ON THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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In his book *Vie et Mort des Chrétiens d'Orient* published in 1994, the French historian, Jean-Pierre Valognes, who spent part of his life as a diplomat in the Middle East, questioned whether in 3000 A.D. there would still be Christians in the Middle East. At the time Valognes provided the sobering answer: "Without a doubt, but they won't count anymore. Without Lebanon as a reference point where they could hold their heads high, they would have to position themselves according to the prevailing beliefs and stop seeing themselves as Christians above all. Thus, one of the longest conflicts in history will soon be lost."

Looking at the current situation of Christians in the Middle East, it unfortunately looks like Valogne's prediction could come true. The proportion of native Christians in the total population of all countries in the Middle East is continually decreasing. This is above all the result of the permanent exodus of Christians from the Middle East. The cause of this in most cases is not, like in Iraq, open violence against Christians, making it impossible for them to stay in their homelands, but a general lack of prospects. This is reason enough for many, including Muslims, in many countries in the Middle East to at least dream of emigrating.

Reliable data on the Middle East countries is difficult to obtain. This is especially true for concrete information on the fall in the Christian population in these countries, not least because in many countries in the Middle East censuses do not ask for religious affiliation, as in Turkey since 1965, or the census results are not published. This is obviously linked to the interests of the respective political players. Even when the Christians in the Middle East are not strictly rejected by the Muslim majority, the world which they come from refuses to develop. In many Arabic speaking Middle Eastern societies, the restrengthening of an intransigent Islam plays a central role, which emphasises the criteria for denominational diversity. It is not only Christians who are affected by this, but all those who do not think in the same way as the representatives of Islam. In Turkey, the restrengthening of Islam is not the main problem for Christians. Instead it is strong nationalism, which excludes all who are not Turkish native speakers and who do not belong to Sunnite Islam. According to estimates, this affects around one third of the population. In Iran, the aftermath of the famous developments since the 1979 Islamic revolution reveals to a large portion of the population – not only Christians – the lack of real future prospects everyday.

It would be wrong to describe the social exclusion of Christians previously referred to as a new phenomenon, with regard to the Arab speaking countries of the Middle East as well as Turkey or Iran. In recent years, the intensity may have increased in individual countries in the Middle East, or it may have been perceived more clearly by the affected Christians. When this was raised with a dialogue partner in Syria in spring 2008, when the midday prayer call could be heard through the open window, he said that one had the feeling that the muezzin's prayer call had become steadily louder over recent years.

Why has the situation of Christians in the Middle East so dramatically changed in recent years? It is not easy to give a simple answer to such a complex question. Alongside the aspects already mentioned, numerous regional conflicts which have become international play an important role; the Palestine conflict, the disputes between Turkey and Greece, the Cyprus problem, the civil war in Lebanon and the three Gulf wars. Political upheavals in the individual countries of the Middle East also need to be considered, which are the indirect or direct consequence of internationalised conflicts in the region.

Against the background of the current developments in the countries of the Middle East, the impact of the Christian presence in Middle Eastern countries is alluded to time and again, not only by observers outside the Middle East, but also by moderate Muslims, and the hope expressed that this presence will continue for a long time. Many moderate Muslims who say this surely see cultural and religious diversity as valuable. Many of them are also sure to fear that in a Middle East with no Christian presence, they themselves would be more obvious targets for Islamic groups than is already the case now.

The co-existence of Christians – as well the Jewish – with the Muslim majority in the Middle East was always governed by rules which Christians and Jews had to accept. So it is no new development for example, that Christians in the Middle East countries as a rule do not occupy any, or at least no important positions in politics, in state administration and where armed forces could be captured. The fact that under Saddam Hussein there were, and in Syria today there still are, civil servants and officers, even in the highest positions, and some Jordanian Christians as ambassadors abroad, does not contradict this statement. Because an important post may seem such from the outside – but what is more decisive is the influence the holder of the post actually has. This can be seen with Christian politicians such as Tariq Aziz, who was Iraqi foreign minister from 1983 to 1991 and the first deputy prime minister – but only deputy primeminister, which in retrospect was probably lucky. A further example is Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who became secretary general of the UN, and who was a minister of state in the Egyptian foreign ministry from 1977 to 1991 and Egyptian deputy foreign minister, but never

foreign minister up until his election as UN General Secretary on 3 December 1991.

In Iraq, the situation of the Christians under Saddam Hussein was often better than compared with their situation today. As with the whole of the population, they had to obey the brutal rules of a regime of terror, which practically took away all fundamental freedoms. Because the regime only supported the Sunnis (around 40% of the population) and therefore could not rely on the support of the Shiite majority, it tried to build its power base from a more or less forced involvement with the Christian minority. So the Christians, who had a comparatively high level of education and who were important for the structure of the country, were unwilling supporters of the Hussein regime, which for its part provided many Christians with work and salaries and accommodated Christian churches. After the US army invasion in 2003, Christians were accused by many Iraqis as being lodgers of the dictator.

Between Iraq under Saddam Hussein and Syria under the rule of Hafizal-Assadand his son Baschar Hafiz al-Assad, there are possibly dangerous parallels for the Christians. Compared with the around 40% population proportion of the Sunni minority which Saddam Hussein supported in Iraq, the regime in Syria is led by the Alevi, who make up only 6% of the population. Like Saddam Hussein, Hafiz al-Assad and his son Baschar have involved the Christian minority, the majority of whom have a high level of education, to strengthen their own power base. Like in ‘old’ Iraq, the Christians in Syria couldn’t and can’t do anything to resist this exploitation by the regime. Similar to the case in the ‘old’ Iraq, Syria does not guarantee individual and collective religious freedom, not only because of the virtual ban on missions and the complementary ban on conversion. However the Christian church does enjoy a certain amount of breathing room. It can organise itself within the framework of the rules set out by the regime. The opening of Syria and the freedom granted by this is also noticeably used by the Sunni establishment to restrict the Christian minority even more, without provoking the direct, harsh reaction of the Alevi dominated government.

The civil war in Lebanon was a deep wound for the Christians. Like the whole country, the Christians have not found their former significance again. The civil war led to a massive bloodletting of the Christian population, who, with their 35 to 40% have not been the population majority for a long time. Developments in the state administration – for instance in the areas of school administration and health administration – have fallen short for the future, as before, in terms of the important role of the Christian church in education and health care provision. These mechanisms, which in many cases substitute the central tasks of the ailing state education and health system, have been left increasingly to their own devices and have been decoupled from

state aid. Seeing the ever diminishing Christian population since the civil war, where the rich are leaving and the poor remaining, the survival of many church facilities is no longer sure. So a future in Lebanon is harder and harder to imagine for those Christians who have not yet turned their backs on the country.

The three examples presented here, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, clearly show that in view of the current situation of Christians in the Middle East, the fears of the French historian and diplomat Jean-Pierre Valognes, which were quoted at the beginning could actually come true. It can hardly be expected that Western politicians would essentially be concerned about the developments linked to this. Last but not least, in the interest of the continuing existence of the Christian presence in the Middle East, which is deemed so strongly desirable by many Muslims, we should hope that the results of the Special Synod for the Middle East called for by Pope Benedict XVI for October 2010 will be observed by the church.

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