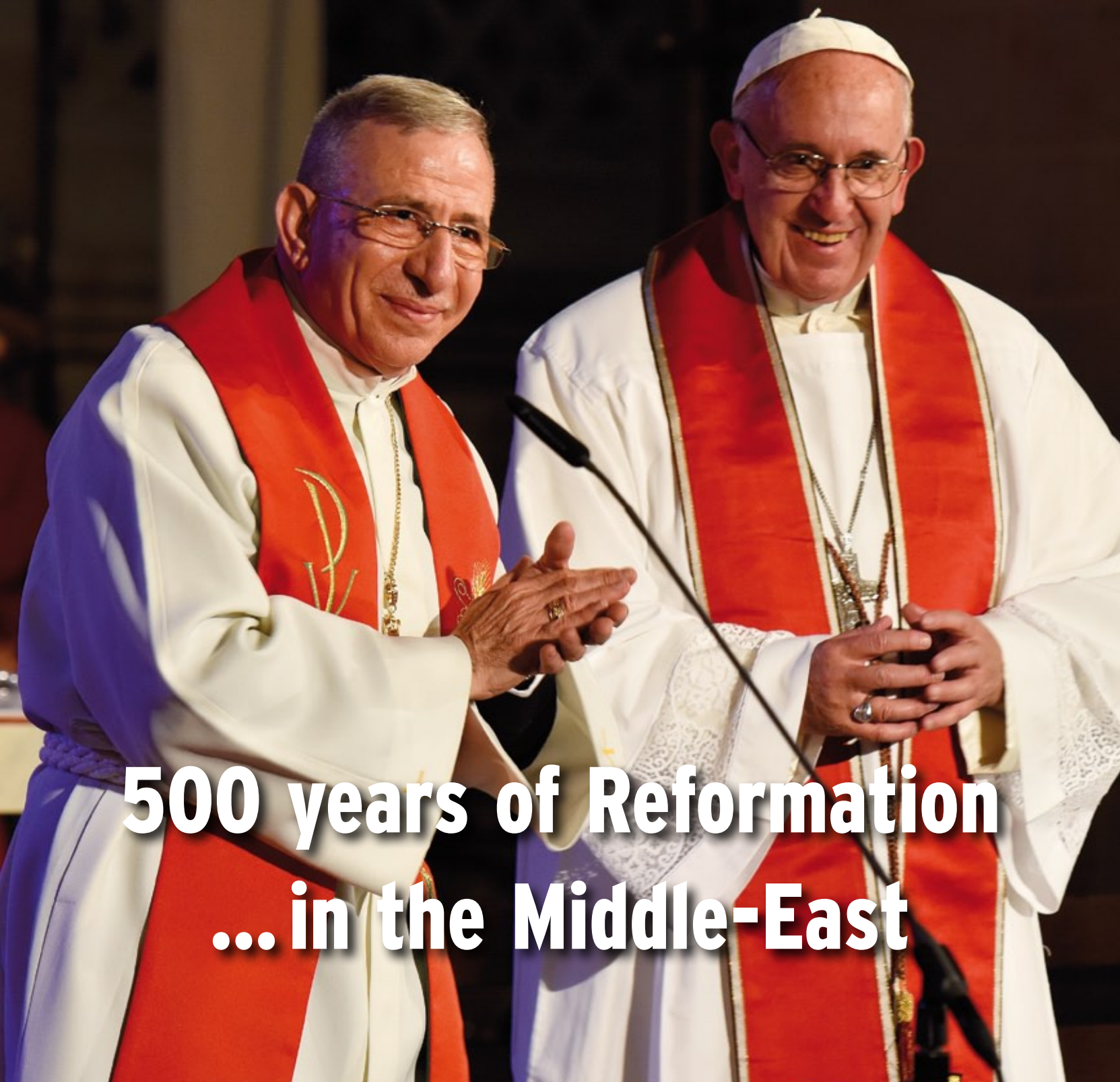


3rd of December 2017  
Golden Rule Day

N°106 / DECEMBER 2017 / 4 €



**500 years of Reformation  
...in the Middle-East**



## Sunday of the Golden Rule

The Second Sunday in Advent December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017

«So, whatever you wish that others would do to you,  
do it yourself for them!»

Matthew 7-12



### Eastern Evangelicals

L=Lebanon | S=Syria | Ir=Iran | I=Iraq | E=Egypt  
T=Tunisia | A=Algeria | P=Palestine | K=Kuwait

## « After the Reformation, we, Eastern people, would like to teach you our beloved neighbors' Islam... »

by Munib Younan, Lutheran Palestinian Bishop in Jerusalem

What is the role of the Reformation movement in the Middle East today? For me, I wonder if the question is: What role can Arab Christian Evangelicals play in the rest of the world today? As Europe and the USA are dealing with a growing religious and ethnic diversity in their lands, we Arab Christians have much to offer.

We have lived side-by-side with Muslims for 1,400 years. We have much to share about what it means to stand firm in one's own identity and at the same time to embrace diversity and difference. We have much to share about what it means to witness to the love of Jesus Christ in a multi-religious environment. Two hundred years after the Reformation came from Europe to our region, we would love to now teach Western countries about the Islam we know, and the Muslims we know not radicals or extremists, but our beloved neighbors and friends.

Embracing diversity, and protecting the human rights of all people, is a challenge not only in the Middle East but across the world today. When we speak of the importance of interfaith dialogue with Muslims and Jews, we



must remember that we do not «do interfaith» simply as an intellectual exercise. We seek wisdom and mutual understanding because it is vital to the future of our planet. In this time when extremists are attempting to hijack all of our religions, it is essential that we find where we share the common values of justice, peace, reconciliation, and living together. It is essential that we combat any kind of hatred, whether it be anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, or xenophobia. This has been a primary commitment of the Evangelical churches in the Middle East, and will continue to be in the future.

The Reformation movement has been a blessing for us in the Middle East. It is clear that the Reformation did not end when the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century passed away. Here in the Middle East, we are witnesses to the truth that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church is always reforming (*ecclesia semper reformanda*). The Holy Spirit continues to work in us today, molding us, strengthening us, transforming us, and sending us out to share the freshness of the Gospel of love with every human being. ■

M.Y.

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**Levant editorial Contributors:** Munib Yunan (Jerusalem), George Sabra (Beirut), Mitri Raheb (Bethléem), Rima Nasrallah (Beirut), Marion Heyl (France), Andra Zaki (Cairo), Michael Schlick (Cairo), Pierre Lacoste (Beirut), René Léonian (Yerevan) P. Akaki chelidze (Tbilisi), B'Chara Moussa-Oghli(Aleppo)  
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## Evangelical Reformation in the Middle-East

# Present Situation and Future Outlook

**By George Sabra**

*President of the Near East School of Theology, Beirut, Lebanon (NEST)*

2017 MARKS THE 500<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION. IT IS AN OCCASION TO RECALL THE ACHIEVEMENTS AND RECORD OF A MAJOR EVENT THAT CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE MODERN WORLD, AND AN OPPORTUNITY TO DISCERN THE MEANING AND ROLE OF THE REFORMATION FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS ALSO. IN THE MIDDLE EAST, THE PRESENCE OF THE REFORMATION IS APPROXIMATELY TWO HUNDRED YEARS OLD. WHAT PRECISELY WAS THE « REFORMATION » THAT REACHED THE NEAR EAST THREE CENTURIES AFTER THE EUROPEAN REFORMATION ?



« The Evangelicals in the Middle-East? A small minority within a larger Christian one »: Temple worship, Alexandria, Egypt: students of Senghor University, Alexandria.

