

{ministry reflection paper}



[doctor of ministry program]

Writing Sample Requirements

The purpose of this paper is to assess the academic writing and critical thinking ability of potential Doctor of Ministry students.

Write a 5 page paper based on the article “The Future of Christians in the Arab World ” by Riad Jarjour (Bailey, Betty Jane, and J. Martin Bailey. *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003. [p 12-21])

In this paper interact with this article by:

- Stating Jarjour’s main argument(s)
- Critiquing his thoughts (both positively and negatively)
- Engaging content in light of your personal ministry context
- Demonstrating your interaction with this article through brief quotes and citing portions of the paper, including footnotes and a bibliography
- Citing other sources as well to further develop your thoughts.

If you have any questions regarding this writing sample requirement please contact the DMin office at dmin@fuller.edu or 1-800-999-9578.



The Future of Christians in the Arab World

RIAD JARJOUR

Are Christians in the Middle East dying out? Whenever the question about the future of Christians in the Arab world is raised, the answer always seems to be pessimistic. In a recent volume in the encyclopedic French series on the Christians of the East, Jean-Pierre Valognes asks,

Will the final uprooting of the Christians from the East take the form of a tragedy? There are too many crude precedents for us to rule out that possibility. But in spite of everything, it is more likely that they will quietly disappear in the process of a draining away, a process at once both unobtrusive and merciless.¹

Valognes is excessively pessimistic. I believe it is important to describe the reality that Christians in the Arab world face, including the challenges to their lives, the responses to these challenges, and the horizons of their future and destiny.

1. Jean-Pierre Valognes, *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient: des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

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The Challenges Christians Face

1. The Middle East's Structure of Endemic Crisis

Since the mid-years of the First World War, when conspiracies were hatching for the division of the Middle East into a patchwork quilt of imperial domains, the region has been the playground of external manipulators. More recently, the success of religious fanatics throughout the region has neutralized the moderate center of Arab society and marginalized the communities that do not belong to the dominant ethno-religious groups. External forces manipulate societies that become less and less able to define their own identity and manage their own reality. The structure of endemic crisis is well established in the region.

In this environment, the potentials of the Middle East are being wasted. The region is greatly blessed with human and material resources. The people are creative and retain their gift of ingenuity. They are enterprising and productive. They create beauty and express humor. In ancient times, the Middle East was among the world's most wealthy regions in a material sense; in modern times, oil and other mineral resources have become major resources.

Middle Eastern communities, however, are being decimated, dispersed, depressed, and disempowered. The largest of the world's displaced and refugee communities are Middle Eastern. Material resources are being sold to the benefit of a select few, and the gap between rich and poor continues to grow. The church bears a heavy burden to work for justice, human rights, and respect for creation — a burden it cannot bear alone.

2. The Demographic Hemorrhage

Christians in the Middle East number between ten and twelve million. This is compared with one hundred and fifty million Muslims. This ratio is changing, and the decline in the number of Christians in the Middle East differs from country to country. Forty years ago Christians in Iraq made up 6 percent of the population; today they are less than 3 percent. Before the civil war in Lebanon began in 1975, Chris-

tians constituted half of the population; today they are about 33 percent. In 1948 Christians composed 50 percent of Jerusalem's residents; today they are not more than 3 percent and a significant number of these are expatriates.

Although the size of Christian families is smaller than that of Muslim families, the most obvious reason for decline is that Christians are emigrating more rapidly than Muslims, and in proportionally greater numbers, to countries outside the Arab world.

3. The Politicization of Religions

Political Islam threatens all Arab Christians. Its goal is to establish a Muslim religious state. In such a state Christians would be no better than resident aliens, guests, or, at best, second-class citizens. Although not all Muslim political organizations advocate the same goals, there still remains the notion of Islam as both religion and secular authority. Given circumstances of time, place, and power alignments, political Islam can lead to certain human rights violations, the most important of which is the right to equality.

Similarly, in Israel and occupied East Jerusalem, political Judaism has imposed an exclusivist claim to a land and a city that historically was not only spiritually important to the three Abrahamic faiths but also was the homeland for many Muslims and Christians. Since the formation of the Zionist state in 1948, Arab residents of Israel proper have been treated as second-class citizens and with great suspicion. Even the secular Jews in Israel feel mounting pressure as their state increasingly is dominated by religious parties. A variety of national policies have led both Christians and Muslims in areas controlled by Israel to feel unwelcome in the land of their birth.

