

CHRISTIANITY IN THE NEAR EAST

AN ESSAY BY
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By the Near East I mean everything between and including Turkey in the north and the Sudan in the south, and between the Mediterranean and Iran, including the latter. Churchill used four terms: Near East, Middle East, East, and Far East. The Near East was the region strategically dominated by Suez, the Middle East the region strategically dominated by the Persian Gulf; on the other hand, India was the East and China and Japan the Far East. For our purposes, Near East and Middle East are somewhat interchangeable, the former describing an area “near” Europe, the latter referring to the same area as being “in the middle,” namely, as being “between” Europe and the proper East. Thus “Near” defines the area by relating it to one term only, “Middle” defines it by relating it to the two terms. The terminological shift in recent years from “Near” to “Middle” measures the rise of the East itself, for you cannot henceforth relate this area only to the West. From the point of view of the East this area is rather “Near West” or “Middle West”. We are in effect speaking of Turkey, Iran, Israel and the Arabic-speaking countries east of and including Egypt and the Sudan.

Statistics, especially in this area, are difficult to come by, and when found, they are not reliable; but the total population of the Near East is roughly of the order of 120 million people, of whom not more than between 6 and 8 million are Christian. Thus the Christians of the Near East constitute between 5% and 6.7% of the total population.*¹ The Copts of Egypt are the largest group,

¹ *Two works should be noted here: *World Christian Handbook*: London, World Dominion Press, 1962; and *A Factual Study of the Middle East*, by W. Stanley Rycroft and Myrtle M. Clemmer: Office for Research, Commission on Ecumenical Mission and Relations, The United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 27, N.Y., 1962. The latter work contains a good bibliography and makes use at several points of figures compiled in the 1962 *World Christian Handbook*. The *World Christian Handbook* suffers from three defects so far as the Near East or Middle East is concerned. (a) In three instances, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, its population figures are those of 1958, whereas it could have ventured at least an educated guess concerning the populations of these three countries in 1962 or 1961. (b) According to this book, there are about 4.5 million Christians in the total area of the Middle East; it appears to me that this figure is too low. There are not many accurate censuses in this area, but I consulted some knowledgeable persons and they all agree that there are more than 5 million Christians in the Middle East. This point is further demonstrated by the following strange discrepancy. (c) On page 65 of the *Handbook* we read that the total population of Egypt is 24,781,000, and if we add up the figures for the Christians given throughout the book (on pages 65, 234 and 237) we come up with the result that there are only 1,724,819 (note also in this connection the remark on page 234 about Protestant Copts) Christians in Egypt. On the other hand, we read on page 248 that there are 17,397,946 Moslems in Egypt. From this figure, and having regard to the above figure of the total population, we are entitled to conclude but there are some 7.4 million Christians in Egypt, since the non-Christians and the non-Moslems e.g., the Jews, are negligible. That’s if we interrogate the *World Christian Handbook* as to how many Christians there are in Egypt, we obtained two radically different answers. Which now is the correct figure for the Christians of Egypt, the 1.7 million or those 7.4 million? Despite the cautions wisely stated on page XX, this discrepancy is serious and cast doubt on the reliability of other figures in the book, or at least the reliability of the sources on which the book bases its figures. Similar discrepancies occur with respect to other countries in the Middle East, for instance, Lebanon and Syria; one way of computing the number of the Christians yields one figure, another way yields another figure. One therefore cannot be too careful in using or quoting statistics. It is not enough to answer that the United Nations is responsible for one figure and the churches themselves for the other; one is entitled to expect the truth from the *World Christian Handbook*, or at least an attempt at resolving or explaining the discrepancy. Perhaps this attempt will be made in future Editions. I have allowed my statement above that the total population of the Near East added here to find is of the order of 120 million people, and that the Christians in the Near East are between 6 and 8 million, thus forming between 5% and 6.7% of the population, to stand.

but they form a distinct minority of the total population of the country. The ratio of the Christians of Syria to the total population is roughly of the order of the ratio of the Copts to the total Egyptian population. The ratio of Christian to non-Christian Deputies in the Lebanese Chamber of Deputies is 6 to 5, and since parliamentary representation in Lebanon is by religious sects, then, if we go by this figure, the ratio of Christians to non-Christians in Lebanon is roughly 6 to 5. The Christians of the Near East outside Egypt, Lebanon and Syria constitute very small minorities of the countries to which they belong. Protestants and other Christians of Western rights are small minorities of the Christian population, but economically, culturally and even politically, their importance is out of proportion to their numbers. The overwhelming majority of the Christians of the Near East are either Catholics with Syriac or Byzantine or Armenian rites, or Greek Orthodox, or Christians with other Oriental rites, such as the Orthodox Copts or Armenians, who for centuries have not been in communion either with Orthodoxy or with Catholicism.



Since the Advent of Islam in the seventh century conversion has virtually always been one-way, namely, from Christianity to Islam; So that apart from slight Crusader infusion the existing Christians of the Near East are on the whole remnants of pre-Islamic Christianity. With very few exceptions, a Christian in the Near East can certainly claim that his religious lineage mounts to the early centuries of the Christian era. Christianity in the Near East, then, is historical and traditional, overwhelmingly dependent on liturgy, and quite conscious that it is but a leftover from the Islamic onslaught. It is not a western importation, however the West may have discovered, aroused and challenged it in Crusader and recent centuries; it is fully rooted, racially, culturally and ecclesiastically, in the Orient; it is what has survived of the Church of the East from the ravages of time, with all the original splintering and marks of this church.

