

Christianity in the Arab World

By El-Hassan Bin Talal. London, SCM Press, 1998, 102 pp.

As Prince Charles commented in his opening words, "Jordan has long been conspicuous as a land of tolerance and peaceful coexistence between people of different faiths," a coexistence increasingly abused by extremists of all three faiths included in the phrase *Ahl al Kitāb* (People of the Book). Prince Hassan's original intent in writing this book was to brief Muslim Arabs on the nature of Christianity and Christian religious institutions. His major focus is on the historical development of the Eastern Christian traditions in the Muslim Arab milieu and the standing of Christians in Arab society today. It is his intention to provide Muslim Arabs with accurate and concise information about the Christians who historically have lived in their midst. The text was first published in English and Arabic by the Royal Institute for Inter-faith studies in Amman, Jordan, and should be classified under both historical and theological sections. It is in wide demand in the West because of the paucity of easily accessible relevant information.

The Arab Christian tradition goes back to Christianity's very earliest days, antedating Islam by those six centuries that witnessed the growth of Christian Trinitarian theology, the spread of the Church, and the division of that Church into different communions. Some of these historical communions have survived in the Arab world and bear titles that usually are greeted with complete ignorance on the part of Christian tourists encountering Christianity in Arab lands for the first time.

As an overall picture of the historical development of Christian doctrine, this book presents the main features and arguments with exceptional clarity and a highly admirable depth of understanding of extremely confusing issues. A more clear, precise, concise *gestalt* picture of the subject does not exist, so far as I know. The reader can follow the reasons for the various theological developments, the schisms that arose, and the passions with which various positions and views were defended.

The text is academic, excellent at history and explanation, and displays a sensitive awareness of words and concepts that require careful definition. The Prince has presented the world of religious scholars and the issues that were so important to them that they were (and remain) willing to sacrifice everything, even life. It does not show the world of actual church people who regard themselves as the body of the living Christ, the devoted followers who strive to live good, prayerful lives pleasing to God by imitating the way of Jesus to the best of their ability. This is not a criticism, but I felt the book would have been improved with a short section on Christian spirituality to counter all the nitpicking and skullduggery that went on in the theological realm.

I also felt the book would have been far better if it had included an equally concise, clear, and straightforward section on Islamic theology and where that vital subject fits within the overall spectrum. The Muslim component of the book was limited to those his-

torical moments that impinged on Christianity's development. This obviously vital component was woven excellently into the text. However, more could have been shown of the Muslim beliefs regarding the person of God, the nature of Jesus, and his relationship with God so that the Christian reader could grasp what has (and still) divides Christians and Muslims. This is something that may be obvious to the educated Muslim reader, but is probably unknown territory for the Christian one.

The Prince's book is deliberately limited to what happened to the Christian peoples of *Ahl al Kitāb*. It reveals starkly the tragic consequences of various congregations trying to grapple with such theological minutiae as the nature of God, the origin of existence, and the origin of evil and the free will to choose it. Those Christians who turned aside from the original teachings of the first followers of Jesus (the Jerusalem Church founded by those who had known Jesus personally, and some of whom were physically related to him), began the long trail down the path of a doctrinal history that Muslims believe will never be presented to the satisfaction of all Christian scholars, simply because it is based on a wrong premise: that Jesus was God Incarnate, and not a messenger of God in the same line as all the other messengers chosen by God.

The first chapter presents a brief definition of Trinitarian theology, the relationship of the "new" covenant to the "old" as expressed in the Hebrew scriptures, the first councils called to define an orthodox Christian creed, and the various early heterodoxies that arose. The second chapter deals with the origins of the Nicene Creed, a formula produced in 325 under the guidance of the Christian Emperor Constantine. It reveals the age-old problem of trying to put divine and spiritual matters into writing and then codify them. No wonder our Prophet and the first Companions were so reluctant to commit statements and opinions to writing. As we know, the *shahādah* (profession of faith) of Islam is so simple, yet look at the history of Muslim blood shed over the minutiae of the things that Muslims believe.

