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Stephan Stetter and Mitra Moussa Nabo (eds.)

**Middle East Christianity:
Encountering Local, Regional and
World Societal Transformations**

Documentation
of an International Conference
Rome, 24 to 26 February 2016

German Bishops' Conference Research Group on
International Church Affairs (ed.)

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Table of contents

Editor's Preface	5
1. Welcoming and Opening Remarks I	8
2. Welcoming and Opening Remarks II Middle Eastern Christianity in an Age of Transformation:	12
3. Opening Panel 1 Five Years into the Arab Uprisings: Stock-taking of the Situation of Christians and Christian Churches in the Region.....	18
4. Panel 2: A Multi-Faith Middle East: Relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and the Impact on the Societal Coexistence in Times of Domestic and Regional Disorder	25
5. Panel 3: A Multi-Confessional Christianity: Dialogue and Relations between the Christian Churches in Arab Countries	32
6. Closing Panel 4: Christianity between Orient and Occident: Social, Political, Economic, and Religious Implications.....	39

Annex:

Keynote Dinner Speech.....44

Agenda of the Conference48

Editor's Preface

Prof. Dr. Stephan Stetter and Dr. Mitra Moussa Nabo

University of the Bundeswehr Munich, Germany

Half a dozen of years into the Arab uprisings the Middle East is a region under great distress: Politically, economically, and culturally. The status quo on the national and regional levels is widely considered to be unsustainable, as the Arab Human Development Reports have warned already a decade ago with a view to the uneasy integration of the region into an increasingly globalized world. The Arab transformation process – affected by both globalization and the Arab uprisings since 2011 – varies from country to country, ranging from bloody war in Syria and Yemen to laboratories of peaceful yet fragile change, such as Tunisia. But one should not get confused. If there is one thing this transformation shows then it is the fact that the region is ripe for a new social contract – one that is more pluralist, human rights based, multilateral, and inclusive than the authoritarian, post-colonial social contract that defined most Arab countries since they gained independence from the erstwhile colonial powers. This post-colonial authoritarian social contract and the polarized regional order will not endure, even if it struggles to survive in new post-Arab spring forms. Yet as in all great transformations the road to a new social order is bumpy and twisted.

This transformation bears uncertainty on many levels. Yet, it affects in particular ethno-national and religious minorities throughout the region. These groups are particularly vulnerable, as the fate of Christians in the Iraqi city of Mosul, to mention just one example, shows in an exemplary way. Throughout the region, from the Atlantic to the Arabian Peninsula, Christians as an important and significant religious minority in this predominantly Muslim region are strongly affected by the political, economic, and cultural changes of the last decade. And their fate matters to the future of the entire region. And this not only because Christianity originates from the Middle East and has been, for two thousand years, a cor-

nerstone of the region's rich social, economic, cultural, and spiritual fabric.

This book documents the results of an international conference that took place in Rome in February 2016. This conference took stock of the changes Christians and Christian churches encounter in the face of the challenge of globalization, the Arab transformation process, and regional turmoil. The conference brought together both leading church representatives from Arab countries as well as academics from the region and beyond who work on this topic. The conference focused *inter alia* on:

- the impact of current transformation dynamics on Christians and Christian churches in the Middle East;
- relations between Christianity in the Middle East and other religions, in particular Islam;
- relations between the different Christian churches in the Middle East;
- inclusion and exclusion of Christians in daily life throughout the Middle East in various social spheres;
- continuity and change in formal and informal relations between Middle Eastern states and churches;
- continuity and change in how Christians in the Middle East live and practice their faith in a modern and globalized world;
- the situation of Christians in selected countries/regions of the Middle East (Holy Land, Lebanon, Egypt, Gulf countries, Iraq/Syria).

This book summarizes the speeches and presentations delivered at the main panels at the conference. Deliberately, it does not seek to promote a single perspective. The main objective of the conference was to give a floor to people from the region. Their voices and personal experiences get heard in this documentation. The perspectives on the situation of Christians and Christian churches in the contributions to this book of course occasionally differ. There was an open, critical, and constructive exchange of ideas at the conference, both in the panels presented in this book as well as in the closed workshops (see the agenda of the conference that is printed on the last pages of this book). The viewpoints pre-

sented in this book are representing the personal reflections and opinions of those present at the meeting and speaking in the panels (the workshops were closed meetings and are not presented in this book). They are not meant to finish the debate, but rather to provide authentic and empathetic inputs for a future dialogue, in the region and beyond.

The conference languages were Arabic and English (simultaneous interpreting was provided). The conference proceedings are published in both this English-language version as well as in Arabic. We hope that the proceedings stimulate discussions in the region and beyond as well as amongst Christians and other social groups and religions on how the various communities in a pluralistic Middle East can contribute to a prosperous future of the region to which all its inhabitants contribute, including its rich Christian communities.

1. Welcoming and Opening Remarks I

Archbishop Dr. Ludwig Schick

Archbishop of Bamberg and Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference Commission on International Church Affairs

Your Beatitude,
Your Eminences and Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ!

On behalf of the German Bishops' Conference, I would like to welcome you to our conference on Christians, Christian Churches and the role of religion in the Near and Middle East. We will look into the living conditions of Christians in countries with an often rich and centuries-old Christian tradition; in many places it dates back to the origins of the Christian faith. In their history, the Oriental countries suffered many conflicts between Muslims and Christians. But they also experienced times of coexistence of believers of both religions – a coexistence which at present is fragile and threatened. Today, Christians in an Arabic and Islamic environment have to live their faith under difficult and sometimes perilous conditions.

I am delighted that our conference gathers bishops and church representatives from the Maghreb to the Arabian Peninsula. It is a great pleasure and honour to have the head of the Maronite Church, His Beatitude Cardinal Bechara Boutros Al-Rai, among us. He will celebrate Holy Mass in the Maronite rite with us tomorrow morning. A particular welcome goes to Cardinal Leonardo Sandri, Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches. For many years, he and his staff have been closely observing the situation in the Near and Middle East and they have worked tirelessly to provide material help and support of all kind to the Churches.

Our conference wants to facilitate dialogue between church representatives and academic experts. So I would like to extend a very warm welcome to the academic experts among us. I am happy that you are offering to the bishops and church representatives the opportunity to relate their experiences and knowledge to academic analyses and assessments. Our hope is that this will contribute to gain new insights into the background and causes of the current situation, into dangers and perspectives for the future.

I am grateful to Prof. Stephan Stetter, the head of this conference, and to his colleague, Dr. Mitra Moussa Nabo, for working out the program of the conference and organizing it here in Rome. I also want to thank the Research Group on International Church Affairs of the German Bishops' Conference chaired by Prof. Johannes Müller SJ. They launched this conference project, which was initiated by the German Bishops' Conference, and added valuable impulses.

You all know: It has been not so long ago that many people associated the political situation in the Near and Middle East with hopeful expectations. In 2011, many people thought and hoped that, based on the will of broad sections of the population, the region would take a major step towards democracy and a fundamental social renewal. Political and religious freedom, human and civil rights finally seemed to achieve a breakthrough also in the Arab world. The so-called "Arab Spring" held out prospects of the emergence of free societies giving even religious minorities greater opportunities for development. However, those who at that time hoped for rapid improvements were soon disillusioned. The events were not only slowed down but even completely reversed. Semi-secular dictatorships and religious fanaticism, war and civil war dominate the scene. There is already talk of an "Arab winter".

Nevertheless, a differentiated view is required. The situation of Christians in the Middle East countries is very different. Traditions are different, and the same holds true for religious policy, religious demography and the open or latent conflicts which influence the coexistence. It is a feature of academic conferences to analyse the different contexts in detail in order to achieve exact results. The key questions are: What are

the chances, at least in the long run, to implement a society that respects human rights and above all freedom of religion? Which could be the decisive factors for the future of Oriental Christianity? What role do international developments play in this context? I am not only thinking of the role of foreign powers playing some wicked games to the detriment of the population. Also significant is the embeddedness of Middle East societies in an emerging world society. Media communication, and above all social networks, have become an important factor of international political and social processes.

Though the objective of this conference is to look at the long-term perspectives, we cannot and must not ignore current hot spots. During recent months and years we have been faced with a migration and refugee movement of historic dimension. Not just Christians take flight. But their mass migration to Europe and Northern America poses a serious threat to the survival of Oriental Christianity. This is why we have to ask what can be done to put a stop to this development? Another question will be: What will be the effects not only on the region but on peace among religions worldwide if the centuries-old tradition of peaceful co-existence of Christianity and Islam in the Oriental countries would come to an end?

Let me be clear: We must not accept an exodus of Christians from the Middle East. On all levels and with all means available we must endeavour to ensure that the living conditions of Christians in their countries of origin allow them to stay there. I am also concerned about those who, for fear of life and limb, already fled their home countries to bring themselves and their families to safety. No doubt, nobody can be forced to a dangerous return. What rather matters is that Christian refugees will not be deprived of the possibility to return to their countries of origin after the end of bloody wars and persecution – for example in the regions of the so-called “Islamic State”. In their “Guidelines on the Church’s Refugee Work” published some days ago, the German bishops explicitly stated with regard to Christian refugees from Oriental countries: “They too have a right to a homeland, they too have a right to return.”

