

**CAN CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST LIVE UNDER ISLAM?
CAN CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST?**

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Introduction

I need first to explain my two titles. I was invited to give last year's lecture when Muhammad Mursi was in power in Egypt and when Christians were bracing themselves for living under the Muslim Brotherhood. So I chose as my title 'Can Christians in the Middle East live under Islam?' I wasn't able to give the lecture for health reasons, and was delighted that Munther Isaac stepped in at short notice.

By the time I was asked to give the lecture this year, Mursi had been deposed, and so my title didn't seem quite so appropriate. Then in February this year I was asked by Munther to fill in for someone else at the 'Christ at the Checkpoint' conference in Bethlehem in March, and asked to address the question: 'Can Christianity Survive in the Middle East?'

John Angle kindly suggested that that presentation would be appropriate for this St George's lecture. So I've simply put the two titles together, and what I'm now presenting is an expanded version of my Bethlehem presentation.

I trust that I hardly need to explain what's behind these two provocative questions. In February this year Martin Accad of the Baptist Seminary in Beirut wrote of 'the growing fear of Islam and Muslims that the present Syrian conflict has been provoking among Christians, both in Syria, in the rest of the region, and to some extent in the rest of the world.' Writing in 1952 Charles Malik wrote: "'Whither the Near East'" is ultimately, for the most part, 'whither Islam'... And for the Christians of the Near East it is obvious that this is a peculiarly crucial issue. The fate of Islam is in a certain sense their fate.' So 60 years ago, long before the rise of radical Islam, he was predicting that the future of Christianity in this region would depend on the future of Islam.

Some outside observers are very pessimistic about the survival of Christianity there. William Dalrymple's classic, *From the Holy Mountain*, leaves readers with the feeling that Christianity is dying out. And the American historian Philip Jenkins, writing about the possibility of western intervention in Syria in April 2011, gave his article the title 'Death Warrant of Ancient Christianity.'

While I do not share their pessimism, I believe that we need to be utterly realistic about the big picture of what has been happening in recent years and the last two thousand years. How are we to explain the decrease in the number of Christians, and what do we and they need to do to ensure that they survive in this region?

I begin with a simple story to underline the importance of asking the right questions. Max Warren, who was for many years the leader of the Church Mission Society, used to tell of an experience he had when he was seriously ill in hospital with a mysterious disease after returning from Africa in the 1940s. One day a medical student had to examine him in front of his professor. At the end of the examination he told the professor his diagnosis of the illness. Warren was convinced that the student would fail because his diagnosis was wrong. Some days later he saw the professor when he was doing his rounds and said to him, 'I suppose that student failed.' 'Oh no, he passed,' was the reply. 'He got the diagnosis wrong. *But he would have got there in the end because he asked all the right questions.*'

Here then are the ten most basic questions which, alongside the more obvious questions about the quality of Christian discipleship, I believe we need to ask.

1. WHAT DOES THE QUR'AN SAY ABOUT CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY?

There's a wide range of responses reflected in verses which come from different periods in Muhammad's life – some quite positive and some more confrontational. It's assumed that Christians are worshiping the same God as Muslims (3:84), and they and the Jews are in a special category and different from polytheists because they are 'People of the Book'.

Some verses are remarkably affirmative. One for example says that Christians and Jews who believe in God and lead good lives have nothing to be afraid of on the Day of Judgement (2:62). Another which is frequently quoted by Muslims is very critical of Jews but positive about Christians: 'You shall find the most hostile people to the believers to be the Jews and the polytheists; and you will find the closest in affection (*aqrabahum mawadatan*) to the believers those who say: "We are Christians ..."' (5:82).

In one context Muslims are told '... do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other.' (5:51, 57; cf 3:18; 4:144). In other verses they are encouraged not to be aggressive in discussion with Christians, but to persuade them into the way of God 'with wisdom and mild exhortation' (29:46; 16:125). In one important verse Christians are invited to come to 'a just word, common between us and you that we worship no one except God: that we associate nothing with Him ...' (3:64).

Christians are strongly condemned for making exaggerated claims for Jesus and believing in some kind of trinity (4:171), and their claim that 'God is Christ, the son of Mary' is described as blasphemy (5:72-73; *laqad kafara alladhine qalu*). Another

verse says that ‘Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the idolaters will have the fire of Hell, therein to remain’ (98:6).

Perhaps the strongest verse is the one known as ‘the Sword Verse’: ‘Fight (*qatilu*) those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God nor in the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax (*jizyah*) and agree to submit (*wahum saghirun*) (9:29).

