in a recent visit we paid him. As Syriac community, they had been historically and officially classified as minority along with some other communities who arrived to Lebanon somewhere during the 20th century as a result of genocides, massacres and expulsions from Anatolia and other parts of the Ottoman Empire or because of other geopolitical reasons. Today they have to share one seat in the Lebanese Parliament among six different Christian sects: Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholics, Latin Catholics, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Copts. In other words, one out of the 128 seats in the national parliament is allocated to Christian minorities subsequently only one of these six would get a chance to occupy it in every electoral round. We have to clarify here that the Lebanese system is based on a confessional system where religious groups are represented according to their numbers; Christian groups with larger numerical presence get a larger number of seats (such as the Maronites, The Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholic and so on). The Syriac bishop's frustration towards minoritization reflected his incapacity to care for his community in ways that will ensure for them a proper life in Lebanon and in turn will keep them from emigrating. *Others* have categorized his community as minority and created a situation of potential competition with the other minorities.

This political restriction translates itself in socio-economic outcomes on the community that is being kept at the lower end of the society. Young Syriacs complain that even when they work hard to educate themselves, they fail to land good jobs because they do not have the right connections and are not part of the confessional and sectarian *system*.

Which takes us to a third theme: *Sectarianism*. Not only do the "minority" groups suffer from the sectarian system but so do all the communities. Throughout the entire previously-Ottoman territories, the Millet System has impacted both the particular communities as well as the political and social systems at large. This inherited socio-political organization keeps the individuals tied willingly or unwill-

ingly to their religious frame. In many countries people's religious affiliation features on their identity cards, categorizing their social belonging and keeping them dependent to some extent on their ecclesial leadership and bearing the consequences of the whims of the community's elite. They also place the clergy in this mediatory position between the state and the citizen and frustrate bishops such as the Syriac bishop we mentioned, who still in the 21st century is burdened with responsibilities that extend beyond his ecclesial function and even his diocese.

These sectarian structures – be they explicit as in Lebanon or implicit as in Syria – limit the agencies, possibilities and public visibility of the communities and make for some to overshadow or oppress the others.

The imbalance in the political and public role of the different sects as well as the minoritization of some have lead throughout history to sectarian conflicts, massacres and demographic restructuring. *Christians in the Middle East have come to accept that sectarian conflict is a fact of life*. Since the time of the Ottoman Empire, to the formation of the state of Israel, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Lebanese Civil War, the Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, the conflict in Iraq since 2003 overlapping with the emergence of ISIS and then developing into the war in Syria, some sort of sectarian conflict has arisen.

One of the surprising effects of much of these recent sectarian conflicts has been an increased solidarity or rapprochement among the various Christian communities. While at the beginning of the 20th century the Christian communities each had its own perspective and ideology concerning its role and participation in the emerging nation states, most have come to the disappointing result that this past century was a “century for nothing” or “un siècle pour rien” as Lacouture and Tuéni have entitled their book about the 20th century.<sup>7</sup> The century that started with ideologies and aspirations ended with sheer disappointment when none of the proposed political and social orders that the Christians thought would give them larger participation, visibility or security have succeeded.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, both the disagreements of the 20th century as well as the aspirations/dreams that accompanied them had to be put aside for the sake of finding a way to cope with new and dramatic situations. We see this for example with the church leaders in Jerusalem who have in the past 20 years made a number of public decla-

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<sup>7</sup> Ghassan Tuéni/Gérard D. Khoury/Jean Lacouture, *Un Siècle pour rien: Le Moyen-Orient arabe de l'Empire ottoman à l'Empire américain*, Paris 2002 – and as Tarek Mitri reminded in a lecture at the NEST.

<sup>8</sup> This is not only the situation in the Middle East but has been experienced in Europe as well and some would link it to generational changes.



rations signed by all of them despite their historic competitions and sensitivities; the latest is the one concerning Presidents Trump's Jerusalem decision. Church leaders in Lebanon after the Lebanese civil war had to rally, today Iraq and Syria are starting to witness an alignment in discourse as well.

Which brings us to the fourth theme: numbers and demographic changes.

A big drive behind the recent cooperation behind many of the communities is *the shock of numbers*. Many a scholar or a demographer have pointed to the numerical or relative decrease of the Christian population in the Middle East, Jean Jacques Valognes in 1994 already wrote a book called "Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient" (anticipating the death of Oriental Christians).<sup>9</sup> Today 25 years later the numbers are even more dramatic. We mentioned the change in numbers in the Khabour area: a drop from 15,000 to few hundreds in one year. Although no statistical censuses have been official done in the area, a recent and reliable estimate I have heard gives the following numbers of Christians in Iraq:

in 1990     1.5 million

in 2003     700,000

in 2010     450,000

in 2015     290,000

today less than 200,000 – this is an alarming rate!

The Christians of Palestine have had their share of decrease, so did the Christians of Syria in recent years. The Christians of Lebanon though still relatively better off than others are on the decrease. What would account for these great numerical losses. Christians in the Middle East have been emigrating since the 19th century, waves of wars, famine but also socio-economic changes and new opportunities in other lands have driven the Christians (along with other Middle Easterners) to seek other homes. However, the past 20 to 30 years and more so in the past 5 years, the exodus of Christians has become massive.

No one can deny that in the case of Iraq and Syria, forced expulsion, destruction of property and lack of safety are reasons behind emigration. However, basing himself on the results of a recent survey done by the World Council of Churches in cooperation with the Norwegian Church AID alliance, entitled "The Protection Needs of Minorities from Syria and Iraq", previous minister and scholar Tarek Mitri remarks that there seems to be a higher level of anxiety among the Christians of the East than in any other "minority" community.

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<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient. Des origines à nos jours*, Paris 1994.

In the lecture he gave at NEST in January 2018, he declared that the fear that the ISIS situation has created among the Christians is ushering a new and pivotal phase in their history. Even if Christian communities are not suffering physically and materially more than other groups, the psychological effect on them has been greater. Quoting from the Norwegian research mentioned above, he highlights that one of the main reasons for their anxiety is that their “Muslim neighbours did not come to their aid as they had expected and hoped for”. Something in the social cohesion that they had bargained on did not hold. This anxiety is also connected to certain scenarios the Christians are imagining based on events from the past century driving them to accelerated emigration.

War and violence, anxiety and lack of trust combined with economic factors in the region at large, Christians are benefitting from the *network of trails that their ancestors have blazed before* them to exit the region as quickly as possible.

Those remaining behind have to face great existential questions. Is this the end of Christian history and presence in the Middle East? Is this the eclipse of the diverse traditions, languages, rites and communities?

Before we try to tackle these questions, or move on to other themes related to my opening example, I would like to frame some of these issues within a fourfold structure that Tarek Mitri has proposed and which in my opinion captures some of the grave consequences and choices made by Christians today.

### Deceptions

He proposes four main deceptions that the various Christian communities embrace in their attempt to make sense of the situation:

#### 1. Conspiracy theory

Many Christians – but also non-Christians – falsely believe that there is a conspiracy against them that aims at emptying the Middle East of its Christians. In discussion with our local students past week it became evident to me that on the popular level, both “Arab” Students as well as Armenian students, along with their parents and relatives are convinced that there is a clear and premeditated conspiracy to eliminate or relocate the Christians out of this region. Some trace that conspiracy theory to the Mandate time of the 1920s, others to the establishment of the state of Israel and others to subsequent deals between great western powers. These conspiracy theories are widely spread and though some of them are targeted towards local regimes as in the case of Egypt where attacks occur on churches at a rate of once

per month and people are starting to believe that their compatriots are planning to eliminate them, most of these theories accuse the West, Israel or other Islamic countries.

2. Though this belief might be a popular deception, what remains true is the fact that Christians in the Middle East are receiving little if any political attention from Western powers particularly in comparison with the past. Since the 19th century, and maybe even before that, Christian groups in the Middle East have relied on the protection and alliances with powers such as France, Britain, USA, and Russia. It is the French who gave a new lease of life to the Christians of Mount Lebanon after the 1860 massacres, the British who facilitated the recognition of the Protestants as a separate Millet, the French who rescued the Armenian victims of Musa Dagh in 1915, the Russian who protected the Greek Orthodox and so on. Christians in the Middle East tend to look back at these events using selective remembrance and building hopes and expectations that their allies will step in and defend them again. Mitri calls this a second deception! And one can ask here if western powers are at all interested in the same way as they used to be in times gone by in a handful of Christian communities. The selective memory of the Christians is also blocking all the moments of betrayal and abandon that they had experienced in the past at the hands of these very same powers. The Semele massacres in 1933 that caused the Assyrian community's arrival in Lebanon, wasn't that the result of faulty British promises? The Syriac community of Tur Abdeen as well as the Palestinian Christians can testify to such moments when relying on the Western powers had backfired.

Christians in the Middle East oscillate between these two poles: blaming the conspiracy or placing hopes on Western powers.

### 3. Resorting to autocratic systems

What other options are there for the Christians? Mitri is not the only one to suggest that in order to overcome their insecurities some Christians have found refuge in autocratic systems where they bartered their privileges and rights for their safety. Habib Malik, professor of history and cultural studies and human rights activists, would

agree with this proposal and goes further to say that in some places accepting to live as second class citizens resembling the Millet or Dhimmi systems was the Christians way to overcome their insecurities. However, these systems as we have seen in the most recent Arab Spring have tumbled down dragging with them those who were sheltering in their shadow.

#### 4. Allying with other Minorities

A last deception that Mitri highlights is that of Christian communities trying to ally with other minorities so that they can gain some strength. Again, this has proven to be not only ineffective but also dangerous as Christians in some places became collateral victims when their allies failed.

So is there no way back to numerical decline? Is this a “reversible or irreversible” damage to speak with Heleen Murre van den Berg terms? Christians remember with nostalgia how their percentage in the levant area had risen at the beginning of the twentieth century to 20–25% of the population. Looking at the percentages today and facing these facts some Christians fear that the Middle East will become an open air museum where few Churches of ancient rites will remain and that Eastern Christian studies will become a field of archaeology!

This brings us to the last theme derived from our Assyrian story: *Diaspora*. One theme that is most often overlooked in studies of Middle Eastern Christians is *Diaspora*.

The Christians are numerically and/or relatively decreasing in the Middle East yet they are increasing in the rest of the world. If we take each of the 12, 13 different churches represented in the Middle East all of them have at least half if not double their constituency outside the Middle East. Going back to the Assyrian example, it is thanks to this large and prosperous and ever growing diaspora that the 240 abducted persons in Khabour could be released. It is the Diaspora that raised enough money and conducted negotiation for release.

The fact that most of the Assyrians, Syrians and Armenians for example live in the West in countries that not only are foreign to their language and culture but are most of the time secular, create great challenges for these churches and upsets basic structures of the community. In the Middle East bishops and clergy have inherited certain patterns of relating to their communities and establishing community borders and channels of authority. In diaspora this cannot be taken for

granted. The position of the church in an individual's personal life and the condition of belonging and involvements are very different.

Add to this the discrepancy in education and culture between the clergy and the international community. Clergy are having difficulty catching up with these societal changes.

Studying the diaspora of the Churches of the East has become an essential element of studying these churches. The diaspora is challenging the established churches but it is also in the diaspora that innovation is happening. It is from the diaspora that financial support comes not only for release of hostages but also for development. It is the diaspora that has become the new advocate of Eastern Churches replacing a role Western Christians used to play.

A number of churches are realizing the importance of this diaspora and are exploring and developing ways to connect their people in fruitful networks. The Maronite Synod of 2006 dedicated a large section in its proceeding to the discussion of the value and relationship with the Diaspora. The Armenian Apostolic Church is training a number of priests in Beirut particularly for the task of pastoring diaspora congregations in the USA.

The current patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, Mor Ignatius Afrem II., recognized that it is the youth of the diaspora that need to be targeted as those are the ones who are mostly alienated from the language, values and seemingly pre-modern church. He thus launched yearly global youth conferences. The first one took place in Lebanon in 2015 (SYGG: Suryoyo Youth Global Gathering). Young people came from Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. They were joined by small groups from the USA, Australia, and Saudi Arabia.

Initiatives like these link the individual Christians of the Middle East through transnational networks that will most likely change the face of Eastern and Oriental Christianity, challenging yet again our attempts at finding a name to these groups of people; could we still call them Eastern Christians if they are second-generation Swedish? Or Christians of the Middle East when their physical presence is one of networks of people living under very different circumstances?

And could we still restrict our study of Christians in the Middle East to the traditional families and regions when we know of the astounding growth Christian communities in the Gulf area as well as the vast number of migrant communities in several parts of the region, from Ethiopia, Philippines and Africa?

We are at a turning point in the field of studies of Middle Eastern Christianity and Christianity in the Middle East where traditional categories have to be supplemented and challenged by new approaches and the lens has to be widened to include the transnational networks as well as the emerging formations in the re-

gion. Questions of identity, minority, conflict and numbers have to be framed within a more global frame that takes into account the large movements of groups as well as the individual trajectories of people.



*Destroyed house in district Hamediye, Homs/Syria*



## Overview and History of the Teaching of Religion in Lebanon and Syria

### The Case of the NESSL Schools

*Johnny B. Awwad/Khairallah Atallah*

This short essay is an overview and history of the teaching of religion in Lebanon and Syria with a focus on the educational institutions of the National Evangelical Synod in Syria and Lebanon (hereafter will be referred to as NESSL). Johnny Awwad covers the topic as it relates to Lebanon and Khairallah Atallah as it relates to Syria. In unpacking the topic, this essay shall proceed according to the following plan. First, a profile of the Lebanese Educational System as it looks today will be briefly sketched. Second, a historical overview about education in Lebanon in general and about the teaching of religion in schools in particular will be presented. Third, the case of the teaching of religion at NESSL schools in Lebanon will be tackled via two paradigms or school-cases. Finally, the teaching of religion in Syria will be discussed through the case of the National Evangelical School in Homs which is also a NESSL educational institution.

## 1 A Profile of Lebanon's Educational System

Today, the Lebanese educational system can be divided into two sectors. The public sector is run by government and is free of charge. The private sector is mostly run by the religious/confessional communities that make up the Lebanese mosaic and is tuition based. Despite the presence of a number of secular schools with no religious affiliation within the private sector, the dominant identity of the educational private sector is that it is comprised of schools that are governed by the various religious/confessional communities in the country, both Christian and Muslim. For more precision, under the Christian category of private schools one can also list schools belonging to Maronites, Catholics, Antiochene-Orthodox, Melkites, and Protestants. Within the Protestant sub-category, one can even identify schools representing Protestant diversity worldwide. Under the Muslim category of schools within the private sector one can list Sunni, Shi'ite, and Druze schools. Due to the low quality of education in the public sector, 65–70% of the student population in Lebanon is enrolled in private schools which are owned and governed by the religious/confessional communities. This profile shows that education in general in Lebanon, and private education in particular, is controlled by the religious/confessional communities in the country.