The Church sees itself as one body. The body as a whole suffers if one of

its members suffers (see 1 Cor 12, 26). For this reason, the German Bishops' Conference for a number of years on many levels has endeavoured to ensure solidarity with the Churches and Christians in the Middle East. We maintain contacts with the Churches in this region and also try to provide material help. We inform the Christians in Germany and the entire society about the situation of Christians who are subject to pressure and persecution by publishing working papers at regular intervals. A second comprehensive and science-based "Ecumenical report on the freedom of religion of Christians all over the world" will soon be published. In addition, we hold talks with the German government and parliament in order to raise awareness of politics in Germany and in the European Union of the needs of Christians in the Arab and Muslim world.

Of outstanding importance to us in all this is prayer. The German bishops regularly ask the faithful to pray for distressed Christians. Some years ago, we also have introduced a special day of prayer for this which is celebrated in all German dioceses and parishes every year on 26 December.

The conference, which we hold in these days is also to be seen as a small sign of solidarity.

The Bishops in the Middle East region and we in Germany, too, at present mainly concentrate on the topical questions we are faced with in this historical moment. The major issue in Germany is the large number of refugees, many of them coming from Syria. I think it will be good if our conference will prompt us to take a step back from the immediate daily requirements and to let us be guided by academic experts in our efforts to understand more about the reasons and backgrounds, the dangers, the chances and realistic perspectives for the future.

In this spirit I hope we will have a successful conference and fruitful meetings during the days to come.

I may now ask Prof. Stetter to explain the conference concept and the key questions of the next days.

2. Welcoming and Opening Remarks II Middle Eastern Christianity in an Age of Transformation

Prof. Dr. Stephan Stetter

University of the Bundeswehr Munich, Germany

I am most grateful to welcome all of you to Rome on the occasion of our International Conference on Christians and Christian Churches in a changing Middle East.

As a scholar of Global Politics and Middle East Studies and as a member of the German Bishops' Conference Research Group on International Church Affairs, I am most honored to be the academic organizer of this gathering. Before sharing with you the rationale of our meeting, let me first of all express my sincere gratitude to the German Bishops' Conference - and in particular to His Excellency Archbishop Ludwig Schick - for the generous support of our meeting. Without your encouragement and backing this meeting had not been possible. Please also extend these thanks to Bishops Haßberger and Zekorn who both have been so supportive to this project in the Research Group on International Church Affairs during the last two years.

Honorable dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen, five years ago, from Cairo's Tahrir Square, from the streets of Tunis and Dara'a to many other corners of the Arab world people started to demand changes of the region's political, economic, and social fabric. But these protests were not the origin of the transition crises we witness in many countries of the region, today. The Arab Human Development Reports, published by the United Nations Development Program, as early as the first decade of this century, already marked the political, economic, and cultural status quo in the region as unsustainable. However, the Middle East is not a universe of its own. It is an integral part of an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. It is part and parcel of modern world society in which we wit-

ness a global flow of ideas such as notions of government accountability, individual rights, inclusive citizenship, and multilateral cooperation. A key characteristic of world society is that people of every religion and nation, women and men, young and old demand respect for their dignity and fundamental rights as modern subjects.

For sure: The transition crisis we are currently witnessing varies from one country to another. Some, such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen are now war-torn and face violent militias, in particular Da'esh. Others, such as Tunisia, pose a laboratory for peaceful change and transformation. Egypt has opted for authoritarian restoration, Jordan and Morocco for cautious authoritarian reform. And Saudi-Arabia has turned out to be the guardian of an unsustainable status quo, both domestically and regionally. Regionally, there are many polarizing conflicts, not only in and between Arab countries, but involving Iran, Israel, and Turkey as well.

However, one should not get confused: For all domestic and regional reasons that underpinned the Arab uprisings, they were also triggered as a result of the embedding of this region into modern world society. To be sure, in many places in the Middle East today, bloodshed, fear of survival, the return to authoritarianism and bitter ideological battles about regional hegemony overshadow the strive for a more just, a more inclusive, and a more open society. But all this cannot and will not bury the legacy of the 2011 uprisings. Arab countries, Iran, Israel, and Turkey and also the region as a whole are in need of a new social contract. The Middle East yearns for a more pluralist and inclusive social contract that pays greater respect to fundamental and universal human rights than the authoritarian social contract that has shaped politics in most countries in the region since their independence from the erstwhile colonial powers. Yet as in all transformations in human history of such a scale, the road to a renewed social order is bumpy and twisted.

The current situation, as you all are well aware, seems to entail more uncertainty and more insecurity than opportunities. In these times of conflict and war, uncertainty and insecurity are particularly alarming for ethno-national and religious minorities. Their fear for their wellbeing or even their collective survival is justified and real. Christians are an im-

portant and significant religious group in the predominantly Muslim Middle East. Indeed, the Middle East is not only the birthplace of Jesus Christ and the origin of Christianity. Christian communities of manifold denominations are a constitutive part of the Middle East's spiritual and social makeup, today as at any point in time during the last two millennia. And Christians need to be an indispensable part of the future of this region.

I recall here my latest visit to Jerusalem where I had the honor to meet His Excellency Monsignore Shomali, who is also amongst our conference guests. Our meeting at the time was overshadowed by an arson attack on the Church of Multiplication that occurred that very day. In the past years we have witnessed many attacks on churches and monasteries as well as on Christian communities and Middle Eastern Christians in places such as Libya, Egypt, Syria, or Iraq. I wish to remind us here about the fate of the Christian community of Mosul about which His Excellency Archbishop Daoud Sharaf can report as an eyewitness – or the twenty-one Coptic migrant workers from Egypt who were beheaded in Libya 2015. The horrifying violence unfolding in the region ultimately threatens people of all religions, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and other religious groups alike – and, as the murder of the Italian and EU citizen, Giulio Regeni, a 25 year old Cambridge PhD Student who studied politics and society in Egypt and who was tortured to death probably by state authorities attests: the ubiquitous presence of fear and violence is an encompassing concern that holds its firm grip upon the region.

Our objective at this conference is not only to take stock of the changes Christians and Christian Churches encounter in the region due to the double challenge of the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, on the one hand, and the embedding of the region in modern world society, on the other. Our objective is also to share ideas openly about political, social, economic, and spiritual ways to make the region's future more peaceful and inclusionary. I dearly hope that in the various panels and workshops or in informal discussions during coffee breaks, lunch, or dinner we can learn from each other's experiences and knowledge and leave this con-

ference with new insights and refreshed hope about the future of the region and its Christians.

As you note from the agenda and the list of delegates you received at registration, our conference brings together distinguished representatives of Christian churches as well as senior academics working on religion and Christianity in the Middle East. I am so delighted to see you all here.

Honorable dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen, I do not intend to present to you the entire program of our conference in detail. But let me give you a very broad perspective on the underlying rationale of the agenda. The conference consists of three main parts.

The first part comprises a total of four plenary panels. The *first panel* focuses on the general situation of Christians in the Middle East these days in the context of both the aftermath of the Arabs uprisings and broader dynamics of globalization; The *second panel* looks to the relation between Middle East Christianity and other religions, in particular the region's biggest religion, Islam. As Pope Francis stated in his letter to Christians in the Middle East in December 2014, "the more difficult the situation, the more interreligious dialogue becomes necessary"; *Panel three* studies the equally important relations between the many different Christian denominations in the region, the "cause of unity" between Eastern Catholics and Orthodox and the faithful of the different churches, another plea Pope Francis advanced in his letter; and, finally, our closing panel not only reflects on the main insights of our gathering but might also come up with some creative ideas about how to make a more peaceful and inclusionary Middle East possible.

The second and third parts of our conference then are two rounds of workshops. Please note that the workshops in each of these rounds are held in parallel, so please consult the agenda and register for one specific workshop in each round. You can choose between three workshops that focus on cross-cutting regional issues affecting the livelihood of Christianity in the region: These are, firstly, the status of Christians in society in everyday life, for example with a view to participation in political and

economic affairs or in the educational system. This relates in particular to the question how being a Christian affects the likelihood of inclusion and exclusion in society's various social spheres; the second workshop looks at continuity and change in relations between church bodies and states in the region. In other words it looks at the political dimension of relations between states and churches and the role church authorities play in national politics and how this role is organized, for example on the basis of a post-Ottoman neo-Millet system; the third workshop then is about continuity and change in what it means to be a Christian in a globalized Middle East in which, for example, modern notions of individualization affect not only political and socio-economic practices, but also religious traits. To mention one issue that can be addressed, what are possible tensions between collective religion and individual expressions of religiosity amongst Middle Eastern Christians?