Because of their historically uninterrupted openness to the Mediterranean-Western world, because of their close concentration in the mountains, because of their General High cultural level, because of their free enterprising nature, especially in matters economic and Commercial, because of the vast Lebanese emigration all over the world, because of the smallness of their country and their peculiar political history, and because of the fact that those of them who are still in Lebanon (and there are about as many outside Lebanon) are at least as numerous as their non-Christian co-citizens, the Christians of Lebanon have a

strong sense a freedom, Independence and self-reliance; they are not overly haunted by fear about their future; they believe that the compact Christian culture which has survived two thousand years of chequered history on the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean we'll probably endure for all time; and they regard the adversities of the present as nothing compared to some of the tribulations their ancestors had to face and overcome in the past.



The Christians of the Near East have preserved the faith they received from their fathers. This in itself is a great achievement. Much of this faith is embodied in custom, ritual, art, song and ceremony. These devices, besides being great artistic Creations, are often excellent conservers, better than what the world alone can carry, of what is under attack: they embellish, cover and conceal it enough to make it appear relatively harmless and unprovocative. But underneath the artistic imagery, sometimes most beautiful in itself, stands the core of the faith in perfect formal completeness. All that it takes to discover that this faith is there and is absolutely in Tapped is to unmask the song and ritual and penetrate to what they say and mean. This happens at times as a sudden and transporting Revelation to a man who has been listening to the song and taking part in the ritual all his life. By attending most carefully to every intonation and every gesture, End by taking in the Majestic sweep of the total ceremony, one can read the whole content of the faith, in fact the whole cumulative history of the church, from a single celebration of the Liturgy. The Liturgy is a special instrument where by the church has been providentially saved by the Holy Ghost under special circumstances over the centuries. This in itself, I say, is a great achievement.

When the church is driven into the catacombs, whether physically or socially and spiritually, it ceases to be a evangelical save unto itself; it turns then liturgical, preserving the entire deposit of Faith behind symbol and song. It dies so to speak that the faith may live. Being-Evangelical is not the only mode of existence of the church; under certain conditions, when the principalities and powers of the world have taken, whether in the name of society, or in the name of some abstract system of thought, or from demonic motives, or even in the name of God, a consciously militant attitude against it, being-liturgical is the only possible mode of existence for the church. It been suffers patiently and in silence, it bides its time, until the word is freed and the heart and mind can sing and Shout again in open exultation.

But Faith overflows also and cultural bearing and general Outlook. While the Christians of the Near East share with their non-Christian Fellow citizens the economic, social and

political life of their respective countries, they tend on the whole to manifest a distinctive intellectual, moral, spiritual and personal existence. At least in theory, at least in the intent of their mind, their view of morality, woman, Family Life, the sanctity of children, freedom, the human person, personal responsibility, Universal Human Nature, reason, the possibility of regarding all men as human beings, tolerance; their being open to all truth wherever it is found, their participating unapologetically in the positive, cumulative, Western tradition of Science and thought, and their founding social and political existence more on consent than on coercion: all disappears, in their actual life and conduct, distinctively and unmistakably Christian. It often brings upon their heads misunderstandings, trials and sufferings of the crudest or subtlest sort, but the fact that they have survived all these things measures how much they have borne. Thus, only God knows how and how much this struggling handful of Christian in the Near East has served over the centuries as an awakener, a stimulant and a leaven; only God knows how and what the Near East, and indeed the world, would have been without them.

IV

Christians of the Near East are conscious of their minority status. Their entire attitude and mentality reflect this minority consciousness. The Lebanese Christians are only a partial exception, because they too, when they mentally set themselves politically within the context of the larger Moslem world of the Near East to which they belong, automatically fall into the strange unauthentic working of the minority mind. The Christians of the Near East develop a dual soul, with a terrific inner tension, often also exceedingly comic, and they suffer under a pathetic sense of insecurity. They will not let go their Christianity, but at the same time they must do nothing that will offend their Moslem world. They do not want to betray their Christian Heritage, but neither do they want to prove traitors to the Moslem world to which they belong economically, socially, politically. In many fundamental interpretations of man, history and destiny, Islam and Christianity do not see eye to eye; in fact, in some instances they hold contradictory positions; and so the poor Christian is torn between the inner world of his fundamental Christian convictions and the overwhelming outer Moslem world of his socio-political existence. He is called to endure, and be not unfaithful to both of these worlds; and if he succeeds in the teeth of the apparent impossibility of this task, no achievement anywhere is more glorious than his. He has kept his integrity not vis-a-vis something neutral and uncommitted (e.g., the pagan world), but vis-a-vis something that has arisen in the first place precisely on the basis of a self-conscious position towards what he stands for. And since

Christianity is a universal religion, since therefore he is necessarily in communion with other Christians all over the world, learning in their schools and seminaries, reading their literature, profiting from their spiritual experience, establishing all sorts of spiritual and temporal associations with them, and since there have been for centuries, going back to the original wars between Christendom and Islam, passing through the Crusades, and culminating in the “colonialism” and “imperialism” of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most important economic and political conflicts and complications between the “Christian” West and the “Moslem” Near East, the Christian of the Near East is always under suspicion that he might be, or is tempted to become, an agent or a “lackey” of “the imperialists,” and a traitor to his own country and people.

