

Arabic Speaking Christianity
(A glorious past and a challenging present and future)

(A lecture delivered by Kenneth E. Bailey to the Middle East Caucus Banquet at the Third Presbyterian Church, Richmond VA June 29, 2004)

I am deeply honored to have the chance to be with you this evening. The task before me is difficult because I follow in the footsteps of my good friend, Moderator Fahed Abu-Akel. I will do my best.

Alar'ie al mathal: ba'd al naar, ya'ti al-ramad

(As the proverb says: After the fire comes the ashes)

A memorable speech or lecture requires the right topic, delivered by the right speaker, on the right occasion and to the right audience.

As to the question of “the right speaker,” you will have to be the judge. But I am confident of the importance of the topic. The occasion seems appropriate. My main problem is the audience. Am I to speak to the Arab Americans here assembled? If so, I would prefer to deliver this address in Arabic. Or am I to focus on the non-Arab Presbyterians who have graced us with their presence?

I have decided to do the best I can to offer ideas (in English), some of which will hopefully be meaningful to each community.

Our topic is enormous and I would like to open with a crucial fact little known in the West. There are more Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East than there are Jews in the entire world. The Jewish community in the entire world numbers about 14 million. The Christian, Arabic-speaking community of the Middle East is at least 15 million and growing. How much do Western Christians know about the Jewish community world wide, and how much time and effort is spent trying to understand them, relate to them and protect their interests? By contrast how much does Western Christianity know about the Christians of the Arab world? Speaking for American Christianity at large I would venture to answer, “almost nothing.”

The American on the street knows that there are Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. But an Arab is not a Muslim. An Arab is a person whose first language is Arabic. Arab Christians are the invisible presence in the larger picture of the Middle East with all of its complexities.

There are historical reasons for the Western ignorance of this huge, significant centuries-old Christian reality. Indeed there are four curtains that have fallen that have sealed off Western Christianity from the Christians at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

1. The first is the Council of Calcedon in 451, where a division occurred between the Greek and Latin traditions on the one hand and the Semitic-speaking Eastern Christians on the other hand.

2. The Muslim conquests of the 7th Century formed a second curtain. After Islam conquered the Middle East very little Christian contact between East and West was possible, regardless of good intentions.
3. A third curtain was created by more than a millennium of wars between Muslim and Christian centers of power. These began with the Muslim invasions and continued on through the Crusades, the Turkish invasions of Europe, the rise of European imperialism, the Middle Eastern theater of the First World War, the creation of the state of Israel and now two Gulf wars. In each of these conflicts Christians in the East and Christians in the West found themselves, by historical accidents, on opposing sides.
4. Finally, comes the linguistic curtain. Western Christian scholarship has always granted the importance of Latin and Greek. But who in Western Christian scholarship, in any major theological discipline, goes on to acquire Arabic, Syriac and Coptic? Yet the treasures of 1900 years of Church history, theology and Biblical studies await the daring and the diligent who are willing to pay the price to cross those daunting linguistic barriers.

These four curtains are formidable. Yet today, living in the Middle East there are 265 million Muslims, 2 million Arabic-speaking Jews, and the above-mentioned 15 million Arabic-speaking Christians.

So tonight we want to reflect briefly and broadly on the past, present and future of this almost invisible community of 15 million Middle Eastern Christians. Much of what we have to say also applies to the Armenian and Iranian Christian communities.

We turn then to our topic.

This Arabic-speaking rainbow of Middle Eastern churches is a critical component in the larger picture of world Christianity for at least three reasons.

Consider the three following realities.

1. Today 60% of the Christians in the world are now found in Africa, Asia and South America. And among those 1.3 billion, mostly new, Christians there are at least 2 million pastors with less than six weeks of theological education.

Who is going to write the books that will meet the needs of this enormous new influx into the Christian faith? Who will help them struggle with their theology and assist in giving direction for the Biblical commentaries that will speak to their needs?

