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The Arab Christian Struggle
Staying in Their Homeland or Moving to the West

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We are bombarded today by reports from media outlets on the struggles and conflicts from much of the Middle East. Amidst the wars and tumult of opinions there exists a small percentage of Arab Christians. Ever since the beginning of the Christian era, there have been Arab Christians. In the Acts of the Apostles (New Testament) we read that on the day of Pentecost, the Arabians heard the wonderful works of God in their own tongue (Acts 2:11). Paul wrote that he "went into Arabia" to preach the gospel (Galatians 1:17). At the first ecumenical councils of the ancient church, there were Arab archbishops present and in the pre-Islamic period, the Christian faith grew among the Arabs (Trimingham, 1979). However, even though Christianity was born in the Middle East, 'Arab Christians' have never had it easy there. And for over a century, Arab Christians have been immigrating to Chile, Honduras, The United States, and other Western countries. The percentage of Christians in the Middle East is rapidly declining. In fact, a region that was once a Christian stronghold, is today only about 3.7% Christian (Wormald, 2016). So why have so many Arab Christians fled and why do some stay? The central aim of this paper is to look at the main factors behind the internal struggle that Arab Christians face in deciding whether to stay in their home land or whether to immigrate to the West. It is of course not an easy decision for anyone to immigrate elsewhere, no matter who you are or where you are from.

Johnny Anastas, a Latin Catholic and small business owner from Bethlehem, Palestine spoke about why Christians leave during a personal interview. He said, "Right now we are less than one percent Christian [in Palestine]. All the Christians run away because they want to live in peace and there is no peace here" (Anastas, 2014). This sentiment is shared among Arab Christians throughout much of the Middle East. A lack of peace can be caused by a variety of factors from political instability, economic hardships, social erosion, or physical threats. Each country and region has it's own distinct factors for Christian immigration. For example, a Christian family from Iraq might immigrate to Canada for a very different reason then a Christian from Lebanon, Egypt, or Jordan. Throughout the course of this paper, a few country specific situations will be highlighted, however the aim is to give broader and more collective reasons for why many Arab Christians throughout the Middle East in general decide to immigrate and why some decide to stay. In order to understand the struggle that Arab Christians face in making these decisions, we will begin by looking at a few significant moments in the history of the Middle East that have affected the Arab Christian community and shaped them into who they are today.

In 610 AD when Muhammad began preaching the doctrines of Islam, he wanted all to accept the message he had received from God, but respected the decisions of others and regarded Christians as

'people of the book', since they too were descendants of Father Abraham and believed in the prophets of old. Christians were to be accorded "toleration and protection in the Islamic state" (Hourani, p.17). In the Hadith it is written that, "Whoever does harm to a Christian or Jew, against him will I myself [the prophet Mohammad] bring an accusation on the day of judgment" (Wessels, p.188). Such a strongly protective statement by the leader of a major world religion shows great respect and illustrates the lack of prejudice that religion should embody. According to the Quran, a forced conversion is illegal: "There is no compulsion in religion", even though conversion was considered desirable (Zidan, 2:256-2).

Soon after the death of Muhammad in 632, however, it appears that a second faith was no longer tolerated in the heartland of Arabia. For example, the city of Najran, in today's Yemen, was an important Christian center. Wessels writes that under one of Muhammad's successors, Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (ca. 590-644), Christians from Najran were displaced and sent to Iraq. Later, under another caliph, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al Aziz, the order was given to have a certain Arab Christian tribe pay the jizya, or tribute tax, that was imposed on all non-Muslim and non-Arab tribes under Islamic rule. Even though they were not Muslim, the tribe refused since they were Arab. 'Umar permitted them to pay the poor tax instead, which was required of Muslims, and required that "their children not be baptized, but raised as Muslims" (Wessels, p.3).

