

Plenary # 4 – Summary

On Saturday morning, conference participants heard a challenging message from Wageeh Mikhail, who spoke on the topic, “The Church in the Middle East – Challenges and Perspectives.”

After an early morning worship service that concluded with singing, “Blessed be the name of the Lord,” seminarian Anne Zaki – herself an Egyptian – testified to Mikhail’s leadership capabilities.

Mikhail thanked the Calvin community for its support, noting that he spent 2 years as a Th.M. student at Calvin Seminary. He also joked that the experience at Calvin was informative with regard to his understanding of climate. “I realized how different the weather is [versus] Egypt,” Mikhail said, but added, “I could feel the warmth of the Calvin community.”

Mikhail began by listing a series of questions that he hears frequently as an Arabic Christian; questions like, “Has the Bible been translated into Arabic?” “These questions are not imaginary,” Mikhail said. “Most of these questions I had to answer myself.”

Such questions reflect some unfortunate facts about how disconnected Christians in the West are from Christians in the Arab world, Mikhail said. “Many Christians have lost sight of their brothers and sisters in the Arab world,” he warned.

Mikhail then presented a startling statistic to the audience; he said there are more Arabic speaking Christians in the Middle East (15 million) than there are Jews in the entire world (14 million). Yet, Mikhail asked, how much do Christians know about the Jewish community, and in contrast, how much does Western Christianity know about Christians in the Arab world?

Although Mikhail said that there are a number of problems that contribute to this ignorance, including historical wars and tensions between the Eastern and Western churches, he focused a majority of his discussion on the linguistic problem of the West’s lack of knowledge of Arabic. “Who in Western Christian scholarship goes on to learn Arabic?” Mikhail asked.

Before Islam, there were several Arabic Christian kingdoms, even in Mecca. The Council of Nicea had two Arabic-speaking bishops in attendance, and even further back, in the book of Acts we read about Arab Christians among those who were listening to Peter preaching. Citing Acts 2:11, Mikhail said, “On the day of the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit spoke Arabic,” which the crowd quietly laughed in agreement with.

Mikhail asked whether or not a Christian Arab culture is possible? He noted that this paradox also hits Arabic Christians. “So many people think the two things – Arab and Christian – contradict each other,” he said.

The tension is felt most strongly by Arab Christian themselves. “We are seen as strangers in the land,” Mikhail said. “Strangers who live among Muslims, yet do not surrender to Islam.”

One of the most interesting of the points was a discussion about the historical importance of Christianity in the Arabian sub-continent. “Years and years before the rise of Islam, Arabic-

speaking Christians were using Arabic as their language of liturgy and worship,” he said. “Christian was a descriptive of Arabs centuries before Islam.”

Christian knowledge and use of Arabic also influenced much of the development of Arabic culture. To make his point, Mikhail talked about the use of the word ‘Allah’ as a name for God used by Christians centuries before the rise of Islam. “This ‘Allah’ is the father of our Jesus Christ as is our Lord,” Mikhail said, gathering loud applause from the audience.

Arabic-speaking Christians found it to be their responsibility to master the Arabic language and express their faith in it, Mikhail said, and noted Arab Christians’ contributions to the Golden Age of Islam in terms of science, linguistics, and literature. Arabic-speaking Christians of the Golden Age translated 90% of the then-known classical Greek works into Arabic. This “speaks well to the Arab Christian community,” Mikhail said.

At the beginning of Mikhail’s lecture, the audience read responsively from a series of passages. During his discussion of the importance of the Arabic language, Mikhail revealed that the text that audience had read were actually Arabic passages. “I made you pray like Muslims,” Mikhail said.

The Islamic faith has had an extremely significant impact on Arabic culture. “It [Arabic culture] has been completely colored by Islam,” Mikhail said. “Arabic and Muslim have become synonymous.” He noted that this is especially a problem for Arabic Christians, whose identity as Christians puts them at odds with their surrounding culture.

From this perspective, Mikhail went on to discuss how Christians should respond to and interact with Islamic people and their religion and culture. His point was that, given the long history of Middle Eastern Christians in being immersed in this culture, the Christian church should look to them for guidance and leadership. “The real Christian response to Islam is not done in a manner removed from Islam itself,” Mikhail said. “Rather, it is done from within its borders. The best way to understand Islam is to understand it from within.” Arabic-speaking Christians, particularly those in the Middle East, understand best how Islam shapes people’s actions and thoughts.

