

## **Towards an Arabic Political Theology : A Contextual approach to Co-existence and Pluralism**

**Rev. Dr. Andrea Z. Stephanous**

This paper will focus on the contextual role of Arabic Theology that promotes dynamic citizenship as a base for coexistence. It will present as well an Arabic Political Theology as a core for pluralism.

Political Christianity in the Middle East is developing as a result of specific trends: crisis in personal identity and ideology; the decline of Arab nationalism; the emergence of Political Islam as an alternative political ideology; the imposition of 'democracy' as a foreign Western political concept; the lack of political legitimacy in existing regimes; authoritarian rule in most Middle Eastern countries; the lack of effective economic development; the re-Islamisation of existing institutions and political systems; the Islamisation of media, economy, and culture; a weak civil society and the absence of a political theology that supports coexistence.

“Arab Christian” is an important term, which will be used in this paper. Different groups in the Middle East and the West have debated a term which can imply contradiction. Some argue that to be an Arab is to be a Muslim because Arabism is equivalent to Islam. In the past, Caliph ‘Umar Ibn ‘Abd Al-‘Azīz (717-720) declared that Arab tribes cannot profess Christianity, and in August 1980 Libyan President Qadhāfi declared that Arab Christians must convert to Islam because “it is a contradiction to be both Arab and Christian.”<sup>1</sup> In an interview in 1985 Qadhāfi stated, “Christians who live in the Arab World have closer links to the Vatican than to Mecca. They have a European spirit in an Arab body.”<sup>2</sup>

However, Arab Christians have existed from the earliest days of Christianity.<sup>3</sup> There are various stories about Christianity in Arabia, where Islam has its roots, showing that Arab Christians were in existence before Islam; there was no contradiction in being an Arab and being a Christian. Another important factor is that most of the inhabitants of the region have the same roots. There is a debate over the origin of the Copts as well as the Maronites. Some argue that the Copts are descendants of the Pharaohs and that the Maronites are descendants of the Phoenicians, both having no connection to the Arab race. It is suggested that the inhabitants of this region are a mix of the Semitic, Hametic, and Caucasian peoples.

So whether they are Arabs, or descendants of the Pharaohs or Phoenicians in terms of race, it is suggested that the origins of the inhabitants of the region indicate they are Arabs. The term Arab Christian will be used in this paper; the words Arab and Christian are not mutually exclusive. Finally, one can argue that the term “Arab Christian” summarizes the core of this research. To be a part of this region, speak Arabic, be influenced by Arab-Islamic culture, to stand committed to the land and fight for its independence, and to live for its development and create its history is the ultimate goal of Arab Christians.

The development of civil society through the practices of democracy can contribute to flexible relationships between majorities and minorities. The dynamic concept of minority in the case of Arab Christians must be supported by a theological position that promotes citizenship and coexistence. The

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Antonie Wessels, *Arab and Christian? Christians in the Middle East*, Kampen: Pharos, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Otto F.A. Meinardus, *Two Thousands Years of Coptic Christianity*, Cairo: American University in Cairo, 1999; Bishop Athanāsīyūs, “The Copts through Ages”, in *WSCF Journal Quarterly*, May 1986; Samīr Fawzī, *Al-Qidīs Marqus wa-Ta’sīs Kanīsa al-Iskandariyya* (Saint Mark and the Establishment of the Church of Alexandria), Cairo: Al-Hay’a al-Mis’riyya al-‘Ama li-al-Kitāb; and Victor Sah’āb, *Al-‘Arab wa-Tārīkh al-Mas’āla al-Masīhīyya* (Arabs and the Christian Issue), Beirut: Al-Wihda, 1998.

theology of minorities in the Arab world is characterized by either passive resistance or sectarian violence. Bībawī indicates that the dreams and the visions that occupy the mind of the minority are of the second coming of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his Millennium. Such dreams reflect the desire of the minority to overcome current problems. However, insistence on a literal interpretation of Bible stories makes criticism difficult and reduces the possibility of developing a theology that can meet the needs of the community.<sup>4</sup>

A theology that focuses on heavenly intervention does not encourage co-existence. Theologies that support sectarian politics – both Muslim and Christian - hinder the promotion of dynamic citizenship. Theological development that encourages pluralism, coexistence and citizenship is needed.

The theology that the Copts adopted was based on passiveness and implies fundamental contradictions. The Church advocates a secular state while it promotes theocracy, seeing itself as the sole political alternative with the traditional view of the separation of the Kingdom of Heaven from the Kingdom of Earth with the eschatological expectation of God's intervention in the favor of His people. Practically, the Church becomes involved in the political struggle, not as a civil society institution, but as a political alternative. This results in the weakening of civil society and hinders the development of citizenship. Dynamic citizenship that is established as a result of common struggle; social, cultural and economic development; and political independence needs political theology that strengthens civil society and accepts comprehensive democracy.