2. No one needs to tell the Americans about the rising challenge of Islam on a worldwide scene. Ready or not, that challenge is thrust upon us.

How can the Christian Church everywhere quickly learn to speak a meaningful word to the Islamic mind about the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the authenticity of the

Gospels, the historicity of the Cross, and the meaning of the Incarnation and the Atonement?

We in the West are geared to speak to a post-enlightenment world, not an Islamic world.

3. The inroads of that post-modern enlightenment worldview and the dramatic losses over the last 60 years to the Western Christian churches are staggering. Andrew Walls notes that only the seventh century, with the rise of Islam, and the resulting losses to Eastern Christendom, can begin to compare with what has happened in the post-Christian West over the last century.

Who will now “come over to Macedononia” and help us?

So what do these three issues have to do with Arabic speaking Christianity?

If an Arab Christian looks out from Jerusalem on the wider world three realities are visible.

Look to the north and west and one can see post-Christian Europe

Look east and one can feel the hot breath of a rising militant Islam that stretches from the Sudan and Saudi Arabia to Indonesia.

Look South and one can hear the new songs of praise that comes from the voices of over 350 million new African Christians.

However, let there be no romanticism regarding this new astounding influx into the body of Christ.

African church leaders have described their own churches as being a mile wide and an inch deep.

We remember the recent Rwandan massacres of a million Tutsies that were carried out by Hutus. The Hutus and the Tutsies are predominantly Christian. So here were Christians slaughtering Christians, like the Christians of Europe in the First World War.

What is missing in the DNA of African Christianity that this African holocaust was possible, and where, when requested can the rest of the body of Christ to help them in their growth and healing?

Arab Christians are in or from the Middle East. The Middle East is just that. It is in the Middle. It is in the middle with the Western world on one side and the 2/3 world on the other.

By virtue of speaking Arabic and being Christian it is inevitably thrust into the middle between Islam and Christianity.

Arab Christians are also in the middle between the Israeli Jews and the Palestinian Muslims. With the Jews they share the Hebrew Scriptures. With the Arab Muslim community they share the Arabic language, many commonalities of culture and common citizenship.

Indeed, Arab Christianity is in the middle between east and west and north and south and in the middle in the Middle East itself.

This strategically located Arab Christian community has a glorious past, it also has challenging present and future.

I. First let us look briefly to the largely unknown glorious past.

Where does it start?

When you return to the 7th to 9th Christian centuries, some of these Arabic-speaking Christians have a Greek background, some Syriac and some Coptic.

But the ancient Arab Roots are also a crucial part of the theological and historical DNA of this community.

Tony Maalouf, a Jordanian Christian scholar who has taught in seminaries in Jordan and Lebanon, just published a book entitled: *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel: The Unfolding of God's Prophetic Plan for Ishmael's Line*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003)

In this well-researched Ph.D. dissertation, Dr. Maalouf traces Ishmael, his 12 sons and their descendants through the Old Testament and into the New. His evidence is extensive and impressive.

Ishmael and all twelve sons were present at Abraham's burial to show honor to their father and grandfather.

The Arab kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts to Jerusalem

The tribes of Qedar and Nebayot are prominent Arab tribes throughout the Old Testament.

The Book of Job has Arabic roots, as do the famous chapters 20 and 31 of Proverbs.

The wise men at the birth of Jesus were almost certainly wealthy Arab scholars from the Jordanian desert and are identified as Arabs by Justin Martyr who in the second century wrote the Church's earliest commentary on the birth stories of Jesus in the Gospels.

When Paul was first in Damascus the city was under control of Haris the fourth, King of Petra and the Nabateans. King Haris appears in the book of Acts and his Arabic name is Hellenised as Aretas. He has a well-known Arabic name and the Nabateans were an Arab Kingdom of prosperous international traders, artists, architects, and engineers. Their ceramics are among the finest of the ancient world. Their remaining architectural achievements in Petra are one of the archeological wonders of the world.

