

SUERMAN, HARALD, ed., *Kirche und Katholizismus seit 1945*. VII. *Naher Osten und Nordafrika*, Schönning, Paderborn – München – Wien – Zürich 2010; pp. XX + 255. € 39,90. ISBN 978-3-506-74465-4.

No future for the Christians in the Near and Middle East? The 1994 book *Vie et mort des chrétiens d'Orient* predicted a drowning of the Oriental Churches. The main reason given was the fall of influence of Lebanese Christians, that once their say is gone at home, their country will no longer be able to inspire the region in a way supportive of a Christian presence. The author of the 1994 essay wrote under a pen-name, Jean-Pierre Valognes, a dramatic expression of the danger out of which he was writing.

Not much more than a year before the outset of what is now often called the «Arab Spring» the Christians of the Arab world plus Turkey and Israel received a new presentation. This is the seventh and last volume of the valuable collection edited by Monsignor Erwin Gatz († 2011) on «Church and Catholicism since 1945». It covers the Arab speaking world and Turkey. In comparison to the situation with other regions, a survey of contemporary Catholicism in the Near and Middle East faces particular challenges: the Catholic Church itself lives here as a unique variety of rites and hierarchies. Prof. Suermann, the volume editor, is a specialist in early Christian texts on Islam but also has, as director of the *Missionswissenschaftliches Institut* and through his work for *missio*, Aachen, life contacts with today's Churches in the zone. He arranged the volume's contents geographically and, so to speak, clock-wise: from Turkey to Iraq, to Syria, the Lebanon, Jordan, the Holy Land, the Arab peninsula, Egypt, and finally to the Maghreb. Suermann entrusted two sections, Turkey and Syria, to Herman Teule, professor for Oriental Christianity at Nijmegen; and the section on the Holy Land to Rainer Zimmer-Winkel, Berlin.

Often the survey needs to look beyond the confines of the title; that is, in order to understand «Catholicism since 1945» one also has to present the years before that, and other religious communities. The Churches' regional divisions and administrations do not follow modern state borders; therefore, grouping the material according to today's political map may be rather artificial. The editor is aware of this problem (cf. V), and the authors are not trapped by it (cf., e.g. 160).

The book provides statistics, especially demographics, ecclesial structures, state legislations, it has a focus on places, projects, persons and events. For a handbook, this is certainly the expectable choice. What is particularly valuable is, however, that on many pages, the authors dare to sketch, after providing the facts, also «the atmosphere»: for example, Christian reticence to denounce acts of discrimination in Turkey (52); the secret Church life in Saudi Arabia (183).

No future for Oriental Christians? The book makes six statements in response to this question. a) It shows that there is impressive life from liturgy to charity in many Churches, in spite of the difficulties. b) There are Christians migrating *into* the area; a factor that strengthens the «Latin» Church: Catholic workers, for example from the Philippines, want to practice their faith in, say, Qatar (180) or Israel (161). c) The reputation of the Catholic Church has grown in North Africa after the martyrdom of the Tibherine monks (Algeria, 1996), because of the fact that other religious did not consequently abandon the region and perhaps also because of the ordination of

several Arab bishops. d) «Western» decisions contribute to the fall of Oriental Christianity, e.g., the US invasion to Iraq; or seem to demonstrate lack of interest, e.g., the closure of several European research institutions on Eastern Christianity (238). e) The effects of migration movements *within* the area, e.g. from the Bagdad zone to Northern Iraq, cannot yet be foretold. f) Interreligious dialogue and academic exchange does in some cases encourage the Muslim population to treasure Christian presence as part of their own heritage, as inspiring partners and as a test case in religious freedom. One might add now that some of the recent political developments offer new possibilities for Christians: tourism should not be undervalued; and newly formed, responsible and self-assured Muslim leaders are looking for the socio-political experience and teaching of the Church in a time of rethinking and reconstruction.

The handbook offers a wealth of precise information. (The few exceptions include page 49: Ankara Üniversitesi is given the honour «der ältesten Universität [des] Landes», but in fact it is only the first university of *modern* Turkey: Istanbul University is of course centuries older.) The combination of historical contexts, exact numbers and especially insider knowledge makes this work immensely useful in a moment when the Christians' future of the region is in danger and solid, sober information is needed.

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