Muslims are just as aware as we are of the variety of these responses found in the Qur’an, and as we shall see shortly, we need to listen carefully to how Muslims interpret these verses and how they apply them in different contexts today.

2. WHAT DOES THE HADITH LITERATURE SAY ABOUT CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIANITY?

The six authoritative collections of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet were compiled in the 8th and 9th centuries when Muslims were ruling over a population in which the majority were Christians, and Muslim attitudes towards Christians were ‘neither uniform nor simple’ (Marston Speight). Here are some of the recorded sayings of the Prophet or his Companions concerning their relationships with Christians:

- ‘The food of those who received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful to them.’
- (When asked about the cooking-pots used by non-Muslims) ‘If you can find other pots, eat and drink from them, but if not, just wash them with water and then eat and drink.’
- ‘Do not extol me as the Christians extolled the son of Mary.’
- ‘The Christians have divided into 72 sects. 71 will be in hell and 1 in paradise.’
- ‘We do not enter your churches because of the statues and pictures.’ (‘Umar)
- ‘Do not greet the Jews and the Christians before they greet you and when you meet any of them on the road force them to go to the narrowest part of it.’
- ‘When the day of resurrection comes God will hand over either a Jew or a Christian for each Muslim and will say, “This is your release (*fikak*) from the fire of hell.”’
- ‘Any from this community of Jews and Christians who hear of me and die without believing in my message will be among the people of hell.’
- ‘I have been ordered to fight with the people until they say, “None has the right to be worshipped but Allah.”’

- ‘May God curse the Jews and Christians! They have taken the tombs of the prophets as places of prayer.’ (Reported by ‘Aisha, during the last illness of Muhammad)
- ‘There should not be left two religions in the Island of Arabia’ (*dinan ... jazirat al-‘Arab*). ‘If I live, God willing, I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and I shall leave only Muslims in it.’

Sayings like these reflect a situation in which Muslims were aware of some common ground that they shared with Christians and Jews, but emphasise important differences in belief and practice. Christians were clearly regarded as socially and religiously inferior to Muslims.

3. HOW DO MUSLIMS TODAY INTERPRET THE QUR’AN AND THE HADITH?

There are three main principles of interpretation which Muslim exegetes developed in the early centuries to interpret the teaching of the Qur’an. According to the first, the context in the life of the Prophet in which a particular verse was revealed is all-important for determining the interpretation and application of the text (*asbabu-l-nuzul*). So, for example, the Sword Verse has to be interpreted in the light of the very specific situation facing the Prophet at a particular time and many Muslims would therefore say that it cannot be made the basis for a command which is relevant for all Muslims at all times.

According to the second principle, a verse which is known to have been revealed later in the life of the Prophet may in some cases abrogate or cancel out the teaching of an earlier verse (*naskh*). Following this principle some Muslims and most jihadis today would argue that the Sword Verse abrogates earlier verses which were much more affirmative towards Christians.

A third principle is that instead of looking for individual proof-texts we need to understand the general message of the Qur’an as a whole.

It should be obvious that we should never put ourselves into the position of telling Muslims what we think the Qur’an teaches. While asking all the questions we want to ask, we really must allow them to explain how they interpret these different verses. A great deal will depend on which of these principles they use to interpret a particular verse. So while many mainstream Muslims would follow the first and emphasize the importance of the original context for interpreting a verse in our contexts today, some Islamists and some other Muslims would use the principle of abrogation, arguing that the later commands addressed to the Prophet represent binding principles which are to be practised by Muslims today. Many of them have little time for the huge body of writing by Qur’anic and legal scholars of the Middle Ages, and believe that they can go straight back to the Qur’an to work out their own very literal interpretations.

When it comes to Hadith, for some Muslims it has almost as much authority as the Qur’an and individual sayings are interpreted very literally, while others reserve the right to make their own judgments about the reliability of the transmitters and the content of a particular saying. Generally speaking, therefore, it seems that the more

conservative and literalist Muslims are, the more authority they are likely to attach to a particular hadith. Conversely, the more open Muslims are to newer ways of interpreting Hadith, the more critical and selective they are likely to be in interpreting and applying any hadith.

4. WHAT WAS THE STATUS OF CHRISTIANS LIVING UNDER ISLAM FROM THE 7th CENTURY ONWARDS?

We've all heard about Christians and Jews living as *dhimmi*s, protected communities under Muslim rule, and we know about the tax that they had to pay (*jizya*) as an expression of their submission. It's important to remember that the vast majority of the population over whom Muslims ruled were Christians and Jews. So in the first few centuries, a few thousand Arab Muslims were ruling a population that was largely Christian. This situation has been compared to the British Raj in India, in which a few thousand Brits were ruling a whole continent. A Code attributed to the Caliph 'Umar lists a number of restrictions imposed on the Christians regarding dress, the building of churches and houses and the public display of religion.