## 2 A Historical Overview of Education and the Teaching of Religion

From its inception, school education in Lebanon was motivated by religion and intended to serve a religious purpose. Historians date the beginning of the private educational system in Lebanon back to the 17th century with the establishment of Maronite Christian schools in Mount Lebanon during Ottoman rule. Back then, schools clustered around churches and monasteries for the purpose of teaching the young of the church how to read and write, as well as, to equip them with Christian values for life. Among the Muslims, and in particular Sunni Muslims, schools clustered around mosques where the young were instructed in the Arabic language preparing them to read and memorize the Quran and study Islamic Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). During the 17th century also, Lebanon witnessed the establishment of monasteries and schools by Christian Catholic missionaries who came from Europe for the purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. Further influx of Catholic European missionaries continued during the 19th century and it intersected with the arrival of Protestant American missionaries. Motivated by the Great Awakening



in North America and a feeling of obligation to proclaim the Gospel of Christ to Muslims and Jews, Protestant missionaries arrived in the Levant and began the planting of schools for the purpose of educating the people of the land, helping them read the word of God for themselves, leading them to Christ, and ensuring their salvation. The competition between the Catholic and the Protestant missionaries fueled the enthusiasm of other Christian communities to establish their own schools like the Antiochene Orthodox and the Melkites. Competition among the Christian communities led to a competition of different kind. In his book *The Modern History of Lebanon*, the Lebanese historian Kamal Al Salibi, describes the establishment of Al Makassid Society in 1878, which is a Sunni-Muslim society that began in Beirut and later opened schools throughout Lebanon, to have happened as a reaction to affluent Muslim families sending their children to Christian schools and later converting to Christianity. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century Lebanon became the cultural and the educational center of the Middle East. All this took place during the Ottoman occupation of the Levant. During the first half of the 19th century, the Ottomans opened public schools for the purpose of Islamic religious instruction and learning, but there was no way that they could compete with what has already been established by local Christians or Christian missionaries.

After WWI, Lebanon came under the French mandate. The French encouraged and showed great support to the private sector and helped in protecting it constitutionally. Drafted and adopted under the French mandate in 1926, the Constitution of Lebanon states in Chapter 2 (“The Lebanese: Their Rights and Duties”) Article 10 the following: “Education shall be free insofar as it is not contrary to public order and morals and does not affect the dignity of any of the religions or sects. *There shall be no violation of the right of religious communities to have their own schools* provided they follow the general rules issued by the state regulating public instruction.” The right of religious/confessional communities to establish their own schools became a constitutional matter. What about the teaching of religion in schools? Unable to either provide the general rules to follow or to regulate public instruction on teaching of religion, the State has practically kept the teaching of religion in the hands of the religious/confessional communities. The situation remained the same after Lebanon’s independence in 1943: Lebanon’s religious/confessional communities continued their monopoly over education in general and the teaching of religion in particular in the private sector. Teaching of religion in the public sector was never taken seriously by the State neither on the level of regulating it nor on the level of considering it a matter of great national concern.

The Lebanese civil war between 1975 and 1990 did not only change the hearts of the Lebanese people, but also Lebanon's demographic map. With more and more Christians forced to move from predominantly Muslim areas to relocate in predominantly Christian areas, the sectarian divide became sharper and the different regions became religiously segregated. The continuity of Christian schools in Muslim areas became threatened and the teaching of religion in these schools became a highly sensitive and dangerous matter.

During and after the civil war, Lebanon witnessed a new educational phenomenon. The rise of Islamic Sunni movements in the Arab world, and the inspiring paradigm of the Islamic Republic of Iran to many of the Shi'ite communities in the Middle East, led to the establishment of schools affiliated with Political Islam. In these schools, Islam is taught as an ideology relating to all aspects of life including sciences. Here, one wonders about who can ensure that these educational institutions do not become exploited for either political extremism or religious radicalism particularly in light of the State's resignation from its responsibility to monitor religious education and to provide the general rules to follow and to regulate public instruction on teaching of religion in the private sector!

The Taif Accord (October 1989), or what is known as the Charter of Lebanese National Reconciliation, which ended the civil war, states the following on education: "The freedom of education shall be emphasized in accordance with general laws and regulations [...] Private education shall be protected and state control over private schools and textbooks shall be strengthened [...] The curricula shall be reviewed and developed in a manner that strengthens national belonging, fusion, spiritual and cultural openness, and that unifies textbooks on the subjects of history and national education." Nothing was said about the teaching of religion at schools.

In the year 2000 the Ministry of Education asked the Center for Educational Research and Development, which is the official body responsible for the revision of the curricula in Lebanon, to put together a unified textbook for religious education that concentrates on the common values of the various religions in the country. Like the unified textbook on history, the unified textbook for religious education in schools has not yet seen the light.

The constitutional right given to religious/confessional communities to establish their own schools and to organize religious education in them, and the inability of the state to regulate religious education, has been criticized by many who consider these rights as means for the division and the fragmentation of society, for distorting the way one looks at the other, and running the risk of leading to religious radicalism impacting all patterns of life. They describe the situation as being chaotic, and many of these voices call upon the state to end any form of religious

education at schools be they public or private. Other voices have called upon the state to turn religious education or teaching of religion into teaching about religious diversity within a curriculum on citizenship. Will the state respond? Only time will tell.

### 3 Teaching of Religion at NESSL Schools in Lebanon

Before addressing the teaching of religion at NESSL schools in Lebanon, it is important to introduce these schools. The number of educational institutions that belong to NESSL in Lebanon is six and they are the remaining legacy of American Protestant missionary work in the country. They are dispersed all over the Lebanese territories, with a total number of students that exceeds 6800. Despite the tremendous negative effects of the Lebanese civil war upon these institutions and the changes in demographics that resulted from it, they were able to survive the war. The demographic changes turned some of these schools into alien entities in their surrounding contexts. A NESSL school in Nabatieh, a Shi'ite city in southern Lebanon, has zero number of Christian students, and almost zero number of Christian teachers. At a NESSL school in Sidon, also city in southern Lebanon and a Biblical site, 95% of the students are Muslims, mostly Sunnis, and only 5% Christians of all denominations. Similar ratios apply to NESSL schools in the northern city of Tripoli and Kab Elias in the Bekaa Valley in the eastern parts of the country. A different student profile can be seen at a NESSL school in Rabieh, one of the suburbs near Beirut city. There, 95% of the students are Christians and 5% Muslims. More balanced ratios can be found in a NESSL school in Zahle, a city in the Bekaa Valley, with almost 50–50 ratios. Protestant students from all the Protestant traditions are only few hundred at NESSL schools. And though NESSL schools are not the only Protestant schools in the country, they are the biggest.

The immense expansion of the private school sector in the last four decades especially in areas that are predominantly Muslim (both Shi'ite and Sunni) due to financial support from Gulf countries and Iran, and the establishment of private schools of Islamic identity began to threaten the continuity not only of NESSL schools but also other Christian schools. Why should Muslim parents continue to send their children to schools that have a Christian identity when there are Muslim schools, both Shi'ite and Sunni schools, around the corner that offer subsidized tuitions and where they can insure that their children are receiving the proper Islamic Shi'ite or Sunni religious education? This reality has created intense competition to NESSL's educational institutions and at the present time poses real challenges for their continuity, especially that four out of the six NESSL schools are in

predominantly Muslim areas. On the other side, why should Maronite, Catholic or Orthodox parents continue to send their children to Protestant schools when there are Maronite, Catholic and Orthodox schools around the corner, and within which they can insure that their children receive proper denominational religious education and instruction? These questions illustrate the critical nature of the situation. The ability to survive this religious and sectarian divide has been a tremendous burden on NESSL, and in particular on the way it must deal with the question of teaching of religion.

Historically NESSL schools are well known for their good academic level. But like all mission schools they were founded for the purpose of either evangelism or to equip their graduates with Christian values needed for life. For these purposes religious education was compulsory at NESSL schools. Students both Muslims and Christians were required to attend morning chapel services and receive religious education as part of the curriculum. Parents who objected to that were asked to withdraw their children from school. This was NESSL schools' policy before the civil war. Today, this policy cannot implement for the following two reasons: 1) NESSL's view on evangelism is no longer to convert others to the Protestant faith as much as it is to share Christ in a life lived with the other. NESSL's involvement in the ecumenical movement on the one hand and recognizing the pluralistic and diverse world we live in on the other have helped NESSL to foster a culture of respect, tolerance and recognition of the other in its educational institutions; 2) the religious and sectarian divides that define Lebanon and Lebanese society have created extremely tensed situations that require platforms for reconciliation on a national level and arenas for meeting the other freely. NESSL perceives that this is the mission of its educational institutions in the post civil war era.

So has NESSL abandoned its right to teach religion at its schools? Or has it abandoned its school heritage and loyalty to its identity? These are important questions that require straightforward answers. If the teaching of religion means instructing students in a special form of a religion, then NESSL schools do not do that. What some of NESSL schools provide is some form of a Christian education program to its students depending on the location of the school and the religious make up of the student body. Christian education programs are offered when the ratio of Christian students is 50% and above. This means that this form of education is offered in only two of the six NESSL schools. What about the other four schools where the ratio of Christian students does not exceed the 5%? Christian education classes have been replaced by ethics classes. So NESSL has two paradigms or school-cases under which the topic of teaching of religion can be discussed. For clarification purposes, an example from each paradigm will be discussed briefly.

An example of the first paradigm is Rabieh School. Founded in 1835, and was the first school in Lebanon during the Ottoman times to educate girls, has student ratios of 95% Christians to 5% Muslims. In this school, students of the same age group, along with their teachers, attend a weekly compulsory chapel service (25–30 minutes) carried out by a chaplain, who is a licensed preacher by NESSL. The chapel service usually has a short message which deals with the daily concerns of the students, depending on their age group, covering a wide range of topics such as dealing with the loss of a close relative, standing for what is right, making the right choices, handling fear, etc.

In addition, the school offers an one hour session weekly of Christian education classes for students from KGI until Grade 10. For ages between 3 and 10, Biblical stories are interpreted through the use of arts and media. For ages between 11 and 15 concepts based on Christian faith are dealt with such as Christian identity, sexuality, pain, suffering, relations with parents, war, peace, telling the truth, team work, freedom of thought, emotional safety, bullying, environmental awareness, addiction awareness, boy-girl relations, etc. Muslim students attend those classes too, but they are taught in a way that does neither exclude them nor provoke them.

The school has also a Bible Club for ages 3–18, with resources for students and parents. The Bible Club is open for a one on one session with students to deal with personal questions, problems, girl's issues, boy-girl relationships, or with parents to discuss their children's needs and concerns.

In addition to the above, the school has special services held by the chaplain on Christmas and Easter. There is a convocation service for all students marking the beginning of the school year, and a special convocation service for teachers and employees. Teachers also attend a whole day annual spiritual retreat during the school year. On special occasions, the school hosts groups from outside either for a Christian Musical or Christian Drama. In addition, NESSL has a policy implemented in all of its schools to present the Bible, the word of God, as a gift to all its graduating students. The school works hard on making sure that its values, which intersect with the Christian and Biblical values, are implemented in all aspects of school life.

It was mentioned earlier that instead of teaching of religion, NESSL is interested in creating a culture. The chaplain at this school describes this culture in the following words: "We believe in the freedom of the individual in determining their understanding of God for themselves. We help them to discern for themselves what is right or wrong. We lead them. We help them but we do not indoctrinate our students [...] Some non-Protestant Christian parents are nervous about our Christian education, especially with regard to Mary and the Saints. But when they see our focus on

God, Christ and Biblical values, our ecumenical openness, and our encouragement to their children to strengthen their own Christian commitments in their own churches, they feel relaxed and they immerse themselves in our culture.”

An example of the second paradigm is Tripoli school. The student ratios in this school are 95% Muslims to 5% Christians. In this situation, Christian education has been replaced with ethics. But to understand why NESSL is doing what it does, it is necessary to offer some background information about the environment and the immediate context of this school. Like other NESSL schools before the civil war, and before the demographic changes that resulted from that war, this school had daily chapel services for students and teachers and religious education classes for all students. During the war, the school was forced to stop any form of Christian or religious education, including chapels for students. Shortly after, the school was forced to provide Islamic teaching to students by sheikhs from the city under the threats of either closure to the school or its confiscation. At that time, the school yielded to the pressure and the teaching of Islam began and it continued shortly after the war was over. One can now debate whether the decision taken then by the school was right or wrong. But this does not change the fact that the environment and the immediate context of the school are very difficult and challenging. Any miscalculation could threaten the continuity of the school. Parents who love to send their children to this school because of the good education they receive which equips them to enter the best universities in the country, are not interested in having them exposed to any form of Christian or religious education. And this is the typical of all the other schools where the Muslim ratio of students is very high. In 2001 NESSL introduced the subject of ethics into the curriculum as a means to compensate for the absence a Christian education program classes to students. Through the subject of ethics NESSL was able to indirectly reintroduce Christian and Biblical values without raising any sensitivity. NESSL could have resorted to its right to provide religious education or any form of Christian education classes at its schools, but what would it achieve if it had done that? What would the implication of such a decision be on the enrollment and the relations with the surrounding context? NESSL could have even provided a Christian education program to the 5% Christians of its student population and exempted Muslim students from attending those classes. But such an arrangement could send negative messages in more than one direction. It could easily be interpreted as an expression of being radical which could generate a radical counter response, or it could reinforce the impression that religion is a divisive issue. For the above reasons and for all the reasons that were mentioned earlier about NESSL's developed understanding of evangelism and of its mission through its educational institutions, Chris-

tian education was replaced with ethics. Interestingly enough, the person in charge of the teaching of ethics at that school is the first ordained woman in the Presbyterian Church in Syria and Lebanon, who is also the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in the city. This fact makes a clear statement about the identity of the school.

Some of the topics that are covered by ethics classes have to do with freedom of thought and conscience, democracy, accepting and respecting others, love, sharing (with community services programs of helping refugees with clothing and food), being fair, not discriminating, challenges of accompany modernity, dealing responsibly with social media, peace, violence, justice, family and family values (this is a crucial topic in Muslim contexts due to high levels of divorce and broken families, and the emotional impact this may have on students), living responsibly, being a good citizen, respecting the law, cleanliness etc. Other topics are of religious nature and include talk about God as creator of all, the love of God and the love of God's creation, caring for creation, environmental awareness, and forgiveness. Because of this the school has regained the trust, acceptance and the respect of the community. Parents know very well that the school has an identity and that that identity determines the way in which a lot of things are done, but they also know that their children are accepted the way they are, and for who they are, and that the values they are being equipped with are for the good of their children.

Has NESSL abandoned its right to teach religion at its schools? The answer is "yes" if the teaching of religion means indoctrinating students in a special form of a religion. The answer is also "no" because in transposing Christian and Biblical values to forms of Christian education and ethics for the purpose of creating a culture that respects context, plurality and diversity, NESSL schools continue to preserve their heritage and live in loyalty to their identity.

#### **4 Teaching of Religion at NESSL's Homs School in Syria**

NESSL has four schools in Syria (Aleppo, Hasakeh, Qamishli and Homs). Only the one in Aleppo is governed by the Educational Committee of the Synod. The other schools are governed by the local churches. In this part of the article, the topic of teaching of religion will be discussed as it relates to the case of the National Evangelical School in Homs.

