



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

# ROAD TO EMMAUS

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# WHERE THE CROSS DIVIDES THE ROAD: THOUGHTS ON ORTHODOXY AND ISLAM

In Part II of a wide-ranging interview, Dr. George Bebawi speaks of his experience of Orthodoxy in England with Russian Orthodox émigrés, clergy, and theologians; his concern about the vulnerability of Christian youth in the West; and his observations on Judaism and Islam in relation to Orthodoxy.

Born in Egypt in 1938, Dr. George graduated from the Coptic Orthodox Theological College in Cairo after a rich spiritual youth spent in the company of contemporary 20th-century Coptic Egyptian desert fathers of Cairo and Scetis. (See *Road to Emmaus*, Summer, 2009, Issue 38). He went on to attend Cambridge University on scholarship, where he studied Theology, Patristics, and Biblical Criticism, receiving an M.Lit and Ph.D at Cambridge University in 1970. Dr. George taught Theology, Patristics, Church History, and Islamic studies at Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant seminaries in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. His hopes for Christian unity also motivated him to serve on various committees of the World Council of Churches and in the Secretariat for Christian Unity at the Vatican. During this period he was also an advisor on Christian affairs for Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat before Sadat's assassination in 1981, and in 1982 served as director of the Red Cross in Beirut during the First Lebanese-Israeli war.

Dr. George returned to England in 1984 where he taught at St. John's College, Nottingham University, until 2000. From 2000-2002 he was the Director of Studies at the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge, England, and lectured on Islam and Judaism for the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges. He also served on a project for the Centre for Advanced Religious and Theological Studies, "The Jewish Roots of Christian Worship" at Cambridge University's

Faculty of Divinity. Recently retired from Cambridge, *Road to Emmaus* staff was privileged to spend several warm and illuminating mornings speaking with Dr. George about his life and work.

### A Guest of the Russian Orthodox Church

RTE: Dr. George, in our first interview you mentioned that you've been a guest of the Moscow Patriarchate since your arrival in London over forty years ago. How did that come about?

DR. GEORGE: When I came to England in 1965 to study in Cambridge, I immediately went to the Russian Church in Oxford to meet the Orthodox theologian Nicholas Zernov. Dr. Zernov introduced me to Archbishop [later Metropolitan] Anthony Bloom<sup>1</sup>, and that was an incident that has to be recorded. I was very ill with the flu from landing in the cold of England after the warm weather of Egypt, and as I was staying at the Orthodox St. Gregory and St. Macrina House in Oxford, I went to Vespers on Saturday evening in the house chapel. I asked the priest, an English convert to Orthodoxy, to anoint me, and he replied, "Are you Orthodox?" I said, "Yes," because I regarded myself as Orthodox.

So when he anointed me, he did it in the Byzantine way with a brush and I said, "Oh, that's different from our way." He said, "Yours? What is your way?" "Coptic," I said, and he exclaimed, "Oh, you're a Copt, I can't even finish the anointing, and he began wiping the oil off. Dr. Zernov was standing there with me. I was shocked. I said, "But Father, you aren't wiping the oil off, you are rubbing it in and anointing me even more." He replied, "I can't even finish the prayers." A short Russian conversation followed between him and Dr. Zernov, who was standing with me, and finally the priest said, "You have to speak to Archbishop Anthony." So, Zernov called the archbishop, who asked me, "Do you believe in the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ?" I said, "Yes." "Do you believe in the two natures of Christ?" "Yes." "Do you believe that the Council of Chalcedon in 451 is a legitimate council of the Church?" I said, "Yes."

After speaking to the archbishop, the priest came and finished the anointing and said, "Archbishop Anthony said that if you want to receive Commu-

<sup>1</sup> Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) of Sourozh (1914 - 2003): Founder of the Diocese of Sourozh, the Russian Orthodox Moscow Patriarchate's diocese for Great Britain and Ireland. Of Russian descent, His Eminence was born in Switzerland and educated as a medical doctor in Paris. Later he became a hieromonk, was consecrated as Bishop in 1957 and Archbishop in 1962, in charge of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain and Ireland. In 1963 he was appointed Exarch of the Moscow Patriarchate in Western Europe, and in 1966 was raised to the rank of Metropolitan.

nion tomorrow, you can." So, I received Holy Communion, and a week later I went to see Archbishop Anthony. He gave me such a welcome! He gave me a Russian bear hug, and said to me, "You are an amazing man. What made you think that the Russian Church is Orthodox?" I said, "Because many of us who have begun to study Patristics feel that the writings of the Russian theologians are in the tradition of the Fathers and the liturgy."

In England, Archbishop Anthony became my spiritual father. I confessed to him for twenty-five years. I had thought of going to the monastery, but finally decided to marry. Archbishop Anthony said, "The monasteries are full of people. They are good people and we need their prayers, but we also need people to stay in the world. You stay and witness to Christ." This was not an order, but the outcome of a series of long talks, usually several hours a week. At the end of my confessions, he would say, "George, you stay where you are. The world is flooded with darkness. We need people who have seen the light. If they do not have the light in themselves, at least they have seen it and can point to it." I also remember him saying, "Where did Adam fall? In paradise! So the environment does not bring holiness to anyone. The environment is a protection, but it doesn't bring holiness. Holiness comes directly from God to the human soul." So," he said, "stay at Cambridge."

I remember a story he told me about some British and American pilgrims who visited Russia and drove for six hours to a monastery. They arrived after midnight and were very tired. A monk came out to greet them and they said, "Father, give us a word." He said, "Weep for your sins, the world is evil, and here are some chocolates for you to eat." Archbishop Anthony said that to come out at midnight and say something that is both deeply truthful and as equally kind to people who have been driving for six hours is very important. How else can you touch a soul? You become more convinced of this with time and inner work.

### Archbishop Anthony Bloom on Lay Spirituality

Archbishop Anthony often discouraged people from reading *The Philokalia* apart from Volume I, the writings on the prayer of the heart. He would say, "We need someone to take the *Philokalia* and dilute it to make it drinkable. This is the great challenge for Orthodoxy today: spirituality for the laity.... When you look at the books that have been published since the revival of Patristic and liturgical studies, most of our French and English transla-

tions are the works of ascetics. They are great teachings, but they talk about a spiritual life that belongs to those who have the time for solitude.” He always encouraged the laity to say the Jesus Prayer. “Try to break away from whatever you are doing for a minute or two. If you succeed in that, come and see me, and I will tell you something more.” I look back and say now, “How right!” Spirituality for the laity is what we absolutely need.

Once, at a diocesan conference, a monk came to give us a talk on the Prayer of the Heart. Sitting opposite Archbishop Anthony, I could feel from the movement of his feet under the table that he was irritated. He stood up after the monk finished and said, “Father, I am a simple-minded man (he was not simple-minded at all) and I did not understand many of the things you said. Can you please explain to me and to these other simple-minded people what you mean by the ‘uncreated light’? What is it? But if that is too difficult, could you just tell me how I know if it’s working in me?”