It should be noted that not all caliphs were intolerant. Many caliphs were sympathetic to the desire of certain Arab tribes to become, but especially to remain, Christian. But even though Muhammad, and even some caliphs, stood up for others and religious force was, as a rule, avoided, over the centuries Christians (and even Jews) who dwelt among Arabs and even spoke Arabic, felt pressure to convert to Islam (Wessels, p.3). Like Christianity, Islam is a missionary faith with desires to convert the world. These fundamental missionary desires seem to put the two faiths against each other as rivals. Viorst suggests that even though "Islam adopted the monotheism of the Christians and Jews and respects their "book", the Bible, it's attitude towards [Christianity] has been ambivalent" (Viorst, p.11). Islam is in awe of Christianity as a faith that had the scriptures before them, while at the same time, the Quran urges to "Fight against those who have been given the Scripture and believe not in Allah" (Zidan, 9:29). It seems that both these faiths are competitors and that from early on, both sought for global religious control.

Since the creation of Islam, this pressure for Arab Christians to convert to Islam as mentioned above, has until recent years, almost always been an unspoken, maybe even inconspicuous pressure caused by the dhimma system. The word "dhimmi" literally means in Arabic someone who lives "under the protection of"… and entails a consequent reduction to second-class status. Dhimma allows rights of residence and guarantees personal safety and security of property in return for paying a tribute tax and acknowledging Muslim rule (Lewis, p.4). This tax, called the Jizya, is clearly stated in the Quran when it commands to fight those who do not believe in the religion of truth, even if they are People of the Book, "until they pay the Jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued" (Zidan, 9:29). This statement is supported by a statement in the Hadith, which says, "If they refuse to accept Islam, demand from them the Jizya" (Hadith, 19:4294). Along with paying a tax, Christians and other minorities under the Dhimma system were "not allowed to carry arms, give evidence against Muslims in the courts of law or marry Muslim women" just to name a few.

The dhimma system may have at first produced "protection", perhaps even at an exorbitant price, but over time it seems that many dhimmis yielded to the unspoken pressure and preferred conversion to Islam and renunciation of their faith in order to escape the hardships of dhimmitude or to avoid losing protection when unable to pay the Jizya (Malik, p.18). From the time that Islam began to rule in the region, Christian communities were dominated and subjugated thereby being forced to give up an existence of complete liberty and to succumb to dhimmitude in their own ancestral lands. According to Bat Ye'or, in her book, Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide, the majority of Arab Christians today, over 90 percent, live in dhimmi communities, which is to say they are under Muslim legal and political rule and reduced to second-class status. Of course, some countries are much better than others.

Throughout the seventh century, Islam spread and conquered cities westward. By 711 Muslims had taken North Africa and entered Spain. "By the time of the crusades [in the eleventh century] the Christian population of Egypt was less than half of the total, and Arabic was rapidly replacing Aramaic and Coptic as the first language of the indigenous inhabitants" (Betts, p.11). In the eleventh century significant conflict between "Church and state, or rather between two radically different views, arose as to whether secular authorities such as kings, counts, or dukes, had any real role in appointments to ecclesiastical offices such as bishoprics. People became personally engaged

in a dramatic religious controversy known as the Investiture Controversy, and as both sides "tried to [rally] public opinion in their favor, the result was an awakening of intense Christian piety and public interest in religious affairs" ("Crusades"). It was at this time also that Christian piety was strengthened by religious propaganda caused by the Church's advocating of a Just War in order to retake the Holy Land of Jerusalem from the Muslims.

Pope Gregory VII struggled over the doctrinal validity of a holy war and the shedding of blood in God's name, but in the end he justified violence. Afterall, what was most important to the Pope was that the Christians who made pilgrimages to the Holy Land were being persecuted and needed relief ("Crusades"). It seems that the crusades were an outlet for the intense religious piety created. "Both Muslims and Christians respectively exploited the call to holy war and to take up the cross to mask ulterior motives" (Wessels, p.216) such as the commercial interests of the Italians to offer ships for the transportation of crusaders in order to have renewed contact with the Levant and produce much profit.

