Christian Minorities under Muslim Rule

May I begin by thanking Dr Mahmoud Ayoub and Dr Donald Wagner for the invitation to participate in this Third Evangelical Christian and Muslim Dialogue conference at Fuller Theological Seminary. I also want to dedicate this paper to Dr Evelyne Reisacher who is sadly unwell and unable to deliver her paper on this important subject. Unlike her, I am not a specialist in Islamic Studies. Nor have I previously undertaken research into Christian minorities living under Muslim rule.

My own specialism is Christian Zionism, its historical roots, theological basis and political consequences. However, ten days ago, when I was asked to deputise for Dr Reisacher, I took a crash course in the subject and I am grateful to some of you for assistance with source material. I also look forward to hearing the response from Imam Abdullah Antepli, confident that he, with your help, will make up for the deficiencies of this paper.

1. Introduction: Them and Us

P.R. Kumaraswamy, in *Islam and Minorities: Need for a Liberal Framework*[1] observes that religions invariably,

> "classify people into two distinct categories: believers and unbelievers. In the name of universality, they normally give a distinct, often pejorative nomenclature to the latter; *goyim* in Judaism, *infidel* in Christianity and Islam, and *melacha* in Hinduism. In each case the believer is held spiritually higher and morally superior to the nonbeliever and hence is bestowed with social ascendency, better status, and higher treatment. Islam is no exception to this segregation… This us-verses-them paradigm is neither new nor unique but as old as religion itself."

Within Islam, two kinds of non-Muslims are differentiated: believers and non-believers. Christians and Jews were designated in the Qur'an as *ahl al-Kitab* or "People of the Book" with subject or *dhimmi status.*

The word *dhimmi* (plural dimam) literally means "protection, care, custody, covenant of protection, compact; responsibility, answerableness; financial obligation, liability, debt; inviolability, security of life and property; safeguard, guarantee, security; conscience". *Ahl al-dhimmi* is "the free non-Muslim subjects living in Muslim countries who, in return for paying the capital tax, enjoyed relative protection and safety."[2]

There are today approximately 12-15 million Christians in the Middle East which constitute between 4-5% of the population. The largest Christian minorities living under Muslim rule are as follows[3]:

Church	Category	Name	Location	Membership
Orthodox	**Oriental**	Armenian Orthodox Church of Cilicia	Iran, Lebanon, Syria	500,000
		Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria	Egypt, Sudan	8 million
		Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch	Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey	200,000
	Eastern Orthodox	Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	Turkey	10,000
		Arab Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch	Syria, Lebanon	800,000
		Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem	Palestine, Jordan	150,000
		Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria	Egypt, Sudan	10,000
	Assyrian Orthodox	Assyrian (or East Syrian) Church [Nestorian]	Iraq, Syria, Iran	120,000
Catholic	**Maronite**	Maronite Church (joined Rome 1580)	Lebanon, Syria	600,000
	Uniate	Armenian	Syria, Lebanon	60,000
		Chaldean	Iraq, Syria	400,000
		Coptic	Egypt	100,000
		Greek Melkite	Lebanon, Syria, Palestine	500,000
		Syrian	Syria, Lebanon	120,000
Protestant		Anglican (Episcopal)	Sudan, Egypt, Iran, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq	300,000
		Presbyterian	Egypt, Sudan, Lebanon, Syria	400,000
		Free Churches (Baptist, Brethren, Pentecostals	Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria	200,000

Clearly the status of Christians living under Muslim rule is a controversial subject. Some might even call it a 'minefield'. It has evoked strong opinions on both sides. There are some within the Islamic community who seem to be in denial as to the contemporary difficulties faced by Christian minorities. And there are some within the Christian (and Jewish) community who exaggerate and exacerbate these tensions for their own purposes.

I will begin with a brief history of the development of *dhimmi* status for Christian minorities; I will present two contrasting interpretations, give an assessment of the status of Christian minorities today, and then offer a (middle) way forward that neither ignores the anxieties of Christian minorities nor demonises Muslim majorities for the tensions that still exist between our two faith communities. Among friends, it is important that we can be open, honest and vulnerable with each other and I ask for your forgiveness in advance, not least for my pronunciation of Arabic words.

2. The Historical Development of *Dhimmi* Status under Islamic Rule

As the early Muslims expanded their territory through military conquest, they imposed terms of surrender upon the defeated tribes and nations.[4] Courbage and Fargues write:

> "Before launching an attack the ruler would offer them three choices — conversion, payment of a tribute, or to fight by the sword. If they did not choose conversion a treaty was concluded, either instead of battle or after it, which established the conditions of surrender for the Christians and Jews — the only non-Muslims allowed to retain their religion at this time. The terms of these treaties were similar and imposed on the *dhimmi*, the people 'protected' by Islam, certain obligations."[5]

The agreement between Muhammad and the Jews of Khaybar, near Medina formed the precedent for the treatment of *dhimma* subsequently. When the Jews of Khaybar surrendered to Muhammad after a siege, he allowed them to remain in return for half of their annual produce.[6] The imposition of tribute on non-Muslims who fell under the Muslim rule is based on the terms of Sura 9:29 of the Qur'an. The verse reads:

> "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold forbidden that which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the jizya with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