You could see the bewilderment on the face of the monk. I sat there trying not to laugh, and thinking, “I wonder what he’ll say?” He answered, “Why Vladika, that’s very easy. You just have to read St. Gregory Palamas.” Then Archbishop Anthony suddenly looked over at me and said, “George!” My blood pressure shot up and I stopped laughing. “What did Gregory of Palamas say?” I said, “Out of my head, I don’t remember.... Say about what?” “What did he say about how the uncreated light works in us?” I replied, “As far as I know, and Father has to correct me, he talks about deification.” “Ah,” said the archbishop, “so what is deification? Right now, I have a pain in my spine (he had been injured) and I can hardly stand up, and you come and tell me that I have been made divine? What does this mean, George?”

I said, “It means that the state of the body remains in its mortality because that will be redeemed on the last day, at the final Resurrection, but the inner life is free, free from passions and free from being linked into a source of life other than God.”

He replied, “Ah, now you’ve become academic—so then, what is inner freedom? I said, “You know that you are free inwardly because you aren’t afraid, you don’t desire anything. You are content in a way, not psychologically, but ontologically.” “So, what does this mean?” He interrogated me like this in front of the whole meeting for the next half hour. Whatever I said became a question. Finally, I said, “Vladika, I think that the deification in me is saying that it’s time to have coffee.” And he laughed.

On the way out, he said to me, “How long are we going to speak in such a

technical way to our own people, to drive them out of the Church? We need to work out a simple presentation, in simple English to our own believers, or we will lose them. If we don’t lose them, we will certainly lose their children.”

Another time, a professor of liturgical studies came to one of these seminars. He could tell you off the top of his head how the liturgy was celebrated in tenth-century Constantinople, and exactly what happened when the emperor entered Hagia Sophia. He had produced a perfect overhead projector show, and when he finished, Archbishop Anthony said, “This is one of the very best Orthodox museum exhibits I’ve seen, but tell us, how should we pray in the liturgy? I don’t care how the bishop gets dressed, or when he should be dressed. All these things are important, but tell me, as a layperson, how should I pray in the liturgy? What does it mean to be in the service?”

Archbishop Anthony always regarded the Holy Mysteries as the revelation of the Holy Trinity and recommended that people read Gogol’s *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*. He also believed that serving the liturgy was something that was handed down to a new priest by an older priest who had been serving for a long time. He used the expression, “The art of the liturgy”—that is, the art of serving it and of participating in it with joy. This art of spirituality is what our priests and bishops need to hand down to the laity.

## Old Russian Traditions

I have a deep sorrow that the older generation of Russians at the Russian Cathedral in London has already died. I could not communicate with many of them, but they were very pious people and there was something special about them. They came out of an extremely rich spiritual tradition that was not written down, or if it was written, it hasn’t yet reached us in translation.

For instance, from these old Russian people we learned that when you make the sign of the Cross—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—you are binding yourself to the Cross by the Holy Spirit. When I first came to the Russian Church, Archbishop Anthony gave me a silver cross, which he himself put on me. He asked, “Do you know what this means?” I said no, and he replied, “It reminds you of your baptism and makes you a *stavrophoros*—a cross-bearer. That is the little-schema for a layperson like you.”

As he said this, a priest named Fr. Alexander standing with us added a few words in Russian. Archbishop Anthony said, “Fr. Alexander agrees with me because he heard this from elders at the Kiev Caves Lavra—that when you

put on the cross, you put on the little schema.” I said, “Does this mean I’m half a monk?” He said, “Well George, I know your love of monasticism, and I don’t want you to miss it. The elders tell us that whatever is in the Church, we can reach it by making the sign of the Cross.”

Fr. Alexander added, “If you can’t come to church to pray, when you make the sign of the Cross, you are in front of the altar of God—and where is the altar of God, George? Don’t tell me that it is only in church. It is also in the human heart when the sign of the Cross is there.” I joked, “Does this mean that if I don’t appear in church on Sunday I am exempt?” “No,” he said, “it doesn’t. This is for you as an individual—when you come to church you share the life in Christ with other believers.” It is important to document these old traditions. If we don’t they will be lost.

If we really want to reach out to the non-Orthodox, to help them be spiritually free, we need something of substance, because people in our century are hungry for spirituality. They are tired of doctrines and debates, but we can convert doctrine into a deep mystical relationship with God. If we succeed in that, then we can gain a lot of people. The philosophical-rational approach is needed only for debate, but when it comes to our personal life, the approach must be our inner life: how the Trinity is important for prayer, for example, or for knowing love. If we fail in this, we haven’t done a good job. Last Christmas, I gave my staunch Protestant neighbor a copy of St. Ephraim the Syrian. She asked, “What’s this?” I replied, “Just a book for you to read in your spare time.” She came to me a few days later saying, “George, who is Ephraim the Syrian?” Her life had been totally turned around.

Of course, the saints are a great challenge for Protestants—the Reformation cut that understanding off completely. Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli thrust a huge knife into the Body of Christ. The saints are always the greatest condemnation of any Christian community that lacks chastity, love, forgiveness, and martyrdom, because they showed us the way with their own lives. When the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in London received a portion of the relics of a bishop who had been killed by the Communists in Russia, there was a big procession in the cathedral with the relics and the icon. A visiting Anglican priest sitting next to me asked, “What is the meaning of this procession with the icon and the relic of the bishop?”

I said, “It is a procession of victory. Here is a man who has been crowned as a martyr, and we think it is the greatest end of our prayer, of our Christian life as a whole. You can commemorate the saints in services, as you Angli-

cans do, but if you also have a relic or an icon you move from the mental imaginative side of human life into the reality, the incarnation, the understanding that the saints and the Church really exist. When we process with the icon and the relic, it is not something just in the head, this is a real man.” He asked, “I wonder why we don’t do that in the Church of England?” I said, “I don’t know, but I think your history is here.”

### Freedom, Canons, and Fasting

What is most missing from our Orthodoxy is post-baptismal catechesis, which has been abolished by custom. Now, once you are baptized, you are “finished,” but if we look back at the fourth-century sources, there was a definite post-baptismal catechesis that is no longer done. If we go back to St. John Cassian and Evagrius, we see that there was a good amount of teaching on freedom in the post-baptismal catechism: how to use your freedom and how to be wise enough to look for the better choice. For example, in the New Creation, when we abstain we abstain from good things, not only from evil. We abstain from good things for our own good—not because God has imposed this on us, but because we think, “I am better off without....” This is like people who take on an ascetic life in the world. They have chosen poverty and chastity, and live on an almost zero income. They have chosen the best, and chosen these good things for their own way of life.