But the birth of Arabic Christianity took place in the upper room on the day of Pentecost where native Arabic speakers heard the preaching of Peter in their own language, the Arabic language. (To my knowledge there were no native English speakers at that gathering!)

It is only natural to assume that these Arabic-speaking Jews took their new faith home with them to Arabia, and that Paul's "two years in Arabia" were spent among them.

The council of Nicea in 325 had two Arab bishops in attendance from the island of Bahrain.

Arab Christians were well established in the Yemen by the fourth century and many were martyred in the sixth century for their faith and are honored as “believers” in the Quran.

The Muslim traditions surrounding the prophet Muhammad record a famous consultation in Medina with a large delegation of Yemeni Arab Christians from the city of Najran. This delegation is evidence of a significant presence of Arabic-speaking Christianity deep within Arabia before the rise of Islam¹.

After the seventh century Muslim conquest, Middle Eastern Greek, Syriac and Coptic Christian churches learned Arabic and began to do their theological work in that language. Much of the scholarship they produced, particularly from the 9th through the 14th centuries, is of the highest quality as judged by any standard.

In the middle of the twentieth century a German Catholic Scholar, George Graf, produced a catalogue of these centuries of Arabic Christian scholarship. This catalogue fills five weighty volumes published under the title *Geschichte der Christlichen Arabaischen Litearature*.² (The History of Arabic Christian Literature)

The surviving documents of this thousand years of life and witness remain mostly in untranslated and unpublished hand-written manuscripts. These treasures were produced by authors who remain unknown, unhonored and unsung.

Before the Muslim conquest the Middle East was at least 70% Christian. The 10% who have remained faithful to Christ all through the long centuries of often-oppressive Islamic rule are the contemporary descendants of this great family of churches.

As we have seen, this tradition stretches from the day of Pentecost to the 15 million Arab Christians who survive and thrive today in the Middle East and beyond, in their Diaspora.

Since 1820 we as Presbyterians have had the privilege of serving with and participating in the life and witness of the Middle Eastern Arabic Speaking Presbyterian Churches. In their church life and through their institutions of learning and healing, we have served together from Iraq to the Sudan for 185 years.

My own scholarly focus has been an attempt at understanding the New Testament in its Middle Eastern cultural context. Habitallah ibn al Assal, Abdallah Ibn al Tayyib, Dionesius Ibn Salibi, Bashir ibn al-siri and Musa ibn hajari have been my tutors. These New Testament scholars are among the above-mentioned Arab Christian scholars who remain unknown, unhonored, untranslated and unpublished.

¹ Louis Shaykho a Lebanese Jesuit scholar has published a large volume of the works of pre-Islamic Arab Christian poets with the title, *al-Shu'ara al-Nasraniyya Qabl al-Islam*.

² Georg Graf, *Geschichte der Christlichen Arbischen Literature*, Vol. 1-V; Vatican City: Bibilotech Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-1948.

Yes, the Arabic-speaking Christian church has a glorious past of almost 2000 years of life and witness. Through wars and rumors of wars, massacres and deportations, invasions and counter invasions they have remained faithful. As American Presbyterians we are privileged to have a part of this great tradition among us in our Church. I salute those of their leaders who are seated around these tables here tonight.

This brings us to ask the question: In what unique ways does this glorious past equip this community for critical witness and ministry in the present and in the future?

We return to the three views from Jerusalem mentioned earlier.

- 1) First is the hot breath from the East.

In April of 2003, at the invitation of the Archbishop of Canterbury, I was privileged to participate in a Muslim-Christian dialogue conference meeting in Doha, Qatar.

As the conference assembled, I was deeply disappointed to discover that the participants were composed of Arab and Pakistani Muslims on the one hand and European and American Christians on the other. One young Greek orthodox Christian from Lebanon was the only Arab Christian among us. Inevitably the conversations reflected the Western debate. There we were geographically in the Middle East and yet, even at such a high level conference, the Arab Christians were once again almost invisible.