One of the great tragedies of the crusades and also key example for understanding the problem of identity for Arab Christians is that "many hapless [Christians such as] Jacobites, Armenians, and even Greek Orthodox, suffered death at Crusader hands simply because they looked too much like Muslims when encountered in the heat of battle or the aftermath of pillage" (Betts, p.13). Every time a new wave of Crusaders arrived from Europe the same problem occurred. What does this say about their perception of the other (Muslims) or even themselves (Christians) for that matter? The implication here is that the crusaders didn't recognize those who were on their own team simply because they thought that all Christians could be categorized as the same – "westerners" equal to themselves. Or on the flip side, the crusaders actions imply that they believed all Arabs were Muslims. This mistaken identity created violence toward the Arab Christians not because of religion, but because of cultural and ethnical ignorance on the part of the European crusaders. There are many who believe that the causes of the confrontations between the East and West during the crusades and the colonial era were primarily religious in nature. Indeed, research does suggests that these two periods had a tendency, because of the experience of the masses, to have religious characteristics, but the more the West "progressed", the more social, economic, and political in nature these confrontations became (Wessels, p.215).

Colonialism expanded during the nineteenth century with the European powers fighting to obtain land and expand their empires around the globe. Some imperialists took a more religious approach to empire. They argued that Europeans (and Americans) had a Christian and moral responsibility to spread the message of Christianity and educate ignorant peoples into higher culture. To many Europeans and Americans, the prospect of saving souls seemed as important as the prospect of expanding prestige and profit. Most Europeans though, justified their actions with humanitarianism, arguing that colonialism benefited the indigenous peoples by bringing them science and education and the benefits of higher civilization. For example, "King Leopold of Belgium rushed enthusiastically into the race for territory in Central Africa [saying,] 'To open to civilization the only part of the globe where it has not yet penetrated, to pierce the darkness which envelops whole populations, is a Crusade worthy of this century of progress'" (Spielvogel, 2011). Imagine what the Arabs must have thought as white Europeans entered their countries to either convert them or educate them.

In much of the Arab world today, there is a suspicion of the West, and for Islamic fundamentalists, this suspicion is often transformed into outright hatred. The collective memory of foreign invasion and imperial control brought on by the crusades and colonialism has served as a "pretext to scapegoat indigenous Christians because they have been perceived as sharing the same religious beliefs with the vilified Westerners (Malik, p.7). In October 2005 there were violent attacks on several Coptic and other churches in Alexandria by fundamental extremists. "When seething mobs approached to burn and pillage, the state's security forces simply stood by and did not interfere" (Malik, p.47). In 1981 President Sadat of Egypt imprisoned the distinguished Pope Shenouda III, the 117th spiritual leader of the Copts, and exiled him to a desert monastery. "In 1983, President Mubarak of Egypt, in testimony to a joint meeting of the two Foreign Relations Committees in the U.S. Congress, denied any antagonism to the pope and promised his release" (Nisan, p.115). Violence and discrimination against Christians in Egypt has not always been this bad. Throughout history there have been periods of flux and only in recent years have we seen the resurgence of Islamic Fundamentalism and an increase in physical violence against Christians in places like Egypt and Syria.

One of the prominent reasons for Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi Christians immigrating today, lives in the resurgence of Islamic religious fundamentalism. This phenomenon has been given many names, such

as fanaticism, Islamism, militant extremism, Political Islam, and more, but essentially they are all the same and boil down to hostility and intolerance towards both non-Muslims and more liberal Muslims who might want to be more like Europe and the West and compete technologically and economically. The term fundamentalism was originally coined in the early twentieth century in the United States with protestant denominations wanting to reaffirm fundamental Christian beliefs and has since grown to encompass much more than just protestant Christians. Today, it is a term used to describe many extreme religious groups such as Evangelical Christians, Iranian revolutionaries, ultra-orthodox Jews, and Buddhist resistance fighters, among others (Beeman, 2001). Fundamentalism is the demand for strict adherence to specific theological doctrines and seems to be a religious reactionary impulse against modernist theology. That is that it seeks to recover and publicize aspects of the past that modern life has obscured.