Since its establishment in 1907, this school has been governed by the National Presbyterian Church of Homs. The student population for this academic year is around 1,700 students who come from different religious and ethnic backgrounds.

In 1968 the Syrian Government passed a law to organize the status of private educational institutions. At that time, all private schools were owned by the various

religious/confessional communities that lived in the country. This law required all



private schools in Syria, including of course the National Evangelical School in Homs, to accept the supervision of the Ministry of Education upon their educational processes. It also required that private institutions accept the national unified curriculum which is prepared, printed, and distributed free of charge to every Syrian student by the

Ministry of Education. In addition to the unified curriculum, private schools were given the freedom to use a supplementary curriculum if they chose to do so.

To insure that a unified curriculum does not necessarily do away with the religious/confessional identity and values of these private schools, the Ministry of Education dedicated one to two sessions per week for religious teaching and introduced two special religious curricula, one to be used by Muslim students and the other by Christian students. The religious curricula were prepared by committees of teachers nominated and financially supported by the Ministry of Education. Teachers who prepared the Christian curriculum were neither Christian educators nor experts in this field. Their choice was based on their personal religious piety and their personal commitment to their churches.

The unified curriculum is used and taught by all Syrian educational institutions till now and it is under continuous revision by the Committee of Curricula in the Ministry of Education. The last revision for the religious curricula was done two years ago which included new topics like “Facing Extremism” and “Supporting Co-existence”.

The National Evangelical School in Homs, like the majority of private schools, applies only the unified religious curricula and keeps its right to use supplementary curricula to teach foreign languages since the unified curriculum in this subject is very weak. At the present time, the National Evangelical School in Homs employs three teachers to teach the Islamic religious curriculum for its Muslim students, and assigns few Christian teachers, who usually teach other subjects, to teach the Christian curriculum. In this case, the student is totally dependent upon the teach-



er's character and his/her personal knowledge and commitment and not on his/her expertise as a Christian Educator.

The main obstacle that faces the teaching of the Christian religion is the lack of specialized Christian educators due to the absence of Theological Seminaries in the country. Moreover, Syrian Christian educators, who have received professional training at an academic institution like the Near East School of Theology, are unable to get equivalence to their degrees from the Ministry of Education, and consequently, cannot hold a full-time position as teachers of religious education at schools.

Having two different curricula taught and studied separately from one another, one for Muslims and one for Christians, have negative consequences. They not only prevent interaction among students, but they also thwart possibilities of being informed about the religion of the other. In addition, a unified curriculum for Christian students frustrates possibilities of acquiring the proper knowledge about the distinctiveness of each of the denominations of the Christian tradition and the differences among them – differences that can be interpreted as signs of riches rather than causes of conflict – provided that those who are preparing the curriculum and those who are teaching it are well equipped and qualified.

The National Evangelical School in Homs tries to fill in the gaps of a unified curriculum on the teaching of religion by organizing multi-religious social activities such as sports training programs where students from different backgrounds can work together for a common goal. These can be considered as good experiences but they are not enough to create mutual knowledge about the other and/or deep religious encounters.

The absence of future plans by the Ministry of Education to establish a National Institute for the training of qualified educators of the Christian religion in schools is a call for the church to step in. The National Presbyterian Church of Homs is called to assess the teaching of religion at its National Evangelical School, to specify its need for trained Christian Educators, to finance their professional development, and to insure their placement as teachers of the Christian religion at the school. Until such a comprehensive intervention is undertaken by the church, the church can move in the direction of organizing short-term training programs in Christian Education for the teachers who are assigned to teach the Christian curriculum and requires of them active participation in Sunday School and Youth Leadership training programs.



*Exchange about the situation in Lebanon and Syria in small working groups*





## Church Schools in the Near East – Possibilities of West-East Partnership? The Case of the Schneller Schools

*Uwe Gräbe*

I would like to contribute some reflections on the aspect of the witness of the churches towards a spiritual rebuilding in the Middle East. The *educational work* is certainly one of the most outstanding contributions of the churches to the Middle Eastern societies which they are an integral part of.

I am sure that this distinguished audience is very familiar with the specific case of school work I am going to speak about now, namely the Schneller Schools in Lebanon and Jordan. Originally established as the “Syrian Orphanage” in Jerusalem in 1860, these institutions have been an excellent example of the ups and downs (and at times: the roller-coaster rides) of West-Eastern partnership in the educational sector for the last nearly 160 years.

Before I come to the core of the issue, please allow me first to start with some general observations. Afterwards, I will have a short look into the history and into the present of the Schneller Schools, before venturing into some possible future perspectives.

## 1 Some General Observations

Whenever I travel to the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Amman, Jordan, the taxi usually takes me down the road from Queen Alia International Airport to the Na'ur interchange, where the driver has to turn right to the eastern parts of Amman. On both sides of this less than 30 kilometres long Airport Road, I see an ever growing number of private educational institutions: branches of American colleges, private Jordanian universities, specialized business schools, Jordanian-American joint ventures, and so on. Without any doubt, these schools are an example of West-Eastern educational partnership in the Middle East. Moreover, they prove that education is big business today.

Wherever a country in the Middle East is considered safe enough to guarantee an undisturbed degree-course, and wherever the atmosphere is liberal enough to accommodate the needs of the well-heeled segments of some rather conservative Arab societies, there you can be sure that private educational institutions will mushroom. Their tuition fees are usually high enough to provide for a good income to those running these institutions, and the names of their degrees sound quite impressive to international ears. In Lebanon, this might be the same as in Jordan: Recently, I overheard our Lebanese partners talking about so-called “education kiosks” in Beirut. And after the considerable efforts which the long standing Near East School of Theology (NEST) had to undertake to receive the official recognition of “equivalency” from the Lebanese Ministry of Education, I wonder how many of these fancy new private institutions have ever managed to gain official recognition for the degrees they award.

Of course, my observations may be totally wrong or at least fragmentary. But as an outsider, I am sometimes confused by the contrast I see in some Middle Eastern countries, between government schools which are free of charge and accessible for all, but sometimes have a terrible reputation, and private institutions that obviously have their customers who are ready to spend considerable amounts of money in order to obtain some kind of international degree, even though, in some cases, the objective value of these degrees may be difficult to assess. With this certainly limited insight about the bandwidth of educational opportunities in the Middle East, I would like to reflect on the possibilities of a fruitful East-West partnership regarding church schools in the Middle East today. What is possible here – and what may rather be a nostalgic dream? At this point, I would like to go back in time to the establishment of the first Schneller School, namely the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem, and to compare that to the present situation.

## 2 Schneller – Past and Present

In 1854, a Swabian teacher and missionary called Johann Ludwig Schneller set out for Palestine, sent by the Chrischona Mission from Switzerland. He was assigned to run the so “Bruderhaus” of the Pilgrim’s Mission in Jerusalem. But as my predecessor Ulrich Kadelbach remarks in an article published back in 1989, Schneller was a person of high political consciousness.<sup>1</sup> He realized very quickly the inefficiency of the mission entrusted to him. And when the turmoil between Christians and Druze in Mount Lebanon broke out in 1860, eventually ending up in a carnage of the Christians, Schneller took action, starting something new and unplanned by his mission society: He brought 9 orphaned young boys from Lebanon and opened the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem on November 11, 1860. This institution quickly developed into the largest and most important diaconal institution in the Middle East, providing good education to marginalized, poor and orphaned children, from Kindergarten to vocational training, encompassing boarding homes for boys and girls, and even a home for the blind.

All of this was based on a kind of double “vision statement”: The first part, formulated by Schneller himself, was: “*Dass sie in Ehren ihr eigen Brot essen*” – “So that they may eat their own bread in dignity”. This was not self-evident, since it usually depended upon the extended family, whether a young person would end up with a profession that would allow him to make a living. Orphans however, had little opportunities, if any. The second part of Schneller’s vision statement was rather implicitly there, almost from the beginning, even though it has been formulated only recently “*Dass sie den Frieden leben lernen*”: “So that they may learn to live peace” – not “in” peace, and not a theory of peace, but very practically – living together in the boarding houses, as young people from very different backgrounds, Christian, Muslim, Druze, and Jewish. How many Jewish children indeed had been admitted to the Syrian Orphanage around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, this is something we have learned only in 2014, when we rediscovered the original registers of the Syrian Orphanage in the archives of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> The papers show very clearly that children of all religious

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<sup>1</sup> Ulrich Kadelbach, *Christliche Schulen im Nahen Osten – Orte der Friedenserziehung?*, in: Johannes Lähnemann (Hg.), *Weltreligionen und Friedenserziehung. Wege zur Toleranz. Schwerpunkt: Christentum – Islam. Referate und Ergebnisse des Nürnberger Forums 1988*, Rissen 1989, 248–259.

<sup>2</sup> Uwe Gräbe, *Die „Aufnahme-Hauptbücher des Syrischen Waisenhauses zu Jerusalem“ unter christlich-jüdisch-muslimischer Perspektive. Eine Entdeckung im Libanon*, in: Claudia Rammelt/Cornelia Schlarb/Egbert Schlarb (Hg.), *Begegnungen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart. Beiträge dialogischer Existenz. Eine freundschaftliche Festgabe zum 60. Geburtstag von Martin Tamcke*, Münster 2015, 267–271.

backgrounds shared the same facilities at the boarding houses, hence learning in a most natural way about the traditions and the respected values of the others. Hence, from the beginning, Schneller has been a space for empowerment and a place of encounter.

All of this came to an end in the 1940ies: After the outbreak of World War II, the British authorities in Palestine first sent the German staff to internment camps, and then established an army barracks inside the Syrian Orphanage. When the British Mandate ended in 1948, and the Israeli forces took over West Jerusalem, they just said thank you for the army barracks. In the “Luxemburg Agreements” of 1952/1953, the landed properties of the Syrian Orphanage, like those of other, similar institutions, became part of the reparations the German government agreed to pay to Israel. In return, the German government paid compensation to the original owners of those properties. This compensation was an important part of the seed money for establishing and building up the new Johann Ludwig Schneller School (JLSS) in Khirbet Kanafar after 1952, which started with a group of children who had made their way from the Syrian Orphanage, through its branch in Nazareth and the Lutheran school in Bethlehem, eventually into Lebanon. While on top of this investment, the Schneller institution in Lebanon had to rely heavily on private/church donations from Germany, the establishment of the Theodor Schneller School (TSS) in Jordan was a whole different story: By the end of the 1950ies, German economy had recovered in a way that the German Government could invest considerable amounts of money into the institution just outside Amman, which had been initiated by former Schneller students. After the laying of the cornerstone in 1959, this institution was built up over the years, until its opening shortly before the war of 1967.

While the new institutions in Lebanon and Jordan function according to the same vision and very similar structures as the original Syrian Orphanage, it is most interesting to note that three important changes took place during the first few decades of these new Schneller-Schools.

First: Whereas the Syrian Orphanage in Jerusalem was an entirely German endeavor, the new institutions in Jordan and Lebanon have been under the ownership of the local churches from the beginning. Already the first agreement<sup>3</sup> between the Evangelical Association for the Syrian Orphanage (which is today the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools, or EVS) and the National Evangelical Church of Beirut, signed by Pastor Hermann Schneller and Pastor Fareed Audeh

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<sup>3</sup> Original copy at the EMS Secretariat, Stuttgart.

in June 1952, stipulates that the land and the buildings of the new Johann Ludwig Schneller School shall be owned by the Church – which cannot sell or give it away – while the German Association will be running the institution. Similarly, and in absence of any other Protestant Church in Jordan at that time, the properties of the Theodor Schneller School were registered from the beginning as a Waqf of the Anglican Church.

Second: The following, very logical change took place in the 1980ies. While the schools had effectively been run by the German partners until then, the German directors and most of the German staff were withdrawn gradually at that time, putting the local churches into the driver's seat. This came practically at the same time when in Germany, the Evangelical Association for the Schneller Schools had been incorporated into the newly established Evangelical Mission in South-West Germany, today the Evangelical Mission in Solidarity, or EMS. From 1972 on, EVS had increasingly been defined as a "supporting association" for the Schneller Schools within EMS; a supporting association – and not a managing association anymore.

And third: In his article published in 1989, Ulrich Kadelbach remarked that the most important transformation, meanwhile, had taken part in the educational systems of most Middle Eastern countries. As opposed to the 1950ies, in a country like Jordan, general education through government schools, as well as vocational training, was now accessible to nearly everybody.<sup>4</sup> The response to this shift, however, according to Kadelbach, should not be a disengagement from the mission field, but rather a sharpening of the own profile, namely by stressing the aspect of *peace education*. This is when the second part of the aforementioned vision statement gained an utmost importance: "*Dass sie den Frieden leben lernen ...*" – And this leads me to my third point:

### 3 Present and Future Perspectives

So we find ourselves in a situation after several important shifts, which have not always been reflected upon thoroughly by all parties involved. In order to see where we stand and where we may be heading for, let us have a look at the main actors:

First, there is the German supporting association (EVS), which has become, for quite a while already, part of a larger international fellowship called "EMS"; a fellowship of which the local churches owning and running the schools are very active

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<sup>4</sup> Kadelbach, *Christliche Schulen*, 249s.

members as well. This association reaches out to thousands of donors, supporters and friends of the Schneller-ministry. It is absolutely vital for generating the resources the Schneller-work needs. At the same time, it cannot be denied that EVS as an association also harbours a spirit one may call a certain “Schneller nostalgia”. There is this deep and unexpressed conviction that the Schneller Schools are “our schools”, in a way. Sometimes, when I go lecturing about these institutions, I feel that what people like to hear most are the heart-warming stories about the old Swabian missionary who dedicated his life for the education of the poor and marginalized Arab children. People, who have visited the institution only once, with a tour group, suddenly come up with expert-studies on how to improve the boarding homes, how to develop the vocational training according to German standards, and how to implement a proper waste management. Retired teachers in Germany get in touch with me, asking whether they could go for a year or so, teaching at one of the Schneller Schools. Usually, this interest fades considerably, once I tell them that it would be helpful to know Arabic for this purpose.

*End of year celebration of the kindergarten of the Johann Ludwig Schneller School in Kirbet Kanafar/ Lebanon*



On one hand, one cannot but admire the dedication behind those conceptions and suggestions. On the other hand, whoever has read Edward Said’s seminal book “Orientalism”, may wonder whether those suggestions of our closest friends may be just another attempt – a friendly attempt of course – to mould a romantic Middle East according to a Western world-view.

Secondly, there are those in charge of the Schneller Schools locally: staff, church councils and board members. Some of the staff may enjoy the fun-factor whenever the German supporters implement something new at these schools – like all of the educational gardens (sense garden, Abrahamic garden, rope course and petting zoo) that have been built at the Theodor Schneller School in Jordan a cou-



ple of years ago. But they are well aware that these Germany supporters are coming and going, while the locals remain. Hence, if one project does not really fulfil the local needs, the next project will come for sure. The local church authorities may be more critical here. A few years ago, I was confronted with heavy criticism of our Jordanian partners towards what they perceived as our German ideas of “peace education”. This could be misunderstood, I was told, as a way of promoting peace with Israel. While I personally think that this wouldn’t be a bad idea at all, I totally understand that such a perception would harm our partner’s standing within the Middle Eastern societies. Hence, I agreed that it may be better, at least for a while, to speak about “nonviolent education”, instead of “peace education”. But then, there are those moments when local staff members even call my office in Stuttgart. This happens whenever something has gone wrong – like salaries not having been paid in time, or someone seemingly not having been treated in a just and fair way. In some of these moments, some staff members call us Germans to “reign in” and to make sure that things work like in the “good old times”. Whenever this occurs, I refer those staff members to their local boards, reminding them that the Schneller Schools are not German schools anymore.