RTE: You are talking about spiritual freedom in a way that I’ve also heard many Russian priests talk about it, but balancing freedom and tradition can be perplexing for converts. For instance, one person might read *The Rudder* and become preoccupied with canons as externally enforced rules, or conversely might decide that these are just outdated edicts that don’t fit our time, and that “*economia*” (used to justify one’s own interpretation) covers all. Both are dangerous shoals.

DR. GEORGE: Yes, we encounter this in many ways, for instance with fasting. One of the good things we used to have in England, though I haven’t yet seen it in America, is that from time to time a bishop will call for a diocesan conference for the clergy, or for both the clergy and the people. The clergy meeting will include heavy-duty work on a particular subject, where a very good study has to be submitted and discussed thoroughly, and no one is immune from criticism or scrutiny.



For one of these sessions, I did a lengthy research on fasting in the Church, trying to separate the practice as a custom from the practice that has been written into the canons. I also looked at the writings of the 12th-century Greek Canonist Zonaras and others who chronicled the fasting practices of the Church from the beginning. The oldest fasts we know of are cited by Tertullian in the first, second, and third centuries, and we know from Origen of Alexandria that the Wednesday/Friday fast and Great Lent were observed before 290. The Great Fast was forty days at first, but we don't know how old the rule is that you shouldn't fast on Saturday and Sunday, which is a day of rejoicing for the Resurrection. Even Isaac the Syrian, who was 5th-6th century, says, "the monk who is afflicted with gluttony rejoices at the coming of Saturday and Sunday." It is very clear that at that time there was no abstaining from food on Saturday and Sunday, at least in the coenobitic communities." (It is also a common mistake to think that Sunday replaced the Sabbath. That is not true, the Sabbath is still there, and we don't fast on the Sabbath, but it is not celebrated in the Jewish way.)

I also found in the writings of Sozomen (375-447) and Socrates of Constantinople (380-mid 4th-century), two of our earliest Church historians, that there was no specific diet for general fasting before the end of the fourth century. Abstaining from meat goes back to the time when there were no supermarkets or refrigeration. When an animal was killed, the whole village was invited to the feast as everything must be eaten quickly. Eating meat was considered part of a celebration in eastern oriental customs; as a daily diet, most people ate vegetables and grains. But if we engage in fasting, solitude, and staying away from social engagements, there are no banquets. Gradually, the idea of keeping solitude and not being busy with the preparation of food took hold, and monastic tradition said, "Eat simple food." There is no canon law, however, that forbids us to eat meat because that would be Gnosticism. The Church cannot forbid any food.

RTE: Why would that be Gnostic?

DR. GEORGE: Because the Gnostics believe that meat is the work of the Evil God, the flesh. Some of the Gnostics also believe that you can't eat meat because of reincarnation—that is, you might be eating the leg of your grandmother who came back as a chicken. The Manicheans also have something like this. There is no canon law that actually says, "You are not allowed to

*Opposite: Dr. George Bebawi.*

eat this or that.” Nevertheless, there is a higher canon, the canon of Isaac the Syrian, which says, “In the time of fasting, you should not make yourself busy by preparing a big banquet because time has to be taken for prayer and for reading the Scriptures and being in communion with God and the saints.” So, here is a delicate situation where we have to look carefully at freedom of choice, in order to choose the better thing.

I also looked at the dialogues with the desert fathers by John Cassian. In Cassian’s dialogue with the hermit Theonas, Theonas says that what is written in the Word of God as a commandment has to be kept at all times, and we are sinners if we break it, but the things that are not commandments we can abstain from, from time to time. He says that fasting is not a commandment from God, that fasting is a practice, and when we eat it is not a sin.

There is a very fine element of discernment here. A commandment is something that runs through the whole of our life. You don’t obey it for a time and then stop; you keep it for your entire life. But fasting, sleeping, eating, marrying, working—all of these things we can do or not do according to our own discretion. Theonas concluded that people should fast according to their ability.

You read in Zonaras and other Greek canonists that you abstain from food before the Eucharist, not because this is canon law, but because you prefer to partake of the divine, heavenly things before you eat earthly food. Traditional Orthodox take this very seriously. You know, don’t you, that many Serbian and Romanian Orthodox fast for a whole week before they receive Communion, as do some older Russians? It is a preference for the better, not something imposed from above by an authority.

RTE: Yes, but don’t you think that there is a danger in speaking of fasting as a preference for something better? Our human nature tends to take the “wide road” the moment we think we have a choice.

DR. GEORGE: I agree. We have to teach this to new converts, but with great care. Isaac the Syrian says, “You cannot teach those who are still in the time of slavery anything about freedom, or you will lose them.” You cannot say to people, “Do whatever you like.”

When we look back in history, we have this accumulated information that cannot easily be sorted out. Great care has to be taken in Orthodoxy that we look for the best. The best is our mystical union with Christ, and this comes about not only through abstaining from food but also through prayer. This is an essential teaching.

In these controversies, you have two schools of thought. For example, Evagrius of Pontus was very vigorous, while Isaiah of Scetis was free and moderate. Then you have Isaac the Syrian saying, “The moderate way is the royal way and it saves many people.” If you go too far into asceticism you can hurt yourself, and if you relax completely, you hurt yourself also, but if you stay in the middle, you are on the Royal Road.... The basic teaching of Isaiah of Scetis is that if you choose a rule for your life, you choose it out of your love for Christ. You don’t choose it in order to become better than other people.

RTE: That is another reason for following the fast that the Church lays down. In following the same practice as everyone else, there is strength in that unity, and it isn’t your own special way.

DR. GEORGE: No, there is no private practice in Orthodoxy. You know, it is very hard to tell converts, “There is not even any private prayer in Orthodoxy. Your private prayers are part of the prayers of the Church. You pray to grow up in your Christian life to be part of the Body of Christ.” “But what about my personal prayers?” they ask. “Yes, they are also within the boundaries of the liturgical books, the daily office, and what has been handed over by tradition.” Because I am a part of this world that is called to redemption, my personal prayers are not only for myself, but for the world, the Church, the state, the sick, and so on.... Personal prayers must not become a way to escape from this life. Real freedom also has its ground in love.

### Freedom and the Person: Where the Cross Divides the Road

In speaking of our “personal life,” I had a telephone call this morning from a young man writing an essay on Boëthius, a 6th-century Latin writer, on what it means to be a person in the Trinity. The West adopted the word *persona*, and then Boëthius added to the concept by using it to mean an individual in nature. Over the centuries, the West dropped the original meaning of “person” and was left with only the meaning of “individual,” while in the era of Augustine, in the old way of speaking, you became a person in relationship to others, not by yourself.