Author Tom O'Golo believes that "a genuine fundamentalist is also a radical, someone who tries to get to the root of the matter." He also says that, "a major weakness with many or perhaps most radicals is not that they don't dig, but that they don't dig deep enough. Consequently many fundamentalists end up defending or acting upon beliefs, which are not really at the heart of their doctrine" (O'Golo, p.105). This is certainly the case for religious fundamentalists who use violence to further their cause. 'Thou shalt not kill' is at the heart of the three monotheistic faiths, and this was even expanded for Christians by Jesus when he taught, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor'. From many perspectives, any Christian or Muslim who harms others in the pursuit of his or her radicalism is blatantly disregarding the root truths of the faith. Neither Muslim, Jew, nor Christian, is innately fanatic. So then the question must be asked, what causes a person to become fanatic and use harm against another in the name of religion? Who and what are responsible for fanaticism? People don't become radical religious fundamentalists because of religion. They become radical religious fundamentalists because of social, economic, and or political changes.

After taking a look at many black and white photographs of Egyptian society from the middle decades of the twentieth century, one thing in particular stands out. None of the women wore veils or any Islamic headdress and they all carried a style identical to that of British women. Pictures today from Cairo of music concerts, dinner parties, or the local market will invariably show a large number of the females with their heads, if not more, totally covered. In the eyes of the West this appears like a regression or a return to the fundamentals. What is the cause of this resurgence of fundamentalism?

British rule over Egypt lasted 32 years, but the British presence remained for an additional 30 years until 1953 when Egypt became a republic. When the British completely pulled out of Egypt, the country was left without a real sense of national unity or identity. After almost three generations of British influence over a people whose roots tie back to the Mohammad and nomadic tribes in the vast desert, it appears that the Egyptians have decided to unify the nation by returning to the past. What better way to instill Arab pride and create their own national identity then through a "uniform". As can be seen in many ways, "today's Middle East is a different place than it was two generations ago" (Malik, p.37).

The question of Arab identity is a source of much discussion and entire books have been written on the topic. The social changes in the Middle East postcolonialism have created a huge question of Arab identity that has been a cause in Christian persecution and migration today. For example, not all 'Arab Christians' claim to be Arab. In fact, there are still Maronites, the native Christians of Lebanon, who claim that they are not Arabs, but Phoenicians (Wessels, p.4). This belief distances some Lebanese Christians from the Arab world, putting Christians on one side and Muslims on another. In fact, Scholar Anton Wessels suggests that "the civil war which [was] fought in Lebanon [from] 1975 until about 1990 can be conceived of as a religious war between Christians and Moslems, and the threat to the Lebanese state can be regarded as a threat to continued Christian existence" (Wessels, p.4). This identity belief by some Maronites is the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, most 'Arab Christians' consider themselves Arabs. In Egypt, the Coptic religious leader Marqus Simaika once said to a Coptic crowd, "all of you are Copts: some of you are Muslim Copts, others are Christian Copts but all of you are descended from the ancient Egyptians" (Cragg, p.173). It is true that the Copts are indigenous to the land of Egypt and therefore are Arab, and Egyptians in particular. The issue here lies in the change that has occurred in the past several decades of what it means to be Arab. In August 1980, the Libyan president, Colonel Qadhafi, declared that Arab Christians simply had to convert, since "it is a contradiction to be both Arab and Christian." … He declared that if Christian Arabs were to be authentic Arabs, they would have to accept the Islamic faith. "Christians who live in the Arab world," he stated, "have closer links to the Vatican than to Mecca. They have a European spirit in an Arab body"

(Wessels, p.1).

The statements made by Qadhafi illustrate the contemporary problems that are faced by these two religious sects. More and more the Copts in Egypt are being kicked out as if they are non-Egyptian. And colonialism may have ended in the early 1960's , but from the standpoint of the Arab people, is there really any difference between a British ruler and an Arab dictator? Thankfully the United Nation's Special Committee on Decolonization and dozens of independence movements and global political solidarity projects ended colonization roughly half a century ago, but imperial rule still continues today. Israel's rule over Palestine, the United States' recent rule in Afghanistan, or President Bashar al-Assad's rule over Syrian are all examples of how the imperialism of the colonial era continues to exist today, only with a new face.