In Christianity, the theological debates of the first three centuries came to a head over the nature of the person of Jesus and his relationship to God "the Father" (Note that in Islam, although the idea of God as "Our Father" is so basic to Christianity, the term *Father* is not one of the 99 Beautiful Names used by God, and that the concept of God as Father appears nowhere in the entire 23 years of the revelation of the Qur'an.)

The First Council of Nicaea was called to deal with the Arian heresy, which was based on speculations as to the nature of Jesus as the "only-begotten Son." If Jesus were *begotten*, his co-eternity with God would have to be denied, for there would have to have been a time when he was not. This really reduced Christianity to no more than an evolved form of Jewish monotheism. This would have been very close to what is taught in Islam, were it not for the fact that Arian Christians still believe the Son and the Holy Spirit to be separate divine entities, even if subordinate to the Father, a belief that could not honestly be monotheistic, despite Christian claims to the contrary.

I would have loved to have had more information on Emperor Philip the Arab, whom Prince Hassan claims was a Christian before Constantine, the Roman Emperor who is traditionally accepted as the first Christian ruler.

Constantine's suggestion for the orthodox creed was that all Christians should accept Jesus as "consubstantial" (of one substance) with the Father. Following that, the statement about the nature of the Holy Spirit was that it proceeded from the Father. At this point, the whole history of religious schisms was established. The Greek Church accepted the wording as it stood, but the Roman Church added the clause *filioque* (and the Son), thereby stating that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son.

The third chapter is perhaps the most important, as it forms the foundation for understanding everything else, including the relationship of Christianity with Islam. It deals

with the organization of the Church and how power became established in the hands of a priesthood basically consisting of presbyters (later priests), bishops, and deacons. Presbyters were originally elders who preached the message, bishops were appointed to oversee and direct the work of presbyters and the church in general, and deacons dealt with practical matters and assisted in the services. The Jerusalem Mother-Church always remained an assembly of the faithful under the leadership of the companions and relatives of Jesus, with enormous authority vested in Jesus' brother James (who virtually disappears from the New Testament as we now have it). The organized institution of the Church run by a hierarchy of officials may have originated with the Gentile mission of St. Paul. Once authority was vested in the hands of a chosen few, they gained enormous power and influence (e.g., the laying-on of hands to announce officially a new Christian or a Christian official was the preserve of the presiding bishop).

Of course, the old conflict of priest vs. prophet or saintly laymen did not originate with the Christian Church, for one can see this conflict, and that between the messengers/prophets of God with a corrupt and ignorant priesthood, throughout the Old Testament. The priests gained more power with the establishment of various sacraments (outward signs of invisible and inward grace) and practices that they alone could perform (e.g., offering Eucharist or Mass; ordaining new clergy; and providing rituals to confirm the forgiveness of sins, sanctify one's marriage, and perform the last rites to ensure the deceased's entrance into heaven). They also had the power to excommunicate and to forbid the faithful from dealing with those who had been excommunicated.

Chapter Four, a chapter of brilliant clarity that provides a most impressive summary of the whole subject, presents the various Christological controversies. Key issues are the theological speculations found in Alexandria, which emphasized the divinity of Jesus, and Antioch, which emphasized his humanity. The Alexandrine position became known as Monophysite: Jesus was God who became man, that his *physis* (nature) was divine, and that the Virgin Mary could rightly be called *theotokos* (Mother of God). On the other hand, the Antiochenes rejected the *theotokos* completely by stressing the separateness of the divine and human natures in Jesus (via Mary). In other words, Jesus was the receptacle of God in a man, and Mary was therefore only the mother of Jesus' human part and not of God. The leading exponent of this belief was Nestorius, an Aramaeo-Arab of Mesopotamia who categorically denied the hypostatic union of divine and human. Both positions threatened what was increasingly regarded as orthodox Christianity, for they both undermined the doctrine of salvation. The Monophysite version meant that Jesus was incapable of true human suffering and death on behalf of humanity, and the Nestorian implied it that it was only the human part of Jesus that had died on the cross, for the divine part of his nature was outside the realm of suffering.