The third part of the conference on Friday morning comprises five workshops which address experiences of Christians in key Middle Eastern regions and countries, namely (1) the Holy Land, this means Israel, Jordan and Palestine, (2) Lebanon, (3) Egypt, (4) the Gulf Countries which witness immigration of Christians from outside the region, in particular from the West and from Asia, and, (finally), countries in war and violent conflict, namely Iraq and Syria.

We will have many opportunities for fruitful discussion and dialogue. I am most grateful to all of you for your willingness to participate at this meeting and your readiness to actively contribute to its success by participating in our panels or by coordinating our workshops. I invite all of us to be open, critical and constructive in our debate. We should openly address the complexities of the current situation and critically examine it. So please do not refrain from voicing frank and critical opinions, but let us do so in the spirit of understanding, empathy and collegial respect.

My sincere hope is that in every panel and workshop we keep the two main vectors of analysis in mind that I outlined earlier. This means we should, on the one hand, examine current trends, such as the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the devastating spread of violence threatening people throughout the Middle East, including often directly its Christian

population. But we should, on the other hand, also take into consideration the impact of long-term and broader dynamics of globalization in our interconnected, modern world society. Thus, let us ask questions about how globalization dynamics shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion of Christians. And, how globalization affects both the nature of church-state relations and the interplay between collective religion and religious subjectivities.

Distinguished dignitaries, ladies and gentlemen, let me close with some organizational comments. Me and my team, in particular my research assistant Dr. Mitra Moussa Nabo and my student assistant Mr. Marcel Düngefeld, are at your disposal for any requests that might arise during this conference. In that context, I would like to take the opportunity to thank in particular Dr. Nabo for his tremendous work in organizing this conference. Most of you know him well already, from the many email exchanges and telephone calls in preparation of this gathering. The same goes for the Secretariat of the German Bishops Conference in Bonn, in particular Dr. Heike Rumbach-Thome. I am happy that she is able to join us here and would like to thank you personally as the Secretariat has been an indispensable partner during the last two years, from the time when the first ideas of holding this conference sprouted, to its blossoming today. Finally, a warm thank you to the staff of our convention center, the Casa Bonus Pastor, whose hospitality we will enjoy this week and to the interpreters tasked with simultaneous translation from Arabic into English.

Let me close by wishing all of us a productive and fruitful conference. I dearly hope that this meeting can make a modest contribution to finding ways for a more peaceful future for all people in the Middle East, notably the Christians in this region in their many denominations.

3. Opening Panel 1

Five Years into the Arab Uprisings: Stock-taking of the Situation of Christians and Christian Churches in the Region

Chair: *Dr. Mitra Moussa Nabo* (University of the Bundeswehr Munich, Germany)

Roundtable participants:

H.B. Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Raï (Patriarch of Antioch and Head of the Maronite Church)

H.E. Metropolitan Ignatius Al-Hoshi (Orthodox Church of Antioch, Diocese in Western and Southern Europe, France)

H.G. Bishop Pavly (Coptic Orthodox General Bishop, UK)

Mr. Ghassan Al-Shami (Journalist, Al-Mayadeen Satellite Television Channel, Beirut, Lebanon)

The thematic focus of the conference's opening panel was a general stock-taking of the situation of Christians and Christian churches in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and against the background of general social and political dynamics in the region. The panel included high-ranking church representatives from the Middle East who were able to present their views on this topic. After a short introduction by panel chair Mitra Moussa Nabo, the panelists presented their statements.

His Beatitude Beshara Boutros Al-Raï gave the first input. In his remarks, he presented a comprehensive analysis of the current situation. Patriarch Al-Raï started reasoning about the factors that led to the uprisings in the Arab world. He argued that the declaration of the State of Israel was a

remote reason that “gave the military in the Arab World the pretext to target those in power and radicalized the national Islamic ideology. Since that time, authoritarian rule determined the political systems throughout the region.” As for the second reason, he stressed the intra-regional antagonism between Iran and Saudi-Arabia that developed to an all-encompassing conflict between Sunnis and Shias. The third and most significant reason, as Patriarch Al-Raï pointed out, is the stalemate in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian and the wider Israeli-Arab conflicts. As for the fourth reason, he identified some negative factors in Islam contributing to the circumstances that underpinned the popular uprising, namely: a fundamentalist Islam, an anti-secularist Islam, an Islam that refuses the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and finally underdevelopment and anti-modernist traits in Islam. Besides enlisting these causes of the Arab uprisings, Patriarch Al-Raï stressed that many mistakes accompanied the popular demonstrations during the uprisings. He stated that the national government’s use of excessive violence to disperse the demonstrations was the first mistake. The second mistake, to which he referred, was the backing and support from some countries for terrorist organization or extremist factions. Against this backdrop, Patriarch Al-Raï shed light on its negative repercussions on Christians and Christian churches in the Middle East, e.g. physical destruction, mass expulsion and cultural annihilation befalling Middle Eastern Christians. Beside these undergarments threatening a two-thousand-year-old existence in the region, in his statement Patriarch Al-Raï criticized the silence of the international community, which is doing nothing apart from facilitating the emigration of the Christians. He emphasized “that the Christians are not individuals scattered in the Middle Eastern countries, but they are the universal Church of Christ, located in those countries, with their various traditions: that of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, with the Byzantine and Chaldean traditions.”

Based on these insights, Patriarch Al-Raï ended his remarks by proposing some ideas to overcome the grievances in the region: 1. Enabling institutional amendments and rewriting constitutions based on the principals of democracy and pluralism – Lebanon, regardless some deficits, serves as an exemplary political system; 2. Ending the wars in the region and

establishing a just, global and permanent peace. In particular, safeguard the special culture of every country that Christians and Muslims built together. From the ecclesial point of view, the following actions deserve priority: The local churches around the world ought to assist the oriental churches protecting the root of Christianity and its historical heritage. Furthermore, all means ought to be used in support of the faithful of the Oriental churches in order to keep them in their countries and strengthen their presence.

The next panelist who rose to speak was His Excellency Ignatius Al-Hoshi. Metropolitan Al-Hoshi delivered his statement on behalf of the Patriarch of Antioch, His Beatitude John X. Yazigi, who unfortunately was not able to join the conference. Metropolitan Al-Hoshi highlighted that the speech was intended for “transmitting the pain of all people of the Orient with all its denominations” to the audience. He pointed out that “it is the pain of my people resulting from what became known as a spring. A spring that brought to my people red poppy anemones smeared with blood of the martyrs and innocent civilians. It is a spring, which my people experienced only as a step back into barbarism and ignorance. Churches and mosques have been destroyed, our bishops abducted, homes ruined and people expelled. All that happened because of revenge excommunication (*takfir*) and blind terror”. According to Metropolitan Al-Hoshi, what is now happening throughout the Middle East is burying alive a whole civilization and erasing history’s identity. Moreover, it is a failure of the international community not being able or unwilling to solve the conflict in Syria. This failure, he stressed, is due to the interest-based politics of the great powers. He argued that for them international institutions are nothing but means to violate the national sovereignty of other countries. Based on this thought he claimed that “I do not want to blame others for the war that is taking place in the Orient. However, the fingerprint of the external intervention in the conflict is not only apparent but also overwhelming”.

Apart from that, Metropolitan Al-Hoshi referred to the oriental Christians as an integral part of the demography and geography of the region. In particular, in terms of the societal coexistence Christians and Oriental

Christianity played and are still playing a leading role in building bridges and safeguarding a peaceful way of living together in the region of origin of Christianity. “We as Christians”, Metropolitan Al-Hoshi stated, “have never been acting in a segregate manner. We are even not a minority and refuse to be seen as such, since in the logic of nationhood there is no majority or minority but an amalgamation comprising all.”

On this basis Metropolitan Al-Hoshi stressed that the world has to wake up and realize that bringing peace to the region means ending the factors that trouble the life of people. That is also why “emigration or even expulsion is a burden for all those affected, and for sure this is not a solution but part of the grievance”. Against this background, Metropolitan Al-Hoshi appealed to the audience and all concerned to take note of the difficult situation of Lebanon. With a view to the cedar state, “we are calling on to take care of our land Lebanon, which is the place for illuminated minds, cultural development, coexistence and nationhood”. He concluded the speech on behalf of the Patriarch of Antioch His Beatitude John X. Yazigi by highlighting the conflict in Syria.

He closed by raising the rhetorical question: “Isn’t it enough what happened and what still is happening in Syria? Let our people live in its homeland. It is time for the world to recover its way to Damascus”.

The subsequent panelist who delivered a statement was His Grace Bishop Pavly. He focused in particular on the situation in Egypt. First of all Bishop Pavly conveyed greetings from His Holiness Pope Tawadros II. He then went on stating how important Egypt was, when it served as a base for a number of cultures and civilizations such as the Greeks, the Romans, the Jews, the Christians and more recently, Muslim-Christian coexistence. However,

“in the 1960s and 1970s ideas and conceptions of excommunication and hostility from countries refusing pluralism were brought to Egypt, when, due to difficult circumstances, young Egyptians went to those countries. They brought to Egypt an extreme form of Islam. From that time on voices have been calling out loud for repealing the church and its representatives”.