A third very active group are the local Alumni associations of the Schneller Schools. Of course, and in a very similar way like EVS, these associations have a huge potential in generating support – spiritual as well as financial – for the institutions which are dear to them. And at the same time, they are very sensitive when it comes to changes within the very delicate fabric of these institutions. What I recently heard most from the Alumni, is their insistence that there should be more Christian students at the Schneller Schools. If we look into the figures, we may quickly discover that the Alumni may have a good point here: In 1983/1984, there were altogether 166 students at the boarding home of JLSS, out of which 111 were Christians, 32 Sunni, 21 Shia, and 2 Druze.<sup>5</sup> In 2018/2019, we have 264 students at JLSS altogether, out of which 172 are Sunni, 34 Shia, 7 Druze, and only 51 Christians. At the TSS in Jordan, the shift in numbers is even more drastic.

Certainly, these figures reflect a trend in the society. For sure, the percentage of Christians is lower today than 35 years ago – but not that much lower that it might justify such a huge shift in the composition of the students’ body. This development may rather reflect the fact that Schneller, first of all, caters to the poor and marginalized. Extreme poverty, however, is much more widespread in the Muslim

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<sup>5</sup> Kadelbach, *Christliche Schulen*, 252. Statistics according to religious groups only refer to the boarding house at that time, not to those attending only the academic school.

segments of the society than in the Christian segments. Should this lead us to deviate from the original purpose of the Schneller Schools, “*dass sie in Ehren ihr eigen Brot essen*”? I don’t think so. There is a sufficient number of schools in Lebanon and Jordan, catering to the elite; we don’t need to make Schneller another one.

This being said, let me draw some conclusions on how the different partners involved may cooperate best for the well-being of the schools which are dear to all of them:

First, it should be clear in a school partnership how the different partners define themselves. And in the best case, this should be pointed out in an official agreement or MoU. A local school supported by a German association is not the same as a German school. Of course, there is nothing bad with having German schools in the Middle East, like Talitha Kumi in Beit Jala, Palestine. In open societies, this is as normal as having American, French, and maybe someday: Lebanese schools in Germany. But once an institution has become a local one, this process should be accepted as irreversible. In the case of TSS in Jordan, the last agreement came into effect on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2014.<sup>6</sup> This agreement spends long paragraphs on describing just who EMS, EVS, TSS and the Church Council of the Episcopal Diocese are – before outlining how, in which numbers and on which questions they cooperate in the local board of the institution.

It should be noted that there is currently no updated agreement between German and Lebanese partners regarding the work of JLSS. Some efforts in the 1980ies to overhaul the 1952 agreement were not completed, due to the Lebanese war. This state of affairs might be non-problematic for the moment, because the current persons in charge know and understand each other well. In the long run and according to my humble opinion, however, it is absolutely crucial that a good agreement should be signed in order to avoid any misunderstandings in the future.

Second: Once a partner has been defined as a “supporting association”, it needs to be explained what the fields of support should be. From the background of the current Schneller-work, I would suggest the following:

1. “Regular” financial support: This is the most elementary part, of course. Long-standing associations with a noble past have the opportunity to reach out to a whole lot of donors, internationally. This way, EMS and EVS succeed to cover roughly half of the budget of JLSS, and about a third of the budget of TSS. In exceptional cases, they can raise funds above these regular contributions, like in the

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<sup>6</sup> Original copy at the EMS Secretariat, Stuttgart.

aftermath of the financial crisis which occurred when the Lebanese parliament had disproportionately increased the teacher's salaries, in 2017.

2. Spiritual support: It should be self-evident that the local and international partners share their life concerns and pray for each other.

3. Intellectual support: There is still a huge need to explain the Middle East to the West and the West to the Middle East. A school-partnership is a convenient setting out of which experts who are able to do this can grow.

4. Personnel support: International partners can offer places for internships and continuous education to the representatives of the schools, *when and if* those in charge of the schools ask for this kind of support. International partners can also send volunteers and experts as ecumenical co-workers for specific purposes defined in consultation of all sides involved.

5. Emergency support: Back in 2013, in the very specific situation of the war in Syria, representatives of two local Protestant churches invited their German partners to assist with an extraordinary school project inside Syria. This project has been defined as temporary, from the beginning, and it will end this summer. Even though an extraordinary situation can also reveal the shortcomings of such a project (and there have been quite a few), this kind of emergency support has helped to stabilize a considerable number of children and their families.

6. Last but not least, we should talk about a transformative support: In Germany, we have the concept of "subsidiarity": There are tasks which normally are within the clear responsibility of a government. But as long as there are stakeholders within the civil society who are able to perform these tasks better than the government could, then these tasks can and should be entrusted to exactly these stakeholders. This principle can certainly be applied to church schools in the Middle East, even more if these church schools are rooted in a solid international partnership. This way, institutions like TSS and JLSS should not fall into the trap of the above mentioned alternative between government schools with a terrible reputation, and private schools which are rather profitable business operations. The Schneller Schools do and always will offer very affordable, in some cases even free education to the most marginalized and most poor members of the society. Thereby, they are a laboratory of equal rights between men and women, of interreligious coexistence, and of democracy in a part of the world which is often associated with war, tyranny, and deep inequality.



*The Coptic-orthodox Bishop Anbar Damian in conversation with the head of Protestant Church of Germany (EKD) Heinrich Bedford-Strohm in Höxter*



*Students of the Protestant Faculty of the Ruhr-University of Bochum read stories about flight and expulsion commended by Monsignore Jihad Nassif, Homs/Syria*



## **Being Christians together? The Situation of Ecumenism in the Middle East An Institutional Perspective**

*Ephrem Ishac*

This paper attempts to trace back the ecumenical life in the Middle East from the past.<sup>1</sup> Being ruled under Muslims and pushing out the ecclesiology of various Churches from political arena; could help Church communities in the Middle East to emphasize on their spiritual identity and being less interfered by political powers to make decision in favor of rulers. Wars which caused atrocities could help Christians in the Middle East to understand their differences and focus on how to live together by establishing an ecumenical life out of necessity.

### **1 Introduction: Seeds of Ecumenism in the Middle East?**

Al-Arfadi, an author from Aleppo in the eleventh century, presents a remarkable theological treatise which reflects openness from his community or at least to report about how the city of Aleppo was a place of accepting theological differences

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is mainly taken from my research on the history of ecumenism in the Middle East with a special focus on the Syrian case, conducted at FSCIRE Foundation for Religious Studies – Bologna in 2018, to whom I am grateful to present some results here.

as diversity.<sup>2</sup> This positive understanding to the reality of variety in Church ecclesiology; rendering such diversity to linguistic or philosophical different interpretations, is interesting to notice at early period in the Middle East.

According to H. Teule, the thought of Al-Arfadi could pave the way to influence later Syriac Orthodox theologians like Barhebraeus († 1286).<sup>3</sup> The latter's book "The Dove" can be a clear example of how the ecumenical attitude could develop to treat theological differences as results of diverse linguistic interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Barhebraeus, in his book "The Dove", presents some excellent ecumenical recommendations to the monks and solitudes that they should not waste their energy by focusing only on the different linguistic interpretations to various theological terminologies. This is not surprising for his case, since he was a figure well known with friendships from other Churches in the regions he lived including Aleppo; especially by excellent relations with the Nestorian prelate Gewargis Warda (13th century).<sup>5</sup> Possibly it was the uniqueness of that age what is called today by the "Syriac Renaissance"<sup>6</sup> which was not only the revival of Syriac literature in the twelve until early fourteenth centuries but also could provide a distinguished ecumenical atmosphere where key Syriac authors could keep mutual understanding to their theological differences.<sup>7</sup> Although these relationships were not general and were not always confident of peaceful approaches to accept the differences of each other; however, it would be interesting to study the motives of cooperation among various religious groups in big cities like Aleppo which attracted Christian denominations including Latin Franks in addition to Muslim groups; how they could live with each other facing challenges but also finding paths to live together.

This previous account may help us to understand somehow the historical background for the ecumenical atmosphere in the Middle East, especially in Syria. In fact, Barhebraeus is quoted frequently in the ecumenical dialogues during the twentieth century to show an excellent historical evidence of ecumenical life in

<sup>2</sup> Herman G.B. Teule, "It Is Not Right to Call Ourselves Orthodox and the Others Heretics: Ecumenical Attitudes in the Jacobite Church in the Time of the Crusades", in: Krijnie Ciggaar/Herman Teule (ed.) *East and West in the Crusader States. Context – Contacts – Confrontations II*, Leuven 1999, 13–27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Hage, "Ecumenical Aspects of Barhebraeus' Christology", in: *The Harp* 4 (1991), 103–109.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Mengozzi, "Gewargis Warda", in: *GDESH* 2011, 176s. See also Anton Pritula, *The Warda: An East Syriac Hymnological Collection. Study and Critical Edition (GÖF.S 47)*, Wiesbaden 2015.

<sup>6</sup> The term of "Syriac Renaissance" was firstly used by Baumstark in: *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur mit Ausschluß der christlich-palästinensischen Texte*, Bonn 1922, 285s.

<sup>7</sup> Herman G.B. Teule/Carmen Fotesco Tauwinkel et al. (ed.), *The Syriac Renaissance*, Leuven 2010.

Syria. Often, ecumenical champions in Syria like Mor Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim<sup>8</sup> who had used the previous historical argument to present open ecumenical ideas in various dialogues, such as a famous quotation from Barhebaeus' book: "The Dove", which concludes that Christians can express differently many dogmatic terms, but they agree in the content:<sup>9</sup>

"After sufficient examination of the subject matter and careful contemplation, I was convinced that the conflict among Christians was not supported by facts, but rather only expressions and terminologies. They all believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is a full God and He is a full Man, without mixing or confusion of the two natures. As for the kind of union, some called it nature (*kyono*), and some called it hypostasis (*qnu-mo*), and some called it person (*parsupo*). Upon seeing all Christian nations united without suspicion, despite looking very different on the surface. Therefore, I cut off hatred from the bottom of my heart and dropped all doctrinal argument with people."

The previous examples can inform us at that, there was a sort of ecumenical communication among these Churches, who happened to be weakened in their homelands in the Middle East for complicated situations.

## 2 Christians in Millet System

The beginning of the sixteenth century marked the region with the victory of the Ottoman in Syria in 1516, which provided the region with political stability after a long time of chaos. This new situation offered to Christians under the developed *Millet* system a better atmosphere to survive.<sup>10</sup> However, because of indirect and direct persecutions in their region, the only solution for many Orthodox Christians

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim's "Nestorius in Syrian Orthodox Tradition. A Plea for Revision in the Light of Recent Research", in: Alfred Stirnemann/Gerhard Wilflinger (ed.), *Syriac Dialogue. Third Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syriac Tradition*, Vienna 1998, 56–67.

<sup>9</sup> Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, "The Reception, Perspectives and Consequences of the Results of the Dialogues from a Syrian Orthodox Perspective", in: Martin Tamcke/Dagmar Heller (ed.), *Was uns eint und was uns trennt. 5. theologische Konsultation zwischen der EKD und den Orientalisch-Orthodoxen Kirchen*, Münster 2005, 81s.

<sup>10</sup> The word *Millet* is a loan Arabic word to Ottoman Turkish which means generally "a nation". However, it was used technically about few recognized religious or ethnic groups in the Ottoman Empire.

was to join Catholicism as a reasonable compromise to change a faith identity, but in return to be protected by European support.

Ottoman *Millet* System was updated over time until reaching its summit in nineteenth century while announcing the new regulations of known as the *Tanzimat* (1839–1876).<sup>11</sup> But just prior to this period, the Catholics suffered from persecution when Sultan Mahmud II (1808–1839) banned all Catholic missionaries from Rome inside the Ottoman territories, since they were suspected politically. Syriac Catholics were officially under the Armenian Catholic Church administration in the Ottoman Empire, which made them suffer later when Armenians were treated as traitors.<sup>12</sup> Many Armenians and Syriac Catholics were killed or forced to change their religions in 1817. After the military defeat for the Ottomans in 1820, European diplomacy intervened to protect Catholics inside the Ottoman Empire.<sup>13</sup>

The end of the nineteenth century is marked by the massacres which targeted Armenian and Syrians in 1895, caused massive killing and migration. That chaotic situation in targeting Christians, which was accompanied later during the First World War by accusing Christians of conspiracy with enemies, caused even worse massacres against Christians in general, especially in 1915.

### 3 Ecumenism in the Middle East during 20th Century: The Syrian Example

By the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, the new independent republic of Syria marked a new atmosphere of living together under the umbrella of citizenship concepts. The French mandate had finally left Syria in 1946, which meant that the main supporting power for Uniate Catholics had gone, even with suspicious credibility about their loyalty to new Syria. This new condition could pave the road toward a need to strengthen ecumenical relations among Church leaders. In the diary of the former Syriac Archbishop of Aleppo Gerges qas Behnam, we can find many examples about ecumenical visits between Patriarch Barsoum and Cardinal

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<sup>11</sup> For more details about the function of Ottoman Millet system, see: Benjamin Trigona-Harany, *The Ottoman Suryani from 1908 to 1914*, New Jersey 2009, 77–111.

<sup>12</sup> For a general overview about Catholic Churches in the Ottoman Middle East, see: John Joseph, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East. The Case of the Jacobites in an Age of Transition*, New York 1983, 29–55.

<sup>13</sup> For example, to read about the relations between French diplomats in Aleppo, see: Hussein I. El-Mudarris/Olivier Salmon, *Le Consulat de France à Alep au XVIIe siècle*. *Journal de Louis Gédoyen, Vie de François Picquet, Mémoires de Laurent d'Arvieux*, Aleppo 2009.



Tappuni already taking place in 1949.<sup>14</sup> This will be developed even to reach common liturgical celebrations between the Syriac Catholic and Orthodox in Aleppo in 1973.<sup>15</sup> When the Baath party started to rule the country in March of 1962, many Christians in Aleppo lost factories, schools and farms. Relatively speaking, Orthodox institutions were less affected by the new socialist political life.

Regardless to its political agenda, the Syrian Baath regime could successfully install Christian religious curriculum done by “an ecumenical committee” at the ministry of education. This could help to create a Christian generation, who believe more or less in the same the Christian dogmas and considering the differences between the churches are just cultural and linguistic. Even more, according to Hinnebusch, the Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad was regarded by Islamic politicians of Al-Ikhwan as a betrayer of the Islamic nation by his support and intervention in Lebanon in 1976 to defend the Christian Maronite Catholic rightists from Palestinian militias.<sup>16</sup> This questioned al-Asad’s credibility in the eyes of Sunni Muslims but could admire unofficially Syrian and Lebanese Christians at that time. This might explain why Syrian Christians felt free to express their trauma of speaking out about Sayfo which could bring them together ecumenically.