The supposed "Code" or "Pact of 'Umar" between the second caliph Umar and the conquered Christians living in Syria and Iraq is another source – although probably as Colin Chapman suggests, "a compilation that reflects a later stage in the codification of Islamic law concerning conquered peoples". The pact summarizes:

> "what came to be regarded as Islamic practice, if not law, concerning Jewish and Christian dhimmis for centuries. In return for toleration and protection from the Muslim rulers, these are the requirements laid down for Jews and Christians:
>
> - All non-Muslim males had to pay a poll-tax (*jizya*) to the Muslim state as an expression of their submission to Muslim rule. (Many documents say they should experience some kind of humiliation while making the payment-for example, by being struck on the neck.) If they owned land, they also had to pay a land tax (*kharaj*)

- Non-Muslims could not engage in military service, since this would involve them in *jihad*, holy war.
- Jews and Christians were not allowed to build new churches or synagogues, or repair those in areas occupied by Muslims.
- They were not allowed to display the cross outside churches or to hold public religious processions outside.
- Their house could not be built taller than those of Muslims
- Their clothes should be different from the clothes worn by Muslims. Often they had to wear a badge to mark them out from Muslims, and sometimes they were required to shave their heads.
- They were forbidden to ride on horses, and had to ride on mules or donkeys.
- They were required to show respect to Muslims-for instance, by giving up their seats to them.[7]

The Muslim historian Baladhuri, writing in the 9th Century drew parallels between the *dhimma* and Byzantine legislation, describing the Jews as the dhimmis of Christians.[8] There also appear parallels between Muslim *dhimmi* regulations and those imposed on Jews within the Byzantian Empire. For example, Jews were banned from all public offices and the army; they were prohibited from criticizing Christianity, marrying a Christian, or owning a Christian slave. Furthermore, Jews paid distinctive taxes, possibly the precursors of *jizya*. The same regulations were imposed on Christians when they came within the expanding Muslim empire.[9]

The similarities between the Pact of Umar and the Theodesian and Justinian Codes suggests that perhaps later Islamic jurists made use of them. At least some of the clauses of the pact appear to mirror the measures first introduced by the Umayyad caliph Umar II or by the early Abbasid caliphs. Michael Nazir-Ali points out,

> "In many parts of the world, Muslim rule succeeded theocratic Byzantine imperialism… It is paradoxical that the Byzantine Church itself became subject to these provisions when they became part of the Muslim legislation on the *dhimma.*"[10]

The treatment of *dhimmis*, including the enforcement of restrictions placed on them, varied considerably, depending on both the goodwill of the ruler and the historical circumstances. The periods when Islamic states were strong generally coincided with more relaxed attitude towards *dhimmis* while their treatment usually became harsher when Islam was under threat from the West. Kenneth Cragg describes the enduring legacy of the Crusades.

> "The Crusades became an enduring symbol of malignity as well as heroism, of open imperialism and private piety… They wrought much havoc along their path… They left noble piles of architecture on the eatern landscape but seared the eastern soul. They gavce Arab Muslims through every succeeding century a warrant of memory to hold against Christian Arabs as, by association, liable to pseudo-Arabness or worse… The image of them is one that no century since has been able to exorcise"[11]

Cragg goes on to explain how, after the Crusades, while Arab Christians had to endure the "suspicion of being the pawns or dupes of western powers" then nevertheless benefited from commercial links between Europe and the Islamic world.

> "When the Crusades finally exhausted themselves against the dominant Turks and Constantinople fell in 1453, Christians in the arc from the Bosphorus to Egypt came slowly into the orbit of western commercial and economic penetration. Local Christians in major centres such as Izmir, Alexandra and Aleppo, taking advantage of *dhimmi* status and/or protected rights of trading functions, forged associations with European merchants, developing lucrative commerce across the Mediterranean. By dint of "capitulations" or chartered rights, that the Ottoman state allowed, Christians, thanks to faith, language, or initiative, were preferred as local agents, dragomans, or interpreters under these prescripts."[12]

Cragg goes on to explain the terms under which *Dhimmi* could live under Islamic rule.

> "The Islamic tolerance of Jews and Christians… was in theory and practice a strictly contractual relationship. Theoretically life was forfeit for non-Muslims but could be reprieved by an agreement to submit politically. At any point the contract to protect could be suspended if, in the judgement of the Muslim power, its conditions had been broken. In practice the minorities – *dhimmis* in this state of *al-Dhimmah* – had reasonable security. The sword of Damocles remained but need not ever fall… In concept and largely in practice, however, it allowed Christians of any persuasion, as monotheists and "scriptured people", to maintain their own worship, teach their own offspring, and administer their own laws of personal status through their own communal hierarchy. In return for "protection," *dhimmis* paid the *jizyah*, or poll tax, and were exempt, as non-Muslims, from the *Zakat*, or alms, due only from Muslims. Thus separation was institutionalised in a form that effectively made the minorities inferior as noncitizens. Their submission in these terms was the legal basis for the suspension of *Jihad*, the obligation to subdue non-Islam by force incumbent on Dar al-Islam as such."

Bernard Lewis notes that while the local regulations and restrictions imposed on *dhimmis* by Islamic communities "did not always conform to the high morals and religious principles of Islam," in practice their actual treatment was sometimes better.