The emphasis on Christian nationalism, the absence of the concept of citizenship, and the limiting of secularization to the political level all create a theological contradiction. On one hand it sees the connection between the Kingdom of God and the current reality; on the other hand it consider politics as a secular concept achieved through sectarian policies. This contradiction confuses religion with politics at the level of identity formation, but not within government, which tends to have a secular appearance. Thus religious identities within secular government limit the development of citizenship.

Religious Institutions need to develop an Arabic political theology that can contribute to the emergence of civil society, encourage democracy and realize dynamic citizenship. Such a task is crucial in developing the role of Arab Christians. A contextual theology that transcends the barriers of the past and contributes to the development of dynamic citizenship will enhance coexistence and affirm pluralism. Some ideas for such a contextual theology are suggested below.

The concept of the Church must be developed. As I have previously stated, religious institutions are considered an old structure of civil society. In that case, Church should not be a political alternative. Although there is no Arabic political theology that supports the notion that Church is a political alternative, the practices of the Church leaders and the instable policies of the state contribute to such a position. In that context, the Church is not part of civil society, but it becomes a political institution. However, if I consider the Church an old structure of civil society which must be integrated into the stream of the civil movement, it must have a theology that supports this role and takes it over to the heart of the developing civil society.

Arabic contextual theology must consider *loyalty* in its wider concept, replacing single religious obligations with multiple commitments. The problem with political Islam is its commitment to religion alone. Loyalty in its wider sense will encourage a contextual theology that accepts other ideas and sees the Kingdom of God as a way toward pluralism and diversity; thus pluralistic loyalty will contribute to the empowerment of civil society - instead of its Islamisation or Christianization. Arabic Political

---

<sup>4</sup> George Bībawī, *The Mind of the Minority*, handwritten document.

theology that introduces such a concept of loyalty will open the door for interaction between theology and society in a way that affirms citizenship. Citizenship is not a religion but religion will be a contributor to its formation. Multiple loyalties will contribute to dynamic citizenship.

Multiple loyalties will contribute to the restructuring of identity. Political theology that considers religious commitments as one component of identity structure is crucial. However, such relative and flexible concept of identity needs a theology that believes that no one owns the absolute truth. In that context, pluralism will become rooted in the religious context, which tends to believe in a single truth. This notion of absolute truth is one of the root causes of theological problems in the Arab world. To encourage a theology that recognizes multiple loyalties, pluralistic identity and transcends a single legitimate truth, multiple interpretations of the religious texts are required.

The *pluralistic interpretation* of religious text is a key concept in developing a political theology that promotes pluralism that is the basis of dynamic citizenship. Arabic political theology also needs this tool to promote pluralism at different levels of the Church and society. Such pluralism will enhance the practice of the concept at the theological level as well as at the social and political levels. The church will accept the need for openness and involvement with other religious communities. Muslims will contribute to a diverse civil society that legitimizes different opinions of the current reality and alternative visions of the future. Such pluralism affirms and establishes democracy that strengthens the civil society and leads to dynamic citizenship.

Arabic political theology considers *solidarity* as the basis of coexistence. Pluralism does not mean fragmentation. The theology that sees solidarity as a tool for common struggle and coexistence can contribute to the realization of dynamic citizenship. Solidarity must be based on the doctrine of creation where all humans have an equal right to exist and to thrive. Equality and justice come before solidarity. Religious doctrines are selective by nature and tend to exclude those who are different. A political theology that can establish a concept of solidarity and go beyond the limitation of doctrine will contribute to the notion of unity and diversity that is essential for civil society and democracy. Solidarity as a theological concept will also contribute to the socialization of the Church and encourage the religious institutions to become an active part of civil society.

*Institutionalization* is a necessary component in developing a political theology that contributes to dynamic citizenship. The absence of the concept of social sin characterizes an individualistic approach to society. This notion is clear in the current Coptic contextual theology that separates the Kingdom of God from the earth. However, political theology that promotes institutionalization as a theological concept will encourage the church to have an institutional role that is independent of the state and contribute to building bridges between the Church and society. Institutionalization will bring the Church to the heart of civil society and help it to overcome the isolation and alienation that the Church faces in the Arab society. It will also establish the role of the Church as an institution, limit the role of individual to some extent and will encourage democracy. Institutionalization will affirm the role of God's people as a community committed to equality, justice and full involvement and these are the essences of dynamic citizenship.

These are some ideas that are needed to develop a contextual theology that can respond to the social and political development of the Arab world and meet the needs of the Arab Christian as a catalytic in the process of achieving dynamic citizenship. An Arabic political theology that demonstrates the involvement of Arab Christians in the public life of the Middle East is an area for future research.