### Identity and character of the Protestants at their arrival in the Middle East

The Reformation that came to these lands was predominantly and primarily a version of the European Reformation that had been filtered through, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century New England Protestant revivalist and pietist movement. Reformation that arose in the Middle East and its perception by the local people who eventually adopted it. This could be summarized in the following four points :

1. To be Protestant or Evangelical (the terms are synonymous) was at first, to be a person who had undergone a religious conversion, and whose life centered around the daily reading and appropriation of the Bible. You were «reformed» if your personal life exhibited renewal in accordance with the teachings of the Bible.
2. Doctrines, creeds and theology were not especially central, and not much time was expended on them. As generally acknowledged, pietism and evangelistic forms of Christianity do not pay much attention to doctrines and theology. «We have no creed but the Bible».
3. Confessionalism, consequently, was very weak.
4. In the second half of the nineteenth century, being Protestant acquired a novel and different meaning for people. You were «reformed» and Protestant if you were enlightened and rational, and viewed the essence of Christianity in terms of values, moral conduct and a new life, rather than in supernatural doctrines and rituals. This

is an identity and a self-understanding that still exists in churches and in society. It has been called «cultural Protestantism».

What is the situation of the « Reformation » in our lands today ?

### The present state of the « Reformation » or Evangelical presence in this region

1. No Protestant or Evangelical church in any Middle Eastern country claims that even 1 % of its population is Protestant. But numbers are never the primary indication of vitality, value or truth.
2. The Reformation churches are a small minority (500 000) within a larger Christian one (15 millions) in the Middle East.
3. The Reformation churches are strongly affected by emigration. Protestants, with their traditionally Western-oriented upbringing, are more willing emigrants than others.
4. Churches and groups deriving from the Reformation are a tiny minority that is split into tens of churches, groups and sects. The decision of some Evangelical churches to be committed to the ecumenical movement has caused a further rift.
5. Older eastern churches accuse them of practicing proselytism, the stealing of sheep from other Christian folds to the Evangelical one, while, in truth, it is the non-ecumenical Evangelicals who are practicing this, not the mainline ecumenical Protestant churches.
6. This strong connection with the West provided them with the means and the institutions to play a religious, cultural and social role in societies that far exceeded their actual size and numbers or local capacities. Many ask : are we western or eastern ? Are we a foreign body in the East ? Ever since the establishment of the State of Israel by the West and its maintenance by Western will and material support, Protestant western connections have become a source of embarrassment and a reason for suspicion by others.
7. The Reformation churches and Christians here live in the larger world of Islam. Today, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, a militant and intolerant face to Islam exists that Protestants had not encountered previously. The situation has become more difficult, and some see no future for them here, and so they emigrate.
8. Protestants lived in the conflicts of the Middle-East. The conflict with Israel has affected Christians. Certain western Evangelical churches and groups espouse bibli-



« The Protestant présence in the Middle-East completes the ecumenical scene » Armenian Protestant Church Saint John in Tehran, Iran : the ordination of Rev. Michel Aghamalian in the presence of an ecumenical delegation.

cal interpretations that make them pro-Zionist. the Sunni-Shi'ite struggle endangers Christians - including the Protestants, of course - who are caught in between.

9. Protestants live in societies where they become Protestant by birth. These only sociological Protestants, are the responsibility of the churches in many civil and religious affairs. Thus, Protestant «churches» have to be more than «communities of believers in Jesus Christ» – a very strange and un-Evangelical understanding of the church and faith!

10. The Evangelical spiritual heritage in the region has raised generations of Protestants on the belief that the public sphere, especially the political, is strictly to be separated from the sphere of faith and the gospel. This was neither the original impulse of the Protestant Reformation nor the only possible understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Some Protestant churches in certain countries have allied themselves with repressive regimes that are currently being challenged or have been overthrown (Iraq, Egypt, Syria). This makes Protestant churches focus almost exclusively on survival, a questionable position, to put it mildly, in light of the gospel.

11. Protestant legacy in Middle Eastern societies in the realms of education, social service, health services, intellectual renaissance, education of women, etc., is a source of pride, but what do they have to offer in the present ? There are no longer areas where Evangelical churches are alone or are better qualified than others. ●●●



«The Eastern Protestantism contributes to the advancement of women in the Church and in the society». Worship at the temple of the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon Church, in Saïda, Lebanon.



## The future role of Middle Eastern Protestants

What is the message of the Reformation churches in the Middle East in the third millennium? To proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in a specific context from three basic contributions:

1. Protestant presence in the Middle East is essential and completes the ecumenical scene between Catholics and Orthodox.
2. Protestant presence and witness in the Middle East provides a bridge between East and West. Protestants in this region of the world played a pivotal role in mediating the cultural, theological and spiritual west to the east, and have, in turn, translated and interpreted the Christian east to the West.
3. The message of the Protestant presence and witness is the witness to, and the embodiment of, the prophetic dimension of Christianity in this part of the world.

There are two religious ways. One way adopts sacramental, sacerdotal and cultic forms. The second stream rejects all enclosing of the divine reality and attack excessive ritualism.

The traditional Orthodox and Catholic forms of Christianity are known for their embodiment of the first way. The Protestant Reformation understands itself as a revival or continuation of the prophetic dimension and should be able to embody and testify it. For the Protestants this is it is part of their identity!

The prophetic role is twofold: internally and externally. On one hand, the main tenets of the Reformation should be heeded and implemented repeatedly in the Protestant/Evangelical churches in the Middle East before being proclaimed to others. Protestants need to ask themselves whether they have not betrayed *solus Christus* (by paying tribute to political dictators), *sola gratia* and *sola fide* (their spirituality and church practices and structures?) as well as the *sola scriptura* and the priesthood of all believers. The witness of these principles must be accom-

plished in love, respect and profound commitment to the ecumenical spirit.

On another hand, Protestants have to identify the contextual needs and challenges of Middle Eastern societies and discern how to play a spearheading role. The greatest threat in the Middle Eastern societies is the rise of religious fundamentalism. Dismantling religious extremism is an undertaking that serves all peoples in the Middle East!

## Dismantling religious extremism

Protestants churches could contribute in a constructive manner in at least two significant areas. First, secularizing society. secularization is the refusal to deify any system of thought or human institution. The western countries that implemented secularization understood it as preventing the state from interfering in church or religious affairs. It allows peaceful competition between religions and churches in a society that secured the individual's freedom of conscience and belief. This occurs also with Islamic institutions who are increasingly convinced that religion and political power ought not to be identified.

Second, promoting the role of women in the church and society. Protestants established the first school for girls in Beirut in 1835. Protestants were pioneers! Their evangelical history, theology of Christian freedom, signify that they are prepared to play a role concerning women's issues in society and in other churches. Traditional Eastern Christians stifling traditionalism prevents ecumenical dialogue on the subject of women's access to full ministry. The. Protestants have a mission no one else can fulfil. «Educate women to defeat fundamentalism» was the call made by the Chairman of the Confederation of Moroccan Communities in Italy\*. This request expresses a rightful and indispensable idea that applies to fundamentalism wherever it exists – in Judaism, Christianity, or Islam.

## A hope

My hope is that all Protestant church leaders, all who are in a position of responsibility and as many believers as possible, realize that their contribution to the cause of the gospel should be one that serves Christian (not just Protestant) presence and witness in this part of the world. This is performed by cooperating with, serving and prophetically addressing and challenging others, always with the aim of strengthening our common witness to the gospel of love and the ushering in of the kingdom of God. ■

G.S.

With the kind partnership of *Proche-Orient chrétien*, St Joseph University's ecumenical revue, Beirut

\* Educate Women to Defeat Fundamentalism: Interview with President of the Confederation of Moroccan Communities in Italy", ZENIT, Zenitenglish@Zenit.org (29 September 2006).

