

# Introduction

The turbulent developments in Syria and Iraq of the last years, the phenomenon of Islamic State, the terrorist attacks, the influx of Eastern and Oriental Christians and the growing presence of Islam in Europe encouraged me to write. The deepest motive, however, is that I feel a strong connection with the Christians in the Middle East. My conscience appeals to me. In doing so, I was addressed in a special way by Pope Francis, for whom I worked at the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity.

Writing about Christians in the Middle East is not an easy task. The problem is that there is no synthetic overview: either the studies are too specialized, or they are too general. Through my mission in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, I regularly gave interviews. Very often arose the request for spiritual orientation and interpretation. Therefore, my approach will be a *'spiritual discovery'*. Explaining the root meaning of the words *'spiritual'* and *'spirituality'*, Wiseman refers to the Latin verb *'spirare'* which means *'to breathe'*, while the adjective *'spiritualis'* means *'of belonging to breathing'*. When the Greek New Testament was translated into Latin, the term *'pneumatikos'* in the letters of Saint Paul was translated into *'spiritualis'*. Wiseman clarifies expressions in Saint Paul's Letters, such as *'spiritual persons'*, in contrast to *'fleshly persons'*. According to Saint Paul, *"living according to the flesh"* means *"to live according to purely self-centred inclinations"*.<sup>1</sup> Wiseman emphasizes that Saint Paul considers spiritual persons as those who are open to the Spirit of God and who live according to the encouragements of the Spirit. According to Wiseman, Saint Paul wants to focus on spiritual maturity, living according to the Spirit of life.

Spirituality is often an ambiguous concept. There are different ways to define spirituality. For all these reasons it must be clarified what is meant by the term *'spirituality'*. According to Kasper, spirituality *"includes faith, the exercise of piety and the conduct of life"*.<sup>2</sup> Spirituality is *"a lifestyle guided by the Spirit, characterized by a life*

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1. WISEMAN, J.A., *Spirituality and Mysticism. A Global View*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2006, p. 2.
  2. KASPER, W., *That They May All Be One, The Call to Unity Today*, Burns & Oats, London/New York, 2004, p. 158.

*in Christ, lived out at the same time individually and in a communitarian way*".<sup>3</sup> Kasper continues his description of the term spirituality by stating that it has two components: from above, the working of God's Spirit and from below, the human condition.<sup>4</sup>

With this book, I want to offer a spiritual exploration of the Christians in the Middle East. In this way, I hope to work on raising awareness and enthusiasm. I believe that there is a broad audience of people interested in the context of the conflicts in the Middle East: not only the terror of Islamic State, but especially the often underexposed role that Christians play and have played in that area. The Christians of the Middle East are a Church of martyrs. I want to give them a voice. Moreover, this writing is inspired by what is often heard from '*behind the scenes*'. That is why it is necessary to listen to the underlying causes, to what is not always said out loud, or only casually appears '*in the margins*'.

This publication is a supplemented and updated version of my book '*Spirituele verkenning van de christenen in het Midden-Oosten*' published in Dutch by the same publisher in 2018.

In a first chapter, I give a brief description of the geographical situation, with particular attention to the waves of emigration and immigration.

A second chapter aims to give a presentation of the various Churches in the Middle East. I want to focus on the Assyrian Church of the East, the Oriental Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The already so complex world of the ancient Churches in the Middle East does not allow me to go into detail about the world of the Byzantine Orthodox Churches.

Thirdly, I offer an insight into the rich spiritual heritage of the Oriental Tradition: the attention to the Holy Spirit, the role of monasticism as well as the various aspects of the Coptic, Syriac and Armenian traditions will be explained.

Fourthly, I clarify in which sense Christians in the Middle East can be called a Church of martyrs. We listen to witnesses of faith in the first centuries, as well as to the martyrs of our time. Christians are united by '*the ecumenism of blood*'. I will also reveal the cruel reality of the '*forgotten genocides*' at the beginning of the twentieth century.

I then discuss the role of Christians in the Middle East as bridge builders, in the ecumenical movement and in the interreligious dialogue, as well as their contribution to the '*Arab Renaissance*'. I formulate some fundamental reflections: the importance of a historical perspective in order to understand better the crisis in the Middle East, the search for the underlying cause of terrorist attacks, a plea for a spirituality of encounter: a growth in openness and a deepening of Christian identity.

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3. BACK, J.P., *Spiritual Ecumenism and the Spirituality of Communion*, in *Charisms in Unity* 17/2 (2009), p. 53. Joan Patrick Back refers to Kasper.  
 4. Cf. KASPER, W., *That They May All Be One*, *op.cit.*, p. 158.

Finally, in a sixth chapter, I reflect on the responsibility of the West: the practice of hospitality, the broadening of the horizon for the richness of the Oriental liturgy, and the dynamic development of creative forms of solidarity.

In the epilogue, I express the firm hope and expectation that there is still a future for the Christians in the Middle East, a new dawn.