Now, in England and America people say to me, “I am an individual in my own right.” Well, I’m sorry, that’s not Christianity. Individuality only came in with the Enlightenment. You are an individual, but you are also called to become a person, and that is how you practice love. You practice love as

communion. If we talk about freedom, we have to tell people that this is the freedom of love, not a freedom to run wild. Freedom is guided by love of the Lord and by love for the community. That is, the community that I am actually a part of, not as people sometimes gnostically think of the Church as an idea in their head, or as an historical manifestation in books. No, this is the Church in the present—you, me, and the people we see around us.

A great problem in the West as a whole is the old Greek word “autonomy”, which is philosophically identical to “individual.” We have our own autonomy, but by emphasizing it alone, by standing on the ground of autonomy, I sin easily because I am within my own rights. You see, the Fall of Adam is to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That is, I become the law of good and evil for myself, which means that I can disregard the commandments of God. When I become the law for myself, I create my own autonomy, tailoring it to what suits me. If I do this, there is really no way that I can live a Christian life. Of course, I can attend liturgy, I can even wear vestments and speak about theology, but deep down in the heart is something else.

This is where the Cross divides the road. If I am the law of good and evil to myself, then I am not crucified with Christ. I am destroying my own baptism without knowing it, and even my communion in Church on Sunday is a condemnation for me. Perhaps I’m completely deceived and don’t even know that I don’t love people, and that I don’t take the Gospel of Christ very seriously.

Now when it comes to the commandments, we Christians are not free. This is part of our obedience to the crucified Christ. Also, Sts. Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac the Syrian, and John Chrysostom said there are two things that cannot be neglected by any human being—giving alms and forgiving injuries, because in both things we imitate God. If I do not obey the command to give alms and forgive injuries, I am deceiving myself if I think that I am really leading a Christian life.

RTE: So, how can we learn real freedom, and teach it to others?

DR. GEORGE: By putting the Cross back into people’s lives and by teaching them to look at Christian life as the best choice for our own good; that freedom is bound up with love. Philemon, my Coptic elder, used to say, “You know, George, I am wise to you.” This was because I loved to read and to study, and I would go and lock myself in the library. “I am worried about you. The more you stay with books, the more you begin to love freedom more

than you should. It is not the love of freedom that will save you, it is the love of the Lord.”

I think that in post-modernism, the culture is running on “pick and mix.” This approach says, “Destroy the basic principles of discernment, destroy everything. It’s all up to you!” This is like eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. You choose what you think is good and do it. This is a false idea. St. Basil the Great said that the great disaster of Adam was that he wanted to become God, but without God. He became the law of good and evil to himself. We need to bring back the idea of the transfigured life as our aim, and we can’t be transfigured if we become the law of good and evil unto ourselves. Only the law of God brings true communion with God; the law we create for ourselves means separation. For Christians to learn this, we must bring back post-baptism catechesis.

## Hebrew and Islamic Studies

RTE: Dr. George, you are also a scholar of Hebrew and Islamic studies, and have taught both at Cambridge. How do you view their spirituality?

DR. GEORGE: Well, first of all, what is Judaism? Judaism is a way of life, right? But what is the downfall of the Law, the Torah? What is its dark side that was not actually part of the divine plan? It is that the Law has the power to make us reflect on *ourselves* all of the time.

This is also why Islam drives people to fanaticism. A few years ago, when the Danish police arrested a young man of Arab origin who was planning to kill the publisher who printed the cartoons caricaturing Mohammed, all of the Danish papers (as if to say, “Kill us all,”) republished the cartoons. This was a huge thing for the Muslims. It shows that Islamic law has become their identity, and when you challenge that, you strip them of their very being.

This applies to Orthodox Judaism as well. When you grow up in an environment where the law is your identity, you cling to that. You can also see people living as Jews in the Orthodox Church, in the Catholic Church, and in the Protestant Church when they become slaves to rituals. You could be 100% Jewish, although you are actually going to church.

Do you know how Christ completely destroyed Judaism, without saying, “I’ve come to destroy Judaism?” By saying, “*Love your enemy, forgive injuries, bless those who curse you....*” All of this runs against the basic fabric of Judaism, and He became the model of this.

Christianity grew out of Palestinian Judaism, not only out of the Jewish Diaspora. It grew out of the spot where Jesus lived. The apostles had seen a better way of life taught and put into practice by Jesus Christ. Everything Jesus said in His teaching could have been accepted by the Jews. There was only one thing that made them very angry with him—that He took everything on Himself: *“If you follow Me, I will give you the Kingdom.”*

Jesus passed through the world quietly, but He created a storm by shaking the entire foundation: *“Whoever asks you to walk with him one mile, walk with him two.... Whoever wants to take your cloak, give him your garment also.”* It would take time for His followers to realize, “Either this or that, you can’t mingle the two things together.”

When things didn’t go well, God brought in Paul, the bulldozer. Whenever we read Paul at home, we were furious, because he destroyed Judaism in two or three lines. Read Colossians 2:16 onwards—all of Judaism is blown up, and the Epistle to the Hebrews is the most critical essay ever written against Judaism. If you read this and take it to heart—not only about Judaism but also about Islam, about communism, about any ideology under the sun -- you will realize how privileged you are to be a Christian.

### Islam and American Youth

RTE: You also worked in the Middle East during the first Lebanese war. Can you tell us about that?

DR. GEORGE: Yes, I worked in the Middle Eastern Council of Churches and when the Lebanese-Israeli war started in 1981, the Norwegian and Swedish Red Cross officials came to my office, put the keys on the table, and said, “We will have nothing to do with you Middle Eastern people. This is your war. We are going to Cyprus.” Do you know who stayed behind? Four Swedish nurses. The women stayed behind, and the men ran away. The men said, “Sign here,” so I signed for the account in the bank, for the six Red Cross Centers for first aid, for two hospitals, and two helicopters. One of our ambulances, which had a large Red Cross on the top that could be seen for great distances, was intentionally bombed by the Israelis.

In those days there was no security. If you walked across the street, you might be shot by a sniper. I would sit in my Red Cross office, and ask the Lord, “Should I go outside?” When I heard the voice of Christ, I went out. Lebanon was a furnace and if Christ had abandoned me for an instant, I

would have been dead in seconds. There were air raids, artillery from the sea, Israeli aircraft, and people fighting over food in the streets. Once the city was under siege and there was great hunger. When I had no water, I cleaned myself with a bottle of whiskey.

RTE: It is our own generation that has brought about the exodus of the oldest Christian cultures. The Palestinian Christians were pushed out by the Israelis, and now the whole Middle East is in flames.

DR. GEORGE: People in the United States don’t realize how quickly the Middle East is losing its Christian population. Whole Christian villages in northern and southern Iraq have emigrated to Sweden—over a million and a half Christians of the Syrian Church are now living in Sweden as refugees. These people left everything behind: churches, monasteries, everything. Under the Kurds you have a hard time, under the Shiites you have a hard time. Why not move if you can? Why continue?

RTE: Is it true that even under Sadaam Hussein, the Iraqi Christians continued as they had from the time of Christ; that it’s only recently they’ve had to leave *en masse*?