Today, Arab Christians may face physical harm by ISIS in Syria, be socially ostracized in Palestine, or have a lack of economic support in Egypt. Generally speaking, they are unable to live the comfortable peaceful life desired and thus often make the decision to immigrate to a Western country. A visual example of the economic hardships that Christians face today can be found in the living conditions of many Coptic Christians in Egypt who fill the position of the garbage cleaner. The garbage is collected from around the city of Cairo and brought to their village for sorting and recycling. Pigs raised by the Copts are a great asset because they eat the organic matter, acting as filters or cleaners. But in 2006 the Egyptian government hired a trash collecting company to manage Cairo's trash even though the people living there recycle almost 90% of all garbage collected, which is four times the percentage most Western recycling companies achieve. Then in the summer of 2009, with the outbreak of the Swine Flu (H1N1) epidemic, the Egyptian government impulsively ordered the slaughter of all pigs, thus destroying a livelihood for these Copts in Cairo and ridding them of their garage filters. With the events of 2006 and 2009, the living conditions for the Coptic Christians has been getting worse, with mounds of garbage piling high and even flowing out of the windows of abandoned buildings. The Copts seem unable to free themselves from the filth and stench of what is now known as Trash City (Eshak, 2012).

Speaking of the Trash City in Cairo, Markarios Nasser Eshak, a Copt who grew up in the Trash City and who recently graduated from Cairo University said, "it lacks infrastructure and often has no running water, sewage, or electricity. Residents are not legal residents but squatters living under perpetual threat of being kicked out at any moment by the government. It was very difficult growing up there" (Eshak, 2012). The physical actions taken by the Egyptian government and the emergence of the trash city is a small visual representation of the prejudice and persecution happening to the Christians throughout the majority of the Middle East.

These events from the spread of Islam, to the crusades, colonization, and on to the present, all feed into the collective memory of the Arab Christian and help shape their identity and connection with the West. Indeed, the Arab mind today has been produced by a few thousand years of events and ideas in the Middle East, the cradle of the world. The Arab community's shared memory, a memory that may not necessarily always be accurate, is also not very positive in many respects. It's a memory of being subjected and persecuted; a significant factor in the reasons for leaving to the West. But what are the reasons Arab Christians want to stay in their home land? First of all the term 'Arab Christian' is often seen as more 'Christian' than 'Arab', but in answering the question just posed, it is important to remember that just because an Arab Christian belongs to the Christian faith, does not make them culturally equivalent to a European or American Christian. An Arab Christian is still an Arab and we can admit that Arab culture is in many ways distant from Western experience. Because Arab Christians are Arabs and belong to Arab society, they most certainly take part in a sort of collective nationalism. Author and Journalist Milton Viorst explains that nationalism is not easy to define, nor is it "rooted in critical thought [or] rationalism" but it can be passionate and even a kind of love. He states that "nationalism is a mystical attachment to historical roots that guides a common destiny" (Viorst, 2006).

Even though Christians of the Middle East are a minority religiously, they have a share in this collective nationalism through both the "historical roots" of the region and the common language. Today the Middle East is divided into many nation states, however all Arabs, both Muslims and Christians, share the common thread of the Arabic Language. The language and lessons learned through history bring Arab Christians across the Middle East together. In a conversation with Father Hanna Kildani, a prominent Jordanian historian and Catholic Priest outside of Amman, Jordan, he remarked that Arab Christians in the Middle East, as members of the Arab society, are part of the same social tissue.

"The country of the Middle East is one region. Now we say Jordan, Palestine, Syria, but just one hundred years ago it was one country, one region. There is a phrase

in Arabic that says, 'If your neighbor is good, you are good.' For example, things are very bad right now in Syria, so we don't feel good here [in Jordan]. We can't say that Syrians or Iraqis are different people than us. First of all they are Arabs. The majority of them are Muslim, but they are from the same social tissue. If you go now and cross the Syrian Jordanian border, it is the same as if you cross the border between two American states. We practically belong to the same nation, to the same culture, just under different names. So if your neighbor is not doing well, you are not doing well" (Kildani, 2014).

This connection and bond between Arabs that Father Kildani alludes to, spawns from their collective Arab Nationalism. Understanding this Arab bond and nationalism helps us to understand the struggle that Arab Christians face in trying to make a decision whether to leave their country or stay; to immigrate to the Christian West or stay in the Arab East. Because even though prejudice and persecution can be found towards Arab Christians (and other religious minorities) in the Middle East, they still feel connected to the fabric of society and even to the land, the birthplace of their Christian faith. Sister Lara Shawareb of the Rosary Sisters of Jerusalem in Madaba, Jordan expressed it this way:

"It's a gift from God for us to be born here. We can see the things that Jesus saw, we can go to the places where he went, and smell the things he smelt. Surely this will strengthen our faith" (Shawareb, 2014).