We can notice also the outcomes of this experience by the contemporary Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Church leaders who would not find a dogmatic serious problem among each other. On the contrary, while raising the issue the commemorating the Sayfo genocide, both Church Patriarchs had to co-organize symposia, official celebrations, some political statements etc., which show their agreement that are both with their people the survival of Syafo, who were forced to move out of their homelands in South East of Turkey to face a new reality.

As Noriko Sato would argue: “The memory of the Sayfo has been a part of the process that the Syriac Orthodox Christians use in order to construct their identity and to be acknowledged as Syrian citizens.”<sup>17</sup> So as she could find out in her research about the Syriac Christians in North Syria, who are the second generation of

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<sup>14</sup> Mor Gregorios Yohannah Ibrahim (ed.), *My Diary: Mar Dionysios Georgios Al-Qas Behnam Metropolitan of Aleppo 1912–1992*, Aleppo 1998, 67.

<sup>15</sup> This liturgy happened after dedicating the year 1973 in Aleppo to celebrate 1600 years after St. Ephrem’s departure. The two Syriac Churches in Aleppo founded “The Mutual Syriac Committee” to organize one-year programme. This committee continued some ecumenical relations focusing on Syriac culture in Aleppo. For photos and some information about this ecumenical liturgy in 1973 (see: [www.sycata.com/index.php?id=4142](http://www.sycata.com/index.php?id=4142)).

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria Revolution from above*, London-New York 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Noriko Sato, “The Memory of Sayfo and its Relation to the Identity of Contemporary Assyrian/Aramean Christians in Syria”, in: *Sayfo 1915. An International Conference on the Genocide of Assyrians/Arameans during the First World War*, Berlin 2015 (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 50), Piscataway/NJ 2018, 307.

refugees who moved to Syria after 1915, that their commemoration of Sayfo or constructing their identity with Sayfo is not to give an explanation about the reason of their moving to Syria from their homeland but it is an attempt to distinguish themselves from the surrounding Kurds by emphasizing on a Christian identity. Sato states that “the Baathist regime acknowledges that Syrian citizens embrace different religious, tribal, class, and local identities. Yet the regime does not want to concede the political rights of those who are not Arabs.”<sup>18</sup>

Sato argues also that “The memory of the Sayfo provides the Syriac Orthodox Christians with the strong sense of their religious identity, which also contributes to merging them into Syrian society.”<sup>19</sup> The emergence of this religious marker of the Syriac identity based on Sayfo memory developed as well the awareness of being one with Catholics in such a memory. This could help then as well to distinguish themselves from the “others” who are Kurds in the case of the Jazeera region. Sato could find in her research that: “Such narratives make these Christians confirm that they are authentic members of the Syrian society as their religion proves. Their religion can trace its origin back to ancient Syria and their liturgical language, Syriac, is a remnant of ancient Aramaic, which is an ancient language of Syria, and which many spoke in pre-Islamic Syria.”<sup>20</sup> The memory of Sayfo could enable Syriac Christians Orthodox and Catholics to establish their existence in Syria from the shared departure point.

In Aleppo the Syriac refugees who were forced to leave their homes in Edessa and settle in a wooden camp; could live as one group regardless to their Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant diversity. In fact, this could help them at the beginning in 1924 to share some of the humanitarian aids which were sent to either confessional group. Strikingly, all these refugees had agreed to forget the questions of what really happened in Edessa (Urfa) during the Sayfo period, and just focusing on how their life was a real challenge when they had arrived Aleppo in 1924. This Urfali community could construct their memory by focusing on the accomplishment of building their new church in Aleppo after the name of St George, which was the name of one of their two churches in Urfa. This success could conceal the pain of converting some of some to Catholicism, which caused a bitter pain among the community because of proselytism. Sato in her dissertation could discover that “In a bid to resolve their isolation and economic problems, in the 1920s and 1930s, many Urfalli Syrian Orthodox Christians converted to Catholicism supported by

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<sup>18</sup> Sato, *Memory of Sayfo*, 308.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

the French Mandate in order to get food and assistance. Contemporary Urfallis do not mention that they or their family members became Catholics then in order to obtain flour and scholarships for their children. Thus, hidden parts of their history emerge only when some community members mention their own or families' contribution to welfare. Such narratives suggest that around seventy-five percent of the community converted temporarily to Catholicism. In their narratives, contemporary Urfallis maintain that the Catholic Church gave food and money to poor Urfallis in exchange for handing over their identity cards to Catholic priests.<sup>21</sup> We know many proverbs in this community how humanitarian aids were monopolized by Catholic clerics in order to join their side "They ironically rhyme: 'No more flour, no more [Catholic] religion (Oum bitti Din bith)'"<sup>22</sup> as it was the case in the Syriac Christians in Jazeera, but this had to stop by the departure of the French mandate and reaching the new Republic of Syria, especially under the Bath rulers, who would focus on loyalty to the state rather than religious confessions. Therefore, their accomplishment of building a new big church despite their financial challenges could strengthen them to forget the past and heal the pain to focus of living together in one neighborhood sharing culture and destiny regardless to their confessional identities.

#### 4 Vaticanum II & Pro-Oriente Ecumenical Foundation

After Vaticanum II (1958–1963), we see the emergence of an ecumenical initiative in Austria by the Catholic Cardinal König who initiated the Foundation of Pro-Oriente in 1964.<sup>23</sup> Participants in Pro-Oriente consultations, who were mainly from Catholic and Orthodox Church leaders, could establish serious ecumenical relationships while coming back to the Middle East. The mission of Pro-Oriente was stated as: "Promoting academic research, publications and all kinds of contacts that may contribute to a better knowledge of the East, especially with a view to serving the cause of a better understanding between Christians of the East and of the West."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Noriko Sato, *Memory and Social Identity among Syrian Orthodox Christians*, PhD thesis, University of Durham 2001, 92s.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 94.

<sup>23</sup> For further information on the history of Pro-Oriente, see: Andreas Schmoller, "Ecumenical Engagement with Eastern Minority Churches in Muslim States. Pro Oriente's Encounters and Legacies in Syria and Egypt", in: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 30 (2019), 195-209.

<sup>24</sup> See for example: Franz Cardinal König's Preamble in *The Vienna Dialogue: Five Pro Oriente Consultations with Oriental Orthodox communiqués and Common Declarations*, Booklet 1, Vien-

In fact, many of participants for these non-official meetings were hierarchies leading their Churches from major cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. Whether it was on purpose by the organizers of Pro-Oriente or it was just because those leaders were influential representatives by their churches; it was a wise decision, since when they came back home after those ecumenical meetings, Church leaders could meet regularly to discuss some ecumenical issues at the Churches publicly, which contributed to enlarge the ecumenical arena.

Pro-Oriente adopted consultations dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and Oriental Orthodox Churches as the first attempt to speak about the major theological differences after the schism; thus, in 1971, 1973, 1976, 1978 and 1988, Vienna received theologians to discuss these controversies. The result was to reach Vienna Christological Formula, which was used later for the official dialogue among these Churches, such as the historical declaration between Pope Paul VI and the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Mor Ignatius Jacob III in 1971<sup>25</sup>, which paved the road toward the most essential agreement including sacramental communion between these two Churches which was done in 1984 signed by Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Mor Ignatius Zakka I.<sup>26</sup>

Another example of Pro-Oriente's ecumenical achievement was the common declarations between two Popes of Rome: Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II with the Coptic Pope Shenouda III in 1973 and in 1979.<sup>27</sup> But it was in 1998 when the Sixth Pro-Oriente Consultation of Chicago had to talk about the theology of Nestorius and Theodore of Mopsuestia, which marked the end of Pro-Oriente unofficial dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the family of Oriental Orthodox Churches. Nevertheless, after this end, a new ecumenical initiative appeared in the Middle East to form a new dialogue but this time among the Oriental Orthodox Churches alone, as one family.

## 5 The World Council of Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the Middle East

Since the Middle East is the region of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Patriarchates; thus, it is useful to study carefully the background of the "Oriental Ortho-

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na 1984, 5.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Hofrichter/Johann Marte (ed.), *Documents on Unity of Faith between the Oriental Orthodox Churches and the Catholic Church*, Innsbruck 2013, 23s.

<sup>26</sup> Hofrichter/Marte, *Documents*, 35–38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25–34.

dox” term and how this name could help to bring together the two Antiochene Orthodox Patriarchates to declare a historical document in 1991.

The term “Oriental Orthodox” emerged with the ecumenical developments around World Council of Churches (WCC). Although each Oriental Church used to call herself “Orthodox”; however, the term “Oriental” was just used to distinguish Chalcedonian from non-Chalcedonian Churches while meeting together in the WCC assemblies. Therefore, by using the terminology of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church families, could facilitate the ecumenical relationships inside WCC from one side but also could influence to create a new Oriental Orthodox identity. In addition to the Council of Addis Ababa in 1965 (which was in the vision of WCC), other factors could also contribute to the rise of the Oriental Churches identity. Since the largest part of the Oriental Orthodox family is located in the Middle East, so the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC) and other geographical realities could also help these Churches to meet regularly and declare agreements to express their unified attitude in certain political circumstances in the region.<sup>28</sup>

Historically speaking, Chalcedonian Churches saw the Oriental Churches as “schismatic”, and in most cases worst as heretical. Since “It is a well-known technique of polemics to attribute the opponent opinions which he does not hold by associating him with more extreme positions than the ones to which he belongs thus socialists are portrayed as communists, and conservatives as fascists, and so on.”<sup>29</sup> The Oriental Churches were designated as “Monophysite” in order to be confused with the heresy of “Eutyches”, but the Oriental Churches always rejected this derogatory term. The term “Miaphysite” would be more appropriate for the Oriental Churches because they “continued to consider the Cyrillian formula *mia physis tou Theou Logou sesarkomene* as the best way of expressing the Christological mystery.”<sup>30</sup> There are other terms as well like “Jacobites” to imply that those Churches do not go back to the Apostolic Church but they are originated by Jacob Baradeus, a sixth-century Syriac Orthodox bishop of Edessa who “against the wishes of the Roman Emperor, managed to ordain large numbers of Syrian Orthodox clergy.”<sup>31</sup> Theologically speaking, it is not easy to judge which side was right or not. The Chalcedonian definition “two natures in one hypostasis” did not satisfy the

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<sup>28</sup> We notice that regimes in the Middle East had to influence some ecclesiastical decisions.

<sup>29</sup> Sebastian P. Brock/David G.K. Taylor/Witold Witakowski (ed.), *The Hidden Pearl. The Syrian Orthodox Church and its Ancient Aramaic Heritage III*, Rome 2001, 26.

<sup>30</sup> John Meyendorff, *Unofficial Consultation between Theologians of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Massachusetts 1965, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Brock/Taylor/Witakowski, *Hidden Pearl*.

Oriental Orthodox Churches. The problem lays in the different understanding to the word “nature, φύσις, **طبيعه**” which was very close in sense to “hypostasis, ὑπόστασις, **شخصه**.” and so “in two natures” is seen to imply a split personality in Christ, a divine individual and a human individual.”<sup>32</sup>

The Oriental Orthodox Churches started this term officially during January 1965 in Addis Ababa, when the five Oriental Churches gathered to announce their first meeting as one family. The Heads of these churches held the council following the way of the Ecumenical Councils. The Ethiopian Emperor invited the Oriental Churches like the same way when the Roman emperors used to call for the Ecumenical Councils. Moreover, the Council called the Ethiopian Emperor as “the Defender of Faith” in the first resolution of the Conference.<sup>33</sup> Emperor Haile Sellassie I opened the council by the blessings of the Heads of the Churches. The Faith and Order Committee from the World Council of Churches (WCC) had made a great effort in preparing for this historical Oriental Orthodox meeting. Two secretaries came especially from Geneva to help preparing the Council. The heads extended their gratitude to the World Council of Churches.<sup>34</sup> For them, it was the most important event after Chalcedon!

The five Oriental Churches who participated in the conference were the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria, the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch and all the East, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchates, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, and the Syrian Orthodox Church of India.<sup>35</sup> One of the problems which faced the Conference was that the Armenian Church did not participate fully because of internal administrative difficulties. That was why the Armenian Church represented as an observer but did not sign the decisions of the Conference.<sup>36</sup> In other words, in this meeting they “proclaimed their unity of faith and discussed the following topics: the challenges of the modern world; co-operation in theological education and evangelism; peace and justice; and their relationship with other Churches”<sup>37</sup> especially “with the Orthodox Church as the first step to Christian Unity.”<sup>38</sup> This final agreement focused on the priority of unity. Because of many

<sup>32</sup> Brock/Taylor/Witakowski, *Hidden Pearl*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> The Oriental Orthodox Churches Addis Ababa Conference, January 1965, Addis Ababa 1965, 115.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 133–135.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Christine Chaillot/Alexander Belopopsky (ed.), *Towards Unity. The Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Geneva 1998, 18.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

divisions in the Christian world, participants of the meeting agreed to categorize the Church families as: Eastern Orthodox Churches,<sup>39</sup> the Roman Catholic Church<sup>40</sup> with clear indication to the remarkable ecumenical progress after Vaticanum II,<sup>41</sup> and the non-Orthodox Churches members of the WCC.

In connection with the development of the ecumenical movement, the meeting expressed a full respect to the efforts of WCC as a fruit of this unique ecumenical movement by presenting good opportunities of meeting in Church fellowship.<sup>42</sup>

### 5.1 Using the Term among Eastern Orthodox Churches

Gradually the term of “Oriental Orthodox family” started to be used and adopted in other ecumenical meetings such as at the Eastern Orthodoxy meeting in Chambasy 1968, where we notice that the Eastern Orthodox Family appointed a preparatory commission for dialogue with the Oriental Churches.<sup>43</sup> Already since 1960s, there are unofficial meetings between the Eastern Orthodox and the Oriental Orthodox Churches in the commission of Faith and Order. At the first unofficial consultation in Aarhus in August 1964, the agreed statement expressed the mutual desire between the two families to know each other in order to restore unity. The statement cited this desire from the Eastern Orthodox Conference of 1961 in Rhodos. In Aarhus, theologians focused on theological controversies which put barriers on the way of unity. However, in their statement, theologians reached the following result: On the essence of the Christological dogma we found ourselves in full agreement. Through the different terminologies used by each side, we saw the same truth expressed.<sup>44</sup>

The second unofficial consultation was in Bristol, England 1967. Theologians assured that those who speak in terms of “two” do not divide; and those who speak in terms of “one” do not confuse. However, they considered that some questions need further study before the full communion with the Churches.<sup>45</sup> At the third unofficial consultation, theologians met in Geneva in August 1970, to declare the reaffirmation of the previous agreement regarding the Christological mutual under-

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<sup>39</sup> Addis Ababa Conference, 109.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New York 1988, 452.

<sup>42</sup> Addis Ababa Conference, 111.