By the standards of today the *dhimma* system sounds totally unacceptable because it reduces Christians to the status of subjects, of second class citizens. There are texts from the Middle Ages which describe in detail how the tax had to be paid: the Muslim official who is seated on a higher level receives the money from the outstretched hand of the *dhimmi* and then strikes him on the neck with his fist to demonstrate his subservient status.

But was it as harsh and intolerable as it seems to us today? Many Muslims and a number of western scholars argue that this picture has been exaggerated. They say that the Code of 'Umar was probably not written down until several centuries later, and that it wasn't always strictly enforced. There was never any compulsion to convert to Islam, and in the earliest period the Muslims probably didn't want Christians to convert to Islam because they needed their taxes. They also argue that the treatment of Jews and Christians living under Islam wasn't as harsh as the treatment of Jews living in Christian Europe.

In the Ottoman Empire the *dhimma* system developed into the *millet* system which enabled Christians to organise their own communities. Since the creation of nation states in the 20th century, the whole system has been abolished, and a Tunisian historian, Mohammed Talbi has written: 'It has become imperative and absolutely indispensable to shelve this notion in the cupboard of history.' It's probably true to say, however, that the idea of the *dhimma* system remains deeply embedded in the minds of both Muslims and Christians. Some Islamists in Egypt in recent years have said quite openly that if and when they gain power, they will revive the system and force the Copts to pay the *jizya*, and in recent months this is what one Islamist group has actually done in Raqqah in Syria.

5. HOW MUCH HAVE THE NUMBERS OF CHRISTIANS DECLINED?

To introduce this question I want to commend a book which I regard as the most significant book on the history of Christian-Muslim relations that I've read in the last ten years: *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia*, by Philip Jenkins, an American historian. Here are some of the basic statistics which he presents:

- In the 6th C there were about 500 bishops in the churches in North Africa; but by the 8th C there were hardly any. Tertullian wrote the well-known sentence about the blood of the martyrs being 'the seed of the church'. But in North Africa the church vanished almost completely as a result of the Arab conquests.

- From 780 – 823 Timothy, the Catholicos of the Church of the East, presided over flourishing churches in Mesopotamia and Syria which still included the majority of the population. Around 1,000 while there were more Christians in Europe, 'Asia could still claim the leadership of the Christian world'. And in 1100, in spite of conversions to Islam, Christianity seemed 'set for a new glorious age.'

- In 1050 Asia Minor had 373 bishoprics and its population was almost entirely Christian; but by 1450 they were between 10 – 15% and had only three bishops.

- The crucial turning point came in the 14th C, which marks 'the decisive collapse of Christianity in the Middle East ...'. By this time Islam had become the dominant religion in the whole region. Between 1200 and 1500 the number of Christians in Asia declined from 21 million to 3.4 million.

- The 20th C saw a further significant decline in the numbers of Christians with the Armenian genocide and the ethnic cleansing of Assyrians in North Iraq. In 1900 Christians were approximately 11% of the population of the whole region, 15-20% of Asia Minor, and 46% of the Ottoman Empire. '... the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration.'

- In 1915 Christians were 15% of Arab Palestinians and are now less than 1.5%. In 1970 Christians in Iraq were 5 – 6%, and are now reduced to less than 1%.

Jenkins concludes: 'For practical purposes ... Middle East Christianity has, within living memory, all but disappeared as a living force'. I have to say that I was stunned when I first read this survey and when, as a western Christian, I was made aware of the numerical strength and spread of Christianity in this region in earlier centuries and of the dramatic fall in the proportion of Christians – especially in the 14th and 20th centuries.

6. TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE DECLINE RELATED TO ISLAM?

This one of the hardest questions of all, and there are two kinds of answers that are often given. On the one hand many Christians jump to the conclusion that it's largely because of Islamic scripture and dogma that Christians have suffered so much under Islamic rule. On the other hand there are Muslims and many western scholars who quote the Qur'anic verse 'There is no compulsion in religion' (2:256) and argue that

Islam is essentially tolerant. I suspect that the truth probably lies somewhere between these two answers, although it is extremely difficult to find the right balance.