A strange type of soul often arises under such conditions. The term Levantine has been aptly used to denote it. Living in two worlds at the same time, the Christian and the Moslem, without fully belonging to either; appropriating from one world a spiritual-moral-existential content and from the other only formal aspects of its economic-social-political existence; compelled to “belong” to the two worlds, on the one hand by the force of spiritual inheritance, and on the other by sheer physical-geographical-social necessity; finding itself quantitatively overwhelmed by one world while being fully convinced in its heart that the other world to which it does not also quite fully belong is nevertheless qualitatively superior; profoundly attached emotionally and existentially to its soil and country, and yet feeling somewhat of a stranger in its own land and among its own people; resigning itself to a permanent status of social and political inferiority; therefore turning its energies, not to the creative responsibilities and decisions of history, but to commerce, shopkeeping, speculation, smuggling, “reporting,” serving as agent or dragoman, petit-bourgeois existence, “interpreting East to West and West to East,” and the dark, shady world of entertainment and pleasure; reducing everything to the common denominator of money and gain; therefore preferring its word, its mind, its body, its pen, its honor, its services, for sale; crafty, sensuous, wily, calculating, sly; stopping in the midst of a sentence and changing its tack (often to an exactly opposite meaning to that intended at the moment the sentence was begun) when it suddenly realizes that the audience is “mixed,” containing representatives of both worlds; developing a strange kind of “eye” whereby audiences are canvassed and cautiously weighed in advance; therefore characterized by shifty eyes and shifty hands; living in whispers, doubletalk, ambiguous phrases, esoteric meanings; boastful, unreal, given to exaggeration and dreams; with a truncated sense of history whereby it shies responsibility for great causes in which it may be called to fight and die for something; sponsoring, when it realizes the unsufferability of its condition, all sorts of national, Arab, Pan-Arab, socialist and communist causes, thereby escaping from the burden of its Christianity and creating a convenient common

platform with the Moslems in which they too escape the burden of their Islam; often unable to discriminate between truth and falsehood, or wilfully slurring over such discrimination; taking childish pride in the most elementary virtues if it ever actualizes them, such as being “sincere” and being “frank”; looking on rather than acting, expecting rather than taking part, waiting for salvation from outside rather than relying on its own resources, receiving and following rather than giving and taking the land – such is the characterization of the Levantine soul in general.

I need hardly reassure the gentle reader that I am here neither thinking statistically nor fastening on particular individuals or groups; I am only asserting that such is the Levantine character however and wherever it arises, and that, by reason of the hard conditions of their life, the besetting temptation of the Christians of the Near East, unless they are most careful, is precisely to develop such a character. It follows that the deepest problem of the Christians of the Near East is how to overcome the temptation of becoming Levantine.

V

Lest any man should pharisaically thank God because he is not like these contemptible Levantines, let it be noted that the phenomenon of Levantinism is much more widespread than people imagine. It is not confined to urban existence in the Near East, although the term itself originated in relation to this existence. Wherever man lives in two civilizational worlds at the same time without fully belonging to either, one world overwhelming his existence quantitatively (e.g., economically, socially, politically) the other determining it qualitatively (e.g., personally, spiritually, genetically), he is likely to become Levantinized. He will manifest some of the typical Levantine Characteristics; duality and self-division, constant inner tension, perpetual painful passage from one world to another, living at the periphery of historical decision, feeling himself unceasingly a “stranger and pilgrim,” sponsoring all sorts of levelling-down causes, commercialism, shiftiness of character, unauthenticity of being, predilection to pleasure and sensuality, etc.

In varying degrees and under diverse modalities the phenomenon of Levantinism

appears under three other conditions besides the Near East. There are distinct traces of it among populations in border areas between large cultural or national concentrations, especially if these areas, as, e.g., between France and Germany, between the Slavic world and Western Europe, have been successively overrun back and forth for centuries by the

two opposing cultures or nations; although, in the case of Europe, the phenomenon is mitigated by the existence of an overarching European or Christian unity. It appears, in the second place, wherever there are sizable immigrations of peoples with diverse backgrounds into settled societies with strong cultural consciousness. This is true all over the Western Hemisphere, Thus nowhere is Levantinism more rampant than in New York, although the phenomenon here appears under a special modality, and again there are features that soften its incidence. One can show by some intensive sociological study that whole sections of New York are thoroughly Levantinized.

They are “at the periphery,” they live in two worlds, they are given to pleasure, speculation and superstition, their philosophers rationalize subjectivism, relativism and individualism into ultimate principles, they sponsor “socialist” causes, and the term “pluralism,” usually used to designate a fundamental philosophy, is intended by them to mean that all ways of life are equally good or bad, to justify every syncretism and eclecticism, and to pave the way for and dignify every form of unauthentic “tolerance”. One is not “judging” this kind of Levantinism, or at least one is not judging it more than other kinds; one is only remarking that it exists, and that perhaps there is a certain fatalism about its existence.

One of the subtlest forms of Levantinism appears whenever people think for a long time internationally and interculturally, or whenever they expose themselves in international conferences for a long time to clashing points of view. Internationalism and interculturalism breed Levantinism. And since nobody today is not somehow personally concerned about some aspect of the international and intercultural situation, there is something of the Levantine in every thinking person today. You begin to see some “good” in the other point of view and you

gradually lose hold on your fundamental principles. Of course there is something “good” in every point of view, otherwise, as Plato and Augustine would contend, it would not exist at all.

So far forth, then, Levantinism itself is “good”. But what is “bad” about it is not that it sees “the good” in the other fellow and the other point of view, but that it soon becomes eclectic, it sees only “the good” without also noting “the bad,” and since every “good” is subjectively valid for whoever holds it, it misinterprets this sheer formal equality into an equality in the contents of the various goods as well. It thus ends by holding that everything is virtually as good as everything else. A radical blur of being and value covers its sight. It loses the ontological dimension of depth and excellence. There is to it no good-in-itself, no transcendent judge.