500 years of Reformation :

# The Role of Protestant Christians in the Middle East Today

By Bishop Dr. Munib Younan

Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land  
President Emeritus, Lutheran World Federation<sup>1</sup>

A NUMERICAL MINORITY, THE PROTESTANTS IN THE MIDDLE-EAST HAVE A FIVEFOLD IMPACT ON CULTURE AND SOCIETY THAT FAR EXCEEDS THEIR STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE.

## Translation of the Bible

One of the lasting contributions for which Luther has been honored is the translation of the Bible into the vernacular language. In the Middle East, this is also a memorable contribution of the Evangelical movement. The most popular modern translation of the Bible into Arabic was undertaken by the Syrian Mission and the American Bible Society and completed in 1864. The original text is preserved in the library at the Near East School of Theology (NEST<sup>2</sup>) in Beirut. This landmark translation has been accepted by the Orthodox and Protestant churches, and is still widely in use today.

## Commitment to Education

In the Middle East, Evangelical Christians are well-known for a commitment to education. The American University in Cairo and the American University in Beirut were both founded through Evangelical mission efforts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These schools have had an impact far beyond academia, however. They brought many intellectuals and others into the spirit of the Evangelical. At a moment of enlightenment in the Arab world, these communities of learning became integral to the development of a new nationalism. This new nationalism proclaimed that religion belongs to God, but land must belong to all citizens equally. Many great Arab leaders were formed in these schools, no doubt informed by the core values of the Reformation.



«gender equality: the first two Arab women to be ordained in 2017» Najla Kasab, one of the two pastors ordained by the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon.

It is true that some of our forbearers came to this region for conversion purposes, and schools were initially one tool toward those purposes. These mission goals have changed, but the goal of providing quality education has remained.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land, we operate four excellent schools. We prepare students from kindergarten through high school. In our Vocational Training Center, we help students achieve hands-on skills for gainful employment. Christian and Muslim students study side by side. The education provided is infused with a strong Evangelical ethos. We firmly believe that the best opportunity for a peaceful future in the Arab world is for all students to be converted – not from one religion to another, but from extremism to moderation, and from division to living together.

## Gender justice

Our church, the ELCJHL, recently adopted a new constitution for family issues. This constitution guarantees gender justice in matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption. This is the first ecclesiastical constitution in the whole Middle East to make such changes toward the goal of gender justice<sup>3</sup>. Evangelicals have always been the vanguards in the Arab world witnessing to God's love in new and bold ways<sup>4</sup>. ●●●

<sup>1</sup> See Munib Younan's portrait page 17.

<sup>2</sup> N.E.S.T. : Faculty of Protestant Theology.

<sup>3</sup> In most Arab countries, Private law depends on religious communities (translator's note).

<sup>4</sup> See page 15-16 FMEEC commitment in this matter (Marion Heyl)





Photo left  
«It was the Evangelical movement, in fact, which brought ecumenism to the Middle East.» The Apostolic Nuncio in Lebanon, Bishop Gabrielle Caccia invited at FMEEC conference in 2016 (see p15-16) in Beirut. He is talking with Anie Boudjikianian, from Lebanon, president of ACO-Fellowship.



Photo right  
«interfaith dialogue: Protestants are for an equality that includes diversity» Syrian pastor Rev B'Chara Moussa Oghli discussing with the Cheikh Mammoud, the young sufi from Historical Ottoman mosque Al-Adiliyé, Aleppo.

●●● Thanks be to God, the first two Arab Christian women serving in the Middle East were ordained in 2017. They were both from the Presbyterian Church in Syria and Lebanon. My church, the ELCJHL, will be ordaining our first woman pastor within the next four years.

### Ecumenism

The churches of the Evangelical movement - Reformed, Lutherans, and Anglicans - are today an integral part of the Christian community in the Middle East. Our role is first and foremost to advance the message of the Gospel of love in our societies. In this way, the role of the Evangelical churches in the Middle East today is no different from that of our founding fathers.

However, in a different context comes a different focus. Our Christian witness should not be weakened by political turmoil or by wars or by persecution. Even in these difficult times, we find comfort and strength in the Scriptures, which remind us: «We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.» (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)

In order for us to withstand the challenges. Evangelical Christians must continue in the commitment to strengthening ecumenical relationships in the Middle East. They showed the way in creating FMEEC and writing Amman<sup>5</sup> Declaration.

It was the Evangelical movement, in fact, which brought ecumenism to the Middle East. The Middle East Council of Churches (MECC<sup>6</sup>) is considered to be born out of the Evangelical movement. The Oriental Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox churches

joined us first, and we give thanks that the Catholics have joined us in the 1990's.

We do not seek to just survive in the Middle East. We seek to thrive and to be bold witnesses to the Gospel of love. Our goal is not to preserve church buildings, but to advance the Gospel causes of peace, justice, equality, reconciliation, and an understanding that human diversity is a gift from God.

### Fostering interfaith relationships

Recently I attended meetings of Muslim leaders in Marrakesh and at Al Azzhar<sup>7</sup> University, on the theme of citizenship. The message I brought was that we are not a minority or dhimma (an Arabic Muslim term meaning «protected people») in the Arab world. We Arab Christians are an integral part of our society. Furthermore, what happens to our Muslim neighbors happens also to us.

call for equal citizenship with equal rights and equal responsibilities in our countries. We stand for an equality which embraces diversity. Our presence in the region adds constructively to this diversity. Evangelical Christians can influence and affect the future of the Middle East.

Arab and Middle Eastern Christians have welcomed warmly the document which resulted from the February 2017 Al Azzhar conference, which affirmed that in the Middle East there are no «minorities.»

We give thanks for the strong voices of our Muslim neighbors who agree that we should all enjoy equal citizenship, and that we can continue to play an important role in our societies. ■

M.Y.

<sup>5</sup> See page 15-16 Marion Heyl's article

<sup>6</sup> Middle-East Council of Churches

<sup>7</sup> Great Sunnite University of Arab world, Cairo, Egypt.

## In Palestine with Martin Luther

# «Till we have a fair peace...»

MITRI RAHEB IS A LUTHERAN PASTOR AND ARAB CHRISTIAN, THE FOUNDER OF THE INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF BETHLEHEM AND ONE OF FMEEC LEADERS, THE FEDERATION OF MIDDLE EAST EVANGELICAL CHURCHES. HE ANALYSES LUTHER'S INFLUENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, HIS ACCUSATIONS OF ANTI-SEMITISM AND, THE CHANCES OF AN ISLAMIC REFORMATION

**In 2006, you created an Arabic-language website about Luther: *Luther in Arabic.org* What were your intentions - who were you aiming to reach?**

We wanted to provide information about the Lutheran Church to a wider public in Palestine, particularly the younger generation. There are several Lutheran schools in the West Bank and we also observe the Protestant holidays. A lot of young people have the day off on Reformation Day, but they don't know why.

**How has the presence of Protestants in the Middle East developed?**

The history of the Evangelical Church here in the Holy Land began in 1841. Prussia and England originally wanted to found a joint Lutheran-Anglican Church in the Holy Land. That worked at first, but political and theological differences meant they parted ways in 1886. Today, around 10% of Christians in Palestine are Lutherans, though Christians in total make up only around two percent of the Palestinian population. We are a tiny minority of 3000 or so believers. Despite being just a small section of the population, the Lutherans have a relatively large cultural influence.

**What's your assessment of that?**

In the West Bank, we have a total of five schools and a Lutheran university, the Dar Al Kalima in Bethlehem. We also run the Ad-Dar Cultural and Conference Center which is part of the Diyar Consortium. Education work has always been very important for Lutherans in the Holy Land. We founded the first schools to exist in this country, of which many leading Palestinian politicians are former pupils.