DR. GEORGE: Yes. Sadaam’s family was originally Christian—they only converted to Islam fifty years ago. Tikrit, where Sadaam was from, was a flourishing Christian city then. He was a secular man, he wasn’t a practicing Muslim like the Assad family in Syria. But when it comes to politics, how much of that spoken tolerance of Christianity was implemented in reality is hard to say.

You mentioned the Palestinians. Do you know that on an average, fifteen Muslim people live in one room in Palestinian Gaza—parents, grandparents, and children? And in such miserable conditions, do you really believe that human life has a value? Undoubtedly, they will be recruited by Hamas. They are creating terrorists. And you know, highly educated, nice people who immigrated to Israel from Russia and other places will be blown up by these children, who have no sense of the value of life because they are growing up without basic commodities: no water to drink, not enough food, no lights at night. Imagine the anger and frustration that ferment inside the human heart.

But do you know what will bring Islam to the United States? And why the U.S. is so ready to accept it? Because our children go to school, but they aren’t trained to think. They aren’t taught to form a critical mind. There is no inner life left that makes them really desire and seek freedom except in



a social-economic sense. You know, Solzhenitsyn and Augustine agree on their view of this materialism. Augustine said in one of his homilies, “I sit on top of the world when I feel that I do not desire or fear anything.” Through the lips of one of the prisoners in his books Solzhenitsyn said, “They took our wives, our children, our Party membership, and when they took everything from us, they lost their authority over us because there was nothing more to take.” Many years ago, I also heard something like this from my Egyptian elder, Philemon: “George, you have too many things to care about. If you lose them, no one has any more authority over you.”

I’m very worried about this decay in social life that encourages consumption but doesn’t teach young Americans to have a critical mind, to select what is good for their own life out of the mass of social offerings. I meet kids 17, 18 years old and ask them, “Why are you Christian? What is so unique about Christianity?” They don’t know. In this atmosphere, Islam will spread easily. From the Islamic campus crusaders, between 100 to 200 young American university students embrace Islam every month. Islam has its own attraction because it is a very easy religion and has a different way of life. People embrace it because they are tired and they want an identity.

Not long ago, a 22-year-old man from a local Protestant church here disappeared. His father came to see me and said, “I need your help because my son is friends with a Pakistani Muslim girl.” I said, “So, how can I help you?” He said, “I think he has become Muslim through this romantic relationship. Can you speak with him?” I answered, “Yes, but what did his church teach him about Islam? Where is the resistance that we should have built into our own Christian people—not specifically to resist Islam, but to teach them to be Christian, so that when they see something different, they can gently keep it at arm’s length?”

I found the boy and went to see him. I spent six hours with him, and afterward told his father, “I’m afraid it’s too late. He has married the girl, and has been given a place in the Muslim community. (He had been a lonely, miserable character, and when he went to church, no one even shook hands with him. His church did not succeed in bringing him into Christian social life.) But here, the Muslims treat him like a king. Theirs is a small community and they all know each other, but in his big Protestant church there are about 2,000 or 3,000 people.

*Opposite: Beirut, Lebanon.*

With his Pakistani wife sitting there, I asked the boy, “What do you think Jesus Christ is all about?” He said, “He’s just like Mohammed, a good man.” I said, “What if you are wrong; what if there is more in the life of Christ than you have in Islam?” He said, “Give me one example, and I will walk out with you.” I said, “Really? Do you promise to do that?” He looked reluctant, so I said, “Let’s make a deal.” I put my hand out, and he replied, “Let me hear it first.” “Are you a coward? Are you afraid?” I asked. “Alright then, where is the grace of adoption? In Islam you are a slave, in Christianity you are the child of God, so how could this just be about a good man named Jesus?” He said, “It’s not a deal, I need to think about it.” I asked him, “Have you thought about this before?” “No.” “Alright, then here is another question for you. Where is the Spirit of God indwelling in your heart in Islam? God dwells in the heart of believers in Christianity as a result of what Christ did for us. Where is that in Islam?” He said, “I don’t know, I never heard this in church.” I said, “They must have told you something. You mean your father never told you this, or that you never read it in the Gospel, in Galatians, in Paul’s Epistles? Are you bluffing me?” He said, “George, I’ve never heard any of that.”

Another time, one of our American boys from a local church called me on the telephone, saying frantically, “George, come down to the coffee shop. Come and help us because a man is trying to convert us to Islam.” I know this boy and I know his family. I said, “I don’t have a car.” He said, “We’ll send one for you,” and within ten minutes a young man was at the door, who drove back to the café like a madman. I found an Asian man of about forty sitting there, just like a Jehovah’s Witness, with a Koran in English, and a Bible with passages colored in blue and red and yellow, talking to four of the local kids.

I greeted him and he said, “Are you a Christian?” “Yes.” “In the Bible, Christ never says, ‘I am God.’” I said, “Christ said that He was the Son of the Father, and this is why we call Him God, because He and the Father are God. But you don’t have that in the Koran, so your question is wrong, and your assumption is wrong. Christ talked about the Father, and you don’t have the Father in the Koran, do you?” He said, “No.” I said, “Fine, then we are talking about a different belief in God.” So he started to think that perhaps he was dealing with someone he’d never met before.

I asked him, “What is your name?” “My name is Mukhtar.” (Mukhtar means “chosen.”) “Mukhtar,” I said, “I have a question for you. If you answer it correctly, I’ll become a Muslim right now. If you fail, I want you to think about Christianity.” So he began to brighten up. I said, “Tell me four

important principles in human history that have made us human and kept us human.” He said, “Will you give me a clue?” “No,” I answered, “Tell me something that makes you human.” He said, “Freedom.” I thought to myself, “Good, the fish is taking the bait.” “Good, what else?... Alright, let me help you—would you say love?” “Yes.” “Would you say development?” “Yes.” “Would you say progress?” “Yes, I have no problem with that.”

I asked, “Are these four basic principles in Islam, in the Koran?” He looked at me.... I said, “I see you have underlined certain verses in the New Testament with colors? Have you also underlined the verses that speak of freedom, of love, of progress, of development?” He said, “I don’t know. You’ve taken me by surprise. I’m going to ask one of our clergy to come and speak to you.” I said, “Fine, when?” After he left, the boys asked me, “Why didn’t we hear these things in church? I said, “Don’t ask me; go ask your pastor.”

This is where the Protestants lean towards Islam, in their reliance on the written Scripture. In both Islam and among Christian evangelicals, the text becomes the revelation, whereas Christ founded the Church as a vehicle of salvation, not a text.

We have to ask ourselves how we Christians teach Christianity in the public arena. What do we say about Christianity? You know, if you live in the heart of Cairo where Christians and Jews are beaten up by Muslims, you go back and ask your parents, “Why are they beating us up?” They answer, “Because they believe in violence, and we believe in the way of Jesus.”

