

AN ARAB VIEW OF THE MILLENNIUM

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The new millennium is an opportunity for the Arab people to affirm the multiple components of this historic occasion that the world commemorates, in a manner that is meaningful both to us and to others in the world. We must not allow the millennium to be defined by others as merely a tourism event or a celebration of Western technological power and extravaganza. Nor is this a moment to be defined mainly as an entertainment or economic opportunity. The millennium celebration is both a global and a local event. It is about religion and political conduct. It is about ancient history and contemporary behavior. This is an opportunity, therefore, for us to focus on what I believe should be the core, defining values of the moment values related to the ethics and behavior of people and political powers, now and two millennia ago. It is a moment, in particular, that challenges Arab Christians to give new impetus and meaning to their ancient faith.

The essence of the millennium -- the message of human righteousness -- is manifested by the commitment of human beings to act according to their faith in the single Abrahamic God, in a context that honors important aspects of the original mission of Jesus Christ in this region: anti-imperial resistance and a commitment to spiritual and ethical human values. The original context of Jesus' life remains valid and relevant for us today in the Arab World; the people of our region continue to struggle for social justice and national equity through principles rooted in faith, and through an Abrahamic value system that commands us to treat all human beings as God's equal children.

The message and mission of Jesus endure today because they offered a sense of justice and hope for ordinary people 2000 years ago; they were and remain relevant to all humankind, not just to a single tribe or society; they

transcend time and place, appealing to all people, throughout the last two millennia. The context of Roman imperial Palestine in which Jesus lived is very familiar to Arabs today, for we still struggle against some of the same political oppressions and socio-economic injustices that Jesus challenged in His day. Therefore we should use the occasion of the millennium to focus on both the specificity of the Arab context in Palestine and the Levant, as well as the universality and timelessness of Jesus' message in His day. It is not sufficient only to celebrate the start of the third millennium after the mission of Jesus; we must also work to promote greater appreciation throughout the world of the full dimensions of Jesus' mission, Christian values, and the concerns of contemporary Arabism.

We can do this first by appreciating the several different dimensions of the millennium phenomenon, and how they relate to one another and to our world today. These dimensions include the land, the person of Jesus Christ, the phenomenon of prophecy and prophets, the concept of God and His Salvation

Plan for all humankind, the multiplicity of human societies and national groups in the world, and the element of time.

I suggest that we should recognize Jesus Christ within His full context, as one of many prophets whom God sent to this particular land to teach humankind about His inclusive, comprehensive view of human salvation through righteousness and faith. God sent many prophets to this land, and they are variously mentioned and honored in the holy books of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The particular moral richness of contemporary Arab society is that we honor and revere all these Abrahamic prophets, as mentioned in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran. This broad celebration of separate and successive, but common, Abrahamic religious traditions is appropriate because this pluralism defines modern Arab society. Our Arab society has almost always manifested a rather spectacular urban and village heritage based on pluralism, tolerance, solidarity and coexistence among different religions and ethnic groups.

Because we Arabs now enjoy widespread spiritual and physical custody of

this Holy Land that spans the entire Levant and other parts of the Middle East,

it is our responsibility to define and celebrate the millennium in its most Complete and inclusive manner not merely a commemoration of Jesus Christ, but a celebration and reminder of the wider prophetic mission as planned and managed by God Himself through the whole range of Abrahamic prophets mentioned in the Old Testament, the New Testament and the Quran.

To be selective and narrow in one's spiritual, ethnic, geographic, or national focus, it seems to me, would be to unfairly restrict the expansive, inclusive, and universal aims of God's noble goals as He unveiled them to successive generations and peoples through His many prophets.

We should also ask ourselves: what are we celebrating? Do we celebrate the law of God as this was handed down to humankind in this area? Do we celebrate the tradition of prophecy and prophets that God repeatedly sent to this land to call humans to righteous behavior? Do we celebrate the covenants

between God and humankind that were successively entered into through Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad? Do we celebrate God's wider Messianic Salvation Plan or Mission for all humankind? All of these basic elements of the

millennial moment reflect historical events as recorded in the holy books that took place here, in this land. Our special obligation as contemporary Arab custodians of the land and its inter-faith tradition is to define the millennium moment accurately and generously, so that its meaning is enhanced and enriched, not diminished or cheapened.

We can answer the question of what we celebrate by asking another question:

what do we value as individual human beings and collective societies? We might answer by saying that we value righteous behavior by individuals, or an ethic of human love and mercy, or the promotion of compassion and forgiveness as defining human values, or human adherence to humility and faith in God.