According to Bishop Pavly this extreme form of Islam, which he identified as Wahhabism, increasingly spread in Egypt, also in the wake of the revolution that occurred in 2011. In the turmoil since the revolution, the imported notion of Wahhabism became dominant and terminated the societal coexistence in Egypt – and led subsequently to the burning of churches. In these difficult circumstances, in particular for the Copts, Pope Tawadros II. declared publicly that the nation is more important than religious buildings: “A nation without churches is better off than churches without a nation”. Reflecting on this statement, Bishop Pavly highlighted the importance of the popular uprising on 30 June 2013. He explained that:

“We thank God for having heard the prayer of the Egyptians to secure our homeland; he gave us a national oriented government and a thoughtful president”.

Following this, Bishop Pavly pointed to the “negative” external influence that threatens the Christians in Egypt. He identified an “ethical crisis”, strengthened by the Western world, which is willing to erase Christianity in the Middle East and helping to expel the Christians from their homeland:

“The West is exaggerating some internal misunderstandings on the one hand and ignoring issues concerning the humanity on the other. Moreover, the West is defending a woman dragged through the streets, which is in fact inadmissible, whereas in broad daylight bishops and churchmen are being killed and burned, totally ignored by a biased media perception. All that is possible since ethical values, degenerated into empty phrases, became in accordance to a US-American agenda a merely functional instrument in order to expel the Oriental Christians”.

Finally, Bishop Pavly concluded by stating that the revolutions in the Arab world generated an “Arab fall”, which eroded the notion of humanity. Moreover, regarding the ethical crisis in the Arab World, he stressed that this crisis is due to a weakness of the resilience of the Arab people. Against this backdrop, he called for collective efforts to “make our people more benevolent and pleasant”. He stressed the ethical values of Christ to be the guiding light for the renaissance of young people in the Middle East.

In contrast to the previous speakers, who are leading church representatives, the final panelist, Mr. Ghassan Al-Shami, is not a cleric. He is a Lebanese Christian journalist and publicist. He started his intervention on a somewhat lighter note, describing himself as a “secularist voice in between tough clergymen”. Mr. Al-Shami took the opportunity to present a general overview on the situation of Christians in the Orient. He stressed that:

“it does not look as if the current storm rocking the foundation of the Orient was about to diminish, since the external interventions and the internal conflicts are still raging destructively. Still, weapons and fighters from outside are diffusing into the region, whereas there is no sight of an objective for a socio-politico renaissance”.

One crucial damaging element in particularly affecting the current circumstances, which Mr. Al-Shami identified, is a barbaric force that makes use of Islam and its legitimacy. This barbaric force, Mr. Al-Shami went on, swept away the intra-regional borders lined up by Sykes–Picot Agreement one hundred years ago. It is furthermore striving to eliminate all other demographic components of Middle Eastern societies. Suddenly the Christians found themselves encountering this barbaric force, which is trying by violent means to rearrange “the geography and the demography”. All this is happening, as Mr. Al-Shami stated, right now. Events of massacres and expulsions in the past are still present in the collective memory of the Christians, starting with the diminishing of the Christian population in the Middle East during the first Islamic conquest up to the Ottoman rule and Saddam Hussein’s horrifying rule very recently. According to Mr. Al-Shami the total number of the Christians in each country in the Middle East fell drastically over time.

Yet, as Mr. Al-Shami pointed out what really matters is not the quantity of Christians but the quality of Christian life. However, even the matter of effectiveness of the Christian representation in politics is questionable. Although in many constitutions, the civic and demographic aspect of Christians is well represented, these rights often remain nominal and secondary in nature. Even in Lebanon, a country that is led by a Christian president, Mr. Al-Shami stated, a large number of its Christian members of parliament are dependent on Muslim benevolence when it

comes to election chances. In view of these findings, Mr. Al-Shami highlighted that in particular the absences of civic, democratic, pluralistic and equalizing parties, Christians in the Middle East found themselves devoid of any foothold. They turn to churches in order to find some economic help or to facilitate their migration. This situation, Mr. Al-Shami went on, just further increased the pressure on Middle Eastern churches.

Concluding his remarks Mr. Al-Shami emphasized that

“the current situation of the Christians in the Middle East does not bode well, except a miracle now takes place or a great support will be offered. The circumstances in Iraq and Syria give the impression that the future of the Christians in the Middle East will be the same as that of the Native Americans. Who is left over will exist as in a museum and under the stars”.

4. Panel 2: A Multi-Faith Middle East: Relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and the Impact on the Societal Coexistence in Times of Domestic and Regional Disorder

Chair: *Dr. Thomas Scheffler* (Orient-Institute Beirut, Lebanon)

Roundtable participants:

H.E. Archbishop Nikodimos Daoud Sharaf (Syrian Orthodox Church, Mosul and Kurdistan)

H.E. Msgr. William Shomali (Aux. Bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Palestine)

Professor Mahmoud Ayoub (Hartford Seminary, USA)

Professor David Thomas (University of Birmingham, England)

Panel number two opened the second day of the conference. The chair, Dr. Thomas Scheffler, made a short introduction highlighting the thematic focus of this panel. He explained that the multi-religious and the multi-denominational set-up of the region point to a paradoxical role in relation to the conflicts we are currently facing. From a monotheistic-religious perspective, Thomas Scheffler went on, diversity is considered as a part of God's creation. At the beginning of modernity in the Middle East, viewing the region as a mosaic of several religious communities became one sociopolitical perception that underpinned powerful images through which people explain the Middle East. Nowadays, Thomas Scheffler stated, religious affiliation – in particular for minorities – influences the political conduct insofar as the idea of coalition building by minorities to counter an inimical majority became a widespread notion.

After this brief introduction, the first speaker, His Excellency Archbishop Nikodimos Daoud Sharaf, took the floor. In an admonitory speech, Archbishop Sharaf sketched a gloomy picture of the living conditions of Christians in the Middle East. In particular, the Christians of Iraq and Syria, as he stated, are facing a real danger of extinction. For him and for the Christian communities in those countries the situation can be summarized under the heading “to be or not to be”.

Coming from Iraq, Archbishop Sharaf took the opportunity to talk about the suffering of his people and his church community. He referred to his cathedral St. Ephrem in Mosul, which was turned over into the “mosque of the Mujahedeen” after the Islamic State takeover of the city. According to Archbishop Sharaf, this was done not because there are no mosques in Mosul, but just to humiliate and scorn the Christian community.

He continued his speech by referring particularly to what happened to the Christians of Mosul and its hinterland. This Christian community with more than 160.000 members was, in just one day, expelled from its homeland. These Christian people, who Archbishop Sharaf regards as the original inhabitants of the land of Iraq, have been the victims of circumstances of various kinds. First, victims of the Sunni-Shia conflict, second due to domestic political bargaining and divisions and, third, because of the greed of Western governments. In this regard, Archbishop Sharaf stressed that “when I mean the West I differentiate between Western people, whom I deeply respect and love and their governments and the infamous politics they conduct”. As he outlined, all these circumstances and conflicts took place at the expense of the Christians of Mosul and Ninawa. Moreover, he went on,

“our people, the original inhabitants of the land, have been expelled and thrown out of their homes. All that happened and no one is bothering to worry about, it just happened. Today a lot of analyses, research and talks are being carried out in order to discuss the issue, notwithstanding that time is the biggest factor working against us, since day by day we get closer to become extinct. For me it is a matter of to be or not to be”.

Against this backdrop, Archbishop Sharaf expressed his bewilderment with the West, which according to different examples is striving for the

safety of animals not to become extinct, while ignoring the fate of the Christian population which is threatened by extinction. He stated that

“today we are suffering from being excluded and marginalized. They reject us and therefore there is no common ground for living together. How can I regain confidence in my neighbor, who was the first one removing the cross from the roof of my church? How can we live together while their sacred scripts command them to excommunicate and kill us?”

Concluding his remarks, he referred to the statement of Mr. Ghassan Al-Shami in the opening panel and stressed that only a miracle or a divine intervention can save the Christian people of Iraq, since there is no hope to get any help from anybody else.

The next panelist who took the floor was H.E. Msgr. William Shomali. In his speech he focused on the Holy Land (Israel and Palestine). Indicating two different development trajectories, Msgr. Shomali began his statement highlighting the difference between the French Revolution, on the one hand, and the Arab Spring, on the other. Whereas today Europe is more oriented toward greater secularization and emancipation from religion, the Middle East is trapped in a spiral of violence due to a convergence of politics and religion. In the Middle East, Msgr. Shomali went on, people kill others in the name of God and are categorized mainly according to their religious beliefs. The Holy Land is not an exception to the norm. This brief introductory depiction led him to the main question of his presentation, namely: How do the followers of the three monotheistic religions live, act and interact?