The chapter then follows the various controversies and councils. In Egypt, for example, it led to the division of the Church into pro-Monophysite Copts and Melchites (Syriac for *king* and a reference to the Byzantine Emperor) who accepted the Council of Chalcedon's (451) ruling that true orthodoxy acknowledged that Jesus Christ had two natures, each perfect and distinct yet united in the one person who was God and Man at the same time. This was supposed to be a political and theological triumph, one that condemned Monophysitism without actually saying so, and was a statement backed by imperial power.

Toward the end of the chapter, the existence of the very early and quite separate Armenian Church is presented, an existence that might have been noted earlier. However, this is a small criticism in view of the complexity of the subject. The Armenians accepted the Monophysite position at the Council of Dvin (506) and rejected Chalcedon. The Monophysite cause also was stoutly defended by an extraordinary woman, Theodora, the

wife of the Emperor Justinian I (the Great, 527-65). One of her favorites was the monk Jacob Baradaeus, who was consecrated Bishop of Edessa by the exiled Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria. After the Council of Constantinople in 553, Jacobite leaders were called Patriarchs of Antioch, although they did not reside there. The Copts and Jacobites replaced the Greek liturgy with Coptic and Syriac, respectively, thus encouraging the notion of ethnic churches.

Heraclius, who wished to go much further in his attempts to reconcile the churches, was faced with the Persian invasion (supported in their territories by the Monophysites), which he managed to see off in 628. Meanwhile, the revelation of Islam had commenced in 610 and altered the entire scenario.

The Maronite church arose through a major doctrinal concession that allowed Theodore of Arabia to preach the emanation of one *energeia* (energy) or *theletis* (will) from the divine and human natures in Christ. This Monothelite formula offered a workable doctrinal compromise, and after pressing for it for twenty years Heraclius finally issued an imperial decree imposing its acceptance in 638. Needless to say, both sides rejected it as a cynical subjection of sacrosanct Christian doctrine to political expediency. It was condemned as a heresy in 680 by the Sixth Council of Constantinople, but by then the Maronites and Nestorians were under Muslim rule and no longer subject to Byzantine imperial sway.

Chapter Five outlines the Iconoclast controversy, the last major dispute to be settled by an ecumenical council. Pope Leo III (717-41) issued a decree banning the worship of icons and sacred images, which, it was argued, broke the Second Commandment, which states that one should not worship graven images (Exodus 20:4-5). In reality, however, it was an attempt to curb the increasing power of the monks.

The monastic movement (from *monazein*, to be alone), was a reaction against growing corruption in high places, irritation with academic theology, and the urge for individuals to take responsibility for their own religious lives and personal piety. Many saintly individuals withdrew completely from public life and lived as hermits, while others lived together in special communities. They had no clerical status, but were devoted, pious, and often highly educated laymen. Their personal examples and perpetual self-denial drew far more admiration than the lives of priestly celebrities, whose lives were often far from exemplary. One could perhaps compare the examples of those caliphs and sultans who lived decadent lives to that of the founders and celebrities of Sufi orders.

The monasteries gained great power and wealth from donations, were not taxed, were excused from military service, and functioned as places of sanctuary for outlaws and rebels. The icons were supposed to be spiritual aids to worship created by particularly saintly monks, but the obvious dangers of idol-worship were genuine. Strangely enough, the chief icon defender was John of Damascus, writing and arguing from the safety of the Muslim capital of the Umayyad caliphate. In the end the monks won this controversy, but there was much violence, killing, and banishment, all of which allowed the Byzantine emperors to gain more control over the state.

Chapter Six deals with the final schism between Rome and Byzantium/Constantinople. There had been separate Roman emperors in the West from 395-476, and the Roman Church generally defied the Byzantine emperors' claim of authority over all Christendom. The old prejudices flared up again and again, mainly over the *filioque* clause, which remained in the Latin but was absent in the Greek version of the Nicene Creed. This chapter outlines the causes and consequences of the Photian schism and the spiritual revival under the Benedictine Order of monks. The Byzantine patriarch was excommunicated by the Roman patriarch on 16 July 1054, which led to the separate histories of the Roman Catholic Church in the West and the Greek Orthodox (followed by the Melchites of Antioch, Jerusalem, and Alexandria) in the East.