Counteracting these movements requires a stronger and more insistent emphasis on concepts of "nation" and "patriotism" that are distinct from and not to be replaced by religious identity. Challenging political Islam and political Judaism also requires that the notion of "religion" be clarified and affirmed. Religious faith ought to be neither subject to nor exploited for political purposes. Religion's proper place is as a reasonable guide to God, the source and destiny of all that is; it is religion that gives life meaning.

4. The Western Intrusion of "Protectionism"

Western Christians might think that for many centuries and even today there is a special kinship tie between them and Eastern Christians and that Eastern Christians are not really Arabs. They do not understand that even in the Arabian Peninsula, Christianity was the environment within which Islam was born. Christianity preceded Islam. "It was in Antioch [now an Arab city] that the disciples were first called 'Christians'" (Acts 11:26).

Since the beginning of the last millennium, the West has intruded into the Middle East with its own particular interests. The pretext was always the same: "protection." The Western Crusades, which merged Western ecclesiastical and temporal interests, theoretically were launched to "protect" the holy places. In fact, they expressed more worldly political and economic interests and revealed a deep Western animosity against Eastern Christians. The Crusades planted in Muslim hearts the seeds of suspicion and doubt against their Christian compatriots, a persistent image that pictures Arab Christians as agents of a greedy West, a "fifth column" poised to stab Muslims in the back.

In modern times, European governments intervened under the slogan of "protecting minorities" in the Ottoman Empire. Then, as the empire declined and became the "sick man of Europe," the European powers swarmed over it, bickering among themselves about how to divide up the possessions of the sick man when he died.

Since 1948 the West has continued to manipulate religion as a factor in its policies. When the Western nations discovered that much of the oil they needed for industrial growth was buried in ground settled by Muslims, the relationship with the Middle East was decisively redefined. Economic, political, and strategic interests dictated that in this new framework there was no place for concern about Eastern Christians.

Christians were victims of a variant form of "protection" practiced for many centuries by Rome and, in later days, by Western Protestants. The latter's purpose was to evangelize or proselytize Eastern Christians. Assuming they could teach the Eastern Christians about Christ, Western churches reopened old wounds that still festered in the East. According to His Beatitude Patriarch Ignatios IV of Antioch, "They wanted to 'stimulate life' in the historic churches by incorporating them within Western ecclesiastical bodies."

Christian Reactions

Christians in the Arab world face these challenges in various ways and with varying degrees of intensity. Their reactions include the following:

1. Resignation

The reaction of resignation or despair is dominated by a feeling of dependency, which in turn can lead to a variety of actions. Arab Christians often fear that their circumstances may become worse than they are now. They may surrender, give up, capitulate. Even as citizens they accept anguish as normal and their inferior or marginalized status as unavoidable. Sometimes they do not even demand their rights, and some Christians respond by giving up their inherited religion.

The result of resignation for many people is to retreat emotionally to "the golden age" when people knew great happiness, unity, and prosperity. As present difficulties intensify, the heirs of that golden age escape into past glory, seeking to forget the bitterness of their present condition. They try to dissociate themselves from their present by living in a fantasy world.

A kind of physical divorce is also the result of resignation. To "go westward" (*al-ightirab*) is one alternative by which Arabs have chosen to avoid living together in tension and hammering out a common political life. In the past, Christians emigrated internally, but in the early years of the twentieth century most of those who emigrated headed westward. They had given up on the idea of trying to be a part of a coherent Arab society. These emigrations have become more or less final divorces.

2. Tribal Solidarity

Tribalism, as a reaction, is another form of resignation, but it represents the other side of the coin, leading to patterns of resistance that gradually become more intense. In all multi-religious and multi-ethnic societies, exclusivity is a natural option. When the peoples of the Middle East adopted Christianity, they were extremely tenacious in retain-

ing their national cultures. The groups who opposed the doctrine declared in A.D. 451 by the ecumenical Council of Chalcedon were forced to distance themselves politically as well as theologically from the Byzantine Empire; they affirmed themselves as national churches.