Christians of the Middle East have been discussing their faith with Muslims since the time of John of Damascus in the 7th and 8th centuries. With more than a thousand years of experience, and with Arabic as their mother tongue, Arabic speaking Christians are far better equipped for such discussions than any other part of the larger body of Christ. Yet once again, this critical part of the body of Christ was invisible. I have raised the question with the Archbishop and he has responded graciously and positively.

Dr. Mark Swanson, a Lutheran American scholar who spent ten years teaching Church history in Cairo Evangelical Seminary, has recently completed a doctoral dissertation in Rome entitled "Folly to the Hunafa". The sub title is: The Cross of Christ in Arabic Christian-Muslim Controversy in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries.

I was instrumental in bringing this important work to the attention of the late Lesslie Newbigin. Newbigin saw it as a rich treasure, critical to the theological needs of the Western Church. It is a masterful and meticulous accounting of what Arabic speaking Christian scholars had to say to Islam in those early centuries on the subject of the Cross and its atoning power. In 1992, Dr. Swanson was awarded his degree summa cum laude at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic studies in Rome. Yet this critical work, like the work of the Arabic Christian scholars he quotes, remains unpublished.

Since 9/11 I have been obliged to fight off the throng of churches and conferences in this country that want me to lecture on a Christian understanding of or witness to Islam even

thought I am not qualified as an Islamicist. All the while, here, under our noses, is a thousand years of discussion on this very topic waiting to be discovered and recovered.

Arab Christians do not approach the reality of Islam with the baggage of the “orientalists” whom the late Edward Said so eloquently criticized. Nor do Middle Eastern Christians lose touch with the harsh realities of centuries of Muslim treatment of non-Muslims within Islamic society. For Middle Eastern Christians there can be no romanticizing of Islam. In their presence Islam cannot ignore the dark pages of its own history, even as we must be open and honest regarding the dark pages in our history.

On the other hand, rarely does Arab Christianity engage in the Islamophobia increasingly prevalent in the West. With them there is no nonsense about Allah being a Muslim God because Arab Christians were worshipping Allah long before Islam was born.

The most important and the most profound theological Christian discussion with Islam is only possible in the Arabic language. Only Arabic speaking Christianity can effectively lead the way. Because of its long history with Islam, Arab Christianity is already at bat with the bases loaded, while Europeans and Americans are still struggling to find the door that leads into the stadium.

This Arabic Christian experience and acquired skills are all the more needed because increasingly we are faced with a self-confident aggressive Islam that seeks to witness to us. It is not by accident that Mike Tyson went to prison believing nothing and came out a pious Muslim.

Yes, this unique challenge presents itself in the present and will remain with us in the foreseeable future.

- 2) The Second view from Jerusalem is to the south with its more than one billion new Christians and its two million pastors with less than six weeks of theological education.

Last year I was privileged to have lunch with a Ghanaian medical doctor who is a Colonel in the medical branch of his country’s military. He is also the director of a special Christian ministry of health and healing to isolated villages in the north of Ghana. I asked him about this problem of the pastors with six weeks of education who are expected to lead churches. “Is it true that African Churches face this kind of reality?” I asked.

“O yes,” he replied, wide eyed.

“We cannot stop them! We cannot stop them. Hundreds of thousands are flocking into the Christian Church. Entire villages come as one, asking for baptism. We cannot stop them. We try to find the right leaders from these villages, who have deep faith, quick minds and a willing heart and give them six weeks training. At the end of the six weeks we give them a Bible, a song book and a catechism and send them back to the village. What can we do? We cannot stop them!”

It's a nice problem. At the same time it is a massive problem that extends across South America, Africa and on into areas of the Far East.

David Aikman, the Time magazine bureau chief in Beijing, has just published a book entitled *Jesus in Beijing*.³ In it he describes the Christian community in China that now has at least 100 million members and 80 million of them are in underground house churches. An estimated 1000 new secret seminaries are training pastors for these underground house churches. But it is a long (?) course of studies. They get three to six months, not just six weeks! Then they are sent out into ministry. Taken as a whole, the Christian community of China is growing at the rate of 7% a year and their leaders are already discussing their vision of reaching out beyond China to the vast lands along the silk road as it stretches back to Jerusalem.