Everything can be compromised, everything can be accepted if seen or taken “from the right point of view.” There is then a terrible decay into philistinism, syncretism, superficialism,

commercialism, sensualism, a flattening or levelling down of the truth, and the soft and moist eyes whereby one sentimentally cries “O my!”. “Survival at any cost” becomes then the overriding principle: there is nothing worse, nothing to be dreaded more, than death, and therefore under the threat of extinction everything is justified. There is no truth or cause for which one would gladly die, no evil which one would rather not live than take part in or

embrace. In internationalist or interculturalist existence you will find softness, sandiness, perpetual yielding, “peaceful coexistence”. You will find fear of force but not fear of the Lord; fear of not-being, but not fear of being. You will find “tolerance,” not in the sense of genuinely “respecting” the other fellow for the good that he has without ever letting him down with regard to what he has not and is not, not in the sense of loving him and seeing him in the light of the good that he may become, not therefore in the sense of judging him in terms of his potential-

ties, not therefore because you yourself are in touch with a real good absolutely independent of you and him in the light of which and by the power of which you judge and see him and yourself, but in the flat, stale and static sense of patting him on the back, of appealing to him to “live-and-let-live,” of not wanting to challenge him at all, of thanking God and laughing in your sleeve if you are only permitted to coexist side by side with him. If you care for conviction, firmness, truth, character, some rock on which one has built his house; if you love the sight

of heroes of faith and heroes of the spirit; then in vain will you search for these things in the abodes of the internationalists and interculturalists.

Since, then, the world has incredibly shrunk into a neighborhood, since the problems of war and peace and of human community are on everybody’s mind, since we must not only understand but also, agree with one another to be able to live together without destroying one another, and since this understanding and agreement necessitate that we live at least intellectually in one another’s world, then the whole world has become a sort of Levant where nobody can afford to live smugly in his own world alone. What the Levant by reason of its geographical necessities went through over the past millennia, the whole world is now suddenly forced to go through. The whole world then is in process of being Levantinized. Let therefore whoever honestly feels himself above the temptation of Levantinism cast the first stone at the characterless and despicable Levantines of the Near East.

VI

Christianity is not a matter of social adjustment or cultural or civilizational necessities, although it has a great deal to say about these things. Christianity arose at the heart of the Levant when the temptation of Levantinism was Perhaps at its intensest. Its affirmations and claims are altogether independent of any sociological or worldly-cultural determinations.

Therefore, Christians, whether Copts of Upper Egypt, or merchants of Damascus, or landowners in the Syrian countryside; whether among the ruling classes of Lebanon, or the shrewd businessmen of Beirut or the sturdy peasants of the wonderful villages of the Lebanese hills and

mountains; whether between the Slavic and Western cultures of Europe, or at the various points where the Eastern Church meets the Western Churches; whether as minorities in Asia and Africa; whether as immigrants in the Western Hemisphere in the midst of overwhelmingly dominant alien cultures; or whether, finally, discharging international or intercultural tasks, or simply concerned about how understanding and agreement, and therefore peace, may be brought about; Christians of any description who are especially subject to the Levantine temptation, and who fall into this temptation, have thereby ceased to be Christian, The most superficial reading of the New Testament, let alone the doctrinal and living traditions of the Church and the great affirmations of the Liturgy, reveals that One, Jesus Christ, made absolute claims about Himself, about man and about history, claims that no modernism, no scientism, no rationalism, no liberalism, no “pluralism,” no pathetic personal escapism, no “higher criticism,” no Levantine necessities, no requirements of peace and international concord, can possibly obliterate or explain away. Therefore Levantinism in the above sense in the religious sphere has nothing in common with Christianity.

VII

The Christian communities of the Near East have performed a splendid task of preservation. Every conceivable material and mental device has been used by them. In their whole existence they embody a sort of sedimentation of centuries of suffering and experience.

They know the catechism and they teach it to their children. Grandmothers play an important role in the transmission of the faith. They piously cross themselves and their daughters wear necklaces with a beautiful pendant golden cross. There are crucifixes in their homes and icons and pictures of saints. Every rite has its own resplendent liturgy coming down from the early centuries and containing, among the Orthodox and Catholics, the wholeness of the faith. Signs and symbols of Christianity are found everywhere: in their homes, in their morals, in their customs, in their language, even in their names (certain names, e.g. George, Michel, Albert, are used on by Christians; other names, e.g. Mohammed, Ahmed, Ali, are used only by Moslems; so that you can often tell a man's religion directly from his name). Religious ceremonies--baptisms, weddings, funerals, the Holy Mass--are most colorful and packed with meaning and memory; and the solemnity with which they are performed leaves an indelible mark upon those who attend or participate in them. They are an education by themselves, so that a child who goes through them several times, even if he received no formal religious education of any kind, has had the substance of the faith imprinted on his soul. There are thousands of church buildings, some very old, all over the Near East, with characteristic Oriental cupolas, and the Holy Eucharist has been celebrated for centuries, in some every morning, in others certainly every Sunday. Practically every hilltop in Lebanon displays an imposing monastery or some religious institution; and all along the road in the countryside are little niches, beautifully lit at night, with madonnas or icons or pictures of particular saints, and whenever the faithful pass these symbols, their heart brightens or they cross themselves. The best wines in the Near East are produced by Christian religious communities. Who can measure how much society in the Near East, both Moslem and Christian, especially in Lebanon and Syria, owes the selfless works of charity of wonderful dedicated Sisters, belonging to diverse religious orders, and of other Christian religious communities, in picking up, attending to and raising waifs, orphans, homeless children, abandoned babies, unhappy girls? No sound in Lebanon is more distinctive and more

evocative of profound nostalgia than the rhythmic chimes of churchbells floating across hill and dale, at dawn or dusk, from churches or monasteries. Young men vie before pretty

maidens in the style of churchbell ringing. The great feasts of the Church (in Lebanon especially Easter, Christmas, the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin on August 15, the Feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord on August 6, the Feast of the Cross on September 14, and the Feast of particular Patron Saints) are occasions of great joy and celebration, preceded for the more pious by special acts (including strict fasting) of mortification and penance. I do not believe church attendance in the Near East is below that in any other part of the world, and in some Catholic churches several Masses are celebrated every Sunday, almost each time with the Church