Mitri Raheb, Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem.

**How have the tenets of Lutheranism been adopted here? What differences are there compared with Germany - where you studied - and with Europe?**

The Lutheran Church did pioneering work in Palestine: from the very beginning the liturgy was read in Arabic. All the Christian denominations prayed in foreign languages: the Catholics in Latin, the Orthodox Church in Greek, the Syrians in Aramaic and the Armenians in Armenian. Admittedly the Melkites did speak a mixture of Arabic and Greek. The Lutherans, however, were also the first to introduce a sermon during a Christian service. Then the question arose as to whether the congregation should discuss the sermon. The Lutherans also replaced some of the rituals, like incense, the sometimes excessive adoration of the Virgin Mary and the belief in spirits, with what we call a «thinking faith». This is still perhaps the most important hallmark of Lutheran spirituality in the Holy Land, this thinking faith, far removed from anything that doesn't stand up to reason.

**How did the traditional Christian communities in Palestine react to the Lutherans?**

To start with, it was a battle: the Protestants placed a lot of emphasis on their anti-Catholic and anti-Orthodox feeling; the other side was extremely anti-Lutheran. Devotion to the Bible has always been very important to the Protestants. That's why they founded schools, so that people could learn to read the Bible. The Evangelical Christians were famous here for knowing the ●●●



●●● Bible much better than the long-established Orthodox priests, some of whom had never read the Bible in their lives.

**With relation to Islam, people keep suggesting that Islam needs an Enlightenment and a kind of Luther. Some Muslim critics of religion or religious reformists have already been descri-**

The Lutheran Church in the old city of Bethlehem.



**bed as «The Luther of Islam». You yourself, Mr Raheb, are a member of a minority within a Christian minority, in a society shaped by Islam. The majority of Bethlehem's population is Muslim. What do you think of the idea of an «Islamic Luther»?**

I follow these debates with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I think it's risky to say that the whole of world history should follow the European model. That is one of our fundamental problems, you know, this Western superiority complex. But on the other hand, I think the claim is justified. The Islamic world needs someone like Luther, who questions God - in God's name. Luther worked on the principle that he had revealed an original understanding of God, independent of external factors. I think that, in part, this is exactly what the Islamic world is struggling with. It's about creating a new understanding of religion, an Islam that isn't simply reduced to laws and rules.

**Is there a chance of an Islamic Reformation?**

Absolutely and I can think of a few Islamic philosophers whose thinking tends in that direction. But we shouldn't just look at individuals; we should look at the historical context. In a sense, Luther appeared at the right time, it was a kind of Kairos moment. Germany and Europe were in a state of flux and humanism, the sciences, the political situation, the printing press – all these things contributed to the success of his ideas. Without the right political context, Luther would just have been a monk with big ideas but no impact. This perfect moment hasn't yet arrived in the Arab Islamic world. The time is not yet quite ripe.

**Martin Luther sometimes adopted anti-Jewish positions, for which he gave theological justifications. As a Lutheran in the Israeli-Palestinian context, what does it mean to engage critically with the anti-Judaism in Luther's texts?**

It means that you don't make your mark as a Christian by speaking ill of others. We have to expose anti-Judaism, just like any form of Islamophobia or xenophobia. You have to recognize that there are divisions within the monotheistic religions as well as between Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Religious plurality is essential today and we should embrace diversity. Anti-Judaism is not the only kind of religiously motivated hatred. There are also Evangelicals who interpret the Holy Scripture as anti-Palestinian. They evoke God as «the God of Israel», to justify war against the



Lutheran baptism in Bethlehem.



Kindergarten, in the Lutheran parish in Bethlehem.

Palestinians. They turn the Good News (evangelium) into bad news for us, as Palestinians. That's not acceptable either and we have to stand up against it.

**You've been accused of anti-Semitism because of your theology of Palestinian liberation. How do you deal with this kind of accusation?**

These days anti-Semitism is used as a charge to halt any criticism of Israel. People who don't want to enter into a debate about the Israeli occupation try to

silence critics with these accusations. But there is only one lesson we can take from Auschwitz: we must have the courage to call the oppression of a people by its name and not immediately take the side of an unjust state. That's why I'll keep talking, until we have a fair peace. ■

Interview conducted by  
**MARTINA SABRA**

Independent journalist, Maghreb, Middle East

## Lutherans in Palestine

Rev. Mitri Raheb's Church is primarily known for the warmth of its hospitality: The church welcomes, in Bethlehem and in the Holy Land, visitors and pilgrims from the whole world.

This Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and in the Holy Land (ELCJHL) took root in the 19e century, when German and English missionaries came and helped the Christians, witnessed their faith and taught the local populations. Ten years later in 1851, a hospital was created by four deaconesses, followed by a school for girls and

an Orphean in 1860. They welcomed children without parents after the Syrian civil war at that time, a Turkish province that killed 30 000 Christians.

Today, it counts 5 communities in Jerusalem, Ramallah, The region of Bethlehem and Amman. Amman and Ramallah's churches are mostly composed of refugees' families who fled when the conflict broke out at Israel creation in 1948. Its runs 12 schools grouping 3 000 pupils and is in charge of four education programs.

It is directed by the Palestinian Bishop Munib Younan (see page 17) and counts nearly 3 000 members in Israel, in Jordan and in Palestinian Territories.

It joined World Lutheran Federation in 1974 and was admitted into Ecumenical Council of Churches in 2013.

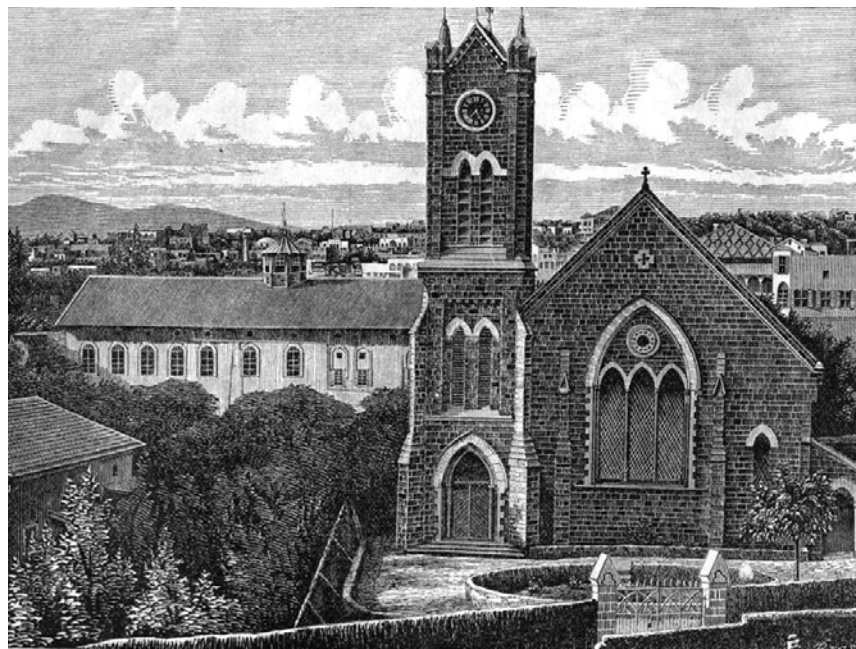
A.H.



In Lebanon, from 1824 to the 1950s

# The Mission and the Education of Lebanese Women

A HISTORICAL STUDY ON SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF PROTESTANT MISSIONS : THE OPENING OF SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS AS SOON AS THE MISSIONARIES WERE IMPLEMENTED. FOCUS ON THE LEBANESE EXAMPLE, DURING THE 19E CENTURY, ITS SUCCESSES AND ITS QUESTIONINGS.