> "The status which they enjoyed has been much idealised by some writers who have magnified the undoubted tolerance of Muslim governments into the granting of complete equality. The *Dhimmis* were second class citizens, paying a higher rate of taxation, suffering from certain social disabilities, and on a few rare occasions subjected to open persecution. But by and large their position was infinitely superior to that of those communities who differed from the established church in western Europe in the same period. They enjoyed the free exercise of their religion, normal property rights, and were very frequently employed in the service of the State, often in the highest offices… they were never called upon to suffer martyrdom or exile for their beliefs."[13]

The status of Christian minorities living under Muslim rule has typically been interpreted in one of two ways – denial and demonization.

3. Denial: Ignoring the Tensions of Christian Minorities

Kumaraswamy, points out, that the most severe and immediate problem facing minorities is the denial of their existence. This operates at two levels, theological and political.

> "At the theological level, the denial is limited to the discriminatory part. There is a powerful trend among contemporary Islamic scholars to defend and portray the glorious and benevolent treatment of minorities living under Islamic rule. In their assessment, the *Dhimmi* was and continues to be the ideal framework for minorities." [14]

For example, the scholar Muhammad Hamidullah claimed,

> "If Muslim residents in non-Muslim countries receive the same treatment as *Dhimmi* in the Islamic regime, they would be more than satisfied; they would be grateful."[15]

It is sometimes implied that under Islam there was even no such thing as inequality[16] or as Sayed Khatab insists,

> "All humans have the right to live in the Islamic state, and with the Muslims they enjoy equality, justice and liberties that crystallize the reality of human brotherhood."[17]

Similarly, Sayyed Qutb, a leading intellectual in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, wrote in 1949, "Islam grants non-Muslims complete political and religious freedom and protection to practice their religious duties."[18] Kumaraswamy points out that on this sensitive issue, Islamic scholars tend to focus on the teachings of the Quran toward minorities, rather than address the practices of Islamic rulers towards them. He says,

> "It is essential to distinguish tolerance from equality. Religious tolerance, personal protection and conditional communal security of the *Dhimmi* in return for their allegiance to the Islamic rule are very different from equality."[19]

Bernard Lewis summarises the fundamental dilemma facing Islam:

> "it is only very recently that some defenders of Islam began to assert that their society in the past accorded equal status to non-Muslims. No such claim is made by spokesman for resurgent Islam, and historically there is no doubt that they are right. Traditional Islamic societies neither accorded such equality nor pretended that they were so doing. Indeed, in the old order, this would have been regarded not as a merit but as a dereliction of duty. How could one accord the same treatment to those who follow the true faith and those who wilfully reject it? This would be a theological as well as a logical absurdity."[20]

Kumaraswamy notes how the denial strategy also operates at a more explicit national or political level. Controversy over the presence or mistreatment of minorities has led a number of countries in the Middle East to adopt an official policy of denial. He says, "Despite the evidence to the contrary or because of it, states seek to dismiss the problem by pretending that minorities do not exist."[21]

Examples include the position taken by successive Turkish governments toward the Kurds and Armenians. Kurds, for example, although most are Sunni Muslim, have nevertheless been denied the right to be recognised as a distinct people, to use the Kurdish language, dress, folk-lore and names were banned. Officially portrayed as 'mountain Turks', then, since 1980 as 'Eastern Turks', the Kurds have languished as 'non-people.' Furthermore, the continued denial of the Armenian genocide from 1915, when between one and one and a half million Armenians were killed in the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, still casts a lingering shadow over Turkey's admission into the European Community. During his recent visit to Turkey, Barak Obama called for the full normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia. At his earlier news conference with President Gul, he had stood by his 2008 assertion that the killing of Armenians by Ottoman Turks in 1915 constituted "genocide" – although as the BBC points out, without repeating the "G" word. (See also CBS News). Other examples of the sometimes 'ambiguous' status of Christian minorities living under Muslim rule, include the Copts in Egypt, Armenians in Iran and Palestinian Christians living under Hamas in Gaza.

If the tendency, on the one hand, is for some Muslims to deny that there is a problem for Christian minorities, the opposite tendency is prevalent within certain Christian and Jewish circles which, whether intentionally or otherwise, exaggerate or exacerbate these tensions.

4. Dhimmitude: Inflaming the Tensions for Christian Minorities

Probably the most outspoken critic of the way Islam handled the minority faith communities it conquered or absorbed is Bat Ye'or who apparently first coined the phrase "dhimmitude" in 1983. Her book, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude,* was first published in French in 1991.[22] Bat Ye'or introduces her thesis thus:

> "In this study, I tried to analyze the numerous processes that had transformed rich, powerful Christian civilizations into Islamic lands and their long-term effects, which had reduced native Christian majorities into scattered small religious minorities, now slowly disappearing. This complex Islamization process of Christian lands and civilizations on both shores of the Mediterranean and in Iraq and Armenia - I have called: the process of "dhimmitude" and the civilization of those peoples who underwent such transformation, I have named the civilization of "dhimmitude".

In a paper "*Dhimmitude Past and Present: An Invented or Real History*"[23] published in 2002, Ye'or answers her critics who accuse her of inventing the concept.

> "I call dhimmitude the comprehensive legal system established by the Muslim conquerors to rule the native non-Muslim populations subdued by *jihad* wars. It is my opinion that this system has not been fully investigated."