The problem that we're dealing with can be illustrated by this sentence written by two Christian scholars of Islam, Peter Cotterell and Peter Riddell: 'Islam has, throughout its history, contained within itself a channel of violence, legitimized by certain passages of the Qur'an, though put in question by other passages'. I feel uneasy about the first part of the sentence, because Muslims could probably say the same thing about Christianity. There's a great deal in our history that must make us hang our heads in shame. However, while we must acknowledge that there are parts of the OT which can be used to encourage violence, there is absolutely nothing in the example of Jesus and in the NT which supports the use of violence to defend or spread the Christian faith.

The second part of the sentence is helpful, however, because it draws attention to the passages in the Qur'an which call for fighting and killing. Liberal and moderate Muslims have no difficulty in interpreting these passages in the light of what they see as the peaceful message of the Qur'an as a whole. But Islamists who use the principle of abrogation can without any difficulty argue that the Sword Verse abrogates all the more peaceful verses and therefore use it to justify fighting to force Jews and Christians to accept the rule of Islam. And Muslims who use the contextual principle can also argue that if Muslims today feel that they are in a situation comparable to the ones in which the calls to warfare were revealed, it follows that they can be guided by these more warlike verses in the way they relate to non-Muslims.

Another major issue that is relevant is the question of how Muslims think about the relationship between religion and state (*din wa dawla*), between truth and power. Most Muslims tend to believe that the kingdom of God needs to be embodied in social and political structures which enable the community to live in accordance with *shari'a*. Muslims in the West and in other minority situations would generally say that they are not seeking to establish an Islamic state. But it's hard to deny that a basic instinct in the minds of most Muslims is, in the words of Kenneth Cragg, 'Islam must rule.' This instinct was expressed in its most extreme form by Sayyid Qutb in the sentence '*la budda li-l-islam an yahkum* (inevitably Islam shall rule)'. It's not hard to see, therefore, how the example of the Prophet, some interpretations of the Qur'an, and centuries of Islamic teaching and history have in some situations encouraged Muslims to find *Islamic* reasons for the harsh treatment of non-Muslims who have been living under their rule.

So does the decline of Christianity have anything to do with Islam? I suggest the answer must be 'Yes!' – but not in the simplistic way that many Christians would like to believe.

7. TO WHAT EXTENT WAS THE DECLINE DUE TO FACTORS WHICH HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH ISLAM?

One of the great strengths of Jenkins's book is that he suggests other reasons for the decline in the number of Christians which had nothing whatsoever to do with Islam:

1. *Fallen human nature and the culture of the time.* Both Christians and Muslims have at different times in history engaged in appalling acts of cruelty. Minority communities have often been made scapegoats at times of severe social disturbance.
2. *Geography and natural disasters.* Christian communities in Mesopotamia were always vulnerable to invasion, while Egypt's Christians were protected by their geographical position in the Nile valley. The Black Death was followed by a period of severe persecution.
3. *Weaknesses within Christian communities.* The churches in North Africa had largely foreign leadership and were not deeply rooted in the country. Some churches were too closely linked to one particular ethnic or linguistic group.
4. *Political reasons.* The clearest example here is the link between the Mongols and Christians. Some of the Mongol tribes were Christian and in the earlier period Mongol leaders favoured Christians more than Muslims. But gradually they began to favour Islam and by 1300 many Mongols had converted to Islam. This victory for Islam led to the creation of what Jenkins calls 'a Muslim super-state' which was 'even more critical for the long-term relationship between Islam and Christianity than the original Arab conquests of the seventh century.' This was the context in which Ibn Taymiyya, who is regarded as the godfather of many Islamists today, set as his goal 'the militant restoration of Islam in the face of its enemies at home and abroad.'

It was similar political factors which largely account for the Armenian genocide and other developments in the 20th century which have had such negative effects on Christian communities. Thus Jenkins writes: 'Mass violence was by no means a new factor in Muslim-Christian relations, but matters deteriorated from the early 19th century, as Muslim societies felt themselves under increasing threat from the Christian West. As so often in history, the persecutors saw their actions as fundamentally defensive in nature, and the sense that a majority community was facing grave threats to its very existence drove them to acts of persecution and intolerance against convenient minorities. And although this certainly does not excuse the later violence, Turkish fears of predatory Christian rivals were by no means an illusion ... the savagery of Muslim regimes must be understood as a manifestation of the shock and outrage they felt at the resistance of people they had come to view as natural inferiors ...' He concludes: 'For all the reasons we can suggest for long-term decline, for all the temptations to assimilate, the largest single factor for Christian decline was organized violence, whether in the form of massacre, expulsion, or forced migration'.