When I was a boy, my grandmother once caught me smoking a cigar with my cousin. We had stolen the cigars from someone in the family. She suddenly appeared out of nowhere (we used to call her “God” because she’d appear without warning). She looked at us, and without any anger, said to me, “Why are you imitating adults? Are you an adult? No. Where did you get the cigar?” “I stole it.” She said, “Alright, sit and listen to your heart. What does your heart say when you steal something? And why do you want to imitate adults when you are not an adult? You don’t even have money to buy a cigar. If you want another one, will you steal that also?” And then she walked away. You know, the reason for doing things is a key to progress, and to abstain from doing things is a key to progress also. If we don’t teach this to our children, we will make them victims of totalitarianism, to be scooped up and spiritually massacred by Muslim clerics.

Why should I abstain from this or that? It isn’t the fear of judgment, it is the fear of losing my humanity. There is hell, yes, but hell is a hereafter. But

now in this present life, I damage my own humanity. And if we take our morality and lock it inside that binding square of the Law, what will our youth learn about freedom?

### The Power of Literature

I was fortunate in my own youth that I met people who put the best French and English literature into my hands. This is what we call the liberal arts, and, you know, if we keep teaching people the arts, we won't go far wrong. With good poetry, art, music, and literature, our young people will grow up and mature.

As a youth I read Maxim Gorky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and Dostoyevsky. My father one day handed me *Crime and Punishment* in Arabic saying, "This is a good book, you have to read it." Later, we read Gogol's short stories and Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. These things create a refined heart that looks for beauty and freedom, for clear thinking. In *Crime and Punishment* you see the image of God and the image of the devil. Where do you see that today in the media? When you grow up with the liberal arts, no one can convert you to anything, except to Christianity.

Russians have always understood the power of literature, even under the Soviets. When we became interested in communism, do you know what the Communist Party in Egypt did? They gave us *The Mother* by Maxim Gorky because it is one of the best novels about communism.

But here in America, what is being bred into the human soul? Emptiness. I recently sat with a group of psychotherapists. Two were Buddhists and the rest were Christian. I asked them, "Do you teach your clients to have life in themselves, do you bring them back to the life within, or do you still make them orbit around the outer circle of life—the television, the iPod, the cell phone, the friends, the laptop, the media, the distractions?" They said, "We have great difficulty in making people turn inward. Sometimes we don't succeed." I said, "But with this 'therapy' they will never be healed, they will become dependent on you, and addicted to these things."

So, all in all, what is the message of religion if it is not freedom? And if the means becomes the goal—this is Berdyaev, by the way—we will be back in the Middle Ages. So, we have a long agenda. These are lessons I've learned from wise people and from a hard life.

RTE: To return to your earlier warning, what do you see as the inner reality of Islam?

DR. GEORGE: With Moslems the goal is the women and food in paradise. What is the best dream for us as Christians? To be completely human, to be like Christ. Compare the two, where does each lead us? The Muslim ideal leads us to the thought that the highest goal is a material way of life, which I must seek in this life and in the afterlife without any inner development. To sleep with "seventy times seventy" women is the greatest dream. But to have the Holy Spirit in your heart, to grow into the likeness of Christ, which will only be fulfilled on the Day of Judgment—in this way, you are active, you develop life within a society, you create science, but in Islam you wait for bananas to fall from heaven. I used to ask Moslems, "If you are only waiting for fruit, for wine, for women....what kind of a person will you be?"

RTE: Do the serious Moslems really look on this as a goal? They must have a sense of God beyond a material reward.

DR. GEORGE: Only the Sufis. Not Sunni or Shiite Moslems. The Sufis don't want any of this, but they are regarded as heretics by the other Muslims. Do you know who the most respected figure in Islam is in America? The Sufi poet Rumi<sup>2</sup>. I was in a Presbyterian church here some time ago, and the minister said, "Have you read Rumi?" I said, "Yes, I've read him in Persian, actually." He replied, "Isn't he great?" I said, "Yes, he's a great thief. He managed to steal a great deal from Christian writings." There is, however, a basic difference between Sufi and Christian mysticism. As a Sufi, I can look to God and say, "I will sit on your throne," but the question is, did God say, "You will sit on my throne?" Sufism has no divine revelation of love; they have borrowed all of their concepts of love from pre-Islamic poetry. The "marriage between God and the soul" comes straight from pre-Islamic poetry. You can imagine anything about God, but the question remains, did God reveal this to you? And if He didn't, then you are living in a fancy dream.

<sup>2</sup> Rumi is a shortened version of the name of Jalaluddin Rumi, born in Wakhsh (Tajikistan) to a family of learned Mullahs. His family escaped the Mongol invasion and settled in Konya, Anatolia, then part of Seljuk Empire. When his father Bahaduddin Valad passed away in 1231, Rumi succeeded him as a teacher of Islamic Law. In 1244 Rumi met a dervish known as Shams-eDeen Tabrizi, and this meeting completely changed Rumi's life. Shams seems to have introduced Rumi to Sufism and to the mystical path of the Dervish. Rumi wrote a six-volume didactic epic work, the 'Mathnawi', which gave life to Islam. His other book 'Fihri ma Fihri', was written to introduce his disciples into metaphysics. Rumi died on December 17, 1273, and in Persian, the night of his death is called Sebul Arus (Night of Union of the bride). Rumi also created a circle of disciples known as Mawlaw Sufi Order.

In Islamic literature, there is a man named Mullah Nasr-el-Deen, who is like a holy fool. One day, Mullah sat with all of the fools and said, "I have completed fifty percent of the arrangement to marry the daughter of the king." The other fools all said, "Great, how?" Mullah answered, "I agree, my father agrees, and my mother agrees—that's fifty percent. Now, she has to agree, and her father and mother. That's the other fifty percent." So, you can imagine all sorts of things, but don't forget that anything from God needs communion and revelation. You need the One who brings the revelation and makes it true.

I have another story. There was a Muslim man doing a doctorate in physics at Cambridge who worked part-time in a shop near my home. He was lonely and his family was in Egypt, so I used to go every Saturday to talk to him. He was studying on a very small stipend from the Egyptian government and needed some help and encouragement.

He knew that I taught Islamic Studies in Cambridge, and one Saturday morning when there was hardly anyone in the shop, out of the blue he asked me, "Why aren't you a Muslim?" I answered, "Because I think Christianity is better." "In what sense?" I said, "Tell me what is the best thing in Islam, and I will tell you what is the best thing in Christianity." He replied, "The best thing in Islam is the One God." I said, "Yes, but that's in Judaism too." "Then the best thing in Islam is that you go to Paradise." I said, "I'm not interested in women and apples and bananas—there's plenty of them in the mall." He said, "Well then, what is the best thing in Christianity?"