1835: under the Ottoman Empire, the 1<sup>st</sup> Protestant girls school, attached to the Temple of the Evangelical Church in Beirut, Lebanon.

One of the characteristic aspect of the work of the Protestant Mission in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is the huge amount of time, energy and money invested in the activities for women. From the formal education of primary school to Higher education, we can measure the most visible aspect of the mission work towards girls and women. However, the striking fact is not only that it has been directed to women but that it has been made by women. Between 1823 and 1936 more than 2/3 of the missionaries sent to Lebanon were women. Some of them

were missionaries 'widows but a large part were single women sent as nurses, teachers, evangelists in close contact with local women.

## The first schools of the Mission

It is likely that the first girls 'school was opened in Lebanon, in 1824 when widows from high officials of the American Council for the Foreign missions, the missionaries Goodell and Bird, began a primary school for girls in Beirut. Young children were entrusted to missionaries' families and were temporarily raised and educated in their houses. However, rapidly a boarding system has been put in place and these boarding houses have multiplied in the country.

Girls coming from different horizons and from different religions were registered and took benefit from the best educative experience in the region. In these schools, the girls learned to read and write and followed a kind of secondary school including subjects such as geography, philosophy, history and moral philosophy, English and from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also French. Moreover, girls were formed to different domestic skills and gradually to domestic economy as a whole, largely inspired by American models.

At the beginning Mission Schools for Girls have two aims: the first, the access to the Gospel for the girls and the second, the formation of a new generation of Protestant wives and mothers who would transmit to the future generations, religion and domestic values. The long-term missionary Henry Jessup calls this kind of education «work for reconstruction of society».



1926: the 1<sup>st</sup> conference of girls secondary schools in Syria and Lebanon with the participation of all schools of Protestant Mission.

No doubt that this intense educational project had a great impact on the women and on the society as a whole. We can mention three points: the spiritual transformation, self-awareness and socio-political promotion of women's engagement.

To study the Bible, to attend the chapel and occasionally to participate to spiritual retreats were activities that went hand in hand with education. Even if few girls have converted to this new form of Christianity - Protestantism - the religious school atmosphere was shaping strongly

the girls 'spiritual attitude. Whether they were Christian, Muslim or Druze, many of these graduates have internalized some aspects such as introspection, seeing religion as a very personal affair, as well as faith as an individual affair.

## The impact of the educational project

It remains that Mission schools have been an essential tool in the development of women's self-awareness. In 1939, Rev. William A. Stolz, president of the American pre-university college wrote: «*The Eastern women have suddenly seized the vision of their own realization*». The vision of one 'self-realization was already in progress since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was possible thanks to the structural attention to women's well-being, which has resulted in giving them the control of some tools such as the access to several languages, musical skills, basic knowledges about health and a general culture. Moreover, the vision of a self-realization grew up with career opportunities for these graduates. The first of them became native assistants of teachers and then missionaries themselves. Next generations travelled all around



the Middle-East. Independent adventurers, they served as teachers in other Arab countries such as Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. And next generation provided female doctors or scientists of the region!

This kind of education and the clear message it carried «turn to the world and play your part» did not only just empower women but allow them to be socially and politically involved. Researchers tell us today that many women who played a central role in women awakening - in Egypt for example - were educated in Syrian Mission schools. Graduates took part with enthusiasm to the Arab nationalism. They had an active role in the promotion of citizenship, especially in the post war years of the 20<sup>ies</sup>. We can see this expression in the activities such as the Institute of the Rural Life in which girls developed rural life through social projects. They camped during their summer holidays to settle schools in villages, to organize care for babies, to provide hygiene in mothers' clinics, to open

Today, facing the temple of the National Evangelical Church in Beirut, Lebanon, the commemorative stele «1<sup>st</sup> building built in the Turkish Empire, for a girls' school, erected in 1835 by Mrs Todd, an English lady from Alexandria for Mrs Sarah L. Smith, the 1<sup>st</sup> teacher. Here also was begun the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday School in Syria in 1894».





Today, Aleppo Protestant College for girls in Syria.

●●● health schools and literacy. They even took part to international conferences on nationalism and citizenship..

### An ambiguous role

We can however note that through their educational project, missionaries and in particular, women, sent «a contradictory message» and this is how the natives received it. This was essentially due to the gender transitory nature against which the American missionaries were fighting at the turn of the century.

On one hand, teachers promoted the housewife's sanctity, as wife and mother, for an improvement of society through domesticity. Schools were seen by missionaries as a training ground of the wife and mother's model. On the other hand, the American missionaries themselves were single women with a lot of temerity. Some of them as Dr. Mary Edy was riding a horse on long distances and was an ophthalmologist for men as well as for women. These missionary women alone were a female model of independence for the local women, even if they taught modern domestic life.

There was not only the American missionaries' example that brought an ambiguous message. Study program for girls and its component of

domestic economy encouraged them to love knowledge alone to reach excellence. We can read this confusion in missionaries' reports and mails, who in a same letter express their concern so see graduates unmarried and besides express their wish to improve their educational cursus for more excellence. Indeed, missionaries gave a discordant and conflictual discourse in the idealization of the middle-class woman's education. As Ruth Woodsmall, a former YWCA executive-Christian Union of Young Women- noted during her travels in Lebanon in the 30ies, we could see a serious danger of «disintegration of personality».

However, in spite of all the criticisms that have been made, no doubt that Protestant Mission Schools have shaped the eastern woman by exposing her to another form of spirituality, by giving her essentials tools and by giving her the choice - not always consistent - between different models of feminism. ■

**RIMA NASRALLAH**

professor at the Beirut Faculty of Theology

## Eastern Protestants From Algeria to Iran

AT THE DISCOVERY OF FMEEC (FELLOWSHIP OF THE MIDDLE-EAST EVANGELICAL CHURCHES), THE EASTERN PROTESTANT FEDERATION.



At the beginning of July 2017, there was the meeting in Leipzig, the GA of the *World Communion of Reformed Churches*. Among other decisions and important positions such as the association to the *Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith*<sup>1</sup>, the assembly elected its new executive committee whose president is now Najla Kassab, pastor of National Evangelical<sup>2</sup> Synod of Syria and Lebanon. Najla Kassab was ordained pastor of her Church in March 2017, a few days after the ordination of the first female pastor of an Eastern Church.

The opening to a female ministry and its realization in these two ordinations are important steps in the path of the Protestant Churches in the Middle-East and North Africa, both gathered in the FMEEC since 1974. Women's participation in the

life of the churches and especially to the decision process was part of the objectives set by FMEEC. Its GA asked as early as 2010 to all of its members Churches to accept to ordain women at the pastoral ministry, but the realization of this decision remains none the less a real revolution within the Eastern Christianity.

FMEEC, created in 1974, in order to «realize unity between Protestant Churches in the Middle-East»<sup>3</sup> and in particular in reinforcing ●●●

Delegates of the Protestant Churches, members of FMEEC, in conference at Cairo in 2014. ACO-France is represented by its president Albert Huber. [The first on the left]

<sup>1</sup> This text approved in 1999 by Roman Catholic Church and World Lutheran Federation, establishes a consensus between the signatories on the doctrine of the justification. It has also been signed by the Methodist Churches in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Evangelical means the historical Protestant Churches and not the Churches called «Evangelical»

<sup>3</sup> Article 2 of FMEEC Constitution.





Rosangela Jarjour, General Secretary of the FMEEC.