In order to provide an answer to the question, Msgr. Shomali referred to Jerusalem as a microcosm, a nucleus which presents the different realities of the Holy Land. Religion determines the everyday life in the city, and it encompasses the people's interactions, spatial structuring and political conduct. As he outlined, this religiously dominated situation in Jerusalem generates a double narrative that reinforces the antagonistic relations between Jews and Arabs. According to Msgr. Shomali this double narrative takes hold of all events and public spaces, e.g. political violence (martyrdom operation vs. terrorist attacks), sacred space (Temple Mount vs. Al-Aqsa-Mosque), territories (occupied vs. disputed) and the

name of the city itself (Jerusalem vs. al-Quds). For Msgr. Shomali the result of the double narrative is hate and ignorance in the Holy Land.

The second topic he addressed in his presentation was the interreligious dialogue. First of all he stressed the cultural, historical, linguistic and theological similarities, which Christians share with Jews and Muslims. Consequently, Msgr. Shomali stated that

“at the level of daily human relations, we try, in our schools, to educate young Muslims and Christians to live together in mutual respect. One of the goals to which we aspire in our dialogue with Muslims is to create a new mindset so that the Muslim majority respects, in practice, religious pluralism, diversity and freedom of conscience.” Nevertheless, he went on, “this becomes increasingly difficult in the current context of the progressive Islamizing of the Middle East. Political Islam rises to power and leaves less space for religious freedom”.

As for the Christian-Jewish dialogue Msgr. Shomali referred to the important document “Nostra Aetate”, which led to the mutual recognition of Israel and the Holy See. Still, “the political situation casts its shadow on relations between Israelis and Palestinian Christians and prevents a deep and fruitful dialogue”. Unlike the Christian-Jewish dialogue, the Muslim-Jewish dialogue is, according to Msgr. Shomali, quite rare, in particular “because of issues concerning the Al-Aqsa or the Temple Mount”. Concluding his remarks, he stressed that

“religion itself is part of the conflict and should become part of the solution. Religious leaders should encourage and support an internationally imposed solution based on UN resolutions, which stipulate the two-state solution. Therefore, nothing prevents us from dreaming about reconciliation between Israelis and Arabs and that peace will reign in Jerusalem”.

After the two churchmen disclosed their notion of a multi-faith Middle East, the renown Islamic Studies scholar Professor Mahmoud Ayoub took the floor. His presentation referred in particular to Christians-Muslims relations from the perspective of the Quran. Drawing on different passages, the Quran reveals an ambiguous view of Christian and Christianity, as Professor Ayoub claimed.

Yet, he also highlighted the positive side of this relationship by stating that

“it is a well attested fact that the Prophet Muhammad and his early followers were in close contact with Christian savants (qississin) and holy desert monks (ruhban), who were not arrogant, and ‘whose eyes would well up with tears when they hear the truth.’ (Sura 5:83) These were ‘virtuous men’ (rijal) who hymned the praises of their Lord, day and night, ‘in sacred houses which God had permitted to be raised up, and in which His name is constantly remembered”.

Referring to the mentioning of sacred houses in the quotation, Professor Ayoub stated that this meant monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques. Moreover, he went on, before enough mosques were built, Christians and Muslims shared these houses of God as places of worship simultaneously. One crucial aspect in the Quranic view is the considerations of Christianity as part of the Abrahamic religions. Accordingly, Professor Ayoub emphasized that the Quran calls on Muslims who were in doubt concerning the revelations which God offered to His servant Muhammad to inquire of those who read the Scriptures before them that is the Jews and Christians. The same injunction is addressed to the Prophet himself: “And if you (Muhammad) are uncertain about what We have sent down to you, ask those who read the Scriptures before you.” (Sura 10:94).

In contrast to these positive aspects of the relationship, Professor Ayoub continued his presentation by highlighting passages in the Quran, which expose a discrediting view of Christian and Christianity. For example, he cited Sura 5:85, in which God, according to the Quran, “warns the Muslims not to take ‘Jews and Christians as friends, or protectors’, (*awliya*)”. Furthermore the Christian doctrine of trinity, as Professor Ayoub explained, is harshly condemned and in this sense the Quran considers Jesus only as “servant of God and His messenger”.

Against this backdrop, Professor Ayoub summarized that

“this Quranic ambivalence is echoed in both the Prophetic hadith tradition (Sunnah) and Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). This attitude, however, has had both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side it allowed for tolerance and ‘amity’ between the women and men of the two faith communities, but often led to deep hostility in times of conflict and military and political tensions”.

With a view to Muslim-Christian dialogue Professor Ayoub recommended a selective reading of the Quran, in particular making a choice for passages that can be a guide for amicable relations. He concluded his remarks quoting the Quran as follows: "In our life in this world we ought to follow the Quranic diction: 'View one another as in a race in the performance of righteous deeds.'" (Sura 2: 148).

The panel's last speaker, Professor David Thomas, is another renowned scholar of Christianity and Islam. In order to address the panel's thematic focus, Professor Thomas focused in his presentation on distinct images, stereotypes and attitudes, which – according to him – largely determine the relations between Christians and Muslims. He drew from an article from *The Tablet* (a weekly Roman Catholic journal) in order to illustrate the delicate relations between Christians and Muslims. According to his brief quotation, in a German shelter Muslim refugees barred Christian refugees from using the communal kitchens since they would be unclean, condemning them as *kuffār*, unbelievers. For Professor Thomas this incident indicates a

"long history of relations between Christians and Muslims and the cumulating portrayals one of the other in the early centuries of encounter. The images that were constructed became so familiar that they came to be accepted without question as images condoned by the authoritative scriptural sources. They developed into stereotypes and were passed on without question".

For Professor Thomas, the Muslims view on Christians is also rooted in the Quran. In the early Islamic state, regulations had been imposed on Christians in order to minimize any threat and to treat them as inferior. Despite these structural restraints on Christian social life, there were, as Professor Thomas explained, theological "attacks on Christian doctrines, usually the trinity and incarnation that were designed to show their erroneousness". Over time, it gradually came to be accepted by Muslims that Christians possessed a faith with little value.

On the other hand, Christians, especially in the early period of Islam, respond with a sense of superior disdain. He explained that "the general Christian attitude was that Islam was misguided because it was based on a misunderstanding of the truth, and this was because it was not from

God but from an illegitimate source”. Against this backdrop, Professor Thomas summed up that these stereotypes grew up in the process of social interaction and especially in the process of identity building in times of social and political uncertainty. Concluding his remarks he stressed that

“if this is recognized, there is a possibility of Christians and Muslims learning from the mistakes of history, going back to their scriptures and identifying there possibilities of affording recognition and respect where the clouding of history has obscured them. Both the Quran and the Bible contain such possibilities if only one has the eyes to see them”.

5. Panel 3: A Multi-Confessional Christianity: Dialogue and Relations between the Christian Churches in Arab Countries

Chair: *Professor Dietrich Jung* (University of Southern Denmark)

Roundtable participants:

H.E. Cardinal Leonardo Sandri (Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Rome, Italy)

Father Michel Jalakh (General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, MECC, Beirut, Lebanon)

Assistant Professor Mariano Barbato (University of Münster and University of Passau, Germany)

Professor Assaad Elias Kattan (University of Münster, Germany)

In panel number three the discussion addressed the multi-confessional dimension of Christendom in the Arab world. According to Professor Dietrich Jung, who chaired the panel, the main topics to be addressed are the forms of dialogue and the relations between the manifold Christian churches in Arab countries. A critical review of the status of relations amongst the different churches is needed, as Professor Jung stated. He went on asking, “what makes the diversity *within* religions?” From his academic view, he offered a two-fold answer. First, religion is part of social life and hence it is part of culture within distinct traditions. Second, religious traditions are subject to continuous interpretations and as such, they can be seen as dialectic diversity.

After this introduction by Professor Jung, the panelists presented their statements, starting with H.E. Cardinal Sandri. Cardinal Sandri expressed his deep gratefulness to the organizer of the conference, which he considered to be very important in order to shed light on the dramatic situa-

tion of “our brothers and sisters in the Middle East”. Thereafter, Cardinal Sandri presented an overview on the variety of multi-confessional Christianity in the Middle East. In this line, Cardinal Sandri highlighted the situation in the Persian Gulf where Catholic Church and Orthodox Church have different perspectives of the institutional setting. Another topic he focused on was the situation of the refugees in particular in Lebanon and Jordan, where in collaboration with the governments essential work has to be done.

A comprehensive stock-taking is necessary because, as Cardinal Sandri explained, the complexity of the circumstances in the region are overwhelming. This complexity consists of different challenges, ancient and new. As for the ancient factors, he directed attention to some topics he considers crucial. These are the roots of Christianity, that can be found in the region, where the

“history of salvation began and got its full expression; the church is also rooted in the region, it rose from the preaching of the apostles. Even the division is ancient and deeply rooted in the region. It developed through doctrinal controversies and due to political factors in diverse epochs.”