Packed. The Christians of the Near East are rooted, racially, culturally, nationally, in the soil of their native lands. They form so many Christian oases, preserved more or less whole, in a vast sea of Islam. There is a distinctive Christian Arabic poetry and literature, especially in Lebanon,

The Bible, Homer and the Summa of Saint Thomas Aquinas were translated and published in Lebanon. There are Lebanese religious orders, some sending forth dedicated missionaries to Africa and other parts of the East.

All this struggling faithfulness, all this marvelous activity of preservation, all this ardent clinging to what is handed down and received, all these movingly stubborn remnants of what was once a most creative spirituality to which the whole Christian world owes so much, are absolutely wonderful. Let no man belittle the preservative achievement of the Christianity of the Near East. When I contemplate what has been actually preserved over the centuries in the face of the greatest of odds, and when I observe the readiness with which Western Christianity, in the face of less trying odds, lapses at times into secularism, liberalism, humanism, relativism materialism, Marxism, communism, and immanentism, I humbly conclude that the achievement of the Christianity of the Near East, in the eyes of the Lord and so far as the “book of life” is concerned, is not altogether null.

VIII

Eastern Christianity cannot afford to look forward only to the accomplishments, great as they are, of transmission and preservation. It must be more original, more daring, more confident, and more creative in its dreams of itself. I now turn to how it may envision its future, to the possible challenges and prospects which face it in the years and decades ahead.

(1) The Christians of the Near East must never separate themselves from the social, intellectual and national stirrings of their world. Rooted in this world, they must endeavor to become even more rooted than they are. When they cannot lead, they must nevertheless take as active a part in these movements as possible. Certainly the living Lord has a special will, often quite unknown and must be sought with tears, for the economic, social and political orders emerging in the Near East. There are two dangers of the most tragic character which face the Christians of the Near East in this regard: (a) to identify themselves with these movements at the

price of their Christianity; or (b) to interpret their Christian identification in such a way as to become virtually excluded from any effective participation in these movements. There is no general rule that can magically or mechanically save one from adventure, experimentation and suffering. The fundamental regulative principle is: never to be disloyal to Christ, and never to detach yourself from the movements stirring your people at their depths; and where the two injunctions conflict, to seek the will of Christ for that occasion with total abandon, and to accept any suffering with which He may wish to visit you. One thing you cannot afford: to be indifferent and “outside,” and not to be in constant daily touch with Him. There is no drab modus vivendi: in the rapidly changing Near East, changing often in mysterious ways, every morning the challenge faces you in ever fresh forms. If one says these things without firsthand knowledge of the infinite temptations and sufferings involved, one had better not say them.

(2) The Christians of the Near East have a special intellectual-spiritual vocation. They must never weaken in holding up the highest standards of scholarship and learning. They must be absolutely convinced that in the bosom of the Eternal Logos all truth safely and certainly and joyously discloses itself. Upon the advent of Islam it was from their forbears that the adherents of the new faith first obtained an inkling of Greek-Western thought. If certain of their present scientific-historical findings concerning the original relations of Islam to Christianity and the

subsequent development of Islam cannot now be published, they should not on that account lose interest in fundamental historical research: on the contrary, they should work out the truth in the fullest detail, and leave it to the safe keeping of future more enlightened generations. They should impart to their world the ideal of absolute dedication to the truth, above all self-interest and all emotion. They should keep in the closest touch with Western higher centers of learning and develop such centers themselves. They should stress not only science and technique, but

above all the liberal arts, the power of reason in all spheres of human existence, the cogency of argument, philosophy, fundamental ideas, the compulsion of the universal, the value of fundamental research in all realms, the original potency of the spirit. In these domains if they do not endeavor to lead, in the face of all hardship and misunderstanding and no matter at what cost, nobody else in the Near East can and will lead. There are great intellectual-spiritual achievements in the classical Moslem tradition--in poetry, in literature, in positive science, in

jurisprudence, in philosophy, in Moslem theology, in art, and above all in sufi writings--that the Christians of the Near East can appreciate, rejoice in and help to discover and elucidate. Canon Kenneth Cragg has been pioneering, especially in his *Operation Reach*, in the field of what he calls "the positive content of Islam. Thus he writes:

There is in many quarters a will to understanding and patient search after the ear at least of thinking Muslims by a careful concern for the positive content of Islam. Themes like sovereignty, God in his signs, the Names of God, man in nature and man in sin, the mystery of idolatry and its antagonism to Divine Lordship, the meaning of Divine unity, are being more deeply studied in Christian circles, in the belief that through these areas of common ground witness to the gospel may more truly penetrate the Muslim mind with those themes, like the Cross, the Incarnation and the Holy Trinity, which have been too long imprisoned in, and ill-served by a barren controversy. It is not that controversy is finally avoidable, but that it must be set in those realms which the issues of it really concern and where the answers can most blessedly arise. There is no front of Christian witness where the art of communication is a more urgent field of loving study and spiritual attainment than that on the Christian frontier with Islam.*²

I completely endorse these words, and I believe that the Christians of the Near East should join with Western Christians in lovingly exploring "the art of communication on

the Christian frontier with Islam." Much more than they have dared to do so far, the Christians of the Near East can make the world of reason, study, thought and books their world, and through it they can perform a unique service in which nobody else can replace them. In the next 100 years there are a 1000 fundamental books which they alone can conceive and write.

