A vital presence

Crisis in the Middle East – 2

Anthony O'Mahony *The Tabet,* **4 February 2011**

The people of Egypt and other Muslim-majority countries are demanding freedom and democracy. The fate of the Christian minorities will be a barometer of progress, an expert on the region argues in the first of a series on the Abrahamic faiths of the Middle East

Christians in the Middle East will be experiencing the recent quietist intifada or popular demonstrations against governments across the region with the mixed emotions of great hope, concern and fear. They will be aware that the great political upheaval that took place in Iraq after the ending of Baathist power in 2003 eventually led to sectarian violence and the displacement of half of all Iraqi Christians, with several hundred thousand in exile abroad, never to return home, and living in poverty elsewhere as refugees.

In Iran, Shia Islam created the Islamic Revolution, and Christians in the region will no doubt be concerned that Sunni political Islamism will not move in this direction. In Egypt, the Christians will be hoping and working for a very different outcome. They will recall the 1919 uprising when the twin communities, Christians and Muslims, stood together against British rule and for independence for Egypt.

Christians confront many of the same challenges as the Muslim population of the region: weak economy, social distress, crises of urbanisation and infrastructure, lack of investment in agriculture, cultural disorientation and above all a crisis in political authority. Yet the recent church bombing in Alexandria only a month ago was a real expression of religious tensions that exist in Egyptian society.

The Egyptian Jesuit, Fadel Sidarouss, a Coptic Catholic, has argued in recent months for an articulation of an "Enlightened Secularism" in Egypt, pointing to the real danger of a dichotomy between the spiritual and the temporal, the heavenly and the things of this world, between the sense of ecclesial and of civil belonging: in a word, the need for a certain kind of enlightened secularity knowing how to distinguish human realities, recognising the particularity and autonomy of each of them.

The twentieth century for the Christians in the East began with genocide and ended with the rapid losses due to the migrations by Christians from the East to the West. In some areas, those who are left have experienced a slow decline and extinction and have known the consequences of political weakness, leaving the Christian tradition there marked by suffering and leaving a permanent wound on its life, witness, theology and spirituality.

The number of Christians, unfortunately, is very difficult to discern, although it is estimated that the Middle Eastern church families represent about 35 million Christians of whom approximately 15 million reside in the Middle East.
For some decades, there have no longer been confessional censuses in the countries of the Middle East, where governments are concerned to veil the multi-confessional nature of their societies. One thing is certain: the proportion of Christians in the East is decreasing, as is, sometimes, their absolute number. Christians in Syria are down from 20 per cent before the Second World War to fewer than 10 per cent (800,000). During the Lebanese Civil War, some 670,000 Christians were displaced as opposed to 160,000 Muslims. Lebanon always had a Christian majority, but no longer has, and this has

allowed the Shia to emerge as the majority community and its political organisations, such as Hezbollah, to try and capture the state and challenge traditional Maronite Christian dominance; Christians still represent some 35 per cent of the population.

Other areas have seen similar displacement:
• Some 1 million Christians have left their northern Iraqi mountain homelands in the last 50 years, some moving to Baghdad.

• Several hundred thousand Greek, Armenian and Syrian Christians left Egypt in the 1950s. Around 500,000 Copts have recently left, while 7-10 million remain.

• Since 1948 some 230,000 Christians have left the Holy Land. The Christian population of Jerusalem was 30,000 in 1948, dropping to 5,000 today.

• Fewer than 150,000 Christians are left in Iran, many having departed after the 1979 Islamic revolution.
Yet the vigour that believers bring to the region far outstrips their numerical importance.

The largest groupings of Christians in the Middle East are those belonging to the Oriental Orthodox Churches – Armenian, Coptic and Syrian – representing up to 70 per cent of the total Middle Eastern Christian population and who all have an Eastern Catholic sister Church, who form with the Maronites, Chaldeans and the Latins the second largest group in the region. The doctrinal position of these Churches is based on the teachings of the first three ecumenical councils: Nicaea (AD 325), Constantinople (AD 381) and Ephesus (AD 431), while they have traditionally rejected the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451). For the Orthodox and Catholic (and derived Reformed) traditions, the Council of Chalcedon had settled the matter over how best to describe the relationship between the divinity and the humanity in the incarnate Christ.

The Arab invasions and the rise of Islam in the seventh century effectively fossilised this division but, from the 1960s, these Churches began a process of rapprochement with both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Today the the Christological quarrels have been overcome, and nearly all the pre-Chalcedonian Churches recognise themselves to be in communion of faith, at least in this area, with Rome and Constantinople.

This led to a signing of the "Common Declarations of Faith" on the nature of the Incarnate Word by Pope John Paul II and the Syrian, Coptic and Armenian Orthodox Churches.

However, in terms of faith, it is not quite true to say that nothing separates or distinguishes them, for, beyond the Christological splits of the early centuries, division led to further areas of doctrinal divergence, each Church having followed its route apart from the others and not having subscribed to the new dogmas proclaimed by Councils following the break of unity.