●●● cooperation between these Churches in various fields. Thus, it gathers Churches from different traditions, Reformed, Lutheran, Episcopalian and Methodist, located from Algeria to Iran, through Egypt, Lebanon, Syria...

The will to reinforce the intra Protestant communion had been carried by Eastern Churches for many years. The creation of a Protestant Unified Church in the Arab world has even been considered without success but the foundation of the FMEEC brought a concrete answer to the requirements of the new regional ecumenical structure, MEEC, the *Middle-East Council of Churches*. Which obliged the Protestant to unite to be represented alongside various Eastern Orthodox Churches. In spite of the will to go ahead together on the way to unity, FMEEC work had a difficult start in view of the regional geopolitical context. The invasion of Cyprus by Turkey in 1974, the Lebanese Civil War, Camp David Agreements signed in 1978 between Egypt and Israel badly welcomed by other Arab countries, the Iranian revolution the next year... are as many elements that made relationships difficult between these Churches and complicated seriously the organization of any meeting.

**Though these tensions**, FMEEC actually made possible to advance on the way of unity. The discussions held within it achieved in the signature of the *Declaration of Amman*, on January 26<sup>th</sup> 2006, an agreement of full mutual recognition between Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Middle-

East and in North Africa, in spite of the position of different Churches on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, subject that influences significantly the relationships between Eastern Churches.

The *Declaration of Amman* is widely inspired by the *Concord of Leuenberg* (1973) that establish ecclesial communion between European Lutherans and Reformed. However, it did not have the same scope than in Europe. Indeed, the confessional differences are less marked and the history of Eastern Protestant Churches did not know the same upheavals as those of their European sisters. Coming from mission of pietistic inspiration, these Churches have belatedly claimed their filiation with this or that particular denomination. So, the *Declaration of Amman* actually comes to consolidate and put into practice what was still existing before the signature, such as exchanges of pastors and intercommunion. The real issues in the implementation of this full communion are probably more cultural and linguistic than theological.

**Place of training and reflection** on various fields, the FMEEC regularly organizes seminars for pastors and people involved in the Church, such as the women's place, the Christian education or Christian and Protestant presence in the East. This last subject is particularly pregnant these times: what about the future for Christian communities in the East, in war or persecution situations which push their members to emigration? Which coexistence with majority Islam where Sharia (Islamic law) is the main source of legislation?

In difficult contexts, when the war in Syria and in Iraq drags on, the peace process between Israel and Palestine is at a standstill, the FMEEC allow the Eastern Protestant Churches to meet up and to be in solidarity. It also allows the most isolated to feel supported and encouraged in their mission. The organized seminars, as well as the *N.E.S.T Near East School of Theology*<sup>4</sup> are all places where the members of these Churches can meet and built together their unity and their future and can be hopeful for each other. ■

**REV. MARION HEYL**

Author of a theology thesis on FMEEC

<sup>4</sup> The N.E.S.T is in Beirut, jointly managed by the Diocese of Jerusalem of Episcopalian Church, the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near-East and the Lutheran Evangelical Church in Jordan and in the Holy land.

## Eastern Protestants

# Munib Younan: Lutheran, Palestinian and Bishop

PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE WORLD LUTHERAN FEDERATION, THE MAN OF JERUSALEM INVESTS HIMSELF DIRECTLY IN THE REQUEST OF PEACE IN THE NEAR-EAST.

**M**unib Younan, an Arab Christian marked by Lutheranism, is known in the Protestantism for his translation in Arabic of the key document, the Augsburg Confession. He is a poised man, benevolent and decided at once, somewhat passionate when it comes to justice and peace. Well, he has himself a card of Palestinian refugee. He is born in 1950 in the old city of Jerusalem where his parents found shelter when they were forced out of their house in Beer-Sheva, in the south of Israel. He frequented the school and the church Martin Luther in the holy city. «We were poor and do not have anything to eat and Lutherans took care of us, offered us clothes and chocolate milk as food. Without Lutheran Church would I have had an education? Would I have become a pastor?»

**He updates his words concerning the refugees**, those who are on our doorsteps. «You, French Churches have also the opportunities to change refugees' life. I ask you not to just tolerate them. Give them an education. Give them the means to take their life in their hands. Love them. Give them necessary tools to allow them to go back home and rebuild nation states where human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of religion reign. Give them hope...»

**He is married and father of three children.** He studied theology among Lutherans in Finland. He is the third Lutheran Bishop of Jerusalem since 1998, in residence in the imposing Church of the Redeemer in the shadow of the Basilica of the Holy Sepulcher. 3000 identified faithful: mostly Palestinian. «We are few but our influence is more important than our number. Influence in the society but also a symbolic influence to maintain a certain diversity in the region...»



Munib Younan in a conference in Strasbourg invited by Christian Albecker, president of the Union of Alsace - Lorraine Churches (UEPAL).  
[on the left]

Eastern Christians? Munib Younan insists on the difficulty for his brothers and sisters of Western Churches to really understand the Arab Christians' point of view. These are disappointed by assistance campaigns launched by Churches and bodies of Western Churches. «We are tired of speeches. We want deeds. Working together to come and help Eastern Christians is a constant challenge. Some Western initiatives aiming to answer this challenge not only do not help us but hurt us. In this time on crisis, we have the impression that some Western Christians took the opportunity to present Eastern Christians as their children, treating us as damsels in distress that must be saved from our Muslim neighbors, rather than help us to stay in our land. Because Arab Christians do not want to be evacuated from their country. We vehemently reject such a paternalistic and colonialist attitude». ■

**ALBERT HUBER**



## Eastern Protestants

# Andrea Zaki: Theologian and social actor

« I WOULDN'T BE AS I AM WITHOUT THE GRACE OF GOD AND THE SUPPORT OF PROTESTANTISM » :  
SO, SAYS THIS PASTOR OF CAIRO...



Andrea Zaki, Pasteur and  
Doctor in theology in Cairo.

I met the pastor and doctor in theology, Andrea Zaki in June 2008 during my first trip to Egypt. He was then only one of the deputy director OF CEOSS, this huge Egyptian NGO of Protestant inspiration. He began to be known especially for his contribution to the great Protestant Encyclopedia of Arabic theology published in 2008. Born in 1960, he studied to the Faculty of Theology of Cairo, and then in Canada, in the United Kingdom.

Since 2008, many things have turned out in Egypt and for Andrea Zaki. In January 2011, Egypt experienced a revolution that swept away Mubarak's regime, followed by a calamitous presidency in the hands of the Muslim Brothers in 2012-2013. The population saluted this military coup that dismissed the president Morsi, and it is the author of this coup, the Marshal Al Sissi who was elected president by an overwhelming majority (96.9%) in March 2014.

## A formative experience for the visitor

Dr. Andrea Zaki, climbed the ladder of the most important organization of the Protestantism in the Near-East, more than 1 million of members. Elected president of the Egyptian Protestant Churches, he reaches CEOSS general direction, and a publishing house, Dar-El-Thaqafa.

Of an impressive work ability, Dr. Andrea Zaki has a systematic mind that allows him to solve quickly and efficiently the problems he faces. A meeting of his staff at CEOSS is a formative experience! He goes around the questions to be treated,

listens to the opinions, decides between the options and sums it all up!

Coming from an old Egyptian family he cares evangelically for the poor who are cruelly affected by the economical crises that their country is going through. The present regime undertakes major public works which should revive the economy, too dependent from the tourism. In the meantime, too many are the poor and left out and CEOSS does what it can and at its level through micro-credits, the defense of small farmers and fishermen, promoting environmentally friendly pilot farms...

## By the non-violent resolution of conflicts

Andrea Zaki, always preoccupied by interreligious tensions, sudden crises and violence on the banks of the Nile, goes to the roots of the evils. He encourages the non-violent resolution trainings and the theological work on holy texts, for a respectful, open and non-binary reading that occurs too often.