Beside this historical perspective, Cardinal Sandri also referred to new elements Christians are confronted with in relations to each other. These new elements consist of collaboration and ecumenical spirit. For example the pan-Orthodox synod, that took place in June 2016, the meeting between Pope Francis and Patriarch Bartolomeo, and the recent meeting of the Pope and the Patriarch of Moscow. As Cardinal Sandri stressed, these facts bear witness to the reality of churches. But the most important issue is that there is a recognition of all, that the center of ecumenical dialogue is Christ in whom all equally believe.

Referring to the thematic focus of the panel Cardinal Sandri stressed that it is noteworthy to emphasize the keywords of ‘welcome and unity’ among churches and the Christian confessions. For him the following questions are central: are we disposing to collaborate sincerely towards building up structures such as the apostolic exegesis? Or do we rather risk understanding ourselves as the unique custody of the ecclesiastical institutions?

One distinguished practitioner in the field of dialogue and relations between the Christian churches in the Arab countries is Father Dr. Michel Jalakh, the MECC's [Middle East Council of Churches] Secretary General. At the beginning of his remarks, Father Michel illustrated some figures that shed light on the demographical development of Middle Eastern Christianity. It represents about 0.6 per cent of the total number of Christianity worldwide. Due to the on-going upheavals in the region and the emigration and expulsion of Christians resulting from it, "Christians now represent from 4.2 per cent to 6.5 per cent at most of the total population in the Middle East, which equals about 10 million individuals out of 150 million as a total". He then continued depicting quantitatively the demographic development in the different countries of the region starting with Turkey, where Christians

"comprise about 0.1 per cent of the total population, in Egypt about 10 per cent, in the Holy Land about 1.5 per cent, in Lebanon about 35 per cent, in Jordan about 4 per cent, in Iran about 0.35 per cent, in Iraq less than 2 per cent, and in Syria less than 8 per cent; and the situation is still negatively developing everywhere in the MENA [Middle East and North Africa] region".

From the perspective of this demographic composition, Father Michel highlighted that Christians form a minority in the Middle East, are themselves divided into small minorities that comprise a total of twenty-nine churches and communities. As he stressed, the everyday life of these communities and churches is currently determined by an all-encompassing conflictive condition, in which they are in a situation of emergency,

"one where their existence is at stake. As we remain preoccupied with the progress of the ecumenical-theological dialogue of Eastern churches, we discover that their priority has been, over decades, just to maintain their mere existence".

Accordingly, the dialogical level is moving very slow, and is very difficult indeed. Centuries-old schisms and divergences that have become deeply rooted in minds and practices cannot be expected to dissolve as easily as one may imagine, Father Michel explained. He then continued outlining that ecumenical dialogue between churches of different countries is not really free from political interference and interests, and since Christianity

is deemed “inferior” to Islam, Christendom remains, if not persecuted, at best tolerated, facing manifold limits. Nevertheless many instances of dialogue and rapprochement are happening between Eastern Christians according to Father Michel. He, for example, referred to agreements to ease up restrictions on mixed marriages between Christians.

Despite all these difficulties, but also thanks to the few opportunities, the endeavour of Oriental Christianity is to acquire their full rights of freedom and citizenship. The right to foster dialogue with churches in other countries or from other traditions remains a pivotal priority. Father Michel went on claiming that

“Eastern churches must take responsibility of their existence and unique role in the region, as a small candle that gives light to a room full of darkness. Despite the quest for survival and continuous suffering, Middle East Christianity remains a sign of hope for Christianity, for dialogue, for openness, for diversity, for the possibility of living together and accepting the other even and especially when we are not identical; for the possibility of witnessing to Christ in the midst of a non-Christian society”.

The panel’s next speaker Dr. Mariano Barbato, a scholar of International Relations and World Society, offered a critical analysis of the reaction of the wider world to the turmoil, transformations and atrocities in the Middle East. Dr. Barbato raised the following questions: Why is the world’s response so half-heartedly? In what global context is the turmoil in the Middle East taking place? What can realistically be expected from the major powers and the international community? Is there something wrong with the demands? What role can the Church, in particular the Roman Catholic Pope, play?

In order to address these questions Dr. Barbato divided his remarks into three parts, addressing firstly the issue of external intervention in the Middle East conflicts. Especially Christian communities feel often betrayed by the neglect and ignorance particularly in Western publics. Accordingly, as he continued, Oriental Christians see secularization often as a development that destroyed Christian solidarity. One must thus take note of the fact “that the Middle East cannot expect that the world or some major powers will intervene with a just and suitable solution”.

Starting with the US, as the sole global super power, Dr. Barbato highlighted that

”in the turmoil after the Arab Spring, the Obama administration regretted its ‘leadership from behind’ only insofar as it is unwilling to allow others to lead them into an intervention. Despite substantial air strikes against the Islamic State and support for various troops on the ground, the United States refuses to play the pivotal role it used to play in the region”.

In addition, the power of the European Union has insofar rightly been described as a normative power as the capacity to pressure neighbours instead of attracting them is almost non-existent. Even the Russian intervention since 2015, which had a significant impact in the Syrian war, should be rightly understood, as Dr. Barbato cautioned. Thus, two factors are of particular importance:

“Russia defended primarily its own naval base in Tartus and used the Syrian theatre of war for an impressive demonstration of its military, particularly also its logistic capabilities suitable for a former super power and strong regional power. The minor priority of the solidarity with Christian brothers in Russian rationale can be seen through a brief comparison with Russia’s policy against Ukraine”.

The second main issue Dr. Barbato addressed in his speech focused on the topic of “authoritarian hopes after democratic illusions?” According to Dr. Barbato, democratization is one of the key-words in international relations and world society that reached out to the Middle East as well. Nevertheless, he went on, majority voting is an important tool of democracies but it should not be mistaken for democracy as such. Majority rule has to be embedded in a context of legitimacy, acceptance and rule of law. Subsequently he introduced what he refers to as the ‘pilgrim of peace approach’, conducted particularly by Catholic popes. In this line the ‘pilgrim of peace’ status of the popes has a pretty pacifist standing and a tradition of opting against military intervention. As for the Arab world, he cited a vision of the Middle East, where Christian and Muslims can build a just society jointly and in peace. Finishing his remarks, Dr. Barbato emphasized that: “The pilgrim perspective rejects a political order based only on might. Instead the pilgrim is ready to leave but also to come home. The pilgrim trusts that in the long run self-confident and

fearless dialogue will prevail and can constitute more stable and peaceful political orders”.

The next speaker who took the floor was Dr. Assaad Elias Kattan. He offered another academic view on the multi-confessional status of Christianity in the Arab world. Dr. Kattan stated, based on a somewhat hermeneutical observation that in context of the panel topic one has to avoid a double temptation. That is first “the temptation of exoticizing the Christian communities as if they were isolated from the societal changes that Middle Eastern societies are currently exposed to, or as though the Christians there should always display, because of the very fact of being Christian, reactions different from those featured by their neighbors”. The second temptation to be avoided, according to Dr. Kattan, is to exoticize Islam as though it were a de-contextual religion impermeable to change, or eternally relying upon an unalterable essence.

After these initial remarks, Dr. Kattan addressed the multi-confessional Oriental Christianity. He highlighted a number of impressive steps in terms of ecumenism, such as the Deir al-Shirfe agreement on Holy Communion and marriage as well as the common book on religious education used in public schools. According to Dr. Kattan these achievements came up less “by ecumenical enthusiasm on the part of the church leaders than by deep societal changes, especially the increasing number of inter-confessional marriages”. In his opinion, this development is a confirmation that the behavior of the Christians, not only as individuals, but also as a group, is determined, largely, by external parameters challenging the logic of independent, self-sufficient, and closed communities.

In contrast to these positive examples of multi-confessional interaction, Dr. Kattan referred to a twofold crisis the multi-confessional Oriental Christianity is currently facing. This is, firstly, the recent crisis of the Middle East Council of Churches. There is a “still yawning gap between a Christian society permeated with the postmodern dynamics of relentless change and a church leadership still operating with structures inherited from the past and exhibiting a large amount of stagnation and dysfunctionality”. As for the second crisis, Dr. Kattan stated that the church

leaders are still unable to implement a genuine cooperation in combating the looming ghost of emigration. This is an indication of a deep-rooted ambivalence. He explained that

“the failure of this leadership, since the outbreak of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, to elaborate together a new discourse and to inaugurate a new style of doing things is only too symptomatic of an inherent incapacity to fathom the underlying principles of the recent Arab upheavals, that is, the quest for more human dignity, freedom, and equality, and to act correspondingly”.

Thus, the “Arab Spring” generated a new awareness that is hostile to dictatorship, dismissive of the ontology of conspiracy theories nourished by pseudo-media, and opposed to ascribing the problems of the nation to a real or constructed enemy. Nevertheless, as Dr. Kattan stated, the church leadership might positively contribute to the current situation by

“launching radical structural reforms, becoming more inclusive of the grass roots, and, first and foremost, working out a common theological, cultural, and societal vision”.