Who will write the commentaries and theological books for this vast emerging Christian world? They do not have time, nor are they interested in jumping through the hoops of the Western theological debates.

What does deconstruction, process theology, Bultmannianism, post-modernism, and existentialism mean to them? Their leaders have spent 20-30 years in prison for their faith. They have more important things to ponder and proclaim. The Bible speaks to them openly and directly and they have oh so much to teach the rest of us. Yet, we must ask, Who is equipped to help them as requested in ways yet to be determined?

As we have seen, contemporary Middle Eastern Christians have deep roots that reach clear to the day of Pentecost. They do not carry the burden of past European imperialism or of recent uninvited American military and political involvement. They are not employees of powerful American international companies. Their faith is not a mile wide and an inch deep. Rather Middle Eastern Christians are the theological descendents of Athanasius and Chrysosome, Cyril and Origin, Ephrem and Basil the Great. They are also a part of a church that has suffered as a persecuted minority. Through the twentieth century they endured the devastation of a dozen wars and armed conflicts and have struggled to respond to them with faith, hope and love. They come up out of the valley of terror with flowers plucked from that valley that can amaze, astound and renew all of us.

Looking to the new emerging majority of the Christian world, who can best interact with and feed the faith of this emerging majority of the world wide Christian faith? Is there not a unique, gigantic task that can call and challenge the best and the brightest of Middle Eastern Arabic Speaking Christians? And are not these Arab Churches in a position to lead the way for all of us?

The Christian faith originated in the Middle East. In its deepest roots it is a non-Western religion. It is my prayer that Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East and in the West will be used of God to participate significantly in this huge emerging task.

³ David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003

- 3) Finally, the third view from Jerusalem is to the north and west to the centuries old discouraged, shrinking churches of Europe, yes and of America.

I am in touch with the Lutheran Churches of Latvia, Finland, and Denmark. In Finland 92% of the Finns claim to be Lutherans, while 3% attend church even irregularly. The Danes are officially 87% Lutheran and one percent attend church. In England 85% of the people claim to be “Church of England” and 5% are active in any Christian fellowship.

The Reformed Church of England has even more discouraging statistics. In 1900 they had a million members. That figure has now shrunk to 40,000.

Enter – the Emigrants.

Dr. Jehu Hanciles of Sierra Leon is professor of Missionary History and Globalization at Fuller Seminary in California. Professor Hanciles has recently published an extremely informative article entitled “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first Century Church.”⁴

In this article hanciles points out that from 750-1750 A.D. the dominant world power was the Islamic empire. During that period there was a global pattern of migration of Muslims through military conquest, imperial expansion, Muslim missionary outreach and commerce.

Then between 1815 and 1915 roughly 50-60 million Europeans emigrated overseas. This “export of people” has been called the “single most important dimension in the rise of the West between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries.” This “export of people?” created Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and the United States.

Now there is a third world wide migration, mostly from south to north and from east to west. But to understand what is happening this new migration must be coupled with the fact that in Africa there are an estimated 23,000 new Christians every day and in Western Europe and North America there is a loss of 6,000 Christians every day.

As we noted earlier, on the one hand is the explosive growth of the Christian faith in the 2/3 world that produces these amazing gains and on the other hand is the secularism, post-modernism and deconstructionism in the West that causes (along with other factors) these unprecedented losses.

⁴ Jehu J. Hanciles, “Migration and Mission: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-century Church” International Bulletin of Missionary Research, Vol. 27, No. 4, October 2003, pp 146-153.