Fadoul Mazzawi, a Latter-day Saint from Nazareth described his connection to the Holy Land:

"It's very emotional. I do believe that I was blessed with being born and growing up in this country, the Holy Land. It's something that you feel everyday... the connection. When you think that 2.2 billion people all over the world consider themselves Christian, their eyes in this period of time to the Holy Land, to Nazareth, Bethlehem, to whatever, it's something that gives you uniqueness and I feel that I have… I have a unique connection to Jesus, the Messiah. He is the man from my country and I belong to this country. It is wonderful" (Mazzawi, 2013).

These statements illustrate the strong connection that Arab Christians feel toward their homeland. Often it is difficult to make the decision to leave to Chile, The United States, or any other Western country because it would mean leaving behind the land that "strengthens [their] faith" and gives them "a unique connection to Jesus". During a personal interview, Johnny Anastas expressed a seemingly paradoxical view that can be found with many Arab Christians. He first said, "I love living where Jesus was born. If I was born in the United States, I would come to live where Jesus was born" (Anastas, 2014). However shortly after, he described his current living condition and the struggles it brings.

"A tomb without a roof. They caged us. Every night, every day, when we wake up we see the [separation] wall in our face. It's not the kind of life you want to live. But we can't do anything. Because it is our home. It is the only home that we've got. Where to go? We can't leave it. We want to live like normal people in peace. But we can't do anything. It's not easy for anyone to live here. We are suffering a lot here."

Anastas feels he and his family are living in a cage and are suffering a lot, although because of his Christian connection with the city and because of his house, he refuses to leave and would even move to Palestine if he lived in the United States. Anastas is not alone in this paradoxical view. Another Arab Christian from Palestine, Odeh Marcous, also shared his struggle with whether to leave the country or stay.

"I believe it's a blessing. You know something, we are blessed to live in the same city where our Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ was born. Most of the people here often forget about the holiness of this place because of the political situation. But deep inside each [Arab Christian] you will find a seed. That they belong to this land, they belong to this city."

He continued,

"As a Christian we live between two swords. The Muslims on one side and the Israelis from the other side, they want to dominate. And the Christians, they are in the middle. And the one in the middle, he pays the price. I have been born here, I lived most of my life here. I love the people, regardless of their race, color, or religion. But unfortunately these days, I have been thinking seriously about leaving for good because of the political situation around us, whether here in the Holy Land, in Palestine, the occupied Territories, or in the Middle East. You know something, whenever you think about your Christian brothers who have been slaughtered or their throat has been slit because of their faith… I have to think about my kids" (Marcous, 2014).

These personal thoughts and feelings from Arab Christians today illustrate the very real struggle that Arab Christians in the Middle East face.

For many Christians, the ultimate fear is the disappearance of Christianity from the Arab East. Some Arab Christians like Odeh Marcous, consider leaving because of a physical threat. Some, like Johnny Anastas, want peace, even simply peace of mind. Many Arab Christians from Lebanon, Jordan and other countries have immigrated not because of economic hardship or fear for their life, but because of the pervasive feeling of uncertainty. And some are simply trying to 'survive'. Throughout the history of Christians in the Middle East, there has been challenges, and struggles that have added to Christians immigrating West. However, because of the strong Arab nationalism and connection with the land and origin of their faith, just to name a couple, some Christians decide to stay and tough it out. With such a bleak current situation it is only natural to ask, can an Arab Christian in the Arab world be and remain a Christian? What future do Christians have in the Middle East? Will Christians in the Middle East dwindle to only a small number like the Samaritans of Nablus? There is no clear answer to these questions. With strong Islamic States and a Muslim majority, perhaps the answers depend on if Muslims see Arab Christians as brothers or as infidels? If they only see them as the later, then it may very well be the end of Arab Christians in their home land. Only time will tell.

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