

Arabic Christianity... it's alive and well!

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Few laymen realize the fact and power of Arab Christianity in our day. Arab Christianity? one may ask. Roman Catholicism, Greek or Russian or Serbian Orthodoxy, British or Chinese Presbyterianism, Welsh or New England Congregationalism, these we know. But what is Arab Christianity?

Arabs swept across the Near East during the seventh century waving the banner of Islam, the same as earlier Goths moved across Europe, Vandals stormed Spain and seized North Africa, or Slavic peoples took over the land between Germany and the Urals. A few picked up the exceedingly complicated theology and cult of the conquered. More, many more, married native Christian girls, tolerated the religious views of their wives, and were not too upset when some of the children accepted the faith of their mothers.

Although in theory, Islam was as wildly bigoted as Ezra or Judas Maccabaeus, in fact Muslims were as tolerant as Ahab or Herod the Great. The Koran itself recognized that Christians were a step above ordinary pagans. Seldom were churchmen put to the sword for purely religious reasons. In fact, Nestorians and monophysites welcomed the Arab invaders because they freed Egyptian and Syrian believers from the ecclesiastical meddling of the Caesaro-Papists.

In the eyes of the Mohammedans, Christians were readers of a Holy Book like themselves, despite their erroneous ideas concerning Jesus, heaven, and revelation. From a practical standpoint, many Christian functionaries were retained in the new Arab empire because no one else was available for such necessary

activities.

Western Christians for purely propagandistic reasons treasure lurid tales of the fierce or voluptuous or infidel Arabs. The tales aren't true. Saladin was eminently cultured and highly sophisticated by comparison with his barbarian foe, the British king Richard the Lion-hearted. The courts at Baghdad, Toledo, or Cairo ranked high above those in any part of West Christendom. After the fiasco of the Children's Crusade and the sheer stupidity of the Fourth Crusade, even the staunchest Eastern Catholics preferred the Muslims to the soldiers of the cross.

Islamic officials quickly accepted the Byzantine model of using the church to serve secular ends. Taxes were levied in order to raise special gifts from the ecclesiastical authorities. Certain fees were exacted from prelates upon assuming their holy offices. Not that this was new in principle. Ever since Constantine, the Christian community had been mistreated.

He called the first Ecumenical Council at Nicea for political purposes. He sought complete ideological uniformity much as Cromwell or Mao in later years. But it was probably more galling to be used by a government of outsiders, as Eastern Christian historians assert. Four of the five ancient urban Patriarchates fell to the Muslims Jerusalem, Antioch, and Alexandria *to* the Arabs, and Constantinople to the Turks (1454). Yet the cross remained on certain altars. In Egypt the Coptic Church with millions of members thrived because of its liberation from Greek rule.

Jacobites and Nestorians spread from Syria and Iraq to India and China. A powerful satellite monophysite church was created in Ethiopia. The Patriarchate of Antioch moved to Damascus, where it remains today. From Constantinople evangelists converted Bohemia, Moravia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Ukrainia and Russia. From the latter, missionaries traveled across Siberia, planting the cross in Korea, Japan, and Alaska.

Iraqi Christians spread the Christian message to Persia and China, where Nestorianism may have even influenced late mystical writings of the Taoists; Syriac Christians became apostles to India in the name of Saint Thomas. Jerome, a monk at Bethlehem, gave Catholics their Vulgate Bible.

Patriarch Timotheous of Antioch, whose headquarters are located in Damascus, Syria, now commands the loyalty of about a hundred or so Orthodox parishes in the United States, with about 110,000 active members of all ages. American churches are administered by Archbishop Philip Saliba, a youthful prelate of remarkable preaching ability and as much personal Levantine charm.

In Washington, Father Louis Mahshie serves as priest of Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Church on 16th Street. Of Lebanese background, Fr. Mahshie is well-trained in theology, sociology and public relations. Among his major activities one can list Saturday morning classes in Arabic language, informative catechetical instruction, and an excellent annual Near Eastern bazaar. With youthful candor he claims that he is not a theologian, yet those who hear him lecture on the debates of the fourth century church fathers are amazed by the clarity with which he sees the most complex doctrinal issues. Services at Saint George are conducted in Arabic, a language familiar to all the adult members.

In the same building, once a month, Coptic Christians of Egypt celebrate their fascinating five-hour liturgy of the fourth century. Orthodox and Coptic Christians have begun work together in recent years after centuries of studied hostility. This growing togetherness of Orthodox and other Near Eastern Christians can be attributed to the publicity given to the ecumenical movement in Christendom as a whole.