For him one factor for the development of a good future of the Christians in the Middle East

“is undoubtedly how the Christian communities will relate to each other and to what extent they will prove able to think and to work together, more intensively and more efficaciously”.

6. Closing Panel 4: Christianity between Orient and Occident: Social, Political, Economic, and Religious Implications

Chair: *Dr. Matthias Vogt* (Pontifical Mission Society Missio, Aachen, Germany)

Roundtable with

H.E. Bishop Paul Hinder (Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, United Arab Emirates)

H.E. Bishop Antonios Aziz Mina (Coptic Catholic Church, Guizeh, Egypt)

Professor Georges Tamer (University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany)

Professor Harald Suermann (Scientific Institute, Pontifical Mission Society Missio, Aachen, Germany)

The chair of the closing panel, Dr. Matthias Vogt, started his introduction by referring to earlier speakers, who focused their remarks on different realities experienced by the different Christian communities residing in the Middle East. He stressed that besides the ancient Christian communities in the region and their Diasporas in the West, nowadays the demographic set up is changing continually not least because of the upheavals taking place in the region. Subsequently refugee-communities, fleeing from Syria, and migration communities, such as Christian migrants to the Gulf, are part of the new reality of Christian life in the Middle East.

After this introductory remarks Prof. Georges Tamer, a renown scholar for Oriental Philology and Islamic Studies, took the floor. He choose to deliver his talk in Arabic. First, as he explained, because personally and academically he is committed to the Arabic Language as a language of diversity, which is not owned by one religion but open for all people

dealing with it. Second, he stressed the necessity for Arab Christians to retain their historical role as key agents for the exchange of culture, ideas, theology, and worship.

He started his remarks by reflecting on the title of the panel and asking the question

“why has Christianity been put in between? The position of Christianity in between the West, on the one hand, and the Orient, on the other, is not proper - since Christianity is the heart of the Orient and originated from the Orient before reaching the West”.

Today, Christianity is simultaneously part of the West and the Orient. Building on this argument, Professor Tamer referred to the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East highlighting their negative effect for Christians and Muslims alike. For him the main reason behind the conflicts taking place in the region is the Iranian-Saudi-Arabian hostility and the struggle over who dominates the Middle East. According to Professor Tamer the prevailing mood in this conflict is elimination and excommunication. Against this backdrop, he sees an important role for Christians in the Middle East and the West. That is to launch a serious attempt for a dialogue to defeat the oppression, which is taking place in the Arab world. Therefore Christians should attempt being a cultivating and civilizing force. According to Professor Tamer, Christians have to continue their historical heritage, which dates back to the Umayyad period. At that time, Christians have been forced to quit their professions in the Umayyad state. Subsequently they started to translate Greek and Syriac science and philosophy into Arabic. This was the driving force behind the Islamic awaking in the medieval time, as Professor Tamer stated. Therefore, he explained that

“when the conflicts come to an end, which is inevitable, Christians have to reshape the societies politically, culturally, and economically. In addition, Christians in the West have to support their fellow Christians not only to raise solidarity but also to take responsibility for the persistence of the oriental Christianity, which is a world heritage. Muslims on their part, they have to advance the Islamic religious mind up to the point that the non-Muslim Other is accepted and tolerated as he or she is. Furthermore, it is important to arrange the principles of citizenship, which is the basic for societal diversity and pluralism.”

The next speaker, Professor Harald Suermann, focused his remarks on the bridging function of the Christian Diasporas in the West. The idea of a bridging function is the first thought that comes to mind when someone is speaking about the relationship between Oriental Christianity and the West. Professor Suermann summarized his main perspective on Oriental Christians as follows: in the Middle East “they are not belonging to the Muslim majority, but they lived and shared its culture since 1,400 years. Christians have another religious identity. However, they are Arabs according to the self-perception of a certain numbers of Christians, sharing this ethnic identity with the Muslim majority; according to the self-perception of others they are Arameans, Assyrians, Armenians etc. and not sharing the ethnic identity with the Muslim majority”. From a political perspective, he explained that the political-cultural struggle of Christians in the Middle East did not succeed in creating real equality with the majority. This is not least because Christians are often considered as a Western fifth column. In modern times, and especially in the last years, many Christians migrated from the Middle East to the West, that is Europe, both Americas and Australia. The idea of the bridging function of the Christian Diasporas has to be reassessed through this prism. Yet, as Professor Suermann outlined, Middle Eastern Christians in the Western Diasporas are not the only possible bridge to the Middle East.

“Muslims coming from the Near and Middle East may be today even better bridges between East and West when they have adapted in a certain measure the Western style of life and its values, while keeping their religious identity. Oriental Christians with their Christian identity are losing their bridging function between the East and the West.”

This situation raises new questions regarding the relation between the Oriental Churches in the West and their mother churches in the region. As Professor Suermann explained, Oriental patriarchs and their churches have discussed this question for example at the Bishops’ synod for the Middle East. They asked to keep the relation with the mother churches and the traditions in the West. They asked as well to financially support the mother churches and to keep a foothold in their countries of origin by not selling land and houses. Furthermore, as he explained, since the

religious assimilation to the majority would annihilate the Oriental churches, Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops have asked the Roman church to take certain measures in order to preserve the oriental identity of their members. Nevertheless, for Professor Suermann “the ethnic-cultural identity does not guarantee the survival of the Oriental church; she may be reduced to a folkloric element.” Moreover, the main obstacle in the preparation of the future is the way churches and Christians stick to their identity and tradition. However, for him it does not mean that there is no need for several churches. On the contrary,

“we need a plurality of churches because the answers are not easy and they may be different, but all valid and convincing. Churches should look into their heritage in order to find current or forgotten elements for answers.”

As for the Middle East, Professor Suermann was convinced that rediscovering the missionary dimension and identity of the church is essential for the future, since only a church open to the entire society has a future. This includes that the churches offer their answers, visions and care to those who are not belonging to their own tradition, like the Christian migrant workers in so many countries and those belonging to other religious traditions.

His Excellency Bishop Paul Hinder forwarded the next presentation. He was very thankful to be invited to the conference since in the opinion of many, the church does not exist in the Gulf region. However, Bishop Hinder pointed out that 3.5 Million Catholics are living in this region, displaying a vital church life there. He started his remarks urging to purify and heal our memories, which are poisoned by a conflictive past. Bishop Hinder referred to the somehow difficult dialogue between Orient and Occident, which accuse each other of being responsible for a violent past; Muslims refer to the crusades and Christians highlight persecutions in past and present. For Bishop Hinder these mutual accusations are historically significant and somehow justified. Nevertheless, for the sake of a better understanding and a dialogue, they are useless. The only way to overcome this dilemma is purifying our memories from these antagonisms.

Another point of concern he addressed in his speech, was the relationship between Orient and Occident, and its geographical misconception. Thus, Bishop Hinder made a plea for an extended geographical view of the Orient and the Occident, comprising Latin America as part of the Occident, on the one hand, and the whole Eastern part of Asia as part of the Orient, on the other. As Bishop Hinder explained, this extended view is important in his personal everyday work since his church community mainly consists of migrant workers coming from different parts of Eastern Asia, such as India, the Philippines, Bangladesh, etc. According to Bishop Hinder this extended perspective has several benefits. For European Christians it means to rediscover their religious identity based on this extended view of the Orient, for example with a view to the genesis of a new church in the Gulf region.

As for Arab Christians, they have to recognize that Christians from different parts of Asia are full Christians, too and should be recognized as such. Bishop Hinder emphasized this point by highlighting prejudices among Arab Christians towards Christian migrant workers from Asia. Bishop Hinder concluded his remarks by stressing the importance of the real teaching of the gospel and not losing oneself in the mentality of a victim. As he closed,

“in Jesus Christ there is not only the death on the cross, but also the resurrection and that is part of our full and integral faith experience”.

Annex:

Keynote Dinner Speech

H.E. Massimo D'Alema (former Prime Minister of Italy)

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank the organisers of this meaningful event for having invited me. I think that this conference is extremely significant and timely, because it tackles the question of the Christian presence in one of the most troubled areas of the world. Perhaps I should say *the* most troubled area of the world. A presence, whose origins are to be found far back in time, considering that the Middle East has been the cradle of Christianity, at least up to the time when Paul decided to establish in Rome the core of the Christian church.

The conflicts that are tearing apart the Middle Eastern countries have, in most cases, a national origin. Yet, they have acquired the features of religious conflicts. And Christians are again the target of execrable persecutions, which are particularly violent in those countries that have been experiencing that process of radical transformation, which started five years ago with the so-called Arab Spring, and are now increasingly taking on fundamentalist characters.

Let me tell you about my visit to the Catholic Hospital in Damascus as I was Minister of Foreign Affairs. I remember that I had the opportunity to meet several representatives of the religious community who were engaged in the management of that hospital. And I remember the many Iraqi Christians who were there because they had been the victims of violent assaults and had been forced to leave their country.