Today, modern crises and contemporary ecumenism are beginning to bring down barriers. There have been agreements between these Churches that allow partial mutual participation in sacraments, formation of future priests and catechesis. While powerful, global ecumenical trends have influenced these reforms, so has large-scale emigration from the Middle East to Europe, the Americas and Australia.

Although this large-scale migration has had a negative impact on the life of the indigenous Christian Churches in the Middle East, there have at least been two good consequences: emigration to Western countries provided the possibility of publication without censorship, and brought the existence of these non-Chalcedonian Churches more into the awareness of the Western ones, thus providing an opportunity and incentive for theological dialogue. Other reasons for optimism are the Coptic revival and renaissance,

the increasing participation of the laity, monastic renewal and fervent piety.

But there are also profound anxieties for Christians in the Middle East: the impact of a reawakening of a militant Islam, and growing political marginalisation in modern nation states with complex and often exclusive national identities – Iranian, Israeli, Arab and Turkish.

Part of the cause is a particular outlook of Middle East Christians. They often choose individual success for their children, rather than hoping for the hypothetical social advance of the group. More urbanised and educated, and more open to the Western world, many Christians in the East enjoy a much higher social position than most Muslims. Their birth rate has dropped considerably at the very point where the Muslim birth rate is increasing and, given migration, the Christian communities have inevitably lost many of their most educated and younger members. The Churches thus not only lose part of their future but also the potential leadership that should be charting the communities' fortunes.

Then there is the gender imbalance. In some communities, more men than women leave, often leading Christian women to marry Muslim men. This further fractures the Christian population and diminishes it, with implications for property rights and the education of children. In Egypt, some 15,000 Christians have "converted" to Islam to obtain a divorce.

Given that Eastern Christians are mainly from the Arab world, their fate has been closely linked to the destiny of Arab nationalism. This seemed favourable to Arab Christians: Arab identity united Muslims and non-Muslims into a single group and the proclaimed ideal was secular. But Arab nationalism reflected the social developments which brought the small Muslim middle class to power and Arabist discourse invoked the umma, the community, appealing to a Muslim vocabulary and hence to an ideology that never abandoned its reference to Islam.

The ambiguities of this discourse and the practice of the new political elites, almost exclusively Muslim, were aggravated by the failure of Arab nationalism after the Six Day War in 1967.

In Egypt, the affirmation of state Islamism was soon reflected in successive constitutions under President Anwar Sadat, who sought Islamic legitimacy: the Islamic law, called "a source" of the 1971 Constitution, became "the main source" of the 1980 Constitution. Sadat went so far as to depose the Coptic Patriarch Shenouda III in September 1981, exiling him to a monastery in the Wadi Natrun.

Islamism in student associations, unions and the media came before the active Islamisation, originally by a tiny minority, of organisations, that were swift to take on the Copts. The waves of violence which began in the 1970s came to their first peak in 1981, before growing again since 1990-1992 in Middle Egypt: fires in churches or pharmacies run by Copts, and even sectarian murders, are one of the aspects among others of Islamist opposition to the regime.

At the same time, the Copts have almost disappeared from the Egyptian political scene: at the 1987 elections, they still had nine (out of 458) elected deputies, but none since. Copts appointed to parliament on party lists are few, which is surprising when the community had within its number a former United Nations Secretary General, Boutros Boutros Ghali. In the emerging political climate of Egypt, the Copts will be certain to mark its depth and meaning by their ability to participate and engage politically.

It is all too easy to be the bearer of bad news about Christianity in the Middle East. The last 100 years of their history has witnessed a profound series of crises from displacement by war, genocide and inter-religious conflict, to loss, emigration and exile.

Against this background, Christians have tried to resettle and build anew. They have been able to make a significant cultural, political and economic contribution to Middle Eastern society.

Some observers have suggested that there is a "Christian barometer" which provides the world with an accurate measurement of the political atmosphere in the Middle East. Progress towards freedom, particularly religious freedom, in the Middle East can be gauged by focusing on the status of the large Christian minorities.

Most are highly educated and multilingual and have studied and worked in Europe and North America where they also have a large diaspora. The theory goes that as the Middle East becomes more free and prosperous, linked to the West and hospitable to minorities and women, the higher the probability that the Christians will continue to live in and even return from abroad to countries like Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.

And should things get worse, if the Arab countries they live in are losing their commitment to political, economic and religious freedom, then even more of them would tend to emigrate from the Middle East.

It is difficult at this stage to discern which direction the Arab "street" will take following these recent upheavals in the body politic of the Middle East. As Louis Gardet, the great Thomist, influential Catholic scholar of Islam and follower of Charles de Foucauld, reminded Christians and Muslims many decades ago, there is a need to create a city "where the temporal remains charged with religious values", and to be seen to "participate in the same humanity."