She argues that dhimmitude is an inevitable consequence of jihad. Her later work *Islam and Dhimmitude. Where Civilizations Collide*, examines the continuing trend toward dhimmitude in the 20th century.[24] She writes,

> "The wars currently waged by Muslim states or through their proxies, in Israel, the Sudan, Nigeria, Kashmir, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other parts of the world, reproduce the classic strategy of *jihad*. … Today, many aspects of dhimmitude remain active or potential political forces. Hence we see a return to the same situation in modern states where the *shari'a* is applied or constitutes the source of the laws, as in Egypt, Iran, Sudan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and until recently in Afghanistan. The condition of Christians in some modern Muslim states is inspired by the traditional rules of dhimmitude relating to the laws of blasphemy, mixed marriage and apostasy, or those concerning the building and repairing of churches, and of religious processions."[25]

Bat Yo'er tends to polarise the classical Muslim division of the world into the *dar al-Islam* and the *dar al-harb*.[26] So in *Islam and Dhimmitude*, she writes,

> "Jihad divides the people of the world into two irreconcilable groups: the Muslims – inhabitants of the dar al-Islam regions subject to Islamic law; and infidels – inhabitants of the dar al-harb (harbis), the territory of war, destined to come under Islamic jurisdiction, either by the conversion of its inhabitants [through da'wa] or by armed conflict [through jihad in its non-Sufi, militaristic sense."[27]

Her contention is that "there is no public debate yet on the ideology of *jihad* against the infidels, nor about dhimmitude, because these subjects are simply obfuscated or denied outright."[28] Not surprisingly, Ye'or's thesis has been heavily criticised also. Sidney Griffiths', for example, in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, says,

> "They [the documents used as sources] are presented out of context with no analysis or explanation... The trouble with *The Decline of Eastern Christianity* is that in spite of the gathering of an enormous amount of historical material, and although she has raised an issue that well deserves study, Bat Ye'or has written a polemical tract, not responsible historical analysis." [29]

Robert Betts, the American historian observes that Bat Ye'or deals with Judaism at least as much as with Christianity so that the title is misleading and the central premise flawed. He writes,

> "The general tone of the book is strident and anti-Muslim. This is coupled with selective scholarship designed to pick out the worst examples of anti-Christian behavior by Muslim governments, usually in time of war and threats to their own destruction (as in the case of the deplorable Armenian genocide of 1915). Add to this the attempt to demonize the so-called Islamic threat to Western civilization and the end-product is generally unedifying and frequently irritating."[30]

Imad A. Ahmad, from the Minaret of Freedom Institute criticizes Ye'or's second book as a "Zionist project". He argues that,

> "This book has little to offer serious scholars of Islam or of world civilizations. It has much to offer propagandists who seek rhetorical ammunition to increase rather than decrease the hatred and strife in the world."[31]

A similar debate has emerged recently over the writings of Canon Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, founder of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity and the Barnabas Fund.[32] His most recent work, *"Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of Militant Islam"*[33] has aroused considerable controversy. For example, Ben White writes,

> "Sookhdeo stresses that the "immediate goal" of "Islamic terrorists" is "to rule the Muslim world according to the strictest forms of Islam" (406) and that "their ultimate global agenda" is "to change all the remaining *Dar al-Harb* to *Dar al-Islam*" (406).[3] This is plainly false, if only because such a gross generalisation lumps together a whole variety of actors fighting for a range of localised reasons and priorities…
> The core of Sookhdeo's analysis in *Global Jihad* is that violence and domination is intrinsic to 'classical Islam', and that the terrorists are above all theologically, rather than politically, motivated. Yet in order to make this case, Sookhdeo ends up distorting or simplifying Islamic theology..." [34]

Sookhdeo and his advocates, notably, David Zeidan and Tawfik Hamid, argue strongly that this is not the case.[35] Some appear to have a vested interest in exploiting or indeed exacerbating tensions between Christians and Muslims. Notable leading Christian Zionists include Dave Hunt[36], Joel Richardson[37], Walid Shoebat[38], as well as Zionists such as Melanie Phillips[39]. Their writings are highly critical of Islam generally and of evangelical Christian-Muslim dialogue in particular[40]. Instead, they endorse an exclusive Zionist claim to both Christian patronage as well as Palestine.

5. Christian Minorities: Contemporary *Dhimmis*?

Bernard Lewis writes, that the status of *dhimmi* "was for long accepted with resignation by the Christians and with gratitude by the Jews"[41] but ceased to be so after the rising power of Western imperialism and the radical ideas of the French revolution caused a wave of discontent among Christian *dhimmis*.[42] Dhimma legislation remained widespread throughout the Muslim world until the mid-nineteenth century, when the Ottoman empire began to relax restrictions placed on its non-Muslim residents. Part of the motivation for this was the desire to gain support from the British Empire in the conflict with Egypt,[43] then later as a result of negotiations with Britain, France, and Austria, whose support was needed in the Crimean War. The edict of 1856 proclaimed the principle of the equality of Muslims and non-Muslims, and produced a number of specific reforms including the abolition of the *jizya* tax. Non-Muslims were also allowed to join the army.[44] Kumaraswamy notes the detrimental impact of the decline of the Ottoman Empire on the Christian minorities:

