

Having Faith in the Arab Spring?

Democracy, freedom and the religious communities of North Africa and the Middle East

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One of the great confusions of the day for our society and the world more generally is the great resurgence of religion that we see around the world, and no more so than during the so-called 'Arab Spring'. As we look to the Middle East, we see not just secular revolution, not just political upheaval, but religious turmoil.

I want to pose the question: 'Can we have faith in the Arab Spring?' I ask that both in the sense of 'can we see it as being a positive change within the MENA (Middle East & North Africa) region?' and also in the sense of 'can we have faith' – or more precisely – 'will religious communities in the Middle East and in North Africa be free to exercise their faith – in the new era?'

At the outset I want to make a few comments. Firstly, the term itself, the 'Arab Spring', is in some ways ill advised, not least because there are other peoples in the Middle East apart from Arabs. Moreover it is by no means clear that we can call it a 'spring'; indeed, recently in *The Tablet* Cardinal Koch, who is the German Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, made the comment 'I find it difficult to talk of an Arab Spring as I sometimes get the impression that it is more of an Islamist winter'.¹

Secondly, I would suggest that it is not a zero sum game. In other words, it is neither all bad nor is it all good. There is a tremendous diversity and complexity. It is always good when an evil dictatorship is overthrown and the voice of the people is heard. But the question comes: 'What will take its place and can the people move on from dictatorship?'

Thirdly, we need to avoid seeing the Arab Spring in adversarial terms: 'us' and 'them'. It is so easy to compare our very best with their very worst. We look at our own tradition, maybe our Christian tradition or our political tradition of democracy, and we take that as our highest ideal, and we compare it with the very worst of what we see of extremism, radicalism and violence in the MENA region, and say 'look at *them*, they're not as good as us.' But of course *we* – the 'West', 'Christians' or whoever – are by no means blameless, and sadly when we look at our own history, even the tradition that we might call 'Christian', it is less than ideal.

Fourthly, this is not a uniform phenomenon. The Arab Spring is a multi-faceted series of events. It is country-specific. Each country is undergoing a unique process albeit with factors in common. And finally, I want to stress how important it is to understand the background to the Arab Spring because it is very difficult to understand current events without understanding something of the history of the region, and the history of the religious communities – particularly the Christian communities which often act as what Anthony O'Mahony calls the 'barometer of the political atmosphere'.²

So can we have faith in the Arab Spring? Firstly, we need a picture of the great complexity and heterogeneity of the Middle East. There has been a population explosion. Including Turkey and Iran along with the Arabic-speaking countries there are now over 400 million people in the region, a fourfold increase in just 60 years. This has made for a very young population. In the United Arab Emirates 25 per cent of

the population are under the age of 15. And that is the smallest proportion of all the countries. The highest is in Yemen which has an under-15 proportion of about 50 per cent.

Often when we think of the MENA region we think of Arabs and maybe Sunni Islam. But the Arab population is by no means uniform. Particularly we hear about Sunnis and Shi'ites, and the tensions between them. Something like 35 to 40 per cent of the region's Muslims are Shi'ite (compared with less than 20% globally). The majority are Sunnis, and then there are also some other small groups of Muslims. There are maybe not quite as many denominations as within Christianity, but they are not far behind. We could mention the 'Ibadis and the Alawites, the Ismailis and the Druze and so on.

However, the Christian church also has a very long, even more complex history in this part of the world. Amongst the different church families of the Middle East the Oriental Orthodox churches form the largest grouping, encompassing something like 70% of the Christians of the region, including the Egyptian Coptic church, the Armenians and the Syrian Orthodox.

Then there are the Eastern Orthodox churches. These are the Greek Orthodox churches of the Middle East, including the three great patriarchs of Jerusalem, Antioch & Alexandria. And for each of the above churches there is a Catholic sister church, and so you get the Catholic Syrian church and the Greek Catholic church of the Middle East and so on. This also includes the Maronites. Then there are the Protestant churches – the Anglican and other Episcopalian churches and the non-conformist churches, evangelicals, many of which date back to the colonial period and the western missionary movement of that time. Finally, there are a few who have converted to Christianity from a Muslim background in more recent years, and who often face huge problems and opposition from their own communities.

Christians in decline

Despite the number of different churches there has been a huge decline in the Christian population of the Middle East both in actual numbers but also in percentage terms. 100 years ago, Christians formed about 11% of the population in the Middle East. Today it is around 3%. Lebanon has the highest percentage of Christians. Deliberately created as a state with a Christian majority by the French, only between 30 and 40 per cent are now Christian, overtaken by a Muslim majority split between Sunnis and Shi'ites. The largest number of Christians is in Egypt, around about 9 million Coptic Christians, some 10% of the population of Egypt. Up until recently the most stable Christian population was probably in Syria, where between 1 and 2 million Christians were living largely peacefully with their Muslim neighbours with a great deal of freedom. This has tragically been shattered by recent events.