We cannot escape the fact, therefore, that Christians have suffered all of this at the hands of Muslims. But trying to understand all the different factors behind this suffering and decline should make us cautious about blaming everything on Islam.

8. WHAT HAS BEEN THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN THE ARAB SPRING?

Many Christians have concluded that the Arab Spring has turned into an Islamic winter – or even an Islamist winter. Are their fears justified?

When Muhammad Bouazizi set himself alight in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, he was expressing his anger over a system which deprived him of his dignity and made it impossible for him to earn a living. The spontaneous explosion which occurred in

Tunisia and spread quickly to Egypt and other countries was basically a protest against one-party police states, corruption, unemployment, economic hardship, and lack of freedom. Islam was *not* a significant factor in the start of the movement.

In Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood was not involved in the initial demonstrations and its leaders waited for some days to see how events would unfold before they encouraged their members to join the protests in Tahrir Square. Their efficient networks enabled them very quickly to mobilise support for the revolution, and the goodwill built up over many decades by their social work enabled them to influence the movement to remove Mubarak from power and then to elect the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Mursi as President.

For a brief year he attempted to impose an Islamist agenda, but was thwarted by popular protests and the power of the old regime, the so-called 'deep state'. The economic, social and political problems in the country were too deep-seated and the Muslim Brotherhood found it difficult to make the transition from protest to power. In June 2013, when 30 million Egyptians were on the streets calling for Mursi to step down and he refused to do so, the army stepped in to remove him, and since then has been doing everything in its power to ensure that no Islamist party will ever be able to seize power in Egypt again. The army is firmly in control, and Christians are very happy with the new constitution that has been passed. This does not mean, however, that political Islam is completely dead.

In Tunisia since the original protests removed President Ben-Ali, there has been an intense ongoing struggle between the main Islamist party led by Rachid Ghannouchi and secular groups. In recent weeks these different parties seem to have reached a compromise which creates a balance between the Islamist and secular agendas, and which some see as a possible model which could be followed in other Arab countries.

In Syria the Muslim Brotherhood was for many decades the only real opposition to the Assad regime, but was brutally suppressed in the massacre in Hama in 1982. The demonstrations which began in April 2011 were initially a protest against police brutality. But before long many Sunnis joined in the protests out of bitterness against the minority Alawite regime which had kept Sunnis out of power for so long.

After decades of authoritarian police states, many Muslims throughout the region genuinely want their governments to be more consciously Islamic. I believe that the majority do *not* want Islamist governments; but equally they do not want secular governments if being secular means that there is no place for Islamic values. When Muslims decide to take part in democratic processes, they are forced to balance their ideology with pragmatism. I suggest therefore that, while the early promise of the Arab Spring has faded away, it's premature for us to conclude that we have entered either an Islamic or an Islamist winter.

9. HOW ARE MUSLIMS AND ISLAM CHANGING?

There are still far too many Christians (especially in the West) who believe that Islam is monolithic – that all Muslims are basically the same – and whose essentialist approach makes them believe that they can sum up 'the essence of Islam'. But we

must surely recognise that Islam has many faces, and while some remain fairly constant, others really are changing and adapting to new realities. These are four of the most significant developments and changes - alongside all the momentous changes created by globalisation and social media - that I see at the present time:

1. There is a battle for the soul of Islam that continues to rage – between jihadi Islamists, Islamists who reject violence, and other kinds of Muslims. This struggle is being played out most clearly in Syria where many jihadi elements have come in from outside and are fighting against the more moderate Muslim forces of the opposition. If Syrian Muslims were left to themselves, they would certainly want Sunni Muslims to be in power; but I believe that the majority would *not* want an Islamist government.

2. Islamists of all kinds are trying to balance Islamist convictions with pragmatism as they face the realities on the ground in any given situation. So if we have begun to understand what Islamism is all about, we now need to understand that there is such a thing as Post-Islamism. A recent book, *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* by Asef Bayat, explains the difference in this way. Islamism refers to ‘those ideologies and movements that strive to establish some kind of “Islamic order” – a religious state, shari’a law, and moral codes in Muslim societies and communities. Association with the state is a key feature of Islamist politics ...’ Post-Islamism on the other hand represents ‘an endeavor to fuse religiosity and rights, faith and freedom, Islam and liberty ... It wants to marry Islam with individual choice and freedom ..., with democracy and modernity, to achieve what some have termed an “alternative modernity” ... (W)hile it favors a civil and nonreligious state, it accords an active role for religion in the public sphere.’