> "The emergence of modern Middle East from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire has indeed worked against the minorities. Not only the territorial boundaries of most of the post-Ottoman states were artificial, they also undermined regional homogeneity. Thus, either different ethnic/national groups were clubbed together or same group was dispersed into different states. Furthermore, driven by the need to evolve new national identities based on territorial loyalties, most of them sought an all encompassing national identity. Some even aspired for supra-national identities such as Arab nationalism and pan-Islamism."[45]

He also identifies the significant impact of Western Imperialism:

> "Historically the Middle East has an unenviable record of external interventions on behalf of its minority populations, especially the *Dhimmi*. The most resented and exploitative Capitulatory System primarily began as a concerted European effort to keep its citizens and subjects outside the purview of the Ottoman legal system. In 1535, the French succeeded in gaining exemption for its Christians subjects living in the Ottoman Empire from paying jizya or poll tax. This privilege was gradually extended to other European powers and eventually to all non-Muslim subjects employed by European powers. The removal of *Dhimmi* status in Egypt in 1923, likewise, was preceded by the Egyptian recognition of the British 'right' to protect Egyptian minorities." [46]

The continuing legacy of Western imperialism has exacerbated the precarious nature of Christian minorities living in the Middle East.

> "European intervention also made these Christian communities "the objects of Muslim hostility." Such apprehensions often move towards paranoia or xenophobia. There are apprehensions in the Middle East that some of the Christian priests who come and work in the region misuse their privileges. Some even fear that "many priests and missionaries who have come to the Third World from the West have spied for Western governments."[47]

Kenneth Cragg summarises the issue:

> "as European commercial – and later political- interests developed in the Arab areas, the Christian communities came under suspicion and duress because of their stake, whether for faith or for profit, in the European factor."[48]
>
> The attraction of foreign protection for the Christian minorities had a long and ambiguous sequel… in the context of nineteenth-century Arabism within the Ottoman order as European pressures and pretensions intensified. Insofar as it modified their *dhimmi* status it gave them new perspectives and horizons. Albeit uneasily, it linked their Christianity with wider dimensions. Some it tempted into emotional or psychic alienation from their own locale, making them, if no longer *dhimmis*, resident aliens where yet necessarily they belonged. When Ottoman power declined in the nineteenth century, protection became at once more congenial but to the Ottomans, by the same token, more suspect and more treacherous. Long legacies of ambivalence, perplexity, and suspicion were bequeathed to Arab Christianity from this history, as well as rivalries within it.

> No cliency is without its costs and no patronage without its vested interests. Both were such as to beset the course of Arabism once Ottomanism reached its term in the twentieth century."[49]

Cragg elaborates on the challenges faced by the Coptic community in Egypt during the transition from Imperial rule to Arab nationalism in the early 20th Century. Their dilemma reflects that faced by other Christian minorities in the Middle East.

> "Copts, by and large, as the genuine "Egyptians" preferred the British alternative. The long future, however, was not with them in that sentiment. With the post-World War situation in the 1920s came a new Egyptian constitutionalism and the demise of the Ottomans themselves. Coptic emotion had then less reason for unease about pan-Islam. The British became the sole target of nationalist aims, and Copts could recognize that their best interests lay not in Coptic separatism but in opting for inclusivism. This meant trusting Islam (defined in the 1923 constitution as the state religion) and participating in a broadly common front in the name of an Egypt committed to the British departure. Through the tortuous vicissitudes marking the stages of that exodus, 1936, 1954, 1957, this was broadly the Coptic position. Though it meant renouncing the force of an identity from a pre-Islamic past… it also meant the final end of *dhimmi* status. British imperialism, which had begun almost unwittingly in Egypt in 1882, had ensured that Egyptian nationalism would leave Egyptian Copts with no option but an Islamic future. The decision was at once painful, risky and ineluctable. It committed Coptic destiny to the open question of Muslim self definition within the new context of liability for a highly self-conscious community, no longer "*dhimmi*-ized," but still precariously hostage to Islamic will."[50]

Kumaraswamy argues that their status was made even more precarious by the rise of nationalist and autonomous tendencies within the Christian minorities themselves.

> "Demands for special protection and privileges articulated and accomplished during the era of capitulation spurred a feeling of autonomy from the central Islamic authority. This has been more prevalent among certain Christian sects and along with the mainstream "*Christian subordination in the Middle East*", observed Walid Phares, "*lies a minor tradition of Christian enclaves*." He identifies five such aspirations: Maronites in Lebanon, Assyrians of the Fertile Crescent's highland, Nubians of the Nile Valley, Copts of Egypt and Syriacs of northern Syria. The Maronites provide the most successful autonomous attempt when at the beginning of the twentieth century they managed to carve out a larger Lebanese state. Others were less successful."[51]

The final factor impacting the status of Christian minorities living under Muslim rule is the existence of the State of Israel, the denial of Palestinians rights and most significantly, Western Christian support for Zionism.

> "The prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict cloud and even poison any meaningful debate on Middle Eastern minorities. Driven by strong national interest calculations, Israel sought to identify, patronize and even exploit internal divisions and diversities among the non-Jewish communities in the Middle East.