I carry a small Gideon pocket New Testament in Arabic, and I opened to the Book of Revelation, Chapter 3:19-21. The text says, "Whoever is victorious I will let him sit on My Throne, as My Father made Me sit on His Throne." I put my finger there and said, "Can you read that?" As he read it aloud, he became like a lion or a tiger about to kill me. His hands reached for my neck, and I caught them—"What's with you?" He was furious. "You are going to sit on the throne of God?!" "Yes, not because I want to, or because I can, but because God gave us that great gift." "You infidels!" He burst into abuse, so I said, "Look, you asked me what the best thing in Christianity is. The best thing in Christianity is that I become like God. The best thing in Islam is that I stay a slave. I want to become like God. If you have a problem with that, I'm sorry."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ed. note: Muslims may react strongly to such verses because, in their view, God is completely transcendent. To speak of man being made in the Creator's image and growing into His likeness would seem blasphemous to the Muslim mind.

I walked away. But you know, if you look at the great goal of the Christian life, then Christianity has something very unique to say. But this Muslim is content with being a slave. Life is just a sort of box. He creeps into the box like a mouse, and eats and drinks and sleeps and has sex. For him that is heaven. But for us it is not. If we have anything other than God, we have not achieved anything, and we remain mortal.

RTE: But we are all made in the image of God. There must be many Muslims who also have this yearning to find Him?

DR. GEORGE: Certainly—in the words of St. Anthony of Egypt, "there is the natural law in us that cries for the Creator." The Creator left His fingerprints on our nature, but the natural law can be damaged by false revelation. This is the great problem of Islam.

There are 168 verses in the Koran where Muslims are ordered to kill non-Muslims: Jews, Christians, and infidels. "If they don't believe in God, in the prophet and in the teaching of the Koran, kill them." Now, this cannot be in accord with the natural law. There is a sense of love and tolerance in the natural law, imprinted by God in us, that has been damaged by such teaching.

There is a basic demeaning of human beings in the Koran that is demonic. For example, when a husband is ordered by God to beat his disobedient wife, it doesn't say what the disobedience is, it doesn't say what sort of beating up... it is said in a general way that allows the male to be the dominant figure in the relationship and doesn't give the female anything. Now, this cannot be from God the Creator and it isn't in harmony with nature, because it breaks the union between husband and wife without even touching on the ideal form of love in Christianity.

Marriage in Islam is not a sacrament; it is a sexual relationship between a man and a woman. Shiites in Iran have a marriage called "occasional marriage." A man will go to a city on business or work, meet a woman and say to her, "I marry you, you marry me. I will pay you \$100 for one, two, three days." After he leaves, the marriage is terminated, with no need for a civil divorce. Actually, this is a form of organized prostitution, because there is no love.

Another example of this attitude towards women—when I taught Islamic Studies in Cambridge, we had a weekly seminar on an Arabic text attended by Muslims from the community. In one place the verse is exactly translated as, "Your women are like a field for you to plough, wherever." Of course, the English edition of the Koran has been mistranslated to mislead the Chris-



tians, but I put the real translation on the overhead projector, and one of the Muslims began disputing its accuracy. I said, “Doctor, the translation says, ‘Wherever.’ ‘Where’ is a place. The Arabic is very clear, like the sun at mid-day.” This is sanctifying abnormal behavior, where the female is an article or tool or object. And do you know what the greatest virtue of the Virgin Mary is in the Koran? Only that she protected her virginity, nothing at all about her as a human being. So this is the highest form of holiness?

RTE: Dr. George, if I didn’t know how well-versed you are in the Koran and the Muslim world in general, I would have wondered if your comments on Islamic marriage were overstated, but just this summer there were articles in the Associated Press about a number of young Moslem women who have disappeared in Chechnya. Most of the disappearances are unsolved, but seven were found shot dead. Ramzan Kadyrov, the president of Chechnya, emerged from afternoon prayers at the mosque, saying that these seven women had had “loose morals” and were rightfully shot by male relatives in honor killings. He further describes women as the property of their husbands and he encourages men to take more than one wife, although polygamy is illegal in Russia.

Then, in looking on Islamic internet sites aimed at presenting Islam in a positive light to Westerners, although there were several that spoke about love and quoted the Koran about “tranquility between spouses,” the most official-looking site on Muslim marriage<sup>4</sup> says quite clearly, “A Muslim marriage contract can have only one goal. It is to meet the philosophical standards of marriage given in [the Koran]. A Muslim marriage is not a sacrament. It is a legal agreement between a man and a woman where either of the parties may include certain conditions to avoid future legal complications.”

DR. GEORGE: You know, you look at these areas and say, “So where is love?” There is little sense of binding love. That is why in the Christian Church even the blessedness of marriage is elevated through prayer, through fasting, and through abstinence. When people ask me, “Should we abstain from relations?” I say, “Yes, you should abstain before Holy Communion. Abstaining doesn’t make you worthy of Holy Communion, but when you abstain, you become aware of something greater. You are also to abstain after receiving Communion because you have filled yourself with something greater.” We need to say to people, “You are told not to, not because it is forbidden, but because there is a better way of life.”

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.muslim-marriage-guide.com/muslim-marriage-contract.html>

RTE: So is it fair to say that without freedom and love there is no sanctity?

DR. GEORGE: Yes, and in regard to that, the Muslims have no saints. The word “holiness” is not applied to humans in the Koran.

### Islamic Conversions to Christianity

RTE: We occasionally hear rumors that many Muslims in North Africa are converting to Christianity? Is this true?

DR. GEORGE: There were 80,000 converts in Algeria this year alone from Islam to Christianity, and at least half a million Muslims became Christian in Egypt over the past two years. We know how many are converting because they speak on the internet chat rooms.

RTE: Why do they convert?

DR. GEORGE: Miracles. Christ is manifesting Himself because the Coptic Church is very weak, and we’ve lost our courage to speak. Not long ago a Coptic Christian priest was defrocked by the order of the Egyptian government because of his missionary work. Through his program via satellite, over 4,000 Muslims in Saudi Arabia became Christian. These converts include Islamic academics, professionals and clergy.

I sometimes hear stories that make my hair stand on end. There is a man in Gaza whom I want to bring to speak here. He is Muslim and has been to Mecca fourteen times. On the last visit, as he was going around the Kaaba,<sup>5</sup> he heard a voice coming from the loudspeaker in Arabic, “Jesus Christ is Lord.” He looked around and thought, “There must be a crazy Christian here, trying to commit suicide.” He couldn’t see anyone, and no one else seemed to have noticed, so he kept praying. The second time around the Kaaba, he heard the same voice, and again, no one else around heard it. He thought, “This is for me, then.” He became a Christian. His brother, who lives in Canada and is a member of an ultra-orthodox Muslim brotherhood, then took a solemn vow to kill him because of his conversion. About a year ago, this man came to the U.S. and gave his testimony at a conference with six other converts, and believe me, those stories take you back to the early days of Christianity. You are hearing things that are utterly impossible to believe.