3. Some traditionalist, orthodox Muslims, who distance themselves from both Islamism and secularism, are in their own way trying to adapt in limited ways to new social and political realities.

4. The Revolution in Iran in 1979 and the creation of the Islamic Republic has had a profound effect on Muslims all over the region, and the tensions between Sunnis and Shi’ites have become more acute. Sunnis are really fearful of the growth of the arc of Shi’ite power stretching westwards from Iran and including Bahrein, Iraq, Syria and Hizbullah on Lebanon. Many in Lebanon are afraid that another civil war would not be between Christians and Muslims, but between Sunnis and Shi’ites.

So can we say that ‘Islam is changing’, or should we rather say that ‘Muslims are changing’? If we would be reluctant to say ‘Christianity is changing’, we would have to admit that we *do* change in the way we articulate and express our faith, and should therefore recognise that Muslims change in similar ways. Some are changing in the process of coming to terms with modernity in all its forms. Others are changing because they have found in practice that slogans like ‘Islam is the solution’ don’t put food on the table, build hospitals and deal with corruption. But could it be that Christians have a role to play as dialogue partners with Muslims? If so, we may not need to feel completely helpless as we watch Muslims responding to all that is happening.

10. HOW IS THE FUTURE OF CHRISTIANITY RELATED TO THE POLITICS OF THE REGION?

James Baker, who was Secretary of State under George Bush Snr, in a report on Iraq in 2006 wrote: ‘All key issues in the Middle East are inextricably linked’, and none could be ‘addressed effectively in isolation from other major regional issues, interests and conflict’. This is where it is important to understand more of the history of the 19th and 20th centuries.

I am painfully aware of the role that Britain played, along with France, after World War I and the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, in carving up the Middle East into different spheres of influence and supporting the Zionist movement. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which developed into the Israeli-Arab conflict and then transformed into an Israeli-Islamic conflict, is still near the heart of the problems of the whole region. The emigration of Christians from Palestine amounts to a severe haemorrhaging and has much more to do with political, social and economic factors than with religion.

To point out the role that the USA has played in the region I want to commend the book *Faith Misplaced: The Broken Promise of US – Arab Relations: 1820-2001*, by the Lebanese-American historian, Ussama Makdisi. It tells the story of how the work of Americans in the Middle East in the 19th century – and especially missionaries – built up an enormous amount of goodwill. But this goodwill has largely been lost because of American involvement and policies in the region in the second half of the 20th century.

The ethnic cleansing of Christians in Iraq has been directly related to the war in Iraq of 2003. The Christian minority has become a scapegoat and been identified in the eyes of Muslims with the so-called Christian West that is waging war on the Muslim East. Perhaps history is repeating itself: just as Christians suffered because of their association with the Mongols, so Christians today are suffering partly because of their association with the West. Twelve years ago soon after the war in Iraq a Lebanese Christian said to me, ‘I cannot understand this hatred for the Christians. Nothing that has happened in the last twenty five years is good for the Christians.’ This is the law of unintended consequences at work.

When I was living through the civil war in Lebanon, this same Lebanese friend used this illustration to explain the kind of proxy wars that were being fought out on the streets of Beirut. Imagine that you’re playing chess with someone when you suddenly realise that the board on which you’re playing is part of a much bigger board in which a group of people on one side are playing chess against another group of people on the other side. So you are no longer in control of your own pieces because other people are using your pieces in the game that they are playing with their opponents on the other side of the board. We are now witnessing proxy wars being fought out – especially in Syria – with Iran, Russia and Syria ranged against the US, the EU and Saudi Arabia. And Israel/Palestine is caught up in this bigger conflict.

The future of Christianity in the Middle East, therefore, doesn’t depend only on Christians and Muslims in the region. It depends to a considerable extent on the foreign policies of the US, the EU and Russia.

Have I asked any of the right questions? If they get us anywhere near an accurate analysis of the problem, we might say that the future of Christianity in this region depends on how well we respond in the following five areas.

1. STAYING ROOTED IN THE REGION

This is the cruel dilemma facing many Christians: what is there to keep us here when we face such an uncertain future? How many would echo the Coptic priest in Egypt who said recently, 'If people want to leave the country, let them leave. But even if we die, we will never leave this country'?

But who am I, living in a secure home in the UK, to tell Egyptian or Palestinian Christians that they should stay where they are? What if you are Christian parents living in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, and you're concerned about how your children will get a good education and whether they will ever find work? If you have relatives in the US, Canada, Europe or Australia who are encouraging you to leave, and if you already have a green card, what is there to encourage you to stay where you are?