I should also mention that there are obviously other faith communities in the Middle East, principally the Jewish community with a very, very long history both in the Jewish homeland of Israel itself, and before that amongst the Arab nations, and it was only after 1948 that many Jews from those Arab countries went to Israel. So three ancient faith communities have developed with so much shared history and yet also so many tensions and difficulties that we are all too aware of.

Many of you will be familiar with the Old Testament's version of Jewish history. Subsequently, in the early Christian era under Roman rule, there was a dispersion of

both the Jews and the Christians out of Jerusalem and into the surrounding areas of the Middle East, especially following the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD. It was Christianity which thrived over the next 250 years, despite persecution, and in a sense conquered the Roman Empire. It became the empire's official religion in the fourth century from which springs our western-centric view of Christian history. But it was the Middle East, including Syria and Turkey, which were the early homelands of Christianity. And it was the Asian churches that were the great early missionary communities. Philip Jenkins in his book *The Lost History of Christianity*³ points out the vibrancy and the missionary endeavour of some of those early churches. At that point Europe was something of a backwater.

However, in the seventh century, with the rise of Islam and the breaking out of the Arab armies from the Arabian peninsula, the eastern church quickly came under pressure. It was not necessarily a religious conquest in the early days. It was really a political conquest, and it is not always true that people were converted 'at the point of the sword' during those conquests. Very often the Christian and Jewish communities were allowed to continue to practise their own faith, but with certain restrictions on them. This was called *dhimmi* status, a word meaning 'protected'.

Christians had some rights to practise their faith but they were not allowed to build churches, they were not allowed to bear arms and they were not allowed to ride horses. They also had to pay a tax called the *jizya* for the privilege of being under this 'protected' status. So by today's standards – which were not practised anywhere at that time including within 'Christendom' – there were discrimination and restrictions, certainly in terms of people being able to choose which religion they wanted to follow. It was all well and good if Christians or Jews wanted to leave their communities and become Muslim; but for a Muslim to convert to the Christian faith was punishable by death under the *shar'ia*, the code of life for Muslims. In fact, death for apostasy is still inscribed in the *shar'ia*. Many Muslims are uncomfortable with this but in 2010 the Pew Forum did a poll of people in different Middle Eastern countries and found that in Egypt 84% of Muslims still feel that the death penalty is appropriate for apostates.⁴ So the church came under great pressure during the centuries of what we might call Islamic imperialism or colonialism. There was a great social pressure on Christians to convert. Many chose to become Muslims because otherwise it was very difficult to advance economically and socially. So the church in these lands began to decline over those centuries. But then there came a new phase. Having gone through what we call the Islamic Golden Age, where the Islamic civilisation had been so successful in science, medicine, astronomy and mathematics, at a time when Europe was lagging behind, we come to a quite different period of Western colonisation. The Enlightenment was followed by the Industrial Revolution; western powers began to colonise much of the MENA region and for the Muslims this created a great dilemma.

Two responses by Muslims

To this point Islam's success had been a sign of God's favour. And so the question arose of how Allah could allow this to happen if Islam were the true religion? How could Muslims come under the power of the 'infidel'? There were two broad answers to that question.

- One was: 'We have slipped behind and we must modernise. We must emulate

the western powers. We must improve our education, our systems of government and so on’.

- The other was: ‘We have failed to practise our religion properly. Allah is displeased with us. We have to return to the true practice of Islam’. This second response led to a resurgence of religious practice.

One example of this type of response came from the group we call Salafis. The *salaf* were the early generations – Muhammad and the three generations after him. So when you hear the word Salafi, it means people who want to go back to what they consider to be the pure practice of Islam. It does not necessarily mean to say they are violent. There are Salafis that would shun violence and some that would espouse violence. Very often, however, they do have an interpretation of Islamic belief and practice that is quite detrimental to minorities within the community.

We still see these two trends amongst Muslims around the world today. This is a simplistic caricature but it provides the background to the developments we are seeing in the Arab Spring today. At the beginning of the twentieth century the West was the dominant colonial power, while Muslims were struggling with their perceived weakness and there was even a question mark over whether Islam would survive at all. But after World War 2 things began to change. Independence coincided with the discovery of oil; if you are an Arab Muslim wondering why you have been abandoned by Allah and then you suddenly discover that you are sitting on a very, very large lake of oil, your response is *‘ilhamdullillah* – Praise God! – this is clearly Allah’s provision for restoring the fortunes of Islam’. And so we saw a change of fortunes from the middle part of the last century: in particular, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which despite being a Shi’ite revolution became a model and inspiration for many Sunni Muslims.