I remember in particular the few words that I exchanged with the nun who directed the hospital. She addressed me quite harshly and said: "If

this is the kind of democracy you would like to bring here. Then, please, leave us with Assad!"

It is probably a disturbing truth, but too often Christian minorities have been protected more by authoritarian regimes than by the confused and unstable democracies that were born in the course of the recent process of transformation.

Yet, we cannot indulge in the regret of dictatorships or in the thought that, perhaps, the most convenient outcome of the Arab Spring is an Egyptian-style *coup d'état*, which, by means of torture, repression and systematic violation of human rights, risks encouraging a significant part of the Muslim Brothers to embrace jihadism.

There must be something between dictatorships and intolerant fundamentalism. And we must work with patience in order to promote the establishment of open political systems that respect and protect human rights and guarantee religious freedom.

In multi-ethnic and multi-religious countries, some of which have very uncertain national identities and whose borders are more the results of colonial domination than of history, we cannot proceed according to a simplistic idea of democracy. Toppling statues of despots and calling for elections does not turn automatically a dictatorship into European-style democratic systems.

European democracy is the result of centuries of history. It's been built after bloody conflicts and after at least two hundred years of religious wars, which were as ferocious as the ones that are currently devastating the Middle East.

The precondition for the founding of democratic regimes in Europe was the establishment of the principles of tolerance and religious freedom. Because democracy is not simply the rule of the majority, but it is above all the respect of minorities.

For this reason, I never believed in the "importation" of models from abroad, but I rather always believed in the need of promoting and sup-

porting processes, which are necessarily long and complex, of transformation of societies from within.

Without a doubt, an important precondition in order to defuse the permanent risk of conflict between the great monotheistic religions is the search for a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the question of the status of Jerusalem, which, in my opinion represent the core of the Middle Eastern crisis.

Events in the region, in fact, risk triggering new and terrible tensions. The Israeli government is currently systematically removing any possibility of establishing a Palestinian state, by means of its settlement policy and the *de facto* annexation of Jerusalem.

If things keep going this way, the risk is the creation of sort of South-African scenario, which might even call into question the very existence of a Jewish state in the region and fuel feelings of frustration and hate not only among Palestinians but in the whole Arab world.

The complete lack of reaction of the Christian community and the Catholic Church to a prospect that might further exacerbate the tensions around Jerusalem is striking.

I strongly believe that a fair solution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue would pave the way to the strengthening of the most moderate components of the Muslim world.

This action shall be supported by an equal commitment on the cultural, religious and theological levels, aiming at preventing the assertive return of a literal interpretation of the Quran, which encourages intolerance, deterring a contextualised interpretation of the holy book of Islam, consistent with the time we live in.

This is, of course, a very delicate question, as the Islamic tradition, unlike the Christian and the Jewish ones, do not allow for the hermeneutics of the Quran. However, there are also components of Islam, that are in favour of a reformed, more open and tolerant Islam.

In my opinion, we should support the growth of this kind of moderate Islam in Europe. I am talking of about forty million people. This with the

aim also of loosening the contacts between our Muslim fellow citizens and the Salafist preachers who often come from their countries of origin.

It is a long and difficult challenge we have in front of us. And the Christians who live in the Middle East are, of course, on the frontline and risk the most.

For all these reasons, I believe that Pope Francis' message is most significant for you and for us. His is a message of dialogue, tolerance and ecumenism.

Europe as well should raise its voice and act more concretely in order to express its solidarity to those like you who claim the freedom of being Christian in that part of the world where Christianity began.

Agenda of the Conference

Day 1: Wednesday 24 February 2016

3.30 pm Welcoming and opening remarks by H.E. Archbishop Ludwig Schick (*Archbishop of Bamberg and Chairman of the German Bishops' Conference Commission on International Church Affairs*)

3.45 pm Welcoming and opening remarks by Professor Stephan Stetter (*University of the Bundeswehr Munich, Germany*)

4.00 pm **OPENING KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

Professor Heiner Bielefeldt (*Friedrich-Alexander-University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany and UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief*)

4.45 pm **OPENING PANEL 1**

Five Years into the Arab Uprisings: Stock-taking of the Situation of Christians and Christian Churches in the Region

Chair: Dr. Mitra Moussa Nabo (*University of the Bundeswehr Munich*)

Roundtable with:

H.B. Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Raï (Patriarch of Antioch and Head of the Maronite Church, Lebanon)

H.E. Metropolitan Ignatius Al-Hoshi (Orthodox Church of Antioch, Diocese in Western and Southern Europe, France)

Mr. Ghassan Al-Shami (Journalist, Al-Mayadeen Satellite Television Channel, Beirut, Lebanon)

H.G. Bishop Pavly (Coptic Orthodox General Bishop, Cairo, Egypt)

7:30 pm **DINNER SPEECH**

H.E. Massimo D'Alema (*former Prime Minister of Italy*)

Day 2: Thursday 25 February 2016

9.00 am *PANEL 2*

A Multi-Faith Middle East: Relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims and the Impact on the Societal Coexistence in Times of Domestic and Regional Disorder

Chair: Dr. Thomas Scheffler (*Orient-Institute Beirut, Lebanon*)

Roundtable with:

H.E. Archbishop Nikodimos Daoud Sharaf (Syrian Orthodox Church, Mosul and Kurdistan)

H.E. Mgr. William Shomali (Aux. Bishop of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, Palestine)

Professor Mahmoud Ayoub (Hartford Seminary, USA)

Professor David Thomas (University of Birmingham, UK)

11.00 am *THEMATIC WORKSHOPS*

WORKSHOP 1: The Tension between Inclusion and Exclusion of Christians in Everyday Live

H.E. Archbishop Shahan Sarkissian (Armenian Orthodox Church, Aleppo, Syria)

Dr. Fiona McCallum (St. Andrews University, UK)

WORKSHOP 2: The Tension between Integration and Non-Integration of Church/State Relations

Professor Antoine Messara (University of Lebanon and the Saint-Joseph University, Beirut, Lebanon)

Father Fadel Sidarous SJ (Coptic Catholic Church, Cairo, Egypt)

WORKSHOP 3: The Tension between Modern Christian Subjectivities and Collective Religion

Professor George Thomas (Arizona State University, USA)

Ms. Barbara Soliman (Coptic Orthodox Papal Office for Projects and Relations, Cairo, Egypt)

2.15 pm Plenary presentation and discussion of the findings of the workshops

3.45 pm *PANEL 3*

A Multi-Confessional Christianity: Dialogue and Relations between the Christian Churches in Arab Countries

Chair: Professor Dietrich Jung (*University of Southern Denmark*)

Roundtable with:

H.E. Cardinal Leonardo Sandri (Prefect of the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, Rome, Italy)

Father Michel Jalakh (General Secretary of the Middle East Council of Churches, Beirut, Lebanon)

Assistant Professor Mariano Barbato (University of Münster and University of Passau, Germany)

Professor Assaad Elias Kattan (University of Münster, Germany)

Day 3: Friday, 26 February 2016

8.45 am COUNTRY WORKSHOPS ON THE SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS AND CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

WORKSHOP 1: The Holy Land (Israel, Jordan, Palestine)

Father Rifaat Bader (Director of the Catholic Press Office, Amman, Jordan)

Dr. Walid Shomay (Bethlehem University, Palestine)

WORKSHOP 2: Lebanon

Professor Charles Chartouni (Lebanese University, Beirut, Lebanon)

Father Karam Rizq (University of the Holy Spirit, Kaslik, Lebanon)

WORKSHOP 3: Egypt

Dr. Vivian Ibrahim (*University of Mississippi, USA*)

Assistant Professor Angie Heo (*University of Chicago, USA*)

Mr. Guirgis Saleh (*Coordinator Coptic Orthodox Church and the Middle East Churches, Cairo, Egypt*)

WORKSHOP 4: Countries in Civil War (Iraq, Syria)

Mr. Ghassan Al-Shami (Journalist, Al-Mayadeen Satellite Television Channel, Beirut, Lebanon)

Father Amir Jajé OP (*Provincial Vicar of the Vicariate of the Arab World, Iraq*)

WORKSHOP 5: Gulf Countries

Professor Hilal Khashan (American University of Beirut, Lebanon)

H.E. Bishop Paul Hinder (Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, United Arab Emirates)

10.30 am Plenary presentation and discussion of the findings of the workshops

11.45 am *CLOSING PANEL 4*

Christianity between Orient and Occident: Social, Political, Economic, and Religious Implications

Chair: *Dr. Matthias Vogt, Pontifical Mission Society Missio, Aachen, Germany*)

Roundtable with:

Professor Georges Tamer (*University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany*)

Professor Harald Suermann (*Scientific Institute, Pontifical Mission Society Missio, Aachen, Germany*)

H.E. Bishop Paul Hinder (*Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia, United Arab Emirates*)

H.E. Bishop Antonios Aziz Mina (*Coptic Catholic Church, Guizeh, Egypt*)

1.00 pm Summary remarks and end of conference