When I raised this question at a seminar in Oxford four years ago, Munther Isaac responded by saying, 'What will keep us here is having a new sense of mission.' In other words if Christians can believe that they really do have something significant to contribute to their societies and their nation, they will want to stay.

This means that Christians in the rest of the world have a responsibility to do all they can to empower national churches and enable Christians to stay. We might also add that some Muslims are pleading with Christians to stay in the region. King Abdullah of Jordan has said that Middle Eastern Christians are 'the glue' that holds the future of the Middle East together. A recent statement by Imam Yayha Hendi, President of Clergy Beyond Borders, encourages Christians to stay and play a full part in the life of their nations.

2. BEING ENGAGED WITH SOCIETY

In the last 150 years many Christian denominations have been engaged in educational and medical work, and some years ago I heard Bishop Samir Qaf'iety in Jerusalem described schools and hospitals as 'the arms and legs of the church'.

But something more is required at the present time. Dare we say that Christians have to come out of their ghettos and find ways of being more engaged in their communities? Already there are clear signs that for Christians in Egypt the barrier of fear has been broken. Tharwat Wahbah of the Evangelical Seminary in Cairo writes that 'the Egyptian revolution marks a new beginning of the national role of the church.' In February 2011, just two weeks after the Revolution started in Egypt, an American Presbyterian professor teaching in Egypt was preaching at an evangelical church in Cairo on Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon in which he brings God's message to the people: 'Seek the peace and prosperity (the *shalom*) of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you

will prosper (literally, in its *shalom* will be your *shalom*)’ (Jer 29:7). After an incredibly enthusiastic response from the congregation after the service she wrote: ‘I was amazed that the church here, whose pietistic (and fearful) isolationism has driven me crazy in the past, is now starting to engage in integrated reflection about public life and civic responsibility ... Christian hope means a vision for society, for God’s will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

I have been deeply impressed with organisations like the Holy Land Trust here in Bethlehem, which among other things is doing all it can to build up civil society from the bottom up. In Romania Danut Manastireanu of World Vision wrote a short book in 2012 called *After Liberation, Then What? Enabling and Protecting Communities in Post-Authoritarian Contexts*, describing what nation-building might mean in these countries behind the Iron Curtain which had suffered from decades of communist rule. I suspect that this kind of contribution will be desperately needed in the coming years in Syria and Egypt.

3. BEING AWARE OF HISTORY AND POLITICS

Several Palestinian Christians have told me that they can trace their family history back several centuries. But how many are aware of the Christian doctors, engineers, artists and translators who played such a significant role under the Abbassid dynasty in Baghdad and made such an enormous contribution to Arab and Islamic civilisation? And how many Christians in the region are aware of the Christian theologians of the 10th to 12th centuries who entered into serious theological debate with Muslims and who had to coin new Arabic words for ‘incarnation’ and ‘trinity’?

Philip Jenkins writes: ‘Losing the ancient churches is one thing, but losing their memory and experiences so utterly is a disaster scarcely less damaging. To break the silence, we need to recover those memories, to restore that history.’ This, of course, may not be so easy for Protestant Christians who know more about the Reformation in Europe than the early church fathers, and who might think that ‘real Christianity’ was brought to the region by western missionaries in the 19th century. We Anglicans, of course, have problems with our identity - since some of us think of ourselves as Protestants while others do not.

And history inevitably takes us into politics. It was living in Lebanon through the civil war from 1975 that made me interested in both history and politics. In the last few years, in an effort to understand what has been happening in the region, I have read far more books about history and politics than about theology. The OT prophets were intensely interested in the politics of their nation and all the surrounding nations. They weren’t just predicting the future, but were trying to understand the events they were living through – especially the disasters like the Exile. They were asking ‘How is God at work in all this mess?’ And it was in the context of war and desolation that the Psalmist writes: ‘Be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations’ (Psalm 46:10).

I realise that it’s hard for many Christians to be interested in politics and even harder to engage in any kind of political activity. But some of us may need to see this as a special calling. And should we perhaps encourage some of our young people to study

history, international relations and political science – dare I say – rather than theology?

4. LEARNING NEW WAYS OF RELATING TO MUSLIMS

Two years ago when I was teaching a course on Islam on a master's programme at Bethlehem Bible College, one of the group summed up her feelings about her Muslim neighbours with the words '*nihna majruhin*, We're wounded'. A Lebanese Christian said to me some years ago, 'We fear them and despise them at the same time.' These words may not express the feelings of every Christian in the Middle East; and there are good historical reasons why many do feel this way. But wherever there is hurt, or fear or arrogance in our hearts – whether we're Arab or western Christians – do we not need to ask the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and help us to work through our fears and prejudices?