> At the domestic level, this policy led to the identification and nurturing of various non-Sunni Muslim minority communities within Israel such as, Christian Arabs, Druze, Circassian, Bedouins, and Bahais. Such a deliberate divide-and-rule policy has come under severe criticisms and is seen as a calculated attempt to undermine the position of Arabs both inside and outside Israel.
>
> Moreover, since the pre-state days, Israel looked to the non-Muslim Maronites as a potential ally in the Middle East… Itself a Jewish enclave in a predominantly Muslim region, Israel at first encouraged the idea of a mosaic of mini-states that would undermine the Arab hegemony over non-Arabs. Well before the establishment of the state, Jewish Agency representatives contacted Maronites, Kurds and other minority groups in the Levant. During the first Sudan civil war, Israeli assistance was evident among the southern guerrilla forces. In northern Iraq, Israeli intelligence agents supported the Kurds. But it was in Lebanon that the Jewish State played the card of a Christian enclave to its fullest… following the June war of 1967, "a group of radical Coptic activists offered to help establish a Coptic state in the occupied Sinai Peninsula." Thus, the willingness of some of the minority groups to seek political support from Israel not only worked against their interests but also made them suspicious vis-à-vis their Arab governments and majority populations."[52]

Michael Nazir-Ali, summarises the legacy of the Pact of 'Omar and demonstrates we have some way to go in order to achieve equal status for religious minorities:

> "Emancipation from the provisions of this pact came only gradually and often painfully, for the non-Muslim populations. It was not until the early years of this century that the pact as such ceased to be operative in most Muslim lands. Vestiges of it survive, however, in the way *expatriate* non-Muslims are treated in the State of Saudi Arabia and in the Gulf. Even in the relatively tolerant parts of the Gulf States, church buildings have to be away from the centre of towns, many congregations must share one building (24 in one instance), no display of Christian symbols is allowed and the ringing of church bells is not permitted. In Saudi Arabia… no church buildings are allowed at all and services in the homes of Christians are liable to be broken up by the religious police."[53]

6. Four Case Studies in the Status of Christian Minorities

Open Doors is a Christian organisation that advocates on behalf of Christian minorities living under Muslim rule. Brother Andrew, the founder of Open Doors, participated in our previous Evangelical Christian and Muslim Dialogue last year in Libya. Open Doors ranks countries by the intensity of persecution that Christians face for actively pursuing their faith.[54] Of the fifty countries where persecution is considered most severe, six countries have Communist or former Communist governments (such as North Korea 1st , China 12th & Vietnam 23rd). Three are non-Muslim (India 22nd , Burma 24th & Kenya 49th). The other 41 countries are ruled by Islamic law.
The four countries where the rights of Christian minorities are considered most under threat are: Saudi Arabia 2nd, Iran 3rd, Afghanistan 4th and Somalia 5th. Allow me to briefly

summarise from the Open Doors report, the condition of Christian minorities in these countries:

Saudi Arabia
Public non-Muslim worship is forbidden, at the risk of arrest, imprisonment, flogging, deportation, and sometimes torture. Most Christians are expatriates; they are generally allowed to worship privately but some have been arrested, issued with death threats and forced into hiding. Recently there has been an increasing number of arrests. Most Saudi believers must keep their faith secret or risk honour killing – there was at least one last year.

Iran
There was a significant crackdown on house churches in 2008. More than 50 Christians were arrested, interrogated and even beaten. It is alleged by Open Doors that one couple died of their injuries. There is still the possibility that those found guilty of converting from Islam (apostasy) will face a mandatory death sentence. Church services may be monitored by the secret police. Believers face great discrimination and can have difficulty finding and keeping jobs.

Afghanistan
The constitution states 'no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam.' Most Christians are secret believers unable even to own a Bible. If exposed, Christians face reprisals from family, community and the Taliban, including expulsion from their homes, verbal and physical abuse, intimidation, beatings, loss of employment, imprisonment and even death. There is no visible Church and Christians must meet in secret.

Somalia
The tiny number of ethnic Somali Christians practise their faith in secret under extremely dangerous conditions. At least ten Christians, including four teachers, were killed for their faith in 2008 and several others kidnapped and raped. Fighting between Somali Islamic militias and Ethiopian forces reportedly led to increasing hostility towards Christians in some areas. There is no legal provision for religious freedom.

7. Christian Minorities and Apostasy

The issue which brings the condition of Christian minorities living under Muslim rule into sharpest focus, however, concerns the most sensitive issue of all - conversion and apostasy. How religions treat those who wish to change their faith is a measure of their treatment of religious minorities generally.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide is an independent human rights organisation, working on behalf of those suffering for their Christian beliefs and promoting religious liberty for all. In 2008, CSW published a report, "No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam" It provides a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the consequences of Muslims becoming Christians. It also summarises international and Islamic declarations on religious rights and freedoms. In the Foreword, CSW President, Jonathan Aitken writes,

> "The issue of religious conversion is both deeply sensitive and hotly debated. It arouses strong emotions in both proponents and antagonists for a number of reasons, not least because it is inseparable from questions of individual and community identity. The right to change religion or belief lies at the very heart of the right to freedom of religion or belief. During the formulation of Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a lengthy discussion on the question of religious conversion resulted in the wording "the right to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice", which was eventually adopted without dissent from any State. The right to adopt a religion of one's choice, the right to change religion and the right to maintain a religion are unequivocally protected according to universally accepted international standards and are not subject to any limitation. It is discouraging and unacceptable that violations and limitations of this aspect of the right to freedom of religion still occur on a regular basis.[55]