I remembered how he dealt with the presentation by the theologian, Antoine Nouis, on the problematic of the ten commandments and the rereading of them by Jesus. Participants wanted to bring the speaker to the question of premarital sex and the question on homosexual wedding. Andrea Zaki intervened and cut short this drift on this subject politically much too sensitive avoiding a scandal... Antoine Nouis in his measured style simply recalled what he read in the biblical text and also what was not there! ■

THOMAS WILD

## Egypt

# Both fragile and strong

THE FRENCH - SPEAKING PROTESTANTISM IN EGYPT LIVED DAILY BY A PASTOR COMING FROM THE FRENCH PROTESTANT UNIFIED CHURCH WHO IS IN CHARGE IN CAIRO AS AN ACO ENVOY.

« Are there Protestant over there? » How many times have I heard such an expression of astonishment during these last months. Though it represents a minority within a Christian minority, Protestantism does exist. However, it is not a « cushy » existence, because he has to face many challenges.

## Resist

To resist in a fragile socio-economic and political context, in a country struck by a bloody terrorism trying to destabilize the political regime and sow hatred among the people from the different religious communities. The Protestantism I start to discover, is both fragile and strong. For some time, the state power leads a protectionist policy toward Christians, which reassures Protestants.

I think of an Egyptian pastor colleague and the story of his return to his country after his studies in the United States. « I could have stayed there, he said, but I wanted to help my Church. I love my country and my Church. My colleagues as well as the president of my church congratulated me for my decision to come back. We are fine in Egypt even if we are poor. Today nobody congratulates me anymore. When somebody learns that I could have stayed there, he says I am crazy. What mistake do I commit?... and as for the former president of the Church... he is now living in the United States! » That are here, the state of mind and the general atmosphere. Those who can, tend to leave and not only the Protestants.

But I also discovered a strong and creative Protestantism. The official Easter worship, organized by the Protestant Federation of Egypt, where we were invited has been filmed and retransmitted to Egyptian television. About one-fifth of the assembly consisted of religious and political authorities of the country.



## In spite of its inferiority, an incredible impact

Protestantism is a chance, a break, that brings its voice in a rather closed society. But in the East, we are not in a culture of debate such as in the West. Some topics are not really debatable. You must have attended a Synod of the Nile meeting to feel the difference. The question of homosexuality for instance seems to be « fashionable » in Europe according to some people. During this meeting, a pastor evokes this subject, mindful to the answer we were going to bring him. The sensitive subject was rapidly settled by the man who was running the meeting and... there was nothing to debate.

In spite of the cultural differences, we remain in a Church coming from the Reformation, that adheres to its principles and is very involved. This Protestantism also opens on Pentecost and Charismatic Movement which begin to intensify in religious landscape. I was surprised to learn that the Mega Church *Redeemed Christian Church of God* is organized under the « protection » of the Protestant Federation, as well as the foreign Churches, the so-called historic Churches. So, goes the little Protestant world on the banks of the Nile. ■

MICHAEL SCHLICK

Pastor of the Protestant French Speaking Church of Cairo and Alexandria

The Pastor Michael Schlick, (1st rank left) during his installation cult in the French-speaking parish of Cairo and Alexandria in November 2016.



## Lebanon

## Ambassadors of the uselessness

FRENCH-SPEAKING PROTESTANTISM IN LEBANON, DAILY LIVED BY A PASTOR SENT BY FRENCH PROTESTANTISM IN BEIRUT.



Rev Pierre Lacoste during a worship in the French-speaking parish of Beirut.

After four years spent in Lebanon I feel like a liberation feeling, both benevolent and fruitful of uselessness. A conviction more than a feeling that I would like to share with you.

**When you think about it,** we the Protestant French-speaking Church in Lebanon, we are here for nothing and for nobody. Let's say for few things and objectively for few people. So much so that considering social and numerical poverty of my parish, someone who surely wanted to flatter me asked me how, as a pastor, I could be satisfied with such a church! If you except 5 or 6 French-Lebanese people, the Protestant French-speaking church of Beirut is composed by fifty or so migrants- Malagasy and African economic migrants. What we indeed? How many are we? The question of the price is central. In a world where everything is quantified, evaluated, justified the little Protestant French church in Lebanon, in its path and its very reality brings a unique testimony in its kind.

**First of all,** we are not the fruit of the great missionary enterprises of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. We are here because of an accident of history. That of the victors, who in the aftermath of the first world war shared the Levantine cake. In 1925 French Protestant received an unlikely legacy. They reaped where they had neither sown nor worked. The basis of an interesting report to the free was posed and should not be forgotten. At the moment where European Protestantism celebrates the 500 years of «its» Reformation, this report to the free must be revisited and deepened. The duration, the historical, cultural and theological wealth, the indisputable contribution in the intellectual, social and economic progress to the modern and post-modern world, does it confer the Protestants any legitimacy, an objective value, a particular merit? I don't hope so because in this case our Reformation would have failed.

In Beirut we have nothing to defend or protect. We are foreigners, without influence or power and everything we have, has been given to us. We have no political or theological interests in General Assemblies of Lebanese Protestantism, in Arabic language, to which we participate without understanding a word! Even our financial situation is taken care of. We are the ambassadors of the uselessness!

This awareness instead of demoralizing me, strengthens me. This posture of uncomfortable appearance, close to the non-existence, offers an immense freedom. I have seen this in many occasions. Our presence is appreciated because it is a carrier of rare quality, freedom. Because. If we are useless, we are however free to serve the causes that seem right to us and that are not interesting many people in Lebanon such as house maids 'exploitation or the transformation of a cemetery in a place of meeting and celebration!

To live in the awareness of one's uselessness is it not that experiencing the grace of God? ■

**PIERRE LACOSTE**

Pastor of the Protestant French-speaking Church of Beirut

## In Armenia

## « A serious and dedicated Protestantism »

TO BE A MINORITY PROTESTANT IN AN ARMENIA AT 90 % OF ORTHODOX APOSTOLIC

## To be a minority Protestant in an Armenia at 90 % of Orthodox Apostolic

What a surprise for many the existence of Protestant Armenians in Armenia or elsewhere. Historically, they go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For Armenians living under Turkish domination, the Armenian Evangelical Church was created on July 1st 1846 in Constantinople. After the Genocide of 1915, Armenian survivors were forced to leave and rebuilt their Churches in the diaspora, with, in France, the support of Dr. Paul Berron's *Action Chrétienne en Orient*.

## Different Protestant Churches in Armenia

On 3 million inhabitants in Armenia, about 100 000 claim to be Protestant. There are on one side, the Churches directly or indirectly coming from the *Evangelical Mission of Basel*. In the first place, the Armenian Evangelical Church and then at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Armenian Baptist Church. These two Churches suffered persecutions after Sovietization of Armenia in 1920. Then they were banned and allowed again in 1944.

On the other side, there are the Pentecost Churches, born in 1960: they used to live in hiding under Soviet times.

Finally, there are new evangelical denominations born from 1991, after the declaration of Independence of Armenia.

## The place of Protestantism in Armenia

To put the presence of the Protestants in Armenia in perspective, you must understand that they are - with the Armenian Catholics - a minority in the country at 90 % of Apostolic Orthodox. For 17 centuries, it is their Church that played a main role in the Armenian people's life. The Armenian Evangelical Church tries to participate, to its measure, in the life of the nation in all its forms.



Rev. Hovhannes Hovsepyan in the meeting room of his Armenian Evangelical Church of Yerevan. Protestants are a small minority in his country.

