

DISAPPEARING CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The transfer in power in Bethlehem from Israel to the Palestinian Authority just before Christmas 1995 inspired a spate of articles on Bethlehem's diminishing Christian presence. They noted that a place not long ago 80 percent Christian is now but one-third Christian. For the first time in nearly two millennia, the most identifiably Christian town on earth has lost its Christian majority. The same changes have taken place in two other famous Christian towns, Nazareth and Jerusalem. In Nazareth, Christians went from 60 percent of the population in 1946 to 40 percent in 1983. Jerusalem Christians in 1922 slightly outnumbered Muslims (15,000 versus 13,000), today they number under 2 percent of the city's population. The same applies in other parts of Israel.

A report from the Galilee village of Turan quotes a Christian store owner: "Most Christians will leave as soon as we can sell our houses and shops. We can't live among these people [Muslims] anymore." One journalist concludes that "The Christian community in the West Bank is close to extinction." Nor are Israeli-held territories unusual in this regard; Christians are fleeing from all over the Middle East. Emigration began in the aftermath of World War I and has greatly picked up in the last decade. In Turkey, Christians constituted a population of 2 million in 1920 but now only some thousands remain. So severe is the problem that the Orthodox Patriarchate in Istanbul is in danger of collapsing for lack of a large enough pool of

CFI Communications, PO Box 2687, Eastbourne, BN22 7LZ

Tel: 0845 230 3067 (local rate) or 01323 410810 • Fax: 01323 410211

Prayerline: 0845 230 3068 (local rate) or 01323 439840

email: info@cfi.org.uk • website: www.cfi.org.uk

Registered Charity no. 1101899

candidates. Christians earlier in this century represented about one-third of the Syrian population; now they account for less than 10 percent. In 1932, they composed 55 percent of the Lebanese population, now less than 30 percent. More than half the Christians of Iraq have left. Copts began leaving Egypt in significant numbers after the 1952 revolution.

The Christian population decline has two main causes: emigration and declining birth rates. Emigration represents the end of a long process of exclusion and persecution. On the West Bank, a nearly permanent Muslim boycott of Christian businesses is the problem. In Egypt, fundamentalist Muslims constantly target Christians. The Lebanese civil war of 1975-90, when reduced to its essentials, represented a successful effort by Muslims to reduce Christian power in the country. But by far the worst situation is in the Sudan, where the civil war that has been raging most of the time since 1954 has led to wholesale atrocities.

Declining birth rates can also be seen throughout the region. In Israel, for example, live births per thousand among Muslims comes to 37; among Christians, a mere 22 per thousand. In addition, the small number of Christians leads some to marry Muslims, which effectively means they are lost to their community.

At the present rate, Hilal Khashan points out, the Middle East's 12 million Christians will likely drop to 6 million in the year 2025. With time, Christians will effectively disappear from the region as a cultural and political force. As one report puts it, "There are more Palestinians living in Beit Jala in Chile than in Beit Jala on the West Bank itself. Along similar lines, Prince El-Hassan bin Talal notes in this issue that "there are today more Christians from Jerusalem ... living in Sydney, Australia, than in Jerusalem itself."

For many years, the plight of Middle East Christians attracted little attention in the outside world. The earlier protectors of their interests - the British, French, Russian, and Greek governments - turned away from the current problems. Recently, however, American organizations have taken up the cause of persecuted Christians around the world, primarily in the Muslim world and in Communist countries. The signs are all around. The Senate has conducted hearings on this topic and the State Department in 1999 began releasing a survey on religious persecution worldwide, the Annual Report on International Religious Freedom. A prominent politician has proposed that New York City not purchase goods from corporations doing significant business in countries where Christians are persecuted. A host of organizations and individuals have made this topic their concern.

This is all to the good, for bringing American and international attention to this unhappy situation could be a significant step toward making improvements. None of these groups, however, are specialists in the Middle East or Islam. To help inform them and others, this article is devoted to the topic of the Middle East's disappearing Christians.

Middle East Quarterly - Winter Edition, 2001 Daniel Pipes, Editor. Reproduced by permission of Middle East Forum 1500 Walnut Street, Suite 1050, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102 USA