² **World Christian Handbook* 1962, *op. cit.*, p.37, in one of the introductory articles to the *Handbook* entitled *The Muslim World*.

(3) The Christians of the Near East should “revive” their own glorious religious past.

This means, among other things, vital re-acquaintance with the great Greek Fathers, especially Chrysostom, Basil and Damascene, with St. Ephrem, with Pseudo-Dionysius, and with the great hermits, ascetics and anchorites of Egypt, northern Syria and the desert. There is room for a hundred books on this wonderful tradition. Circles of study, courses in schools, sermons in churches, celebrations of feasts, topical retreats for the faithful, exposition of the Liturgy that everybody knows by heart--all these things can sensitize living Christians to an integral deposit that arose and matured in their own lands and under their own skies, a deposit on which the whole edifice of Christian doctrine and life, both in the East and in the West, has been built.

There are innumerable Christian relics in the Near East awaiting interpretation and dramatization for those who have been for centuries living so callously among them. With the humanism and immanentism of this age, in which man and history are conceived as wholly self-sufficient and paradise on earth as attainable through revolution, social change and unaided human effort, nothing is more needed to remind mankind that it must first “give God the praise” than the original transcendental spirituality of the Near East. God is Creator and Wholly Other (there is here a fruitful “common ground” with Islam), history and man are wholly in His hands, and man can mystically unite with his Creator (again a “common ground” with the great Moslem mystics) through absolute detachment from all creatures and through seeking His face alone. This independence and otherness of God, His free Majesty, are wonderfully represented in the Eastern Liturgies; the sinner attending Mass completely forgets about himself and his miserable sins and loses himself in the Divine Majesty; he experiences a “lift” of freedom from himself, because nothing that is said touches his particular personal sin, the entire drama depicting God, Heaven, the Angels, Christ, the Cross, the act of salvation, the Mother of God, the Divine Economy, the mystical coming of Christ in person right there in the Bread and Wine on the Holy Table, as though he and his stupid sins did not exist. Original Oriental mysticism has much to say to the complacent, pagan, modern world, so wrapped up in itself, so entangled in its own self-analysis. Moreover, the “revival” (the notion of revival is very paradoxical) of this original spirituality opens up the real dimension of history as nothing else does, for it is a fact, so often forgotten or unappreciated, that the Eastern Fathers of the first six centuries determined the entire course of the subsequent development of Christianity. When vigorous Christian communities in the West (for whom the whole world is grateful), forgetting this original impulse to which in the end they owe everything, have had a thousand years of trials behind them, they will then rediscover and feel at one with the Christianity of the Near East; they will find that its conclusions are not much different from theirs: and in the achieved unity of history they

will become humble. If the Christians of the Near East knew how to “revive” this original mystical spirituality, they will help considerably both in correcting the no progressivism and immanentism of this age and in re-establishing the unity of history.

(4) The Christians of the Near East owe a great deal to Western Christian missionaries-- American, British, French, German, Austrian, Italian, and Russian-- both Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox. The direct Christian impact of this mighty movement or the spirit during the last century and a half upon the Moslems of the Near East has been negligible, Islam as such being quite resistant to Christian conversion. The ultimate reason for this resistance is that Islam, as it first formed itself, took a final, clear-cut, conscious stand about Christianity, and once such stands have absolutized and established themselves, their change becomes humanly impossible. But if the direct Christian impact of the missionary endeavors upon Islam has been almost nil, the indirect impact, through contact and association, hospitals and education, books, acts of charity, and the revitalization of the native Christian communities themselves, has been enormous. In the final reckoning of things no one can tell what this indirect fecundation will eventually achieve or amount to. I am of the opinion that no sacrifice has been a waste, no tear has been shed in vain, no sigh or suffering has been of no avail. The story of how much the Christians of the Near East owe the great Western missionary movement, not only spiritually, but in every other way, will fill volumes, and in its exact total scope it can never be written: it is known only to God. Some Western missionaries have been turning over their responsibilities lately to native forces, but of course they cannot altogether disinterest themselves in what they have created and left behind. Three problems arise: (a) how each missionary enterprise may continue to relate itself both to its product and to the old Churches of the Near East; (b) how the scandal of rivalry, suspicion and division, both among the Protestant missionary enterprises, and between Protestant and Catholic missions, may be ended; and (c) how the Kulturkampf among the diverse home cultures as the various missionaries carry them over to the field (e.g., among the Protestants, between British and American, and between German and Anglo-Saxon; and among the Catholics, between French and German, and between European and American) may be softened. These three problems are among the determinants of the future of Christianity in the Near East; for the Near East, more than any other region in the world, faithfully mirrors the state of the world, both the degree of unity or disunity prevailing, particularly in the West, and the scandal of Christian disunity. Tell me how Europe is going to develop, both internally and in its relations to America and Russia, and tell me what course the Christian ecumenical movement is going to take, and I will tell you how the future of Christianity in the Near East is likely to unfold itself.

