

Is the Church in the Middle East on Life Support? Part 2

With the church of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) on life support and fingers regularly pointing at Islam as the cause of its demise, there are three challenges to be faced:

1. Widespread negative views of Islam and Muslims.
2. The possibility of Christianity as we know it ceasing to exist.
3. An intrinsic focus among evangelicals on conversion, particularly of Muslims in the MENA context.

Much of my teaching of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations and dialogue, then, has come to consist in the “management” of these three major challenges.

Furthermore, the reasonable amount of experience I have teaching Islam in the West tells me that these challenges are quite significant there as well.

When I teach Islam to Arab Christian students, I find it utterly important to help them reflect on their attitudes and feelings toward Islam and Muslims.

Their feelings may prevent them from even engaging with Muslims or, conversely, they may cause them to interact with them only aggressively or defensively.

Their understanding of Islam may cause them to categorize all Muslims in a single box that generates in them feelings of fear, bitterness or distrust.

I consider it more important for a seminary education to address these sorts of feelings in students than simply to increase their knowledge about Islam – although the latter is certainly crucial, too, in the next stages.

This conviction requires a realistic and pragmatic approach to feelings and

emotions rather than a repressive or idealistic approach.

As for the real possibility that Christianity as we have known it historically in the MENA region could cease to exist, the solution is not to fan these fears and respond to them by developing strategies of war against Islam. But rather the transformation should start from within.

My approach has been to increase students' awareness about the diversity in Islam.

When students realize that most of the Muslims they know from everyday life - the "real" Muslims - are not bent on violence and on harming them, they begin realizing that the minority population in the MENA region are not the Christians, but rather the militant nihilists who use religion not only against them but also against their Muslim neighbors of all streams.

Our evangelical Christian attachment to evangelism and conversion needs to go through a radical paradigm shift.

It is when we withdraw ourselves from the cosmic war of religions that we come that much closer to Christ's gospel.

We need to realize that the gospel is not about increasing the number of Christians in order to win a demographic war against Muslims.

Jesus did not address the ills of his society by seeking to make people more religious - in his case more Jewish.

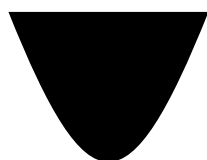
He did it by teaching them how to be more loving, more self-sacrificial, more like the children of their Father in heaven - in short, more like him, less religious.

When we refocus our lens and reframe our perspective on the MENA region, we discover that as formal Christianity decreases, there is inversely a growing movement of Christ-followers entering the Kingdom of God with looser ties to the more formal religious institution.

An increasing number in this subversive movement are not interested primarily in winning a war against a particular religion.

Unwittingly, we may be witnessing a discreet revolution that will overturn the societies of the MENA region as we know them.

So, when some of us feel inclined to toll the funeral bells for the official representative historical church in the MENA region - whose reality on the ground is very sad indeed - we may want to pause and give some thought to the body of Christ beyond the institutional walls.



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Editor's note: This is the second of a two-part series. Part one is available [here](#).

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