The report details the range of judicial sentences used to punish apostates from Islam:

> "Apostasy is the renunciation of religious faith, and apostasy from Islam in particular has always been a contentious issue. Although the Qur'an does not prescribe a temporal punishment for apostasy, the vast majority of traditional Islamic theology and jurisprudence has advocated the death penalty for a mentally sane male apostate and life-long imprisonment or harsh treatment for a female apostate…
>
> An increasing number of contemporary Muslim thinkers, particularly those residing in the West, have called for a re-evaluation of the shari'a position on the death penalty for apostasy and a return to a more faithful interpretation based on the Qur'an. Although the views of these reforming scholars are encouraging, traditional views on apostasy continue to dominate popular Muslim opinion…
>
> Two countries, Sudan and Malaysia, have codified laws prescribing the death penalty for apostasy, and one country, Egypt, has legislation on apostasy which allows for the marriage of an apostate to be annulled and can result in the loss of inheritance and custody rights.
>
> In Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Iran, where the death penalty for apostasy is not codified, death remains a real possibility for the apostate on the basis of their application of shari'a. In other countries where shari'a is used to govern personal status matters, such as in Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Yemen, apostates face serious penalties, such as the annulment of marriage, termination of citizenship, confiscation of identity papers and the loss of further social and economic rights. Apostates are also penalised under other laws, such as 'insulting Turkishness' in Turkey, the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, contempt of religion in Egypt and treason in Iran.
>
> Apostates are subject to gross and wide-ranging human rights abuses including extra judicial killings by state-related agents or mobs; honour killings by family members; detention, imprisonment, torture, physical and psychological intimidation by security forces; the denial of access to judicial services and social

services; the denial of equal employment or education opportunities; social pressure resulting in loss of housing and employment; and day-to-day discrimination and ostracism in education, finance and social activities…

The experiences of apostates in Muslim countries are blatantly at odds with their rights as guaranteed under international law. Most Muslim nations are members of the UN and have ratified international human rights treaties. However, these nations and the international community have failed in their duty to uphold the rights of apostates by neglecting to guarantee their personal safety and their full and fair participation in society. This report calls on Muslim nations, the international community, the UN and the international media to resolutely address the serious violations of human rights suffered by apostates."

Let me illustrate this with one personal case I received from Iran from last month:

"On March 5th 2009, two Iranian Christian women, Miss Marzieh Amirizadeh Esmaeilabad (30), and Miss Maryam Rustampoor (27), were arrested by the Iranian security forces. Their only crime is that they are committed Christians who follow the teachings of Jesus. They are being unfairly labelled as 'anti-government activists', because of the hostility of the government towards practising Christians.

Their shared apartment was searched and personal belongings confiscated. They were hand-cuffed and first taken to the Police and Security Station 137 in Gysha, West of Tehran for interrogation. Later they were taken to Vozara Detention Centre. Then they were taken to the Branch 2 of the National Security Section of the Revolutionary Court. Afterwards, several sessions of interrogation took place. Finally, on March 18th, after appearing at the Revolutionary Court, they were sent to the notorious Evin Prison where they are being held without charge.

They have been told they could be freed on a bail of US$ 400,000. This excessive bail level is unrealistic and is designed to intimidate and make the release impossible. The families have subsequently been told on several occasions a judge is not available to discuss the case. Both women are allowed just a one minute telephone call every day to their immediate families. Both are unwell and in need of urgent medical attention. During their last call on March 28 Marzieh said that she was suffering from an infection and high fever. She said 'I am dying'… Iranian Christian leaders from around the world are calling for the immediate and unconditional release of Marzieh and Maryam."[56]

I have publicised the case of Marzieh and Maryam and will advocate on their behalf when I visit Iran next month. Christian Solidarity Worldwide urge the governments of majority Muslim states to:

- uphold their responsibilities under international law to guarantee the personal safety of apostates and their full and fair participation in society;

- take concrete steps to end intimidation, detention and torture of apostates by security forces, religious police and paramilitaries;
- openly and resolutely address all forms of discrimination and inequality suffered by apostates;
- provide an easy and transparent mechanism to allow apostates to change their religious affiliation on all state identity documentation, or rescind national requirements to record such data;
- guarantee apostates the freedom to marry a partner of their choice and refrain from any state interference with or annulment of marriages of apostates;
- protect the religious rights of the children of apostates including removing the requirement for compulsory Islamic religious education for these children;
- provide unhindered access for the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief;
- take steps to address wide-spread propaganda and disinformation.[57]

8. Conclusions: Reformation - A Third Way?

Kumaraswamy provides a succinct conclusion of the issues as well as possible way forward:

> "None of the Middle Eastern states is homogeneous and each state has a number of ethnic and/or religious minorities. Most of these minorities pre-date state formation in the Middle East. In their desire to evolve national identities based on arbitrarily drawn territorial boundaries, most of the states tended to ignore, belittle or undermine the existence of ethnic, national and religious minorities. Prolonged external intervention on behalf of minorities and resultant dismantlement of the Ottoman Empire considerably hardened the region against minority rights. Demands for autonomy and external linkages often provide a rouse to dismiss concerns over discrimination and inequality suffered by the minorities. The prolonged Arab-Israeli conflict has only muddled the debate.
>
> As a result, a number of states tend to deny the existence of minorities or pretend that they are not discriminated. At the same time, most of the conflicts in the Middle East are closely linked to ethnic or religious minorities and their vulnerable status in society. Instead of perceiving the issue as a conspiracy against national unity and integrity, the states of the region could view the minorities as an integral part of the Middle Eastern mosaic and try and evolve a new national identity that would accept, recognize and incorporate various ethnic, national, religious as well as linguistic minorities."[58]

International Law, notably Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, protects the rights of religious minorities.