(5) The Christians of the Near East are gradually discovering both one another and the Christian world as a whole. Unless they understand, love, help and cooperate with one another, they cannot pass, Christianly speaking, from the old virtue of conservation to the new path of creation. Partly as a result of the present ecumenical impulse which I do not believe is a passing phenomenon and which has certainly reached the Near East (the spirit of John XXIII has virtually wrought a revolution), partly by reason of other processes, pressures and compulsions, a wonderful new spirit has come upon the scene. There is less acrimony and mistrust than ever before; people are more inclined to grant the other fellow “the benefit of the doubt”; there is a new openness of spirit, a new creative tolerance, a readiness to listen and learn, a genuine longing for fellowship and unity. Christians feel one another’s stimulating and sustaining presence more than ever before. The Liturgy is not as repulsive to Protestants as it was only a generation ago; Orthodox are not as suspicious of Catholics as they were only a decade ago; and Catholics enter into creative conversations on questions of doctrine and unity, with both Orthodox and Protestants, more than they used to do only two or three years ago. If this spiritual rapprochement continues under the Holy Ghost and as He wills, and if the underlying subtle Kulturkampf is reduced to manageable proportions, then wonderful creative days lie ahead before the Christianity of the Near East. But two conditions are absolutely necessary: more calls for religious vocations, and constant touch with the sources or the streams of ecumenicity in the world, particularly at Rome, at the World Council of Churches, and with the Russian Church.

The Russian Church has age-old intimate relations with the Greek Orthodox See of Antioch which are likely to continue and deepen, and in the Greek Orthodox churches in Lebanon and Syria you sometimes find written on the iconostasis or on some of the icons outside the iconostasis Russian or Greek or Russian and Greek, with or without the Arabic, but no Western European language. The Christian world cannot be indifferent to the fate, both spiritual and temporal, of the Christians of the Near East; and the Christians of the Near East cannot remain isolated from the stirrings of the Holy Spirit among their fellow Christians throughout the world.

X

(6) If one has fearless regard only for the truth, one must observe that the Christianity of the Near East depends to some extent on the fate of Lebanon. It is not correct to say that Lebanon is a Christian country, because about half of its population is non-Christian-- Moslem (Sunni and Shii) and Druze. But it is correct to say that Lebanon is a country in the Near East in which the Christians are, or should be, as free as they are, and feel, or should feel, as much at home as they do, in Rome or Paris or Munich or Madrid or Manchester or Boston. The Moslems too are, or should be, as free and happy as they are anywhere else in the Moslem world, but what is distinctive about Lebanon is that the Christians in it are, or should be, as free and happy as they are anywhere else in the Christian world. The uniqueness of Lebanon is that both Christians and Moslems feel, or should feel, perfectly at home in it. If you ask a Lebanese Moslem: Do you want a Lebanon in which a Christian does not feel perfectly at home? he will emphatically answer you, No; and if you ask a Lebanese Christian: Do you want a Lebanon in which a Moslem does not feel perfectly at home? he will also emphatically answer you, No. There is, then, a tree, equals self-reliant, self-respecting, historically rooted, unoverwhelmed, distinctive, Christian culture in Lebanon. This is a most valuable thing in itself, Its value is appreciated almost unanimously by Christians and Moslems in the Near East. It is some Western diplomats, wholly unworthy of the deepest in their own cultures, who have never understood the uniqueness or importance of Lebanon, Politics in Lebanon is never an end in itself: politics subserves far deeper cultural and civilizational themes. Any political arrangement with respect to Lebanon may vary, and any person or regime is expendable, but what should be looked upon as fixed and invariable is the concept of Lebanon as wholly dedicated to the human person, country in which the truth, at every level of existence, may be freely sought and found, and wisely declared, a country in which human rights and fundamental freedoms are held sacrosanct, and therefore a country in which both Christian and Moslem can live happily and creatively side by side in peace, each feeling no less at home than any Christian or Moslem feels anywhere else in the world. It is obvious that Lebanon does not wholly fulfill this ideal, but it is this ideal nevertheless that justifies Lebanon and that imparts the deepest joy to those who really know it and believe in its wonderful possibilities. The Lebanese themselves are of course primarily responsible for translating this ideal into working, stable arrangements, but the slightest acquaintance with history and with the actual facts of the case will reveal that this responsibility does not devolve upon them alone. The world, both East and West, both Christian and Moslem, is also responsible. The prospects of Christianity in the Near

East are not independent of the fate of Lebanon, and this fate is a function at once of the wisdom of the Lebanese among themselves and of the wisdom of the world. Nowhere else can concerned outside forces have more creative relevance and bear more certain fruits, in the service of man, truth and freedom, than in Lebanon.

XI

(7) The fullest identification with the aspirations of the people, the most vigorous intellectual leadership, the most intensive effort to “revive” the tradition of the Fathers and Saints, the closest cooperation among themselves and with existing missionary activities, the most sincere participation in the promising ecumenical movement of this age, and the brightest prospects for a free, independent and secure Lebanon—all this is not enough to cause the Christians to move from the preservative to the creative stage of existence. They are excellent preparations, but without the independent, free, sovereign, additional agency of the Holy Ghost, no creation is possible.