<sup>43</sup> Chaillot/Belopopsky *Towards Unity*, 31.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 48: First Unofficial Consultation Agreed Statement.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 49s: Second Unofficial Consultation Agreed Statement.

standing. However, there were some differences regarding the ecclesiological issues, number of the ecumenical Councils that each family confessed and about the fathers of one family who were anathematized in the other family. In a way, this meeting put practical steps toward the unity, such as, encouraging students from the two families to study in both seminaries.<sup>46</sup> The last unofficial consultation was in Addis Ababa in 1971. Theologians discussed here the issue of lifting anathemas and recognition of Saints. These meetings led to significant official agreements. The last one was in Chambesy in November 1993 when official representatives of the two families met to consider the procedure for the restoration of full communion.<sup>47</sup>

These theological developments between the Oriental and Orthodox Churches could be reflected in Syria to reach a serious mutual statement by the two Antiochians Orthodox Patriarchates. In November 1991 both Patriarchates agreed that their Synods in Damascus had announced publicly the good news of a better understanding between their Churches especially since they share similar authentic Oriental heritage. This delectation reaches even to a pastoral mutual care between the Orthodox in Syria: “If bishops of the two Churches participate at a holy baptism or funeral service, the one belonging to the Church of the baptized or deceased will preside. In case of a holy matrimony service, the bishop of the bridegroom’s Church will preside [...] In localities where there is only one priest from either Church he will celebrate services for the faithful of both Churches including the Divine Liturgy, Pastoral duties and holy matrimony. He will keep an independent record for each Church and transmit that of the sister Church to its authorities. If a bishop from one Church and a priest from the sister Church happen to concelebrate a service, the first will preside even when it is the priest’s parish.”<sup>48</sup> Although the statement could not reach to a concelebration of liturgy between the clerics of the two Churches, since this would mean a full communion, which cannot be done without an Ecumenical or Pan-Orthodoxy Synod; nevertheless, this statement is considered pioneering ecumenically, which only could happen in Syria! Even this statement was heavily criticised by few Orthodox Churches and caused some pastoral conflicts among the Eastern Orthodox Churches in diaspora; however, Antiochian Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches were always proud of reaching this ecumenical development which they need it in Syria.

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<sup>46</sup> Chaillot/Belopopsky Towards Unity, 51–53: Third Unofficial Consultation Agreed Statement.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 67: Theological Dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

<sup>48</sup> Christine Chaillot (ed.), *The Dialogue between Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches*, Volos 2016, 455.



## 5.2 Using the Term by the Roman Catholic Church

From the Catholic side, the rise of the ecumenical movement also played an active progress to the modern identity of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Once again, an unofficial dialogue also played an important role in the relationship between the Oriental and the Catholic Church. In three years, three Oriental Heads of Churches visited Rome: Catholicos of Etchmiadzin in May 1970, Patriarch of Antioch in October 1971, and Patriarch of Alexandria in May 1973. All of them tried their best to find new means for better relations between them and Rome. When the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch visited Pope Paul VI at the Vatican, both the Pope and the Patriarch stated that the faith of their respective Churches in the incarnate God is one and without dispute. During the visit of Pope John Paul II to St. George Syrian Orthodox Patriarchal Cathedral in Damascus on May 6th 2001, the Pope declared the close relationship between the two churches from the first visit of the Syrian Patriarch to Rome 1971:

“With fraternal affection, I greet His Holiness Moran Mor Ignatius Zakka II was, whose guests we are in this magnificent cathedral. I am especially pleased to be able to return the visits made to Rome by Your Holiness and your predecessor Moran Mor Ignatius Jacob III [...] Your Holiness the marked ecumenical openness of your Church is a source of deep joy to many, and an encouragement to move steadily along the path toward full communion (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 62-63)”<sup>49</sup>

The background of these common declarations is the Foundation of Pro-Oriente as we discussed previously in this paper. The relationship with the Catholic Church and the Oriental Churches goes back to the Council of Vatican II 1962 when the churches sent observers to attend all the sessions. Since that time and after the distinguished efforts of Pro Oriente, a new official dialogue started to meet regularly between the Roman Catholic Church with the Oriental Orthodox family. In the last official dialogue in Rome January 28–31 2019, the challenges in the Middle East were among the burning issues to discuss during the meetings.

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<sup>49</sup> Journal of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East 204–206, Damascus 2001, 233.

### 5.3 The Middle East Council of Churches Adopts the Term

Since three of the Oriental Churches are in the Middle East so *de facto* the Churches became members in MECC. The council categorizes the Churches in the Middle East into families including the Oriental Orthodox family. The Council welcomed the opportunity initiated by the Heads of the Oriental Churches to meet regularly. Every year, the three Heads, of Alexandria, Antioch, and Armenia meet to discuss the different issues. In their Common Declaration at the 10th meeting, which took place at the Syrian Patriarchate, Damascus 2007. They declare their unity in faith and discuss different current issues, like the critical political situations in the Middle East after Iraqi war:

“We focused our attention on Iraq which is exposed to the destructive activities of evil forces. This prevailing critical situation obliges a great numbers of people, both Muslims and Christians, to emigrate from their homeland. We encourage the United Nations (UN) and all the humanitarian organizations to support the suffering people of Iraq, wherever they are, till the Lord gives their country security and stability.”<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the specific circumstances in the Middle East led the heads of the Oriental Churches to meet for presenting an official statement regarding new challenges.

Moreover, we notice that MECC had always welcomed local ecumenical initiatives in Syria, such as Council of the Churches in Aleppo, which commits with regular meetings among the heads of the Churches in Aleppo to discuss ecumenical activities and to draw an ecumenical vision through many local programmes. Furthermore, we notice that MECC could inspire some ecumenical departments in Syria, such as the Department of Ecumenical Relations and Development (DERD), founded in 1994 by the Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius IV and Office of Ecumenical Relations in Aleppo, founded in 2009 by the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo Mor Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim.

Their 12th meeting took place at Atchaneh/Lebanon at the new Syriac Orthodox patriarchal residence in June 21st 2018. This was a historical moment, since after concelebrating the Divine liturgy together for the first time in history, the

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<sup>50</sup> Journal of the Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and all the East 264–270, Damascus 2007, 174f.

three Oriental Orthodox Patriarchs consecrated together the new patriarchal Church after the name of Mor Severus of Antioch († 538) which for the Armenian Church, his theology is controversial.<sup>51</sup> The Armenian Orthodox Catholicos Aram I, says in the consecration event that his participation comes after: “centuries of misunderstanding about Mor Severus; His Holiness [Aram] expressed that he looks forward for further researches and studies that will make clear the life and teachings of Mor Severus for the Armenian Orthodox Church, and makes sure that this great Saint will always be the Saint of the all the Oriental Orthodox Churches.”<sup>52</sup>

After this historical meeting, they released a common declaration signed by the three Oriental Orthodox Churches (Tawadros II, Aram I, Aphrem II).

The most recent meeting between the Coptic and Syriac Orthodox Patriarchs was in Cairo on 30th January 2019, both Patriarchs insisted on being faithful to the life of coexistence in the Middle East and believing that it is an essential part of their spiritual message through the dialogue of life in their historical homelands.

Many factors played important roles in the rise of the modern “Oriental Orthodox” identity. The spirit of the ecumenical movement that came from WCC was the spark for the Council of Addis Ababa in 1965, the most important event in the modern history for the Oriental Orthodox Churches. Opening the door of dialogue with other Churches requires the necessity of assembling in one family. The beginning of dialogue with the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches helped the development of the “Oriental” Orthodox identity. Moreover, the geographical location presents more opportunities to flourish the relationships between the Oriental Churches under the umbrella of the Middle East Council of Churches.

## 6 WCC & MECC Ecumenical Efforts in Syria

Possibly, one of the greatest international ecumenical projects which influenced positively the ecumenical relations in Syria was the involvement of WCC. Although the Catholic Church was never an official member in WCC, but in the Middle East the Oriental Catholic Churches joined in 1990 MECC which is somehow similar to WCC at least in the idea of Christian fellowship and in matter of its administration. MECC started in 1974 as an evangelical initiative to bring a

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<sup>51</sup> <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2018/06/twelfth-meeting-of-the-heads-of-oriental-orthodox-churches-in-the-middle-east-at-chaneh/>.

<sup>52</sup> <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2018/06/consecration-of-mor-severus-patriarchal-church-in-the-new-patriarchal-residence-at-chaneh/>.

fellowship with the Oriental and Eastern Orthodox Churches in the Middle East, focusing on Antioch as the first place to be called Christians and to witness their faith in the cradle of Christianity. In Syria, where religious parties were forbidden, Christians could find the board and offices of MECC gave an exceptional opportunity to express Christians political ideas while dealing with the critical topics.

It is interesting to feel that there is a kind of confusion between the concepts of ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue in the vision of MECC (For example, we read in the official mission: MECC is the tangible expression of the Christian presence in the region and works to unify the visions and attitudes among the churches, especially in issues related to Christian presence & witness in the Middle East as well as the topic of Muslim-Christian dialogue).<sup>53</sup> This is not surprising since the mother of MECC is possibly the Near East Christian Council (NECC). The latter was not based on a prior foundation but still stranded in half way between national and regional body.<sup>54</sup> According to Dr. Riad Jarjour, the former general secretary of MECC: “Some Protestant church leaders speaking of the first step in formation of the ecumenical movement, and particularly the Middle East Council of Churches, go back to historically to the world missionary conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. They (late Rev. Dr Hovannes Ahronian, MECC President), believe the Edinburgh conference had the decisive action in promoting modern ecumenism, and specially in world mission movements that came later to the Middle East in 1924, the first missionary movement was held in Jerusalem under the name Council of west Asia and North Africa.”<sup>55</sup> The constitution of NECC was planned in 1927; in 1929 it was announced and named officially.<sup>56</sup> But we should keep in mind, that it was a result of cooperation between the national evangelical councils and the Christian Literature Committee for Muslims (which was the outcome of Jerusalem conference in 1924). One of the main weaknesses of NECC that its leadership came mainly from foreign evangelical missionaries which challenged its ecumenical agenda in the Middle East where traditional Churches are mainly Orthodox. Possibly this challenge even continued later in MECC which led to some crucial challenges. NECC had a focus on the missionaries’ relations with Muslims. Many

<sup>53</sup> See for example principle No. 8 in the statement of “The International and Ecumenical Conference Christian Presence and Witness in the Middle East” between WCC and MECC in May 2013, Lebanon.

<sup>54</sup> Harold E. Fey (ed.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement II. 1948–1968*, London 1993, 79.

<sup>55</sup> Riad Jarjour, *Communication and Ecumenism. A Middle East Perspective*, 2007 ([www.fgcd.org/articles-details.php?id=21](http://www.fgcd.org/articles-details.php?id=21)).

<sup>56</sup> To read more about MECC in a broader framework, see: George Sabra “الإنجيلية والمسكونية في الشرق الأوسط” in: *نحو لاهوت عربي معاصر* Cairo 2007, 449–486.

workshops were organized to train Christians in the Middle East about the “the Art of being a minority”. Harry Dorman<sup>57</sup> wrote about the challenge of integrating WCC and NECC in the Middle East where authentic historical Christianity is still present. So, the NECC had to change goals and approaches of how to reach those ancient Churches. The first step was to promote the concept of “Christian fellowship” to win those ancient Churches by encouraging them to share their spiritual heritage. In 1964 the NECC changed its name to become “The Near East Council of Churches”.<sup>58</sup> It is interesting to notice that until 1964 only the Syriac Orthodox Church was the pioneer to send a delegation to the NECC. The political development in the region, especially the rise of the Israeli-Arab conflict with its refugees’ crisis encouraged other Orthodox, Catholic Churches to cooperate for serving refugees according to the NECC concept of fellowship. The birth of MECC in 1974 promoted the ecumenical fellowship concepts among Church leaders and members in the Middle East. Many workshops and lectures could raise the ecumenical awareness among Christians in Syria. This could contribute to create a fertile atmosphere to flourish ecumenical events, which encouraged international ecumenical movements to examine this successful experience. In January 1995, Mar Gregorios Youhannah Ibrahim hosted at his diocese in Aleppo, a meeting for Faith and Order from WCC. In his welcoming speech, we can realize how this city was distinguished in terms of ecumenical relations, and how proud was the bishop to share with WCC:

“Ecumenism has found a place in every corner of each of the eleven different Christian denominations of this city [Aleppo]. We have six different Catholic Churches, which are members of the same body, but under the jurisdiction of different heads. They live in harmony because they all share the same doctrines and articles of faith. There are three different Orthodox Churches with three bishops and three liturgical rites and languages. They are Armenians, Greeks and Syrians. There are also two Evangelical Churches: Arabs and Armenians.

To give you an idea of the way ecumenism works in Aleppo, I will mention the following:

- A monthly meeting of the bishops and church leaders to discuss issues of common interest.

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<sup>57</sup> Harry Dorman, *Churches and Missions in the Near East*, in: *International Review of Missions* 1962, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Fey, *History*, 81.

- The participants of all Christians in each other's sacramental celebrations (Baptism and Marriage) and liturgical services (funerals).
- Common programmes for biblical studies, and mixed biblical studies.
- Mixed work and youth camps.”<sup>59</sup>

Because of financial issues and other internal ecclesial conflicts which are beyond the scope of this paper, MECC had to terminate some programmes in 2008<sup>60</sup>. Some gaps in the administration of the Council led to a serious conflict especially between the Patriarchate of Jerusalem and the Coptic Orthodox Church in April 2010. The latter even announced her withdrawal from MECC, but a reconciliation could happen after a mediation by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch. It was a big task to reactivate MECC in 2012 because of the serious challenges which threatened to continue the life of this peculiar ecumenical initiative. In 2016, the political situation after the “Arab Spring” had to be one of the main topics at the agenda of the MECC bi-annual meetings. We notice a repeated emphasis on setting out concepts such as “citizenships” and “human dignity” to build bridges between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East.

In January 2018, MECC elected a new General Secretary from the Catholic Family; Dr Souraya Bachealany, who is the first woman to take this leading position in MECC! In her first interview, she announced that in her agenda there are various files especially the focus on a common Easter day for Christians in the Middle East. She is also concerned with active participation of MECC in peace making projects.<sup>61</sup> In her speech at Bologna in October 2018, she expressed the mission of MECC to speak on behalf of Christians in the Middle East in international levels, during the ongoing wars which threaten the existence of Christianity in countries like Syria and Iraq. She says: “We want to be the voice of the voiceless, of those who swallow their tears, as Pope Francis said, in a devastated and agonizing Middle East, tyrannized by Money and Power, and War.” Obviously, the Iraqi conflict since 2003 could lead to lose majority of Iraqi Christians who had to immigrate to the West; since 2010 with the ongoing Syrian war, at least one third of the Syrian Christians had left as well.

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<sup>59</sup> Commission on Faith and Order. Minutes of the Meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission January 1995 Aleppo, Syria, Faith and Order Paper No. 170, Geneva 1995, 4.

<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, the archive of MECC was exposed to serious dangers of damage during the Lebanese war and other difficulties which left many important documents in boxes. Today with the new vision of MECC, there is a priority to revive the archive, so it can be open for scholarly access. Until today, the archive is not accessible for scholarly purpose.