Mikhail pleaded with the audience to read and interact more with Middle Eastern Christian writing and theology. He noted that it is a theology of the marginalized and the challenged, but if Western Christians desire to understand Islam, then the reading of Arabic Christian theology is a must. “It is not a perfect theology, for there is no perfect theology,” Mikhail said. “Christian Arab theology presents a close look at Islam and the challenges it presents to Christians. It addresses the deep challenges of Islam that we as Christians face. The most profound Christian discussion with Islam is only possible in the Arabic language.”

Mikhail concluded by asking participants to become more aware of and involved with the Middle Eastern Christian church. “It is my deep conviction that the Western church needs the help of the Arabic-speaking Church,” he said. He noted that such an effort might usher in a new ecumenical era, and thus might start a Western-Eastern dialogue.

“Many of us today represent organizations and seminaries and churches worldwide,” Mikhail said. “May I urge you, as you think of Islam, to put into consideration the Arabic-speaking Christians and their tremendous history of dealing with Islam.”

After all, Mikhail noted at the end, “We are one catholic church.”

“God, in Your mercy,
we are favored in truth and rightness!
Praise be to God,
before whom nothing was,
and who was before everything,
after whom there is nothing,
and He is the heir of all things,
and to Him all things return;
who kept the knowledge of all things,
by His knowledge,
and nothing but His intellect
is sufficient for this;
in whose knowledge is the end of all things,
and He counts everything by His knowledge...
We ask you, O God, by your mercy and power,
that you make us to be among those who know your Truth,
who follow your good pleasure,
and who avoid your wrath;
who give praise using your most beautiful names,
and who speak using your most sublime similitudes.
You are the merciful one, the merciful Lord of mercy.
You sat on the throne,
were exalted above all creatures,
and filled all things.
You give preference to what you will,
but are not subject to others’ preferring;
you establish your judgments,
but are not subject to others’ judging;
you have no need of us,
but we are in need of you.
You are near to the one who draws near to you,
and responsive to the one who calls upon you and prays to you.
For you, O God, are Lord of all things,
and God of all things,
and Creator of all things.
Open our mouths,
loose our tongues,
soften our hearts,
and lay open our breasts,
that we might praise your noble Name,
which is exalted and great,
blessed and holy!
There is no God before you,
and no God after you.
To you is the destiny [of all things],
and all things are in the disposal of your power.”¹

Early Christian Arabic Prayer written circa 760

¹ Mark Swanson, “Arabic as a Christian Language,” (Luther Seminary); available on www.luthersem.edu/mwanson/papers/Indonesia%20Arabic.pdf; Internet.

The Arabic-Speaking Church

I am honored to receive the invitation to be here today. I spent two years studying my Th.M. at Calvin Seminary, where I experienced the drastic difference between the balmy weather in the Middle East and the freezing temperature of Grand Rapids. Yet, I could feel the warmth of the Calvin community, its support, and assistance. I have a great appreciation of Calvin Seminary and I thank God for its role in helping me as a student of theology.

Therefore, I consider it very honoring and humbling to be here today, speaking to you. I must say, first, that I am in no position to speak on the issues related to the CRC, or its relief agencies, for I am not really in contact with it. Nevertheless, I come to you today with a different experience—an experience that I hope you will find interesting.

Introduction:

“When did you become Christian?” “Have you always been Christian?” “When did you convert from Islam?” “Are there Christians in the Middle East?” “Is the Bible translated into Arabic?” “Do you have seminaries in the Middle East?” “Are there CRC churches in the Middle East?” “Is there a PCA church in Egypt?”

These questions are not imaginary questions; in fact, most of these questions I have had to answer myself. As you can imagine, these questions reflect some unfortunate facts! First, they reflect how disconnected Christians in the States are from Christians in the Middle East. Many American Christians have lost sight of their sisters and brothers in the Middle East. Second, these questions show us how naïve some people are. How can a PCA (which stands for the Presbyterian Church in America) exist in Egypt? If we are to make up our own abbreviation, it must be PCE! However, thank God the Arabic language does not really use many abbreviations.

