

THE FUTURE OF MIDDLE EASTERN CHRISTIANITY

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On 22 November 2014 a ‘hearing’ took place in Constance, Germany, the city where a famous church council was convened exactly six hundred years ago. Church leaders from the Middle East met with experts on the history and the politics of that region to debate whether Christianity has a future there – and, if so, under what conditions. This occurred under the aegis of Constance University’s unique Research Centre for Aramaean Studies, established last year in the Faculty of History and Sociology at Constance. The church leaders came to tell what the non-Muslim minorities, especially the Aramaean Christians, are going through in Syria and Iraq. The experts were invited to explain the history, the ideology, the politics and the economics of what is happening. The newly elected patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church, Ignatios Afrem II Karim, had agreed to take part. This expectation probably explains the fact that the venue – St Conrad’s, a church built in 1604 and restored in 2006-14, the pews of which seat over three hundred – was filled to capacity, largely with members of the Syrian Orthodox diaspora, resident in Germany, Switzerland and Austria. To the disappointment both of the organisers and of the faithful, the patriarch decided, after all, not to come in person.

The hearing was opened by Dorothea Weltecke, the director of the Research Centre for Aramaean Studies in Constance. One after the other, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Constance, Silvia Mergenthal; the Syriac Orthodox archbishop of Germany, Philoxenos Mattias Nayis; a member of the Islamic community who teaches Arabic at the University of Constance, Mohamed Badawi; and the Chair of the Foundation for Aramaean Studies, Emanuel Jacob welcomed the Middle Eastern church leaders and the professors. The proceedings began with a lecture by *Hubert Kaufhold* on Syriac Christianity. Apostles of the new religion reached Syria and Mesopotamia (including modern Turkey and Iraq) soon after the execution of Christ. This region was conquered by the followers of Muhammad in the seventh century. Thereafter Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians have continued to live in the Middle East, but their numbers have steadily dwindled. Prof. Kaufhold was applauded when he pointed out that the Crusades, far from being gratuitous aggression against the Muslims, as is often claimed, were in fact an attempt to take back Christian territory which the Muslims had seized by force some four and a half centuries earlier. The decline of Christianity in the region of its origin was due to many factors, notably the political and economic penalties paid for not adopting Islam after the Arab conquest. To these were added periodic massacres, culminating in the notorious persecutions of 1915, which are still denied by Turkey. This genocide, the victims of which included Aramaeans as well as Armenians, will be commemorated next year at its centenary. The so-called ‘Islamic State’ has given a contemporary example of such atrocities. Its vicious attack has driven so many from their homes that some doubt whether there is still a future for Christianity in the Middle East. However, the Church has shown such resilience in the past – whenever their circumstances improved – that it may grow back again, like a felled olive-tree. This time, however, that will not be possible without economic and political support from the rest of the Christian world. Germany can, in addition, offer moral support by stimulating at her

universities the study of the Christian Orient and reversing the drastic decline of this discipline, which stands in stark contrast to the flourishing study of Islam at German universities.

The following speaker was *Eleanor Coghill*, of the Constance Research Centre. Her subject: "Aramaic: a priceless linguistic heritage under threat." Her talk was illustrated with slides, which excited great interest from the Aramaeans in the audience. They stood up to photograph the family-tree of the Aramaic languages; an Assyrian relief showing two secretaries, one taking notes in cuneiform Akkadian on a tablet, the other in alphabetic Aramaic on papyrus; an incantation-bowl written in Mandaic. Dr Coghill's own research is on the Aramaic dialects of northern Iraq. It is a rich linguistic landscape, continuous with the Jewish exile in Babylon, which is now threatened with extinction. The last Jewish Iraqis were forced to emigrate to Israel in the 1950s; their Aramaic dialect has all but died out in consequence. It is much to be feared that the same will happen to the dialects of the Christian and Mandaean speakers of Aramaic. This is a kind of cultural genocide which transcends the boundaries of religion. There is even a Muslim village in Syria where Aramaic is spoken. Addressing in conclusion the question of what is to be done, Dr Coghill drew attention to an online petition to the UN Security Council, calling for 'a safe haven in Iraq to protect Christians and others threatened by ISIS' (<http://tinyurl.com/IraqiSafeHaven>).

The third speaker was *Gabriel Hanne*, from Warsaw, a Syrian Orthodox Christian from Tur Abdin. His theme was Islamic extremism. Dr Hanne quoted from advocates of the Islamic State – some Sunnite, others Shi'ite; some Arabs, others Iranians, or Indians. His conclusion was that the Islamist movement is an essentially religious movement, based on the doctrine that there is only one God, who has only one interpreter (or 'prophet') for the whole human race, namely Muhammad. His response to the present crisis: 'If we do not stop them, they will impose their rule on every square inch of the globe.'

The fourth talk, written by *Christine Schirrmacher*, of the University of Bonn, and delivered by her husband, Thomas Schirrmacher, the Director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom, was more analytical. Disagreeing with Dr Hanne, it described Jihadism as a political ideology with a religious terminology and traced its origins to the foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. It stressed the gulf between the moderates and the extremists in Islam and the threat which Islamic extremists pose both to lives of their fellow-Muslims and to the good name of their religion. It documented the fact that the Jihadists, who claim to go back to pure Islam, are at odds not only with Islamic tradition, but with the Qur'an itself. One of its heresies is that the way to the state in which God's laws are implemented on earth lies through the persecution of Christians. Among the causes of this perversion it named the oppression of the Islamic community in Palestine; the lack of education and prospects; and that arrogance which often accompanies decline. The 'Arab Spring' failed to materialise because of the lack of those concepts which make for peace: the construction of a civil society; the rights to freedom of religion and of speech; the balancing of the interests of women and men, of the state and of religion.