We should also define those goals which we aspire to achieve by manifesting the above values. Do we aspire to equality for all human beings in their personal lives as their collective national lives? Perhaps we aspire to a sense of peace based on justice. Or maybe we aspire only to the goal of promoting goodwill to all men and women on earth.

And finally, these questions should prompt us to acknowledge precisely what it is that we fear. I would suggest that our shared Abrahamic faith teaches us to fear two things that may be seen as two sides of the same coin: we fear a life of exaggerated materialism and secularism that ignores the dictates of faith in God and His way; we also fear the consequences of an exaggerated religiosity that ignores the temporal rights of human beings in their ancestral lands, and that denies individuals their freedom of action and choice within the guidelines of their morality and faith.

What do we do, therefore, in view of the above questions, and in the context of the millennial moment that defines the world, the special responsibility that defines our modern Arab culture, and the unique occasion that defines our particular landscape? I would urge first of all that we appreciate the special opportunity we have as Arabs to engage the rest of the world in this millennial arena in which we have more than equal opportunity to raise the relevant issues and address the pertinent questions. This may be the only modern arena in which Arabs match Israel and the West in terms of our assets and credibility.

Consequently, I suggest, we should first affirm the unfinished nature of Christ's mission in this land. We should make it clear that the millennial moment is not only about celebrating Christ's birth, but also about working hard today to fulfill His life mission. The millennium is not only about recalling what happened in the past, but also about working to attain rights and righteousness today. It is not only about historical events, but also about contemporary goals and future promises that pertain to all humankind.

Second, we should go beyond religious dialogue to seek solidarity among the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and between the

peoples of this region and others throughout the world. In the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Quran, God revealed His Salvation Plan through many different prophets and peoples. It is particularly incumbent upon Arab Christians today to demonstrate the common moral values that define all three religions, for Arab Christians uniquely represent that point of cultural and spiritual commonality with the preceding Jewish faith and the succeeding Muslim faith. We are uniquely placed to affirm and to put into practice God's wish to bless and protect all humankind, spiritually symbolized by the one family of Isaac and Ishmael, and of Jacob and Esau. Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ lived 2000 years ago in order to promote righteous behavior according to the laws of the Old Testament, or the Hebrew Bible, and they are also revered as prophets in the Quran. The birth, life, mission, and death of Jesus Christ that we commemorate these days is a point of spiritual and moral convergence among the three Abrahamic faiths not the sole possession of one faith or people. This is aptly captured in God's proclamation in the Quran (21:70) that "We delivered Abraham and Lot unto the land that We had blessed for all beings" (my emphasis).

Third, this should be an opportunity for Arabs, Christians and Muslims to redefine a more realistic, constructive, and effective role for religion in public life, to complement spirituality's long-standing source of strength and comfort for individuals in their private lives. Arab Christians in particular should find new ways for their churches to engage more in the public issues that face their societies. Churches as institutions should live up to that profound responsibility and role that was defined for them 2000 years ago. If the church as a whole is the institutional, global legacy of Jesus' life and mission, the Arab church in particular is the direct, linear inheritor of the legacy of Jesus Christ in the land of his birth, life, and death. Yet, the Arab church today is drifting in the land of its birth. We celebrate the birth of Christ at a moment when Arab Christianity is suffering depletions in numbers and marginalization in its mission. Our celebration of Jesus' birth should be a moment to celebrate the rebirth of a more activist Christianity that struggles for justice and

righteousness in this spiritually rich land. The revival of a dynamic Christian institutional presence in this land should take place within the wider context of Christian-Muslim partnership and solidarity that aim to address pressing domestic challenges and regional tensions. We have much to learn from the recent public activism of churches for social, economic, and political equity in other parts of the world, especially in Latin America, South Africa, Eastern Europe, and North America. Issues such as economic disparity, social marginalization, political autocracy, good governance, pluralism, gender equality, and environmental protection, to mention only a few, beg for a more concrete, public response by Arab churches -- often the same churches that were born nearly 2000 years ago in a crucible of explicit action for the equal socio-economic and political rights of all people.

Christian individuals and churches in the Middle East should stop acting like vulnerable religious minorities, and start acting like core elements in a majority coalition of Arab and Semitic human beings who share both a rich spiritual legacy and an explicit array of contemporary human, national, and political rights. The millennium is the moment to celebrate both the genesis and the continuing relevance and efficacy of Christianity as a faith that espouses love, tolerance, and forgiveness, and as a strategically placed historical phenomenon that bridges the other, Jewish and Muslim, members of the Abrahamic family.