<sup>5</sup> One of the Islamic rituals of pilgrimage to Mecca requires pilgrims to walk around the Kaaba (the holiest building in Islam) seven times in a counter-clockwise direction. This circling is called the Tawaf, and as pilgrims circle, they chant “Labbaik Allahumma Labbaik,” which is, “I respond to your call, Lord, I respond.”

One of these converts has a DVD available on the internet. She was the headmistress of a secondary school in Cairo when a young Christian woman who had just transferred to her school came to greet her wearing a golden cross. The headmistress saw it and said, “Christ was not crucified,” and snatched the cross from the girl’s neck, snapping the chain. A little later, Christ appeared to the headmistress in her office, called her by name and said, “Why are you resisting me? I have died for you.” (Now, isn’t that just like Paul of Tarsus?) She went to the Copts, but they were afraid to baptize her so she was baptized in an evangelical church and then she emigrated abroad. Sometimes these Islamic converts go to the Coptic Church, sometimes to the Catholic, sometimes to the Orthodox Church. Believe me, there is something going on in Egypt, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Iraq, in Saudi Arabia. We don’t know why Christ is moving the crisis in that direction but this is what is happening.

On a recent visit, a priest that I trained years ago at the Coptic Seminary told me, “George, I baptize at least one Muslim per week. We don’t advertise, we don’t speak, we don’t let them tell their story publicly in church. They can speak in small Bible studies and prayer meetings, but we don’t expose them to danger.” All of his converts from Islam have come to Christ through the healing of a medically impossible situation.

Once, when I served with Fr. Mikael at St. Mark’s Church in Cairo, one of our church members, a very fine Christian, had a heart attack. Because he was wealthy, they were able to rush him to the best military hospital in the south of Cairo, where he was placed in a small room with another man. We went to pray with our Christian brother, and after Fr. Mikael anointed him, the man in the next bed asked, “Why don’t you anoint me also?” As usual, in order to avoid any complications with the police, we asked, “Are you a Christian?” He said, “No, I am a Muslim.” Fr. Mikael then said, “Do you believe that Christ can heal you?” He said, “Yes.” So he anointed him, prayed with him, and left.

The following day our Christian brother died. We were very sad, and as I sat in my church office arranging the funeral, a neatly-dressed man walked in and said, “I’ve come to see you.” “Yes, what about?” He said, “You must teach me the Christian faith because I have to be baptized.” I asked, “Who are you?” “My name is General \_\_\_\_.” He was a high-ranking officer in the Egyptian army. I panicked because sometimes the authorities come as fake converts to create problems for us. I replied, “I can’t baptize you. You will

have to see our priest.” When I told Fr. Mikael, he replied, “George, let’s go, he is ready to accept the faith.”

As it turned out, this was the man in the other bed, who had been anointed the night before. I didn’t even recognize him. After we left, Christ had appeared to him in a vision, taken out his heart, put it aside, and put a new heart in its place. Christ said to him, “Do you see this pool of water? You have to go into this water. And do you see this table with bread and a chalice? You have to eat this bread and drink from the chalice. The young man who came with the priest yesterday will teach you the Christian faith.” I was amazed. Me, teach the Christian faith? What a privilege, but how dangerous! The General said, “That’s why I’ve come.” He was hungry for anything I said, and was always asking for more books.

We baptized him on a Thursday at three in the morning. In our churches, like all ancient churches in the Middle East, the font is about the size of this room. You walk down steps and stand up to your chest or shoulders in the water. As we were praying, two bodyguards who had come with him (Muslim boys from the army) stood outside. In the middle of the service they suddenly broke through the door of the baptistery shouting, “Where is the general? Where is the fire?” They had seen a flame of fire fall from heaven onto the baptistery. I asked Fr. Mikael, “Where is the fire?” He said, “George, there has been a manifestation of the Lord, but not for you to see....” The two Muslim soldiers saw it, the priest saw it—but I didn’t see it.

The general came out of the baptismal font, and afterwards he insisted on giving his testimony in the cathedral on a video in front of 6,000 people. He left the country immediately afterwards. His wife and two daughters followed him and they live somewhere abroad under false names. We look back now and think, “My goodness, we lost our Christian brother, we gained a convert, and his testimony came like an earthquake.” This was under Nasser, when one could still do those kinds of things. Now he would be killed. We have a file of testimonies of tortured converts that has been given to the U.S. Congress in Arabic and English. In one American city there is a street of thirty-five homes, all occupied by Islamic converts to Christianity from Egypt.

A similar story occurred in a secondary school in Cairo. During recess, a Christian girl often used to open her desk and read the New Testament. Another student became curious and thought, “What is she doing?” One day, she opened the girl’s desk and found the New Testament, which she took to read. This was the daughter of the highest-ranking Muslim cleric of Al-

Azhar, the largest Islamic university in the Middle East, and she became Christian after reading the New Testament.

Her family lived in a Muslim neighborhood, and when they found out that she wanted to be a Christian, they chained her to the entrance of their block of flats and all of the people who lived there threw garbage on her and tortured her. One night she said to Christ, “I can’t take it anymore. You have to save me.” So Christ came and cut off her chains, and said to her, “If you go to that street you will find a priest. Follow him, he will lead you to salvation.” That priest was Fr. Mikael.

The good thing is that our priests wear their black cassocks on the street, so she recognized him right away. She followed him and said, “My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and this is my story....” He replied, “Come with me,” and she lived in a room next to mine at the Coptic seminary for six months. Meanwhile, the police were looking everywhere for her, and I have to tell you that we were afraid. I was present when she was baptized, and afterwards a group of Christians working in the passport office gave her a false passport and smuggled her from Egypt to Lebanon. From Lebanon she went to Jordan, where she lived with a Jordanian woman who later moved to the United States. One day, I was speaking about Amel (her baptized name), when this Jordanian woman, who is a friend of mine said, “Oh, Amel! She lived in my house!”

But, you know, these things go on all the time. Because the Christians cannot testify or preach, the Lord is doing His work outside the churches. Even in Saudi Arabia Muslim clerics are converting to Christ. And these converts from Islam are not timid, there is something powerful in them. Whenever Amel prayed you felt there was a fire in the room. When I asked Hassan, who heard the voice at the Kaaba, if he needed police protection, he said, “No. If my brother really wants to kill me, he will come and kill me. My time is in the hands of the Lord.”

Just a few weeks ago I learned that the Dean of Islamic Studies of the largest university in Cairo has just converted to Christianity. He said that he has come to the conclusion that monotheism, because it lacks communion within the Godhead, is empty and unsatisfying, and that a God who does not reveal Himself as a person, but only through law or in a book, is not worthy of study.

You look at all these people and marvel at how Christ is working.

RTE: Amen. May He give the increase. ✦