It focuses on many biblical and theological formations for the pastors and lay people. A lot of educational, cultural and social programs are organized in the whole country with the support of different current means of communication. Many ecumenical programs are carried by the Apostolic Church and the Catholic Church.

Generally, Evangelicals' seriousness and dedication are widely appreciated, both by public authorities and by the population.

## The future for the Protestants in Armenia

Their future is tied to that of Armenia in general. We cannot forget the instability of the Caucasus, unresolved conflict of Karabagh with Azerbaijan, the tensed relationships with Turkey... The Armenian Evangelists also try to work for more justice, less inequality, less corruption.



Mass at the new Orthodox Apostolic Cathedral of Yerevan. The Apostolic represent 90% of the Armenian population.

Recently, they have communicated to the Armenian government their approach and their concrete proposals in the frame of the drafting of a new law on freedom of conscience and religious freedoms in the country. Humbly but with conviction, they wish to be attentive to the Bible that teaches us to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. ■

**RENÉ LÉONIAN**

Pastor, president of the Union of the Armenian Evangelical Churches of Eurasia



## A Forum in French-speaking Switzerland

# Shifting effects of the Reformation in the Middle-East and in the world

THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION IS A HISTORICAL EUROPEAN REALITY ANCHORED IN THE PARTICULAR STORY OF THE WESTERN CHRISTIANITY. HOWEVER, ALONG THE CENTURIES THAT FOLLOWED, THIS SHOCK WAVE SPREAD TO DIFFERENT REGIONS OF THE WORLD THROUGH UNPUBLISHED SPIRITUAL IMPULSES. THE INDIVIDUALS AND THE PEOPLES WHO HAVE THUS PERCEIVED THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE HAVE IN TURN EMBODIED IN THEIR OWN CONTEXTS GIVING RISE TO NEW FORMS OF PROTESTANT CHRISTIANISM.



Ordination of an Iranian Pastor, Michel Aghamalian, in St John Armenian Evangelical Church of Tehran in 2009.

To take the measure of this kaleidoscope of Protestantisms, the French-speaking Churches of Switzerland, D-M Echange et missions, in partnership with ACO, organized *the International Forum R500* from 5-12 June 2017, with a dozen of invited Churches members coming from the four continents. The format combined 3 days in Switzerland and a weekend in Germany in Wittenberg and Halle.

Unfortunately, none of the three guests from Syria and Lebanon could come. But Rev. Sargez Benyamin, the former president of the Synod of the Evangelical Church of Iran, now living in Germany, was present. See page 23. In his presentation he made the link between the historical Nestorian Church - he

is himself from Assyrian origin - and the shifted waves that touched Iran in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Since the last antiquity, Nestorian Church has been a missionary Church, bringing the Gospel to a large part of Asia, to Mongolia and China. Then, this Church fell back on itself at the end of middle-age. This decline due to the adoption of Islam by Persian Empire and to the Mongolian invasions was accentuated by the exclusive use of the Syriac language.

**At the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Protestants missionaries translated the Bible** in an excellent Farsi, then the American missionaries came in 1834. With the diffusion of the Bible, there were a literacy work and a major educational and social involvement. Through the renewing Christian faith, all aimed at the conversion of Muslims and Rev. Sargez Benyamin identifies himself with this vision. He concluded on an amazingly positive note, underlining the current impact of Reformation on a part of the reformist Muslim elites in Iran, who are well established at Qom university, but also on an increasing number of Muslims who join the movement of the house churches.

The working groups, late in the morning, showed the Protestant diversity, goal of the forum: that is to say to put in dialogue the Reformation's sons and daughters in their diversity, openly. This bet was won. And if one of the Reformation effects would be to make us go out of our cultural ecclesiastical microcosm in order to better «*witness to one another*», DM-Echange et Mission's motto? ■

MARC SCHOENI

## Record in exile

# « The Iranian Church will be a model in the Middle-East... »

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE IRANIAN PASTOR, SARGEZ BENYAMIN.

**Can you introduce yourself in a few words?**

My name is Sargez Benyamin, I am 51 and I come from an Evangelical family from the North-west of the country. My two grandfathers were pastors as I am myself. Well, I was pastor, because I left Iran 3 years ago.

**What is the condition of Christians in Iran?**

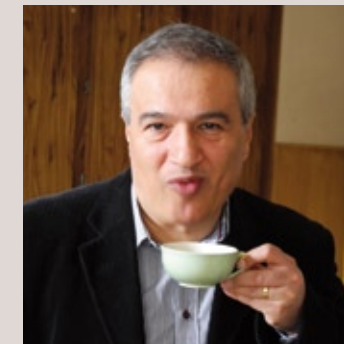
It is that of a minority. It is estimated that after the Islamic revolution in 1979 and after the Iraq-Iran war that succeeded, the number of Christians fell down from 200 000 in 1973 to 120 000 in 1994. As for the Protestants, the first Protestant Church was created in 1834 in the North-west of Iran and in 1876 it is the first Farsi-speaking Church that is created in Tehran.

**Quelles communautés représente le Synode de l'Église évangélique en Iran?**

Depuis ses débuts, le Synode compte l'Église évangélique assyrienne, l'Église évangélique perse et l'Église évangélique arménienne. Durant huit ans, j'ai été le secrétaire général du Synode et ensuite pasteur de la paroisse farsi à Téhéran pendant six ans, jusqu'à sa fermeture.

**Which communities represent the Synod of Evangelical Church in Iran?**

Since its beginning, the Synod counts the Assyrian Evangelical Church, the Persian Evangelical Church and the Armenian Evangelical Church. For eight years I was



Rev Sargez Benyamin at ACO-fellowship Executive Committee in Strasbourg, 2016

the general secretary of the Synod and after, the pastor of the Farsi-speaking parish in Tehran for six years until it closed.

**Personally, did you fear for your life?**

I was accused to share the Gospel with Muslims. The government advised me to hide or leave. I fled with my wife and my daughters to Armenia. I stayed there for two years before leaving, a little over six months, to Nurnberg, Germany.

**Why do the religious communities represent a danger for the government?**

If most Iranians accept Christians, this is different for the government, because they offer an alternative. Especially the Protestant who present something else, and that's what makes the regime anxious: openness and relation to God: he does not want that, not this simple relation to the God of the New Testament. Because it is all we preach: openness and relation to God. You know, Iranians are

tired, exhausted, the youth in particular. As they want to live something else, some of them come to God.

**Is it the case in Iran?**

Yes, there is an increasing number of house churches all over the country. The government know it but cannot control this expansion. Outside, the government wants to give a good image of openness but Iran has become like North Korea. Between 2007 and 2017, it is estimated that the number of the people who watch Christians has been multiplied by 400!

**What are you doing in Germany?**

I work with Iranian Farsi-speaking refugees. Most of them are young and they arrive to Europe hoping to realize their dreams. Most of them are happy of what they find: to feel free, to be free to express, to say what they think and feel. That is what surprised me: a great number of young well-educated Iranians were not convinced by Islam and many of them left the country, not for economical reasons as I thought before coming in Europe, but to be free.

**How do you see the future of your county and your own future?**

I see a nation that hoped, much hoped and that slowly disillusioned. Iranians went from disappointment to disappointment to despair. They are tired, exhausted, they can't take it anymore. As for me, I am going on my way and I am anxious to see my family come and join me in Germany. As for my Church, I am sure it will be a model for the Middle-East Church.

INTERVIEW BY SYLVIANE PITTET





**A Christian who lives in this firm trust in God,  
Knows all things,  
Can all things,  
Dares all things that are to be accomplished  
And accomplishes all things happily and freely**

**Martin Luther**

Sermon on good works