<sup>61</sup> [www.annahar.com/article/743730](http://www.annahar.com/article/743730).

In the last Executive Committee of MECC which took place in January 2019 at the new Syriac Orthodox patriarchal residence of Atchaneh-Lebanon, His Holiness Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, emphasized in the inaugural session “that Christians should always seek peaceful coexistence with other components of the societies. His Holiness considered that Christian leaders should meet continuously and unify efforts against extremism and terrorism.”<sup>62</sup> This is just an example about the worry of MECC and Church leaders in the Middle East regarding the current political situation in the region which concerned their historical existence.

## 7 Easter: One Common Day?

Under the patronage of WCC and MECC, the Syriac Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo hosted in March 5th-10th 1997 a conference to discuss the issue of the Easter date. The conference included specialized scholars and representatives of various Church families (Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Old Catholic, Adventist and Pentecostal). Participants had expressed at the opening sessions, the sad reality of the Church schisms in history; they mentioned that one of the major issues which separated Churches was celebrating Easter according to different dates. They were happy to meet in order to study critically this issue and feeling the responsibility of the achieving a united day of Easter. They agreed to begin from the Nicaean Council decision as a starting point; so to continue the principle of choosing the first Sunday after the spring.

After the consultation, participants proposed a new calculation list to the coming years to be followed by the Churches as a new unified calendar. At the end of this ecumenical academic conference, there was a public presentation to the new recommendation attended by the hierarchies of Aleppo. Almost every Church leader announced to the public that his Church has no problem to agree on one suggested day if the other Churches agree. The only exception was the Greek-Antiochian Metropolitan of Aleppo who was clear that for the Eastern Orthodox Church, it is very difficult to reach such a decision since the Orthodox heads could not reach yet to a decision of meeting altogether (Pan-Orthodoxy), so it was very early to discuss officially the one Easter Day. In fact, the Ecumenical Patriarchate with the other Orthodox Churches did not react or at least not officially on Aleppo statement which is not expected since, this statement was drafted to give a full respect of celebrating Eater day according to the Acts of Nicaea Ecumenical Coun-

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<sup>62</sup> [syriacpatriarchate.org/2019/01/mecc-executive-committee-inaugural-session-theological-panel/](http://syriacpatriarchate.org/2019/01/mecc-executive-committee-inaugural-session-theological-panel/).

cil. This might tell us, that celebrating Easter altogether is not a burning issue to all the Eastern Orthodox Churches who do not live in the specific circumstances like living as a Christian in Syria. Even in later years for the Eastern Orthodox Churches, Aleppo statement did not echo powerfully as it became remarkable influential in other international key ecumenical delectations. Although the “calendar question” was expected to be included in the draft agenda of the long-awaited Pan-Orthodox Synod in Crete 2016;<sup>63</sup> however, we do not see any remarkable discussion about it during the meeting, possibly it is because of the absence of Antiochian Orthodox Church.<sup>64</sup>

The conference was concluded by producing a statement to confirm the results of their consultations, as the following:

“The need to find a common date for the celebration of Easter, the Holy Pascha, the feast of Christ’s resurrection. [...] This is a matter of concern for all Christians. Indeed, in some parts of the world such as the Middle East, where several separated Christian communities constitute a minority in the larger society, this has become an urgent issue.”

One of the major concerns by the Syrian hierarchies who participated in the consultation is to convey a message that celebrating one Easter Day is not only to enjoy the ecumenical life of living together; it is a message of power in a society where Christians had been living as minorities. That is why MECC had spent remarkable efforts to push the question of celebrating Easter in one day. Possibly, it is useful to quote here the whole paper while speaking about its significance in the Middle East.

In recent years, concrete steps have been taken in the Middle East, where Christians of so many traditions live closely together in a largely non-Christian society. The Middle East Council of Churches has been particularly active in encouraging and facilitating the celebration of Easter on a common day. Two recent consultations have taken up this concern. A consultation on “Christian Spirituality for Our Times” (Iasi/Romania, May 1994) proposed that “a new initiative be taken toward the common celebration of Easter”. Even more striking are the conclusions reached by a consultation “Towards Koinonia in Worship” at Ditchingham,

<sup>63</sup> Basilius J. Groen, *How Long It Was and How Far. A Catholic and Ecumenical View on the Arduous Way to a Common Easter Date*, Graz 2013, 39.

<sup>64</sup> See the critical edition: Alberto Melloni (ed.), *Corpus Christianorum Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Generaliumque Decreta IV/3. The Great Councils of the Orthodox Churches Decisions and Synodika*. Crete 2016, Turnhout 2016.



England in 1994: “Besides the work already done on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, the churches need to address the renewal of preaching, the recovery of the meaning of Sunday and the search for a common celebration of Pascha as ecumenical theological concerns. This last is especially urgent, since an agreement on a common date of Easter – even an interim agreement – awaits further ecumenical developments. Such an agreement, which cannot depend on the idea of a ‘fixed date of Easter’, should respect the deepest meaning of the Christian Pascha, and the feelings of Christians throughout the world. We welcome all initiatives which offer the hope of progress in this important area.”<sup>65</sup>

The following year after Aleppo consultation, we hear its international echo at The North American Orthodox-Catholic Theological Consultation by welcoming Aleppo Statement of a common Easter day in 1998 declaration: “Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha” which was affirmed in a later declaration in 2010: “Celebrating Easter/Pascha Together.”<sup>66</sup> One of the reasons beyond the success of Aleppo statement ecumenically, is its faithfulness to Nicaea Ecumenical Council as an agreement from Christian tradition, concerning the Eastern calculation. The success of this statement did not only remain in North American ecumenical declarations, but we notice remarkable developments toward a better understanding to the significance of celebrating one date for Easter:

“the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the Anglican Lambeth Conference, the Lutheran World Federation, the Ukrainian Catholic University in Lviv, the National Council of Churches in the USA, and Patriarch Gregory III [Laham] of the Melkites (the Byzantine-rite Catholics in the Middle East), and others, have also advocated a common Paschal date, and most of them also endorse the Aleppo Statement.”<sup>67</sup>

Therefore, Aleppo consultation could offer a basis for a larger scope of thinking about the urgency of a common day of celebrating Easter. Most possibly, the specific circumstances of Christians in Syrian could help to speak about this issue loudly and producing an international ecumenical statement. This might support

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<sup>65</sup> Thomas F. Best/Dagmar Heller (ed.), *So We Believe, So We Pray. Towards Koinonia in Worship.* Faith and Order Paper No. 171, Geneva 1995, 9s.

<sup>66</sup> Groen, *How Long It Was*, 37.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

the argument of this paper that ecumenical life in Syria is a necessity while facing many challenges; unlike the other international experience.

Probably, one of the impulses which encouraged Christians in Syria to believe in Ecumenical life prompted by MECC, was given by the fact of living as minorities in a society of Muslim majority. Therefore, MECC has been insisting on the concept of citizenship in society, through many workshops including educational programme. In the last statement by the general secretary of MECC, she emphasized on this principle: "it is by supporting public policies that implement inclusive citizenship, where religious, ethnic, social, and intellectual diversities are encompassed, resulting in laws that protect and enhance this diversity."

In fact, it would not be surprising to know that for majority of lay faithful Christians in Syria, the ecumenical efforts revolve around the agreement of how to celebrate Easter in one day as a tangible gesture of Church unity.

## 8 Refugees and Ecumenism

In the second half of that century, Syria had to receive tremendous number of Palestinian refugees after 1948. Of course, this would include Christian refugees and part of the Churches responsibility was how to deal with this new crisis of flowing refugees. In Bishop Gerges' diary, we read that important relations were built with Catholic and Protestants in Aleppo to arrange a strategy of how to help Palestinians refugees.<sup>68</sup>

In 1951, WCC held a conference on the theme of refugees in Beirut to arrange a roadmap of how to act in the conflict situation which created many refugees in the Middle East. The result was to establish an intergovernmental initiative where many Churches (Orthodox and Protestants) could work together.

In 1956 there was a second conference also in Beirut, dedicated for the same topic of rescuing Palestinian refugees in the region. Here, we can notice the ecumenical development by the presence of many Orthodox Church hierarchies, which reflect how this mutual humanitarian project could successfully strengthen the ecumenical relations in the Middle East.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the NECC could not win members from the ancient Churches until 1964. However, the emergency of the Israeli- Arab conflict reaching to the war of 1967 and 1973 with the reality of refugees' conflict, could help Middle East Christians to think about their spiritual common and on

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<sup>68</sup> Mor Gregorios Yohannah Ibrahim (ed.), *My Diary*, 75.

their Christian “fellowship” which helped to found good infrastructure for ecumenical relations.

Reaching the end of the twentieth century, Syria had another refugees’ conflict coming from Iraq. Churches in Syria had to cooperate by organizing many Programmes of how to help Iraqi Christians through Caritas and other humanitarian international projects who would trust Church leaders by funding various projects. Although that would mean an extra burden, which would raise some local problems insides parishes and Churches in Syria, but that challenges could broaden the horizon for ecumenical cooperation.

In 1st January of 2000, a new inter-religious initiative took place at the Syriac Orthodox Cathedral of Aleppo, where the Mufti of Aleppo (later in 2017 became the Grand Mufti of Syria) Dr Ahmad Bader Al-Deen Hassoun headed with the Syriac Orthodox Metropolitan of Aleppo Mor Gregorios Youhanna Ibrahim, a prayer dedicated for peace in the Middle East. The echo of this prayer hoped to reach a political message to avoid the American military attack to Iraq. However, although the prayer itself did not reach its political goal to influence the West; however, it remained a tradition to pray for peace at the beginning of every new year. Interestingly, later during the Syrian War (2012 until today) the same Grand Mufti moved this prayer to include Patriarchs and all the Church leaders in Damascus in addition to many leading Imams.

Relatively speaking, the relations between Christians and Muslims in Syria in the second half of the twentieth century were good. In his opening speech for meeting of the Faith and Order Standing Commission in Aleppo 1995, Mor Gregorios had touched some points concerning this interreligious dialogue of life:

“Concerning the Christian-Muslim relations, we emphasize the dialogue of life, which is actualized in mutual visits between religious leaders and families. We believe that the long history of co-operation and peaceful co-existence between the two religions constitutes a solid background for creating this quiet atmosphere of peace and harmony, up until now. This, however, should not mean that everything is perfect. I will just mention two issues which can be further explored to improve the quality of our dialogue. The first one is that of mixed marriages. While the Christian partner in such a marriage has to become a Muslim, the Muslim partner is not allowed to convert to Christianity. The second one is the issue of private schools. Today we have some private schools, but we are not permitted to open new schools, whether primary, secondary or high schools. Apart from that, I am convinced

that Syria can serve as a model for co-operation and peaceful co-existence between these two religions. There is, however, a fear that fundamentalism which is a growing phenomenon among Islamic groups may have some influence on the relations between us and the Muslims in the future.”<sup>69</sup>

Christians in Syria constitute about 10% of the total population, with majority of Muslims who mainly belong to Sunni Islam in addition to other religious minorities. In the old city of Damascus, three Patriarchates of Antioch are located just in the same Christian quarter near St Thomas Gate [Bab Tuma]: the Greek Orthodox, the Syriac Orthodox and the Melkite (Greek Catholic) Patriarchates. Probably, this peculiar experience cannot be found in another place. In addition to these Patriarchal Sees of Bab Tuma district, ancient Churches belong to the Armenian, Syriac Catholic, Latin and evangelical missionaries are located on a walking distance. This could contribute to build a Christian identity while being surrounded by Muslim majority. Similarly, Aleppo Christian districts are full of these ecumenical relations because of this practical reason. Homs, had a similar situation where Christians used to live altogether. Homs even became the See of the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch from 1918 until 1957, this city which could host until recently a large Christian community until the recent Syrian war when “estimated 50,000 persons being forced to leave the city.”<sup>70</sup> In 2012 Christians in Homs could not celebrate Easter in their old churches because of the catastrophic war situation. Christians of Homs had to leave their homes at the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011 to the suburbs of their city or to other cities in Syria with less influence of war or even to become refugees in the West (like hundred thousands like over two millions of Syrian refugees spread in different parts of the world). These forced migrations, could show how Christians from various denominations could cooperate to solve their problems. St Ephrem Patriarchal Development Committee (EPDC), for example, which is run by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate could offer financial and logistic supports to all Christians regardless to their denominations. Many humanitarian relief projects during the ongoing Syrian war provided housing for thousands of displaced people in Damascus and Aleppo. EPDC started its mission since 2003 with the crisis of Iraqi refugees in Syria with a clear motto of

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<sup>69</sup> Commission on Faith and Order. Minutes, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Erica C. D. Hunter, “The Syrian Orthodox Church”, in: Lucian N. Leustean (ed.), *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, New York 2014, 547.

“No discrimination”<sup>71</sup> among those who ask for a help. This project and other similar charitable initiatives by Churches in Syria since 2003 (such as Caritas<sup>72</sup>, World Vision,<sup>73</sup> International Orthodox Christian Charities,<sup>74</sup> etc.) which took care of thousands of Iraqi refugees in addition to multiple numbers of the newly needy Syrians because of the war. These projects could create ecumenical and inter-religious bridges. In many cases, donors for these projects had to ask that aids should not go to a certain religious group, which could help to help a broad mission to help with any religious dissimulations.

In a recent meeting with the UNHCR representative in Lebanon, the MECC General Secretary Dr Bechealany, emphasized on the ecumenical mission of MECC to help refugees: “The Middle East Council of Churches is committed to standing by the most marginalized social groups, by the displaced and refugees. Together with our local, regional and international partners, we have refugee relief programs in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Palestine, whereby we undertake to assist and protect these people, who are all children of God, brothers and sisters of our kind, created in the God’s image and likeness.”<sup>75</sup> This statement explains how theologically the mission of contributing to make peace and help refugees goes alongside the ecumenical bridges.

## 9 Ecumenism in the Shadow of the Syrian War

Perhaps, one of the most painful messages which touched the Church hierarchies in Syria during the ongoing Syrian war, was the incident of kidnapping the Syriac and the Greek Orthodox Archbishops of Aleppo: Mor Gregorios Youhannah Ibrahim and Mar Bulos Yazigi by unknown armed group after killing the driver on the 22nd of April 2013. The two abducted Metropolitans were on their way back to Aleppo after a failure attempt to negotiate for releasing two priests from Aleppo: Fr. Mafhuz from the Greek Orthodox Church and Fr. Kayyal from the Armenian Catholic Church. Patriarchs and Bishops in Syria understood that it is a very threatening time which targets every Christians without any moral consideration. Hunter writes about it: “The abduction of the two Metropolitans has become a

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<sup>71</sup> <http://syriacpatriarchate.org/epdc/>.

<sup>72</sup> <https://syria.caritas.org/>.

<sup>73</sup> <https://www.worldvision.com.au/global-issues/world-emergencies/syrian-refugee-crisis>.

<sup>74</sup> <https://www.iocc.org/>.