Ken Bailey, in addressing the same issue, puts ahead of us this shocking fact:

There are more Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East than there are Jews in the entire world. The Jewish community in the entire world numbers about 14 million. The Christian, Arabic-speaking community of the Middle East is at least 15 million and growing. How much do Western Christians know about the Jewish community worldwide, and how much time and effort is spent trying to understand them, relate to them and protect their interests? By contrast how much does Western Christianity know about the Christians of the Arab world?²

This naiveté is justified; one can understand the reason why Christians (almost) worldwide do not understand Christianity in the Middle East. We learn from history that the Church

² Kenneth Bailey, "Arabic Speaking Christianity: A glorious past and a challenging present and future." A lecture delivered to the Middle East Caucus Banquet at the Third Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA: June 29, 2004. Available at www.saltfilms.net/guides/bailey.html

has undergone division. Also, wars between the “Muslim” East and the “Christian” West have definitely made communication between Christians in the East and West almost non-existent.

Almost since the time when Muslim Arabs invaded the East and took hold of it, the Arabic-speaking church lost its connection to the rest of the known world. With the dominion of Islam over the Arabic language, another aspect of the problem came to life, i.e. linguistic divisions.

Western Christian scholarship has always granted the importance of Latin and Greek. But who in Western Christian scholarship, in any major theological discipline, goes on to acquire Arabic, Syriac and Coptic? Yet the treasures of 1900 years of Church history, theology and Biblical studies await the daring and the diligent who are willing to pay the price to cross those daunting linguistic barriers.³

History again is very informative. There were several Arab Christian kingdoms in the Arab Peninsula. Several Arab Christian communities existed in Nagran in Yemen before Islam. Even in Mecca itself, there were Arab Christians! The Bible was partially available, as many historians would now argue, in Arabic. “The council of Nicea in 325 had two Arab bishops in attendance from the island of Bahrain.”⁴ Let it be clear that Arab Christians are mentioned in the day of the Pentecost, as among those who were present in Jerusalem listening to the Apostles. They received the Good News of Christ, and upon their return to their countries, Christianity reached their homelands. You see now that one amazing thing that happened on that day is the fact that the Holy Spirit “spoke Arabic!”⁵

Many wonder, however, “How can a church be Arab?” “Is a Christian Arab possible? Is a Christian Arab culture possible?”⁶ This paradox also hits Arab Muslims. Many of them do not see it possible that one can be Arab and Christian. The two things contradict. Qadhafi once said, “It is a contradiction to be both Arab and Christian. Christians who live in the Arab World have closer links to the Vatican than to Mecca.”⁷

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kenneth Bailey, "Arabic Speaking Christianity..."

⁵ One is also reminded again of “The Arab kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts to Jerusalem. The tribes of Qedar and Nebayot are prominent Arab tribes throughout the Old Testament. The Book of Job has Arabic roots, as do the famous chapters 20 and 31 of Proverbs. The wise men at the birth of Jesus were almost certainly wealthy Arab scholars from the Jordanian desert and are identified as Arabs by Justin Martyr who in the second century wrote the Church’s earliest commentary on the birth stories of Jesus in the Gospels. When Paul was first in Damascus the city was under control of Haris the fourth, King of Petra and the Nabateans. King Haris appears in the book of Acts and his Arabic name is Hellenised as Aaretas. He has a well-known Arabic name and the Nabateans were an Arab Kingdom of prosperous international traders, artists, architects, and engineers. Their ceramics are among the finest of the ancient world. Their remaining architectural achievements in Petra are one of the archeological wonders of the world.” Kenneth Bailey, "Arabic Speaking Christianity..."

⁶ Robert B. Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A Political Study* (Athens: Lycabettus Press, 1975), xv.

⁷ Quoted in Antoine Wessels, *Arab and a Christian? Christians in the Middle East* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1995), 1.