> "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion, or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."[59]

Islamic declarations have built on this foundation. Most notably The Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (1981), The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990) and the Arab Charter on Human Rights (1994). The question is, how can we strengthen these declarations and ensure their consistent implementation in protecting the rights of minority groups whether they be Christian or Muslim?

Iraq probably holds the unenviable position of being the leading country in the world for endemic sectarian religious violence, bringing into conflict Sunni, Shia and Christians. And as the minority community, the Christians have been targeted in particular.[60] Since the downfall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the US backed invasion, the Christian minority has been decimated. According to Christian Today,

> "There are currently around two million refugees from Iraq living in Jordan and Syria. Last year, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho was kidnapped and murdered by al-Qaeda. In October 15,000 Christians fled the city of Mosul after a spate of murders were committed against Christians. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights nearly half of all refugees leaving Iraq are Christian, even though Christianity is the religion of only three per cent of Iraqis."

However, Iraq also provides a model of how the faith communities can work together to repudiate violence and promote mutual respect. Canon Andrew White is an Anglican minister serving in Baghdad. In 2005, he set up the Foundation for Relief and Reconciliation in the Middle East. To bring an end to religious violence in Iraq, he also facilitated the formation of the High Council of Religious Leaders in Iraq. Delegates include Sunni and Shia leaders including the chief of staff of the Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the Iraqi Sunni sheikh, the chief religious advisor to the Prime Minister, and the chief spokes-person of Muqtada Al Sader's Mahdi Army.

The Council recently issued the first joint Fatwa (decree) against all violence. This is the most recent declaration that they issued together (and which I believe could apply in our contexts beyond Iraq):

> 1. A strong demand for the unity of the Iraqi land, defence of the legitimacy of Iraq and its full independence, and an end to the foreign presence in the country.
> 2. A resolute condemnation of organized criminal violence against the Iraqi Christians who form a genuine part of Iraqi society. In addition, a call for all the political parties, the official institutions and the civil institutions to stand firmly against such criminal behaviour and to work together to stop such inhumane activities.
> 3. Despite there being positive indications of decline in the amount of sectarian tension, those present in the meeting emphasized the importance of spreading the spirit of forgiveness and of putting an end to sectarianism and discrimination using media channels and through all levels of education.
> 4. Keeping arms in the hand of The State is the only way to ensure establishment of the State of Law. At the same time, pursuit of such a path will meet the demand of the Iraqis to build their state and secure common peace and communal life.
> 5. It is so important to activate the general amnesty law, to secure as soon as

possible the release of the innocent, to stop the arrests that have taken place outside the legal process, and to put an end to torture and any other actions that are against human rights.

6. A strong condemnation of terrorism, regardless of the name or shape under which it is carried out.

Canon Andrew White writes,

> "We all need to realise that all religion has power - either it can create something beautiful or destroy. In all this work I simply keep thinking of the words of Jesus to love your enemies. In Christ those you hate can become your friends and they do."[61]

In 1980, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, representing evangelicals world-wide, published a report on Christian Witness to Muslims. It included the following acknowledgement:

> "we have no right to point the finger of accusation at Muslim communities and governments, if we are blind to the ways in which Muslim minorities suffer from unfair discrimination in so-called Christian countries in the West. Christians in this kind of situation are called to take seriously the words of the Mosaic Law, "You shall not oppress the alien, for you know how it feels to be an alien; you were aliens yourselves in Egypt" (Exodus 23:9). We also need to take very seriously Jesus' warning about the danger of judging others, "Why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the log in your own eye? ... You hypocrite!..." (Matthew 7:3, 5). Only if and when we have taken this warning seriously can we begin to draw attention to situations in the Muslim world in which Christian minorities feel that their religious freedom is being threatened, not only by subtle forms of discrimination, but also new Islamic constitutions which affect the status of minorities…
>
> We urge Christian leaders in all walks of life to use their influence to encourage governments and business organisations to follow as far as possible the principle, "Do for others what you want them to do for you" (Matthew 7:12)."[62]

Last July, King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia sponsored a World Conference on Dialogue in Madrid, Spain. During the conference I participated in an Iranian Press TV programme with the Chief Rabbi of Vienna and an Islamic scholar in the USA. In discussing the value of such conferences, I said that most interfaith dialogue remains superficial because it does not address the three most fundamental rights of all – the right to express one's religion, the right to share one's religion and the right to change one's religion.

Both Christianity and Islam are missionary faiths. We each welcome those who wish to join our faith community. If our dialogue is to be authentic , constructive and lasting in effect, then we must respect and defend these three rights for each other and not just for ourselves, where ever we are living in the world, whether as a majority or as a minority.

It is my hope and prayer that this Evangelical Christian - Muslin Dialogue will "contribute to the universal establishment of a climate where States meet their obligations to ensure the freedom of religion or belief for all."[63]
As Jesus said, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets." (Matthew 7:12)

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