When I was working with students in the region in the 70s and early 80s and wondering how to approach this subject through Bible study, it dawned on me one day that there might be a parallel between Christian attitudes towards Muslims today and Jewish attitudes towards the Samaritans at the time of Jesus. These attitudes had something to do with three things: race, religion and politics. It occurred to me that if we can find out from the Gospels and Acts how Jesus went about changing the attitudes of his Jewish disciples towards the Samaritans, perhaps we can find how we can become less fearful and more open and loving in the way we think and feel about our Muslim neighbours.

If we can face our fears in this way, we may be able to see the prayer of the early church in Acts 4 as a model of how Christians should be praying in this situation today. They are aware that their backs are against the wall. So they pray, 'Now, Lord, consider their threats.' But instead of asking for protection, they ask to be delivered from their fears and to be given freedom, courage and boldness to communicate the good news about Jesus: '... and enable us your servants to speak your word with great boldness ...' They then go on to ask that God will act in his sovereign power to reach into the lives of their neighbours: '... while you stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus' (Acts 4:29-30).

It seems that God has been answering this kind of prayer, since in recent years we have seen increasing numbers of Muslims becoming disciples of Jesus. We need to welcome them warmly as members of the Body of Christ, while at the same time allowing them the freedom to find their own ways of expressing their commitment to Christ. This is a significantly new phenomenon, and it may well be that 'Christianity' in this region will look very different in twenty years' time.

5. UNDERSTANDING MUSLIMS AND ISLAM

When I was teaching a course on the Qur'an at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut, the daughter of a pastor admitted that although she had grown up with Muslims and knew something about their faith, she had never actually opened a

Qur'an. In Cairo some years ago I was surprised that no-one in a group of Egyptian Christians had ever read the text of the Code of 'Umar.

One of my heroes has been Temple Gairdner, a CMS missionary who worked in Cairo until his death in 1927. He knew Arabic well enough to engage in public debates with sheikhs from al-Azhar and to write poetry in Arabic. During a sabbatical in the US he was deeply influenced by D. B. Macdonald, a scholar of the OT and of Islam. Before that year of study Gairdner was more interested in finding knock-down arguments to use against Muslims. Macdonald taught him the importance trying to understand Islam *at its very best* and also as *as it is*. After a visit to Cairo in 1907, he wrote: 'I was profoundly conscious that they (the missionaries) did not understand the Muslims because they were not properly trained for the work – were in fact as far as Islam was concerned, horribly ignorant ... the result for me was that I made up my mind if ever I could do anything to train missionaries to Muslims to know Islam, I would put my back into it.' Does 'horribly ignorant' not describe the situation of many Christians?

CONCLUSION

Can Christians in the Middle East live under Islam? Yes, of course they can – but of course it doesn't now look as if they will have to in quite the way that we were expecting this time last year. And can Christianity survive in the Middle East? I'm sure that all of us here today would the answer the question with a resounding 'Yes!' But I would want to add 'provided we are prepared to ask all the hard questions.'

Christians in the region will probably be fewer in number; but I would like to believe that they will be more confident of their identity and their roots and deeply committed to stay where they are; more actively involved in the life of their communities and their nations; more aware of their history and more engaged in what's happening around them; more open and outgoing in their relationships with their Muslim neighbours; and more understanding of what Islam is all about.

I end with two passages of scripture. Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in Babylon includes the words: 'I know the plans I have for you ... plans to prosper you and not to harm you [literally 'plans of *shalom* and not of evil'], plans to give you hope and a future [Hebrew: *acharit watikwa*] (Jer 29:11). In the past I have always read this as a promise addressed to me personally as an individual believer. But from now on, since it says 'you' (plural) and not 'you' (singular), I want to read it as a promise that is addressed to the people of God as a whole, and in particular to all the Christian communities in this region.

One of the most relevant books in the NT for this situation is the first letter that Peter wrote to Christians in Asia Minor to prepare them for difficult times ahead. He says 'Do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you ... Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.' He is careful to distinguish between suffering that we endure because of the name of Christ and suffering that we endure for other reasons, and he concludes, 'So then, those who suffer according to the will of God will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good' (1 Peter 4:12-19;

2:21). So as we commit the future of Christianity in this region into the hands of God, let's commit ourselves to work for the total well-being of our societies.

And I leave it to you to work out what all this might have to do with St. George's College in Jerusalem.

End