I personally remember that when I was taking the High School Arabic composition and calligraphy test, my teacher asked for my name. My first and second names are common names; both can be Muslim or Christian. However, as soon as he heard my third name, which is an exclusive Christian name, he said, “So, you are Christian!” “Yes,” I said. Then, he said, “How can you be a Christian and good at Arabic calligraphy?” This is a perfect example of the dilemma Arabic-speaking Christians in the Middle East face. They are seen as “strangers” in the Muslim land...strangers who live among the Muslims, yet do not surrender to Islam thus raising several issues into questions. I must mention something about Arabic calligraphy here as a side-note. The well-known Arabic font “Kufi” attributed to Kufa city was developed by Arabic-speaking Christians. This is the font used to write Qur'anic verses on the walls of Mosques!

One issue that Arabic-speaking Christians have been facing since the advent of Islam is their language. Years and years before the rise of Islam, Arabic-speaking Christians were using Arabic as their language in liturgy and worship. Therefore, by the way, the question of whether or not the Arabic word Allah should be used to refer to the Christian God is totally nonsense and absolutely irrelevant to us in the Arabic-speaking church. We have been worshiping Allah since the first century. This Allah is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! This word is ours!

In answering the linguistic question, we must not overlook that fact that “Christian was a descriptive of Arabs centuries before Islam, and there has been a Christian Arabism, an Arab Christianity, throughout the Muslim centuries since Muhammad’s day.”⁸

This dilemma that we face can be blamed on the comprehensiveness of Islam. To this, Kenneth Cragg says, in his masterpiece, *The Arab Christian*, “The Muslim dominance of Arabness...from the beginning brought a tension and a tribulation into that Arab Christian existence under which it has labored and survived.”⁹ With this comprehensiveness of Islam, and the fact that the Muslim Scripture is an Arabic book, Arabic culture has been completely “colored” by Islam, to the extent that “Muslim” and “Arab” have become to many, even Arabic-speaking Christians, synonymous. Now, as you see, Arabic-speaking Christians are “caught in a strange paradox, which has attended them ever since.”¹⁰ Worse yet, “The paradox passes from language to identity, from the medium of faith and culture to the psyche and the soul. The language that gives them (Arabic-speaking Christians) identity has its supreme identity elsewhere.”¹¹

What, then, should they do? Are they to find a new language disconnecting themselves from the language of Islam? Or, should they produce what some might call “Christian Arabic?” It seems that they have two choices. They could “Islamize” their language and thus risk the particularities of the Christian faith.¹² Or, they could keep their own linguistic distinctive and

⁸ Kenneth Cragg, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² S. K. Samir and Jørgen Nielsen, eds., *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), ix..

styles, that is to say that “they could continue to think and write in their traditional literary languages and produce more or less mechanical translations into Arabic.”¹³ They actually chose a better way.

Arabic-speaking Christians and those who were arabized after the advent of Islam found it to be their responsibility to even master Arabic and express their faith in it. They have made a great use of all resources available to them, and thus approached the Arabness of Islam amazingly in a positive manner. Their approach was a model that speaks to the Christian church worldwide. It is a model of translatability, contextualization, and inculturization.

They started to produce massive Christian literature in the Arabic language. Syrian Christians took the lead, and pioneered this tremendous endeavor. They were followed by others, and lastly by Coptic-speaking Christians who produced their massive works between the 13th and 14th centuries.

As early as the eighth century, one can read theological texts in Arabic with Islamic flavor, i.e. the language, the structure, the idioms, the forms of speech, and the vocabulary are all taken from the Quran! They put an Arabic garment on their faith, even once again as their context got changed by the advent of Islam. “They produced apologies for the Christian faith, in response to the counter claims of Islam, not only in Syriac, the traditional language of Christians in the area, but in Arabic as well, the new lingua franca.”¹⁴ In fact, to a modern Arabic-speaker reading some of these theological treatises, their first impression is that these texts could have been written by a Muslim! That is because:

The author is impregnated with the Qur'anic culture. He does not live in a “Christian ghetto,” nor does he use what some might call a “Christian Arabic” vocabulary or style, and much less a “Christian Arabic grammar.” He shares with Muslims....the common Arabic culture, which carries many Qur'anic words and expressions, and a certain style and even some Muslim thoughts.¹⁵

Theologians from all Christian families of faith started to defend the credibility of Christianity. The first generations of Arabic-speaking theologians included Theodore Abu Qurrah (d. 825), Ammar Al-Basri (first quarter of the 9th century), and Abu Raitah Al-Tikriti (9th century).

