

# Kimball discusses Christianity in Iran and the Middle East at large

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“Christianity is a Middle Eastern religion,” Charles Kimball said.

There are between 14 and 17 million Christians in the Middle East today, but many struggle to understand or remain unaware of their traditions and history.

Kimball is the director of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of five books, including *When Religion Becomes Lethal*. His lecture at 2 p.m. Wednesday in the Hall of Philosophy was “Christians in Iran: Before and After the 1979 Revolution.”

Kimball opened his lecture with a quote from the first chapter of his book, called “Christmas with the Ayatollah.” From 1977 to 1978, Kimball lived in Cairo as a part of his Harvard doctoral program; it was during this time that Anwar Sadat announced he would travel to Israel to attempt peace talks. He said these two experiences, his time spent in Egypt and the 1979 Iranian revolution, “set me on a 30-year path, exploring what in the world is going on in terms of religion and politics, especially in the Middle East, but also here in the United States.”



Kimball set out to explain the presence of Christianity in the Middle East.

“Most of us, in the West, especially, know very little about the Christian communities in the Middle East,” Kimball said. “There is an abysmal ignorance that accompanies any awareness ... and I think there is a form of intellectual imperialism at work among many in this process.”

This intellectual imperialism is the idea that Christianity can't spread without the help of western missionaries. It's not true, Kimball said.

“It's good to remember at the outset that the Middle East is the place where Christianity began,” he said.

Yet church history in western seminaries tends to ignore Middle Eastern churches, though there are

several prominent denominations specific to these countries that are believed to have their foundations in the work of biblical disciples.

“For the Christians in these communities that date themselves back to the earliest centuries of Christianity, these are the traditions that they've always held,” he said. “They were founded by the disciples themselves, and they continue to be a presence and witness, down through the centuries ... whether we were paying them attention here or not.”

Kimball discussed two of historical Christianity's most important controversies: the nature of the trinity and the divinity of Jesus. The eastern churches struggled more with coming to an agreement over the nature of Jesus' divinity and humanity. This schism resulted in two schools of thought, the Monophysitism and Nestorianism, by 451 A.D.

Although it was deemed heretical by the Council of Chalcedon, Monophysitism was the dominant idea in Egyptian and Syrian churches, whereas Nestorianism flourished in modern-day Iran. Today, 80 percent of Christians in the Middle East are associated



Photo | Megan Tan

Charles Kimball, director of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma, gives Wednesday's Interfaith Lecture in the Hall of Philosophy.

with the Egyptian (Coptic), Syrian and Armenian churches.

“Christianity is not monolithic; it has never been monolithic,” Kimball said.

Christians endured both safety and danger in the Sassanian period, their persecution usually at the hands of Zoroastrians.

“If you want to look at the history of Christianity in the Middle East and find a history of persecution, you can certainly find it,” Kimball said. “But you can also find a long history of cooperation.”

The fundamental message of Islam is not one of mass conversion, Kimball said, because that could not account for the high numbers of Christians living in the Middle East today.

“It speaks to a different understanding of Islam,” he said.

Christian missionary activity — be it Catholic, Anglican or Presbyterian — did not often result in the mass conversion of Muslims, for two reasons. First,

Kimball explained, the figure of Jesus already fit into Islamic theology and history — there was already an established place for him in Islam. Second, conversion to Christianity for many Muslims could result in their deaths. Christians began to proselytize to other Christians “who weren't quite Christian enough” in the views of the missionaries, instead of Muslims.

The ecumenical movement in the 20th century encouraged churches to find common ground. Kimball worked with the Middle East Council of Churches to help the sundry Orthodox churches and those of other traditions reconnect with western churches.

Just as Christianity is not monolithic, nor is Iran, which in fact made provisions for three seats for Christians in Parliament. Iranians have demonstrated a desire for democracy for at least the past 30 years; their primary complaint in 2009, for instance, was the act of disenfranchisement. More than 80 percent of the country voted in the 2009 election; just three hours later, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won, somehow with an excess of 20 million votes.

“You can be pretty sure

that this is a completely bankrupt process,” Kimball said. “Part of what people were so angry about was the sham of democracy, when it was such a rigged election.”

Kimball himself met with different ayatollahs, who proved to be more moderate, concerned about too much religious involvement in government. That's not to say persecution doesn't exist against Christians in the Middle East, Kimball explained, pointing to the burning of Coptic churches in Egypt, or that discrimination against other religions is absent.

But it's important not to define entire religious systems by their times of catastrophe, he said.

Kimball posits that there is no “magic formula” or workable template to connect politics and religion successfully, let alone to create a thriving Islamist state. Other governments can learn from both the strengths and weaknesses of countries like Iran, even the United States.

“If we live up to our own principles, we can model something better than we've done at many points, for the rest of the world,” Kimball said.