<sup>75</sup> The meeting took place in Beirut at 3rd of October, 2010; see: <https://mecc.org/mireille-girard-at-mecc-eng/>.

symbolic icon of the threat to the very existence of Christianity in its traditional homelands in the Middle East. It occurred at a time of utmost need for Christian leadership as the crises in Syria and Iraq were unfolding. These continue to have dramatic consequences for the Christian communities who have experienced considerable persecution and who have borne the brunt of ethno-religious cleansing.<sup>76</sup> The moment of realizing that an extraordinary man of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue like Mor Gregorios, had to face such an ambiguous destiny, this imply that the concept of “dialogue” is not anymore welcomed by groups who had lived possibly very close to him. Although this will indicate to a gloomy picture for the present and future; however, this reality could awaken Church leaders in Syria to push them toward serious ecumenical relations. It is a challenge to live in Syria while facing similar destiny in a conflict zone, but also it is an opportunity to live and pray together for a better future.

## 10 Ecumenical Relations in Diaspora

In a recent study by A. Schmoller based on personal interviews with Christian refugees in Austria, he could find that in many narratives there is a tendency toward better ecumenical life while cooperating as Christians, who mainly speak Arabic, in the challenges of the new life in diaspora.<sup>77</sup> Families who belong to Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Melkite, Orthodox and other Church denominations from the Middle East; could find strong relations with their daily life to exchange visits even in their Churches. Religious networks among refugees could help to answer practical daily questions which concern linguistic, financial, social and other challenges they face in their new home.

Although Syrian Christian refugees are relatively new in Europe, but we already have some cases of marriages of different denominations. E. loosely, had noticed during her research in Syria that “when you hear mention of a ‘mixed marriage’, people are referring to a young person who has married into another denomination – not another religion or race as the term implies in Europe.”<sup>78</sup> These “mixed marriag-

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<sup>76</sup> Erica C.D. Hunter, “Foreword”, in: Mikael Oez/Aziz Abdul-Nour (ed.), *Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim. Pluralism, Dialogue and Co-Existence*, London 2016, V.

<sup>77</sup> Andreas Schmoller, “Of Safe Havens and Sinking Ships. The Church in Oral Histories of Middle Eastern Christians in Austria”, in: idem (ed.), *Middle Eastern Christians and Europe. Historical Legacies and Present Challenges*, Zürich 2018.

<sup>78</sup> Emma Loosley, “Peter, Paul and James of Jerusalem. The Doctrinal and Political evolution of the Eastern and Oriental Churches”, in: Anthony O’Mahony/Emma Loosley (ed.), *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, New York 2010, 2.

es” in diaspora could be open to include choices who belong to a similar linguistic culture (mainly Arabic, in addition to Syriac and Armenian), which could offer a convenient experience to families who are interested to keep their cultural traditions among their communities. It is still early to talk about exact numbers and statistics but if while examining the case of these Church communities who arrived Europe decades ago (like the Syriac Christian refugees from Tur-Abdin in South East of Turkey), then we may suggest that building a strong Arabic Christian community goes in parallel with providing power ecumenical relations with surroundings (for example: EKD in Germany or Pro-Oriente in Austria). As S. Brock explains it in the case of the Syriac Orthodox openness to dialogue in diaspora: “the Syrian Orthodox emigration in Europe has received a great deal of assistance of one sort or another from the different Western Churches. This was already the case in the very early years of the emigration and has continued to this day. It was certainly in part due to this large-scale presence, for the first time in history, of Syrian Orthodox in Europe that the need for theological dialogue between the Chalcedonian Western Churches and the non-Chalcedonian Syrian Orthodox Church became more apparent.”<sup>79</sup> This implies that ecumenical relations can be strengthened when there is a need of Church members such as the refugees from the Middle East with their particular challenges in their original homeland.

Although the growth of the Middle East Christians in diaspora creates a serious challenge, but the catastrophic wars made limited choices for them to survive. In the current Syrian war, most of the Christians had left the country. Therefore, Church leaders had to speak about their common concern of how to keep their faithful in Syria. The churches in Syria had to define their mission as a universal to reach diaspora in their spiritual responsibility. This new mission could be a challenge for their members in diaspora since they share different corners and worries. Nevertheless, Church leaders in Syria pay attention that the migration question is difficult to answer and needs a proper experience to lead their communities according to different needs. It is interesting to notice that the Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Patriarchs served as Archbishops of America, which possibly might explain the distinguished ecumenical relation they had to show since they became Patriarchs for their Churches in Syria! Somehow, this cooperation is not a choice rather it is a necessity. Flannery puts the future of the Syriac Catholic Church as the following: “It is true that the acceptance of a degree of Latinization has resulted

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<sup>79</sup> Sebastian P. Brock, “The Syrian Orthodox Church in Modern History”, in: Anthony O’Mahony (ed.), *Christianity in the Middle East. Studies in Modern History, Theology and Politics*, London 2008, 33s.

in a loss of religious specificity, whereby the Syrian Orthodox Church may be seen as the truer repository of the ancient Syriac liturgical tradition [...] The Syrian Catholic Church and other Churches of the region, perhaps working through MECC, may also be able to play a key bridge building the cultures of East and West, something of which we certainly stand in need.”<sup>80</sup> The need is to cooperate with other Churches especially after the Iraqi and Syrian Wars, which could threaten clearly the existence of the whole Christianity in the region.

## 11 Concluding Remarks

This paper has tried to study the ecumenical experience in the Middle East while living together regardless to the difficulties and challenges in that region, as we can notice it from the institutional cooperation which could develop a strategic vision toward ecumenism in the Middle East. Studying systematically the historical seeds of ecumenism in the Middle East is necessary to construct an objective assessment to the ecumenical life of the present while taking into consideration also the current reality after the recent rapid developments in the Middle East during the ongoing wars. Although, theoretically speaking, it is the time now in the Middle East to harvest the fruits of the distinguished ecumenical experience of the past decades, especially after the achievements of the Middle East Council of Churches; nevertheless, the recent reality of migration from the Middle East to other Western cultures, where religious identity has a different scope, might touch the question of ecumenism among Middle Eastern Christians and their Church leaders. Possibly, this reality is not given enough attention by the key figures of ecumenism in the Middle East. Looking toward a promising future with a long-term vision of how to live together as Christians in the Middle East, cannot be understood without thinking about ecumenical atmosphere in its historical and contemporary context to guarantee its prosperous future.

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<sup>80</sup> John Flannery, “The Syriac Catholic Church. Martyrdom, Mission, Identity and Ecumenism in Modern History”, in: O’Mahony, *Christianity*, 164–166.



## **Abschlussklärung von „Studium im Mittleren Osten“ (SiMO) und der Near East School of Theology (NEST) vom 26. April 2019 in Höxter-Brenkhausen**

Seit 20 Jahren besteht das Programm „Studium im Mittleren Osten“. Jährlich studiert eine Gruppe aus Deutschland an der Near East School of Theology im Libanon. Hierbei handelt es sich um das einzige evangelische Programm, welches Studierenden der Theologie das Studium der orientalischen Kirchen in ihrem interreligiösen Kontext ermöglicht.

Im Rahmen des Jubiläums hat die 6. Internationale Konsultation zum Thema „Die Auswirkungen der gegenwärtigen politischen und sozialen Entwicklungen auf die Kirchen im Mittleren Osten und in Deutschland“ vom 24. bis 27. April an der Universität Göttingen und im Koptisch-Orthodoxen Kloster in Höxter-Brenkhausen stattgefunden.

Über 60 Studierende, Professorinnen und Professoren aus dem Libanon, Syrien, Palästina sowie Österreich und Deutschland diskutierten die Herausforderungen für die Kirchen und die theologische Ausbildung angesichts der gegenwärtigen Umbrüche im Nahen Osten und weltweit. Vor dem Hintergrund der dramatischen Entwicklungen der letzten Jahre stehen die Kirchen vor der Aufgabe, Kriegstraumata zu heilen, Gemeinden neu zu sammeln und Bildungseinrichtungen wieder aufzubauen. Dabei steht für die Gemeinden im Vordergrund, ihren Mitgliedern Orientierung zu geben und Hoffnung zu vermitteln sowie das Zusammenleben mit ihren muslimischen Nachbarn auf eine neue Basis zu stellen.

Die Konsultation hat erneut gezeigt, wie wichtig dieser Austausch auf der akademischen und praktischen Ebene ist. Deshalb fordern die Teilnehmenden die Kirchen in Deutschland auf, solche Begegnungen zu fördern, daran mitzuwirken und daraus Perspektiven für das Zusammenleben der verschiedenen Religionsgemeinschaften in Deutschland zu gewinnen.



**The 6th International Consultation of „Studium im Mittleren Osten“ (SiMO)  
and the Near East School of Theology (NEST)**

April 24–27, 2019

in Göttingen and at the Coptic Monastery of Brenkhausen (Höxter)

**„The Impact of the Current Political and Social Developments on the  
Witness of the Churches – A Time for Spiritual Rebuilding?“**

<b>Tuesday, April 23, 2019 (closed meetings)</b>		
10:25	Arrival delegation from NEST at Frankfurt Airport	Responsible: Rammelt
	Transport to Bochum	
	Signing of the Agreement of Cooperation between NEST and the University of Bochum	
	Transport to Göttingen	
19:00	Dinner of the NEST delegation with the Executive Committee (GA) of SiMO	
<b>Wednesday, April 24, 2019</b>		
Morning	Guided walking-tour through Göttingen for the NEST delegation	Responsible: Tamcke
	<b>Opening Event at the Protestant-Theological Faculty of the Georg-August-University Göttingen</b>	
15:00	Words of greeting from Prof. Dr. Reinhard Feldmeier, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Director of CORO (Centrum Orbis Orientalis et Occidentalis); on behalf of the Dean of the Protestant-Theological Faculty	
15:30-16:15	Opening Lecture I: The Rt. Rev. (Landesbischof) Ralf Meister, Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Hannover	Moderation: Gräbe
16:15-16:45	Opening Lecture II: Prof. Dr. George Sabra, NEST Beirut/Lebanon	Moderation: Rothe
16:45-17:15	Opening Lecture III: Prof. Dr. Martin Tamcke, Georg-August-Universität Göttingen	
17:15	<b>Reception and encounter with representatives of the Church and the Academic Community:</b> - Words of greeting from OLKR Rainer Kiefer, EKD (Kammer f. weltweite Ökumene, Deputy Chairperson) - Launch of the Jubilee Booklet: 20 Years of SiMO and (almost) 15 Years of „The Friends of NEST“ association.	Responsible: Rammelt
19:30	Transport to Brenkhausen/Höxter	
<b>Thursday, April 25, 2019 (Maundy Thursday according to the Coptic Calendar)</b>		

	<b>Session 1: “The Impact of the Current Political and Social Developments on the Witness of the Churches” (09:00-12:30)</b>	
09:00-09:45	Rev. Dr. Rima Nasrallah van Saane: The Situation of the Churches in Syria and Lebanon	Moderation: Tamcke
09:45-10:30	Small working groups: The daily life experience in Lebanon/Syria	
11:00-12:30	Rev. Friederike Weltzien: Traumas and Work with Trauma Subjects - What do traumas mean for the shaping of a society?	Moderation: Rothe
	<b>Session 2: Crisis in Ecumenism? Ecumenism in Times of Crisis (14:00-18:00)</b>	
14:00-14:45	Ephrem Ishak: Being Christians together? The Situation of Ecumenism in the Middle East. An Institutional Perspective.	Moderation: Tamcke
14:45-15:30	Comments from the NEST delegation: “Are we all Christians?” Ecumenical experiences in daily life.	
16:00-16:45	Fr. Jihad Nasif and Students from Bochum University: „My Neighbor has Become my Enemy?“ Reflections on Christian-Muslim Coexistence.	Moderation: Herrmann
16:45-17:30	Rev. OKR Detlef Görrig, Protestant Church in Germany (EKD): Christian-Muslim Neighborhood in Germany	
19:30	Evening program organized by the „The Friends of NEST“ - Book presentation: <i>ORIENTierungen. Die Bibel im Kontext gelesen, edited by Claudia Rammelt, Ann-Kathrin Knittel and Uta Zeuge-Buberl (Predigtempfehlungen Bd. 3), Münster 2017</i> What is the Uplifting Function of the Sermon in Times of Crisis?	Moderation: Rammelt
<b>Friday, April 26, 2019 (Good Friday according to the Coptic Calendar)</b>		
07:00	Possibility to attend the morning worship service of the monastery	
	<b>Session 3: Education as an Opportunity for Rebuilding (09:00-12:30)</b>	
09:00-09:45	Dr. Sara Binay: On the State of Islamic Theology in Germany	Moderation: Rothe
09:45-10:30	Prof. Dr. Wolfram Reiss: Islamic Chaplaincy – Reasoning, Aims and Methods, Challenges	
11:00-11:45	Prof. Dr. Johnny Awwad: Overview and History of the Teaching of Religion in Lebanon and Syria: The case of the NESSL Schools	Moderation: Sabra
11:45-12:30	Dr. Uwe Gräbe: Church Schools in the Near East. Possibilities of West-East Partnership? The Case of the Schneller Schools	
	<b>Session 4: Conclusion (14:00-18:00)</b>	

14:00-15:30	Migrant Churches as a Place of New Beginning in the Diaspora– A Tour through the Monastery of Höxter und Conversation with Bishop Anba Damian	Moderation: Tamcke
17:00-18:00	Concluding Session with Communiqué	
20:00	Evening Gathering and Celebration of the 20th Anniversary of SiMO, and 15 years of the circle of „The Friends of NEST“.	Responsible: Diehl
	Departure or Overnight at the Coptic Monastery of Brenkhausen (Höxter)	
<b>Saturday, April 27, 2019 (Holy Saturday according to the Coptic Calendar)</b>		
	Departure after breakfast (except for NEST-Delegation, SiMO-Beirat, and Friends of NEST)	
	<b>Closed Meetings:</b>	
09:00-12:00	Field trip for the students (and Faculty members) of NEST, either to the “Externsteine” rock formations, or to the “Hermannsdenkmal” Germanic monument.  German participants of the conference (who are not members of the SiMO-Beirat or of the circle of “Friends of NEST”) may join the trip inasmuch as places are available on the bus (registration during the conference).	Meetings of the different bodies involved: - SiMO-Beirat (with representation from NEST), - Freunde der NEST e.V. - Libanon-Freundeskreis
13:10-16:44	Departure of all remaining participants. Departure of the NEST Delegation from Höxter to Frankfurt	Accompanied by Gräbe
18:00	Guided tour of the recently reconstructed Old City of Frankfurt	Responsible: Knoche
<b>Sunday, April 28, 2019 (Easter Sunday according to the Coptic Calendar)</b>		
12:00	Departure delegation from NEST to Frankfurt Airport	

Many thanks to the supporting churches and organizations:



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„Studies in the Middle East“ is a one-year programme at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut (NEST). In honour of its 20th anniversary, academics and teachers from the NEST and from Germany met at Georg-August University in Göttingen and in the nearby Coptic Orthodox Monastery in Höxter-Brenkhausen to discuss the current situation in the Middle East and possible ways to initiate a spiritual new beginning in this crisis and war-ridden region. The present volume offers various contributions that were made on the subject.



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