Again, it is regrettable that the Western world, especially in regard to church history and systematic theology, has, to a great extent, ignored such names. Most church history books

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sindy Griffith, “Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians” in *The Beginning of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 63. Mark Swanson, professor of Islamic Studies at Luther Seminary in Minnesota has a fine article titled “Arabic as a Christian Language.” He speaks of the transmission of the use of Syriac and Coptic to the use of Arabic in the churches under Islam. Dr. Swanson lays out the difficulties which Christians first encountered, and then he goes on to demonstrate that they accepted it a language by which they could worship God and in it they could write theology—Arabic theology.

¹⁵ S. K. Samir, “The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c.750)” in *Christian Arabic Apologetics During the Abbasid Period (750-1258)*. Samir Khalil and Jørgen Nielsen. Eds. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 109.

begin by speaking about the background of the church, i.e. the Greco-Roman world before Christ, then Christ and the Early Church, and amazingly jump to Medieval Europe, and the Reformation!

This makes me outraged; it makes me angry. Did the Holy Spirit depart the whole region of the Middle East until He went to indwell Luther and the Reformers? Was there any church in the Middle East before the arrival of the Euro-American missionaries in the 19th century? Or, look at systematic theology books and the way they speak of the development of theology throughout the centuries. If you are fortunate, you might read something about the theological contributions of John Damascene (d.750) as the last Father of the Eastern Church, who knowing Arabic, did not write in Arabic. But one of his followers was Theodore Abu Qurrah, another monk who lived in the same monastery in Jerusalem. Abu Qurrah is the first known-by-name Arabic-speaking theologian!

The Abbasid Period (750-1258 AD) was the golden age of Islam and Arabic civilization. It was the time when Muslim scholars mastered several areas of science. Arabic-speaking Christians played a major role in this golden age. They were the well-educated ones who knew three or four languages (Greek, Syriac, Arabic, and Farsi). Not only did they write theology in Arabic, but also produced massive translations of the classical Greek works into Arabic. They pioneered the translation movement during the first 100 years of the Abbasid Period. They translated 90% of all Greek works known back then! Many Greek works by figures such as Aristotle, Plato, Euclid, Galen, and others were translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic. It is enough to say that the head of the translation department at Dar al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), the intellectual center for such scholarship and translation, was Hunayn ibn Ishaq, a Christian theologian. Dar al-Hikma was the first translation school in the Arab world.¹⁶ Another important figure was Qusta Ibn Luqa, a famous theologian and well-respected doctor, who was asked by a Muslim minister to accompany him to Mecca for the Pilgrimage. Qusta Ibn Luqa did not go, but he did compose a book on the hygiene of pilgrimage. A Christian wrote on the Pilgrimage to Mecca!

Again, who speaks of this? Who speaks of the role of Christians in building the Arab culture? Who says that the famous Muslim figures were taught under Christian scholars?¹⁷ Avicenna's teacher of medicine, for example, was al-Masihi, which means "the Christian."¹⁸ Avicenna, Averroës, and other great Muslim scholars "were the heirs of three or four centuries of hard work by Christian Arabs."¹⁹

Arabic-speaking theology is apologetical in nature. Samir Khalil has indicated, "Arab Christian theology is always...apologetic since it is obliged to defend itself against continual Muslim attack."²⁰ Thus, Christian Arab theologians actually had little liberty to write on

¹⁶ S. K. Samir, "The Christian Communities, Active Members of Arab Society throughout History" in *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: the Challenge of the Future*, ed. Andrea Pacini (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 79.

¹⁷ Ibid., 77-82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 81.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82.

²⁰ S. K. Samir, "Christian Arabic Literature in the Abbasid Period", in *Religion, Learning and Science in the Abbasid Period*, ed. M. J. L. Young, J. D. Latham, and R. B. Serjeant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 451.

different theological topics. Their topics were already set before them as they found opposition in Islam, the Qur'an, and the Muslim *mutakallimun*. The choice was not theirs; the theological agenda of their discussions with Islam was prepared before them. It was set by Muslim theological needs.²¹ Issues such as the incarnation, the Trinity, baptism, Eucharist, the crucifixion, the veneration of the cross, etc., were, and still are, the focus of the theological conversations between the two parties. They have become the standard issues in any Christian-Muslim theological conversation.²² Therefore, in a word, early Christian Arab theologians were, in a sense, forced to defend their theological positions in an "Arabic phraseology modelled on that employed by contemporary Muslim *mutakallimun*."²³ Yet, although the scope of their composition was limited, they, because of the varied Muslim attacks on the Christian faith, found themselves writing on a wide area of theology.