With the Muslim conquest and the formulation of Muslim politics and theology, the greatest mass of Middle Eastern Christians became Muslim. Those who remained loyal to Christianity also preserved their ethnic heritages. In the matter of language they accommodated themselves to the Arab-Muslim reality, but they retained their original ancient languages in the context of their liturgies.

The *dhimmi* status given to Middle Eastern Christians under traditional Islamic government has always resulted in a "legal" reason for Middle Eastern Christians to preserve their exclusivity.² In a society that allowed for co-existence of Muslims and non-Muslims, the legal inequality of and restrictions on Christians and Jews led each of them to close ranks within their own communities. Even though today's modern sensibilities call for equality of social and legal status, the mentality and social practices of the past era still have repercussions.

Fundamentalism or sectarian extremism is another manifestation of tribal solidarity. Religious fundamentalism advocates a return to the Scriptures and to a "golden age" when religion is considered to have been pure. But religious fundamentalism quickly turns into sectarian extremism and becomes a political enterprise, as one religious sectarian extremism faces another religious sectarian extremism.

3. Living within the Tensions

Not all Christian reactions to the challenge of living in the Middle East are so extreme. Some Arab Christians avoid both the feelings of resignation and the patterns of resistance. Instead they struggle to live within the various tensions of their society.

The first tension is within Christianity itself. Christians belong to a specific local community of faith. They also belong to a denomination. Their local group represents a spiritual bond, a communion of the faithful, while the denomination is the social embodiment of the

2. For an explanation of *dhimmi* status, see the boxed text on p. 54.

church. The denomination is a sociocultural bloc, distinguishing itself from other blocs of the same kind, and defining its identity by its particular history. Christians ought not live out their loyalty to the local church at the expense of the denomination or vice versa. As they live within this tension Christians must find a middle road or accurately read the signs of the times to know when to focus on the local community of faith and when to focus on the wider community of faith. Similarly, all Christians also live with an ecumenical vocation. No part of the church can faithfully exist in any given place while it ignores or is at enmity with the other parts. Christians must seek ways of remaining loyal to their particular community of faith while expressing solidarity with all who follow Christ.

Some Christians feel torn between the spiritual and temporal dimensions as they live lives defined by their national belonging. When Arab Christians — even in Lebanon, for example — became minorities, they began to suffer as all minorities suffer in societies not built upon full secularism. Are they citizens who are equal (or should be equal) with all others? Or are they members of minorities whose status in society is defined by the sect to which they belong?

The third kind of tension that Christians in the Middle East experience is whether they belong to the Arab East, whose cultural features are defined by Islam, or whether they identify with a Western society that bears the historical stamp of Christianity. The culture of the Arab East has been shaped by its experience with and within the Muslim culture. Many Arab Christians feel that their fate is bound up with that of their Muslim compatriots. If they do not fully participate in this destiny, especially at critical fate-determining points, they must ask themselves about their relationships with the West.

Choices of Destiny

What good is it for Arab Christians to understand all of this if their awareness does not provide them scope to control their own destiny and to define what they must do with the options open to them? Christians in the Arab world face four choices that offer firm foundations for lives of dignity and freedom.

1. Liberation in Renewal

The most inclusive choice — one that can sum up all the choices — is the choice to seek “liberation in renewal.” Liberation is the object; renewal is the means.

Today there are many reasons for anxiety, but the church in the Middle East has begun to take its destiny into its own hands. The Eastern churches are experiencing internal renewals, each in a manner relevant to its situation and with the goal of transcending present problems to move toward a brighter future. These renewals include renovations of buildings and institutions, youth movements, the revival of monastic life, dialogue with Islam, a measure of comfort in the Muslim world, and the deepening of indigenous roots.

The very real anxiety concerning the future of Christianity in the Middle East has gone beyond the fear that the Christian monuments in the region may someday become mere museums. The Christian community has come to see this issue in qualitative terms. Christian presence in the Middle East is now being expressed as an issue of Christian life and witness, and church leaders and people have taken upon themselves roles as ministers of mercy in the wider society. Already their work has produced fruits of tolerance and communal reconciliation.