What is needed is effulgence of light and power, the peace of being that freely creates, the certainty of the hand of God. God Himself must bless and act. Without godliness, saintliness and holiness, without the victory of the cross and the joy of the spirit, nothing is possible save staleness and repetition. In Christian existence it is impossible to “create” in our own unaided human power: the Creator Himself must create in us and through us. Thus the Christians of the Near East cannot just “resolve” one morning to pass from conservation to creation and then the creation will forthwith ensue: it may be that God does not want them to create; it may be that their utmost task now is only to conserve. conserve. To be in a position to create, the Christians

of the Near East must once again affirm in their own life the mystery of “suffering for His name’s sake.” They are actually suffering in all sorts of ways, but somehow the suffering is not counted to them for righteousness: it is a cosmic waste. That is why they do not “count” in the total Christian scale; that is why there is no inspired Near Eastern Christian literature read in Helsinki and Paris, in Burma and Buenos Aires, There are a number of causes under consideration in the councils of Rome, but the cause of the Maronite hermit Sharbel Makhoul appears to be more advanced than the rest. If this man of God is declared saint, it will be a great day in the modern history of Near Eastern Christianity: it will signify that

God has once again deigned to call men to suffer creatively and “countingly” for His name’s sake on these shores. Man can only suffer: it is God alone who can transfigure suffering into glory. Man can only accept the Cross: it is God alone who can raise from the dead. Absolute detachment from the world and all its deceitfulness; dying to self; treading under foot the ugly face of the devil through the power of the Cross; repenting, confessing, sharing, trusting, expecting; absolute nearness to the heart of Christ; the sanctification of whole actions and institutions; simply letting the Holy Ghost guide, lead and direct; entering into the glorious company of the saints through contemplation and ardent prayers of intercession; the quiet of eternity; loving and obeying unto death; calling every minute upon the Holy Name of Jesus; the ecstatic contemplation of the Holy Trinity--you can pray and yearn for these things; you can reject them when they come your way; but one thing you cannot do: you cannot produce or create them. They are the free and independent gift of the Holy Ghost. The question is whether it is in the design of the Holy Ghost to grant them to the Christians of the Near East.

XII

As samples from only one contemporary Near Eastern Christian spirituality with which I happen to be acquainted, I close with two translations from the literature of the Orthodox Youth Movement of Lebanon and Syria, one a simple statement by the Father Superior of a new Monastic Order of Deir-el-Harf made on the occasion of four monks taking their First Vow, and the other a prayer by a Greek Orthodox priest.

(1)

We thank God who hath called us unto Himself and confirmed us in the way of His patience unto the end. We thank Him because He hath overlooked our weaknesses and accepted and continues to accept us as we are. We thank Him because He is ever-present cause of our faithfulness to Him.

As we take the First Vow we become consecrated. We are pledged to put aside through His grace the pleasures of the world and to seek and pray for Him always.

We know we are unworthy of this wonderful grace; we know that the way ahead suits neither our nature nor our powers; we know we shall stumble on the way. But God visits His slaves, whoever they are, and the imperfection of those who surrender to Him He is able to heal.

Have we chosen a strange way, thereby separating ourselves from others? But God Himself brought us to this strange and unknown way, and no doubt He is the author of the plan. And the Holy Church our Mother hath approved it from the beginning, and it is She, in the Person of His Lordship, our Venerable Father and Bishop, who clearly first encouraged us and tended our early steps. ...

The Church yearns in us all for the mercy of Her Lord and needs to be filled with His grace.

In our opaque world the Church needs members who long for the face of the Lord above everything desired and longed for.

From the heart of the beloved Church of Antioch we draw near to the Lord, and there before Him we confess our sins, and through patience, blood and the ascetic life we beseech the dew of His great mercy and the shining of His love and light.

The Church is the Bride of the Lord. How can She therefore forget Her love and His love?

The Church is the beloved Bride of Christ. How can She therefore not seek Him with fervor? How can She not await His coming in the night, with the lamps burning strong and bright, to receive His salvation, and His resurrection in its dazzling light?

Will the Lord accept our burnt offering? Will He grant us to rise above ourselves and cleanse our hearts? Will He make our whole life a petition, pure and undefiled, in the mouth of the Church our Mother, bearing to Him with fidelity the longing of Her Heart? ...^{*3}

(2)

I thank Thee o God for Thou hast visited me in my anxiety and sought me in my despair. Thou hast come down to the abyss and I ceased to feel that I am in it. In it Thou hast come to me with a new vision, taking off from Thy face the veil of my sin. Thou hast deigned to exchange Thy love with mine, and when Thou coveredst me with forgiveness, it was as one intoxicated though perfectly sober that I met Thee. And before Thy face Thou liftedst me a brother beloved.

O Thou my companion in the sorest of trials and my mate in the sweetness of yearning. O Thou who when temptation reaches its utmost bounds causeth Thy face to shine upon me, with tenderness and compassion. O thou who only after I meet Thee I come out of my

³ *The Publication of the Monastery of St. George at Deir-el-Harf (Nashrat Deir Mar Jirjus Al-Harf), No. 14, December 1962, PP. 1-2.

distress, to know Thee more and more. O Thou who in my choking and darkness makest Thy way Thyself to me. And as I behold Thee, Thou becomest my hope, and I know that I am then beyond death, having climbed the mount where Thou wast transfigured.

This is Thy story with me day after day. Thou hast thus become a law and a norm unto me, and Thy ways with mankind became perfectly clear. I then reconciled myself to what became only too familiar to me. I learned that I am powerless to save myself, but Thou acceptest me in my weakness though this weakness ever remains the same. This is what Thou hast willed from the beginning, and this is how Thou lovest. Thy mercy hath so amazed me that I spend all my life, between one fall and another, singing praises about it. I sing these praises because Thou transformest my stumbling always to meditating on why I did not walk in Thy statutes. And so love captivates me anew, I penetrate to the awful depths of my sin, my misery and Thy mercy disclose themselves equally to me, and I am assured moment, in victory and in defeat, in doubt and in certainty, that Thy dealings with me are dealings of compassion.*⁴

4 *An-Nour, May 15, 1963, p. 138. Prayer by Archimandrite George Khudr.