Most of these theological masterpieces remain in manuscript. Or, to use Bailey words, "These treasures were produced by authors who remain unknown, unhonored and unsung"²⁴

So, now, what do Arabic-speaking Christians have to offer to the church in North America, or to the church worldwide? Please allow me to highlight some issues:

Understanding Islam

The Arabic medieval contribution to theology is imperative in understanding Islam and early Islamic thought. It reflects on the nature of Islam as a religion and culture, and it speaks directly to the puzzling question of the case of religious minorities under Islam. Without such interactive and integrated theology, any understanding of Islam, I am strongly convinced, is vague and is created in ivory towers away from the real life of Islam and Muslims and the challenges they impose on non-Muslims.

The real Christian response to Islam is not done in a manner removed from Islam; rather, it is done within its borders. The best knowledge of Islam does not come from the media, books, lectures, or any similar device. These devices are tremendously helpful and full of insight. Yet, it has been proven throughout history that the best way to understand Islam is to understand it 'from within,' that is to say that without a daily encounter with Islam, our judgment and evaluation of it is void.

As mentioned earlier, one cannot dismiss the most significant fact about Islam, i.e. its comprehensiveness. Islam is never 'just another religion,' rather, it is a whole culture and way of life, and it composes one entity. Islam is 'religion/life.' "In other words, in Islam the religious and the political are indissolubly one."²⁵ Islam links faith with the empire, the creed with government. "Islam dates itself," Cragg reminds us, "from the Hijrah, the time, not of its Prophet's birth or of its own birth as a thing preached, but its birthday as a polity, as a

²¹ Samir and Neilson, ix.

²² Sindy Griffith, "Comparative Religion," 64.

²³ Sindy Griffith, "Habib ibn Khidmah," 162.

²⁴ Kenneth Bailey, "Arabic Speaking Christianity..."

²⁵ Hendrik Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions: The Coming Dialogue* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), 107.

thing politically established.”²⁶ There exists in Islam an eternal marriage between *Din wa Dawlah* (Religion and State).

Christians, therefore, have no liberty whatsoever to separate the two aspects of Islam. Muslims themselves never separated these two aspects of their religion. How can we, then, as non-Muslims, separate them? To deal with Islam and to come to a better understanding of it, one must live ‘within’ a Muslim community where Islam is lived, practiced, and where it shapes people’s actions and thoughts.

Arabic-speaking Christians understand this aspect of Islam. Their theology was written ‘from within.’ It was the theology of the marginalized and the challenged. Therefore, it is my conviction that if non-Arabic-speaking Christians seek a better knowledge of Islam, and if they desire to learn about the best way to dialogue with it, then, the reading of early Christian Arab theology is a must. To be sure, there are many things that are lacking in early Christian Arab theology; it is not a perfect theology. There is no perfect theology. Theology continuously seeks better formation and adjustment. Yet, it presents a close look at Islam and its challenges to Christianity. One should always remember it does not speak about Islam as though Islam were just an ideology of some people; rather, it addresses the deep challenges which Islam has imposed on Christianity. Again, allow me to quote Kenneth Bailey:

Arab Christians do not approach the reality of Islam with the baggage of the “orientalists...” Nor do Middle Eastern Christians lose touch with the harsh realities of centuries of Muslim treatment of non-Muslims within Islamic society. For Middle Eastern Christians there can be no romanticizing of Islam. In their presence Islam cannot ignore the dark pages of its own history...²⁷

Dialogue with Islam

The West has awoken to the harsh reality of 9/11. Since then, hundreds of books were written to address the issue of Islam—whether or not it is a peaceful religion that accepts tolerance, or whether or not it is a militant religion. Needless to say, several Arab Muslim countries, various organizations in the Middle East, and even individuals and organizations here on American soil launched a huge campaign to convince the Western World that Islam is peaceful. It is not my intention to address this issue now, yet I mention this as an example of the varying portrayals made of Islam to the average Western person.