Even earlier in the early 20th century there had been renewed difficulties, leading to persecution, for many of the Christian communities of the Middle East. In 1915 something like 1 to 1.5 million Armenian Christians were killed by the Ottoman Empire, or what we would now call Turkey. There was also a pre-war massacre of Assyrian Christians in northern Iraq. As Philip Jenkins puts it: “From the First World War onwards Christian communities were systematically eliminated across the Muslim world and the Armenian horrors of 1915 are only the most glaring of a series of such atrocities that reach their peak between 1915 and 1925.’

So even before the recent resurgence of political Islam the Christian communities of the Middle East were being eroded. This was not only through violence. Christian communities were better educated and they invested more in education. As tends to happen, that led to lower birth rates amongst Christian communities and so the Christian percentage of the population fell because of lower birth rates at a time when the Muslim birth rate was high. It also led to increased emigration, because if you are more educated, if you have more social and cultural opportunities, then you have the opportunity to emigrate, and many Middle Eastern Christians came to the West during the course of the last century.

For those that remained there was a lack of state or political protection. One of the only viable political vehicles that Christian communities in the Middle East could join during those years, particularly in the post-war period, was the Arab nationalist, or *Baathist*, movement. This was an ethnic *Arab* nationalist movement, not an Islamic

movement, and so it was open to both Muslims and Christians. Indeed some of the political thinkers and founders of the *Baathist* parties were Christian Arabs, like Michel Aflaq. However, these parties came to be dominated by strong dictators and also lost a lot of credibility in the humiliating defeat of the Arab nations by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War. The Palestinian struggle was then hijacked by an often-violent Islamist agenda, through the rise of factions like *Hamas*, *Hizbollah* and *Islamic Jihad*. Christians lost something of their political voice.

At the same time the West was also meddling in the Middle East. Much of its behaviour has undermined its calls for democracy and human rights, and led to an increasingly cynical response by Arabs, who accuse the West of hypocrisy. These views were seemingly affirmed when the West supported the suspension of democracy in Algeria in the early 1990s and refused to recognise Hamas' victory at the ballot box in 2006.

It is also the case that the dictators who have been ejected by the Arab Spring were all supported to some extent by western powers which valued economic stability and security over freedom and rights. This too has led Arabs to be cynical about western intentions for the Middle East. All of which has made it extremely difficult for many of the Christian communities of the Middle East; because in Arab Muslim thinking there is often no distinction between being 'Western' and being 'Christian'. They see the historic Christian communities of the Middle East as potential fifth columnists, who must be on the side of the western powers.

The West and the Arab Spring

These trends take us back to the Arab Spring. It is important to remember that these recent events have not been western-led. The western powers were extremely reluctant to acknowledge or to support the Arab Spring, certainly in the early days. Rather, the recent revolutions and demonstrations should be seen as the next phase in the post-war independence movement. Independence saw certain types of government coming to power – Arab nationalist (Baathist), socialist, monarchical – all of which proved to be corrupt and self-serving in different ways. As we have seen, in the interests of stability and security they were supported and upheld by the West because it achieved the West's own ends. We are now seeing a new phase where the people, the grass roots, are rejecting those forms of government and are looking for their own new forms of government.

Nobody saw the Arab Spring coming. More than anything else it started as a reaction to economic conditions, anger at corruption and protest at a lack of political freedoms. It started mainly with secular young people. Those from our first category of Muslims who, whilst wanting to maintain their faith identity, also want to modernise and emulate some of what they see in the West. In the early days the Islamists did not join the revolutions. They came in some days later and saw the unrest as an opportunity to introduce an Islamist agenda often with a more prominent role for *shari'a* as an aim. This has been the case in Tunisia where it was underemployed young people, who felt disenfranchised, who started the protests. Very quickly the movement was joined by the middle class, with access to social networking technology enabling the rapid mobilisation of large numbers of people. In a matter of days Ben Ali, the dictator of many years, had fled the country.