Chapter Seven deals with the difference made by the coming of Islam. By this time, of course, the Christians of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq had been under Muslim rule for four centuries. In general, the Melchites remained loyal to the Byzantines, and the Monophysites saw Islam as a very welcome relief from Byzantine oppression. The Monophysites and Nestorians might well have succumbed if Byzantium had succeeded in preventing the Muslim takeover of Egypt, Syria, and Iraq; however, they saw the Muslims as fellow Arabs and not as aliens like the Greeks and Romans. They were accepted in Islam as *dhimmi*s (protected non-Muslims) and paid the *jizyah* (poll tax). The Melchites of Jerusalem survived in good condition, for they had surrendered to the Arabs on favorable terms in 638. Islam guaranteed their protection against unsolicited external interventions that could have compromised, if not terminated, their existence as independent communities. Jacobite and Nestorian scholars were to become very valuable to Islam as translators of Greek manuscripts into Arabic. However, vast numbers of them became Muslim, which depleted the numbers of Christian communities most favored by the Arabs and most amenable toward Islam. The unconverted remainder was far less favorable or amenable.

Chapter Eight deals with the Crusades, the arrival of the Franks, the creation of their four Latin states (Antioch, Edessa, Jerusalem, and Tripoli), and the Maronite union with Rome. Under Mamluk rule, the Maronites kept in touch with Rome through the intermediation of the Franciscans, founded by St Francis in 1209. They had missions in Jerusalem and Beirut. Western Europe then went through the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Reformation, and a new surge of Roman Catholic missionary activity, as seen with the Society of Jesus, founded by Ignatius Loyola in 1523. During the Ottoman period, the Jesuits and Capuchins (a branch of the Franciscans) increased their influence. In 1585, Pope Gregory XIII founded a seminary in Rome to train Maronites, and in 1608 John Makhluḥ was elected patriarch.

Chapter Nine outlines the development of the Uniate churches. The Ottomans categorized their eastern non-Muslim subjects as *Millet-i-Yahud*, *Millet-i-Rum*, and *Millet-i-Arman* (the Gregorians, Syrians, Jacobites, Nestorians, and Maronites). The scheme was not successful, for people resented the millets into which they had been put. Roman Catholic missionaries advised them to ignore the millet system and join with Rome. This resulted in each church splitting into Uniates (those in favor of joining with Rome) and non-Uniates. The full complicated history is outlined concisely.

Chapter Ten gives an overview of the Arab Protestant churches, with the evangelical movement emanating from Britain and the United States that based itself on the authority of the Bible; the necessity for every Christian to read and study for himself or herself; and the need for personal spiritual transformation due to Bible reading, prayer, trust in Christ, and a modeling of one's life on the life of Jesus as presented in the Gospels. Major activities included printing Bibles and religious tracts, establishing Sunday schools, and encouraging education in general. The new movements have not been particularly successful in converting people, but their contribution to education and social causes has been outstanding.

In Chapter Eleven, Prince Hassan comments on the negative aspect of such missionary activity by saying that it destroyed the unity of the older churches by encouraging converts to join their own particular sects, which led to a legacy of distrust and quarrels. On the positive side, the Uniate churches emerged as new communions with an enhanced sense of ethnic identity. Whereas the Melchite churches remained dominated by a Greek clergy, the Uniate Catholic Church broke away and established an Arab clergy. They started the first Arab press and were intimately involved in starting the Arabic literary revival. In fact, the Prince suggests that Arab nationalism was given its first articulation by Christian Arabs, mainly Uniates and Protestants.

Finally, Chapter Twelve outlines the scope of Christian groups in the modern Arab world. He provides some very interesting facts and figures, such as that there are some ten million Christians in the Arab world today, the largest group being the Copts of Egypt. The Prince concludes with a warning note against the spread of a fanatical and hostile Islam riding upon waves of social behavior driven by ephemeral emotion rather than solid reason. He hopes that the heritage of trust and good faith shared between Christian and Muslim Arabs over the last fourteen centuries will still find its place in the Arab world of the future, to their own benefit and to the benefit of all parties concerned.

This excellent and much-needed book presents vital information in a straightforward and down-to-earth manner, in a language accessible to all. I cannot recommend it too highly, nor echo too fervently the aims it proposes.

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