Arabic-speaking Christians have much to offer here. We did not wait until 9/11 hit the world to start a conversation with Islam. Nor, did we wait until WCC started to dialogue with Islam. We have been involved in this business for over 14 hundred years! Sometimes we start the conversation, but most of the time we are in it against our will.

²⁶ Kenneth Cragg, *Sandals at the Mosque: Christian Presence Amid Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 61.

²⁷ Kenneth Bailey, “Arabic Speaking Christianity...”

Arabic-speaking Christians know that Christian-Muslim dialogue will be more effective once both parties agree on the terminology used. This is crucial. The misunderstanding between the two religions has been increasing in recent years. And as the whole world seeks a better knowledge of Islam, many corrupt and sometimes politically motivated views are offered. These views do not offer any help—especially to Christians under Islam.

Early Christian Arab theology teaches that in order to dialogue with Islam, one must first know Islam and, second, one has to know how to use relevant terminology in conversing with its adherents. Arabic-speaking Christians and their theology are absolutely relevant as it uses terminology that is not alien to the Muslim mind. “The most important and the most profound theological Christian discussion with Islam is only possible in the Arabic language. Only Arabic speaking Christianity can effectively lead the way.”²⁸

It is my deep conviction that the Western Church deeply needs the help of the Arabic-speaking church, as the first seeks a better understanding not only of Arabic terminology and its significance and relevance to Muslims, but also as it seeks dialogue with Islam. This might possibly usher in a new ecumenical era as churches worldwide seek to understand Islam, and thus might start a Western-Christian/Eastern-Christian Muslim dialogue.

Conclusions:

Please allow for me to conclude with some practical suggestions and questions. Many of us today represent organizations and seminaries. May I urge you as you think of Islam and dialogue with it to put into your considerations the Arabic-speaking Christians and their tremendous history of dealing with Islam?

- How is it possible to overlook a Christian experience with Islam which is 14 hundred years old?
- How do you overlook such a rich theological heritage already awaiting discovery?
- How is possible to ignore that “form of Christianity that does not mourn the loss of power influence because (we never) had any for over a thousand years?”²⁹
- Can you ignore a church which did not confuse the Cross with its flag?³⁰
- Can you really overlook the value of a church whose “ancestors died for the faith as “martyrs,” not “national heroes.”³¹
- Do you know of the many challenges facing the Arabic-speaking Church?
- Do you know that the Christian population in the so-called Holy Land decreases tremendously?
- Do you pray for the thousands of Iraqi Christians who are forced to convert to Islam or leave their home with everything in it?
- Do you know that Many Christians in the Middle East feel forgotten by their sisters and brother in the West?

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

- Do you know that it confuses us when you condemn this and that, and in the meantime, you do not speak of what many Christians go through in the Middle East?
- Do you know that some of our tax money goes to support Al-Azhar University? This is where the most fundamental Muslim student goes to study, and after graduation, they go on missions world-wide. No Christian can enroll at that university?! This is the same university where many Western Christians come to dialogue with Islam, yet Western Christians rarely talk to them about Arab Christians under Islam in the Middle East?!
- Do you know what it means to have suffered persecution?
- Do you know that most of the time “the perpetrators were not brought to justice, and often the larger community denied that the persecutions ever took place.”³²
- Do you know that our Christmas Easter celebrations are still holy occasions, and they have not “been taken over by a secular world?”³³
- Do you realize that you are missing a church which inherited the culture of the Scriptures? Therefore, it sees “the stories of the Bible (in) bright colors.”³⁴
- Do seminaries in the West care to teach Arabic to students just as they care to teach German, or French? In this regard, do you know that almost only 5 universities in the USA grant Ph.D.’s in Arab Christianity? How many universities offer Ph.D.’s in Jewish studies? Several publishing companies in Europe refuse to publish scholarly articles and proceedings of conferences on Arab Christianity. Leiden did agree to publish such works, but the most recent book is sold \$180!
- As you teach courses on Islam, Muslim Evangelism, Dialogue with Islam, and the alike, do you include a course on Arab Christianity in you curricula?

At the end, I ask you to pray for the 15 million forgotten Christians in the Middle East!

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.