Middle Eastern Christians also are seeing the need for more interactive and constructive relationships with Christians in other parts of the world. These relationships often provide encouragement for the local or regional churches in the Middle East, demonstrating that the Christians of this region are neither alone nor isolated but are part of a larger community of witness and compassion.

2. Muslim-Christian Dialogue

Within the Middle East, the future of the church is to live within an environment dominated by Muslims. Therefore, engaging in Muslim-Christian dialogue is one of the basic choices Christians must make to assure their future. The majority of Christian Arabs acknowledge the importance of this dialogue and assign it the highest priority. Even though the old language of polemic is still current in Christian conservative and fundamentalist circles, the historic churches have chosen to

close the chapter of past attacks and, in place of this, are engaging in theological efforts that are reopening their own patristic and scriptural heritage. For Christians to get to know Islam has nothing to do with supremacy, or with converting Muslims to Christianity. It is recognition of human, national, and spiritual kinship.

Even so, Christian-Muslim dialogue is strewn with hazards. For example, it is not easy for those engaged in dialogue to remain open to understanding one another without succumbing to the urge to lecture the other. It is difficult not to be governed in one's attitude by the pressures of immediate circumstances. It is difficult for each person to keep a balanced view of the other's religion, avoiding an emphasis on differences and concluding that no consensus is possible. The reverse also is crucial: to avoid glossing over real differences to the point of denying that they exist.

In the present context, filled as it is with tension and the claims of competing fundamentalisms, it is difficult to assess the value of dialogue. It sometimes seems easier completely to abstract it from its political and social incarnation or define it by politics and exploit it for worldly ends and short-term benefits.

3. *The "Church of the Arabs"*

The future of Christians in the Arab world is bound up with the future of their church. This region is the cradle of religions, and structurally the churches have continued to increase in number so that variety has become division and sectarianism more than a contribution to a rich spiritual heritage. The issue of Christian unity is urgent, but the collective conscience must perceive unity as an imperative both of the gospel and of society. The call to build the "Church of the Arabs" is a call to transcend short-term strategic considerations and look to the future.³

To advocate the idea of the "Church of the Arabs" is not to overlook the Armenians, Greeks, Iranians, and others who live in the Middle East Arab world but are beyond the reach of Arab nationalism and language. The "Church of the Arabs" refers rather to "Arabness," which is not limited to a particular ethnicity nor defined by specific religion.

3. Jean Corbon, *L'Eglise des Arabes* (Paris: Cerf, 1997).

The Future of Christians in the Arab World

The idea behind the “Church of the Arabs” is to incarnate the Christian faith through a sense of belonging to Arab culture, identifying with people, societies, language, culture, and a common destiny.

The “Church of the Arabs” is meant to be a unity in diversity. It is a communion of faith and life. Its faith is one even though the languages of expression and modes of worship may vary. It is a living unity expressing common roots in a single land. This expression of unity already exists – at least to some extent – in and through the Middle East Council of Churches.

4. Owning One's Citizenship

As Christians seek internal renewal and dialogue with Muslims, they raise the spiritual pillars for the integration of Christians into the Arab world, an environment dominated by Muslims. The basic item on their agenda is to discuss how to build a civil society within which all citizens may find opportunity and freedom to engage creatively in building a common future. As they do this, Christians will find that their Muslim interlocutors are tackling a long-deferred agenda of their own – that of working out in Islamic terms a new social contract to replace the medieval one that no longer applies in the modern world.

Owning one's citizenship means that Christians must radically reassess their cultural standards. Openness to Western culture, to modernity, and even to internationalism must not mean the denial of national culture. And, if Christians can extricate themselves from the trials of escapism, from the minority complex, and from alienation, their first priority must be to integrate fully into society. Integration means sinking roots down; it also means active identification with the issues of society.

Christians cannot be saved alone; either the Christians and the Muslims will be saved together, or both will be destroyed. Then and only then will Christians in the Arab world have the right to demand equality – an equality of belonging to a homeland, an equality as citizens. Then Christians will not be anxious about their destiny within the Arab world. Their worry will be for the future of the Arab world, Christian and Muslim together, a future of good and blessing, a future of justice and peace.