Yes, the great demographic centers of the Christian faith are now in the 2/3 world. In a stunning new book, *The Coming of Christendom*, David Jenkins writes, “The era of (the dominance) of Western Christianity has passed within our lifetimes, the day of Southern Christianity is dawning. The fact of (this) change itself is undeniable; it has happened, and will continue to happen. So little did we notice this momentous change that it was barely mentioned in all the media hoopla surrounding the end of the second millennium.”⁵

But in this case the new migrants, the new *higra* from south to north and from east to west often brings people who are deeply and profoundly Christian. Naturally they bring their faith with them, as did the Christian immigrants from Europe to America over the last 400 years.

Over the last 40 years, in England alone, over 3,000 new African churches have been established and many of their leaders have the distinct vision of evangelizing the secular society around them that has abandoned the Christian faith. Today London’s largest Christian church is no longer St. Paul’s Cathedral or Westminster Abby, it is a new African Christian Cathedral that seats 5,000 people and is packed to capacity every Sunday.

The same movement is strong here in America as almost daily we see new Arab, Hispanic, African, and Korean congregations spring up around us. Together we are witnessing what Jehu Henciles calls, “The de-Europeanizing of American Christianity.” In this movement I rejoice, because as Christianity in this country goes through his process it will have far more to say to the other 95% of the world’s population.

I have to say this in Arabic
Ya Ahibba’I – la to-qalliduna, lakin bessheruna.
(My dear friends, do not imitate us – evangelize us!)

Those of you who are in leadership in the Arab American congregations of this country, I know that you have the task of caring for newly arrived emigrants from the Arab World. You are rightly concerned to help them with their profound cultural adjustments and guide them through the complexities of American life, along with providing worship and fellowship in the Arabic language. I also applaud your legitimate concern to help sustain the churches from which you have come.

But I would like to challenge you tonight to see yourselves as a part of this wider reality that is happening all over the West as new fresh spiritual energy is flowing through you in the direction of the tired, troubled churches of Europe and North America.

⁵ David Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity*. (New York: Oxford U. Press, 2002, p.2.

For 200 years Western missionaries went south and east with the mandate of “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” As Hanciles points out, the Christians moving west and north come with a new banner that reads “As the Father has sent me even so send I you.” This represents mission from below, not from above. It is the witness of the powerless, not the powerful and as such it flows ever more authentically from the Cross.

You, my Arab Christian brothers and sisters, come to us representing a form of Christianity that does not mourn the loss of power influence because you have not had any for over a thousand years.

You have not confused the Cross and the flag and your national flags were not placed on your pulpits in worship.

You have not needed to struggle over “family values” because your families have remained incredibly strong.

Your ancestors died for the faith as “martyrs,” not national heroes,” and you understand the difference.

You are not traumatized with the new American sense of vulnerability since 9/11, because for centuries you have lived with total vulnerability.

Most of you are from churches that have suffered persecution, where the perpetrators were not brought to justice, and often the larger community denied that the persecutions ever took place. We have yet to learn how to cope with such painful realities in the present – and the future is unknown.

Your celebrations of Christmas and Easter have not been taken over by a secular world around you.

You have lived with militant Islam and learned how to deal with it in non-violent ways.

The New Testament virtues of patience and long suffering are for you an integral part of who you are. In this you represent great strength that touches European Americans at points of some of their greatest weaknesses.

For you the authenticity, inspiration and authority of the Bible are flint like realities that shine through all your expressions of life, faith and ministry.

The stories of the Bible are for you seen in bright colors because you are the modern inheritors of the culture that underlies the Scriptures.

Of all the various new cultural forms of Christianity that are in these days arriving on our shores, I am deeply convinced that you have the most to offer us.

Arjukum, ja ikhwati wa akhawati, la tuqalliduna, walakin ‘aks thakil – bessherurna.
(My brothers and sisters, again I say: do not imitate us, but rather, evangelize us.)

Come with me to Jerusalem, the holy city. Look East, look South, look West and North, the fields are white unto the harvest.

*Wa salam al-Rubb allthi foq kull 'aql, yakun ma'kum min al-aan wa ela al-abad.
Ameen.*

(And may the peace of God that passeth understanding be with you now and forever)
Amen.

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