So ended the morning, which was devoted to analyses by the experts. After a lunch-break, it was the turn of the church-leaders. First the *Syrian Orthodox bishop of Mosul*, the Iraqi city taken by ISIS in June 2014, spoke about the humanitarian crisis there. There are now between 100 and 150 thousand Christian refugees from Mosul and the Plain of Nineveh

living in Iraqi Kurdistan. They have inadequate accommodation, if indeed they have a roof over their heads. The need for 5,000 family homes there before the winter was made known to the European Union; as yet, nothing has been done about it. The refugees see no prospect of returning to their homes. Hanna Petros, who escaped, driven out in the name of God when ISIS took Karakosh, ‘There is no hope for us Christians in Iraq’. They want the Christian West to grant them visas.

The next speaker, an ascetic figure with an incongruous Australian accent, represented a mixture of cultures. *Mar Oraham Odisho*, educated in the West, resident in Sweden, was born into the Church of the East in Iraq. The first part of his talk retraced the lines of Professor Kaufhold’s magisterial summary. The second part was more emotional. Stressing – as did several speakers – that the Christians were once the owners of the Fertile Crescent, not to be marginalized by the more recent Islamic incomers as a ‘minority’, he described his co-religionaries as the ‘hostages’ of Middle Eastern politics. Agreeing with Eleanor Coghill, he thought the only solution was a safe haven.

This East-Syrian speaker was followed by his West-Syrian confrère, Archbishop *Dionysius John Kawak*, the Vicar of the Syriac Orthodox patriarch, who proposed that western powers establish a safe haven for minorities on the Plain of Nineveh, or else that the province of Mosul should be incorporated in the Kurdish part of Iraq. He claimed that Paragraphs 35 and 36 of the Iraqi Kurdish constitution provide for a measure of autonomy in any region where the majority of the population is non-Muslim. A Syrian Orthodox deacon pointed out the many dangers of creating an isolated Christian/Yezidi state.

The last speaker – and the only one to speak positively about a future for Christianity in the Middle East – was the vigorous octogenarian *Gregory III Laham*, *patriarch* of the Melkite Catholic Church, resident in Damascus. His speech formed a contrast with those of the other church leaders. Where these had claimed that it was no longer possible for Christians and Muslims to live together in peace, he argued that this was the only way forward. Where they had said their very survival was in danger and had advocated a safe haven for Christians and Yezidis on the Plain of Nineveh, he challenged all Christians to embrace what he claimed was their traditional role as builders of civic society in the Middle East. It was Christians, among others, he maintained, who had taught the Arabs to regard themselves as a single nation. So long as the Arabs were united, the Christians would prosper. It was when the Arabs were disunited that the Christians were most in danger. He went on to address the Palestinian problem. If this could only be solved, he urged, the silent majority of Muslims would come out against terrorism. Now they refrained from condemning suicide bombers, because they felt keenly the injustice done to the Palestinians, who have found all ways to a political solution barred. Finally, he turned to the theme of martyrdom. Christians were commanded to have no fear, he said, even in danger of their lives. To be killed for one’s faith is to follow in the footsteps of St Peter and St Paul. Yet, in spite of the man’s humour – he described St Paul as a converted Jihadist – there was an undercurrent of unease. Was he not following the party line imposed on him by the dictator under whose protection he lives? He presented his loyalty as pragmatism. He supported not a man, but a project: the project of a united Syria. The man might not be perfect, but what alternative was there? ‘The man is there: work with him!’

After supper about a hundred people gathered again in the church to listen to the experts debate and to make their own contribution from the floor. It was generally felt that something drastic must be undertaken right now to protect minorities in the Middle East. Had *Louis Raphael I Sako*, *patriarch* of the Chaldean Catholic Church, been present, as was intended at the time the programme was printed, he would no doubt have sounded the note he struck three days earlier in Vienna. (Google 'Muslims, not outside forces, should resolve Mideast conflicts' and read the whole speech on the English site of Vatican radio.) 'Do not forget that Christians are natives in this region [*sc.* Iraq and Syria], nor that they have contributed a great deal to Arab culture! Arabs must present a unified position against extremism. This united Arab coalition must ensure a peaceful solution. Extremism is everywhere. What is required is moderation and an intelligent rejection of obscurantism. And, above all, the rejection of terrorism in the name of religion.'

What I took away from the meeting is that the citizens of western countries ought now to be giving more generously and involving the Middle Eastern Churches, which are helping both Christian and Yezidi refugees through the winter, as NGOs. Furthermore, the European Union ought immediately to implement the plan to build homes for the refugee families in Iraqi Kurdistan. I am reluctant to believe there is no hope for Christianity in the Middle East, for then what hope is there of world peace? Modest and humane Muslims the world over must find a voice to condemn extremism, before it is too late. They must actively resist fascism in the guise of a resurrected Caliphate and acknowledge that cultural pluralism, not a worldwide Islamic State, is the way forward.