Tunisia was quickly followed by Egypt. But the revolution there has been different

in character. Egypt has a much larger working class that has for many years suffered political and economic oppression, and the group that had been the political opposition and had been providing the education and the welfare during that

period was the Muslim Brotherhood. Today we call the Muslim Brothers Islamists – a rather loose term that usually means ‘politically motivated Muslims’. During the Mubarak era they were banned but were highly organised and worked at the grass roots level providing for the



population. This explains why now, post-revolution, the people have looked to them as the only organised political alternative which was helping them during the hard years. In contrast the more liberal and secular parties were not nearly so organised and did badly in the post-revolution election. Egyptian Christians, however, supported the more liberal candidates and do not have any influence amongst the Muslim Brotherhood. They thus feel vulnerable.

The Libyan revolution was much more tribal, being about the historical tension between the east and west of the country. Very quickly it became a global conflict as not only NATO got involved, but also the Gulf States, which poured huge amounts of finance into Libya – mainly to Islamist militia groups. Other countries have had different experiences again. Some of the rulers, in Morocco and Jordan, for example, have largely placated the people for the moment. But in Algeria the few small demonstrations were overwhelmingly snuffed out by the security forces. Other countries have been able to buy their way out: the oil-rich Gulf States have largely thrown money at the people, raising salaries and providing better jobs.

Finally, we come to Syria, where we see the full-blown implications of the faultlines between religious communities in the Middle East. It has become about Shi’ite and Sunni. The majority of the Syrian population is Sunni Muslim. But the ruling party is largely drawn from the minority Alawites – a Muslim sect related to the Shia’a, which helps to explain why they receive support from Iran, from Hizbollah and more recently from Iraq. The Syrian rebels are largely Sunnis and alongside them are increasing numbers of Islamist fighters from other countries in the region and even from here in the UK.

When the western powers went into Iraq in the Second Gulf War they completely upset the balance between Sunni and Shi’ites in the Middle East. Up until that point Iraq, despite having a Shi’ite majority, had been governed by a minority Sunni government. Now there is a Shi’ite government which, of course, is a lot closer to Iran. This has very much concerned Saudi Arabia – one of the big Sunni powers in the region – which has come down very heavily on its own Shi’ite population; the Saudis also supported the minority Sunni ruling elite of Bahrain against a Shi’ite rebellion a couple of years ago.

So now we are seeing that played out again in Syria, where a type of Shi'ite minority government, dominated by Alawites, is in danger of being overthrown by a Sunni majority. The Christians are caught in the middle and have been ambivalent about which side to support; the Alawite minority had been protecting Christian rights. Christians are very afraid of a Sunni backlash; there are understandable concerns that, with the amounts of money coming in from the Gulf, a new Sunni regime might take on an Islamist nature.

So in all of these countries we have seen an exodus of Christians. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Christians have left since the Second Gulf War. Again they were caught both between Sunni and Shi'ite sects and also between Muslims and the West. In the twelve months after the Egyptian revolution it is reckoned that 100,000 Coptic Christians left Egypt. Something like half a million have left in the last 10 years. In the same way we are seeing many Syrian Christians fleeing Syria. We are witnessing a tragic attrition of the Christian communities of the Middle East.

It is not all bad news! We might think of Tahrir Square in Cairo in the early days of the revolution where we saw Christians and Muslims demonstrating together, holding up the cross and the Qur'an. Think also of Tunisia where there were also demonstrations after the revolution declaring 'we are Muslims, we are Christians, we are Jews, we are all Tunisians'. There was a TV program made not long after the revolution, and it featured Tunisian Christians worshipping. These are Tunisian Christians from a Muslim background.

And yet there are still those disturbing stories we have seen: pictures from Egypt of Coptic churches being burned by Islamist mobs; President Morsi snubbing the new Coptic Pope and not attending his installation; the kidnapping of Christian women. The Anglican Bishop of Cairo recently said 'Salafists treat us like *dhimmis* – second class citizens.

Conclusion

The 'Arab Spring' is a momentous series of events. We do not yet know where it is going to end. At times we might be tempted to see these developments as being very negative, but there are also some hopeful signs. Each country has its own story. We have to be active in offering support for religious freedom, particularly encouraging the Christian and other minority communities of the Middle East, protesting where we see oppression and persecution. But otherwise we need to wait before passing judgement. As somebody said when they were asked what they thought of the Protestant reformation, they said, 'it is still too soon to say'!

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Notes

- 1 PONGRATZ-LIPPITT, C. Arab world entering Islamist winter. The Tablet, February 2nd, 2013.
- 2 O'MAHONY, A. A vital presence. The Tablet, February 5th, 2011.
- 3 JENKINS, P. (2009) The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia--and How It Died, HarperOne.
- 4 PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE (2010) Muslim Publics Divided on Hamas and Hezbollah: most embrace a role for Islam in politics. p14. cf Jordan 86%, Pakistan 76%, Indonesia 30%, Lebanon 6%, Turkey 5%