The
Christian Exodus
From the Middle East

by
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In another decade or so, given present trends, there will be few if any Christians living in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. The same is true of Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, and even of Jerusalem, where nearly 600 historic churches still stand.

Christians in the Palestinian territories have dropped from 15 percent of the Arab population in 1950 to just 2 percent today. Both Bethlehem and Nazareth, which had been overwhelmingly Christian towns, now have strong Muslim majorities. Today three-fourths of all Bethlehem Christians live abroad, and more Jerusalem Christians live in Sydney, Australia than in the place of their birth. Indeed, Christians now comprise just 2.5 percent of Jerusalem, although those remaining still include a few born in the Old City when Christians there still constituted a majority.

And it is not only the Holy Land from which many native Christians have fled. Throughout the entire Middle East, once significant Christian communities have shrunk to a miniscule portion of their former robust selves. In 50 years they may well be extinct.

What happened? Why has there been a great – and little reported — Christian exodus from the Middle East, with some 2 million fleeing in the past 20 years alone? Why have perhaps fully half of all Iraqi

Christians clandestinely emigrated in the last ten years? Why have hundreds of thousands of Egyptian Copts left their homeland, with the famous Antioch community collapsing from 15,000 Christians a couple of decades ago to a mere handful today?

The single greatest cause of this emigration is radical Islam.

SometimesIslamist intolerance toward Christians has been instigated directly by the state; in other cases it is a result of government's attempt to accommodate insurgent Islamist movements. For beleaguered Christians, however, the effect is often the same.

To be sure, there have been other reasons for the exodus. Educated Middle Eastern Christians sometimes emigrate to the West for economic reasons. Some have left to avoid the endless procession of violent conflicts. Their lower birth rate and compatibility with the Christian West has reinforced these tendencies.

But an entire group does not cavalierly abandon a homeland in which its ancestors have lived for nearly 2,000 years. It does not sever ancient ties to the land where its

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religion was born, uprooting itself to relocate six thousand miles away, simply because of the allures of a more prosperous society. Such people have to be pushed out, too. And that is precisely what radical Islamists are managing to do.

In his recent book *The Body and the Blood: The Holy Land's Christians at the Turn of the Century*, Charles Sennott reports on one Christian community after another that is "perilously close to extinction."

"In one Jerusalem parish there were not enough young Christian men left to carry a casket at a funeral…In the sanctuary of an Upper Egypt monastery, Christians cowered in fear of violence from Islamic militants and systematic human rights violations by Egypt's police state. In Lebanon the empty halls of once-grand Maronite Christian monasteries echoed a long-distant past crumbling and disappearing in the aftermath of a devastating civil war … In all these places I found the Christian community withering, as daily life grew steadily more difficult."

Lebanon and Egypt are revealing cases precisely because no one, a generation or two ago, would have imagined that their large historic Christian communities would be so beleaguered today. Yet during and after the Lebanese civil war of the 1975-1990, 600,000 Lebanese Christians emigrated and perhaps 100,000 were killed. This left Lebanese Christians, once a solid majority of the country, with less than one million people and shrinking rapidly.

Egyptian Copts, meanwhile, have felt the brunt of both the state and Islamic fundamentalists. Many laws and customs favor Muslims, and the constitution proclaims Islam as the state religion. Muslim, but not Christian, schools receive state funding and Arabic may be taught in schools only by Muslims. Not only are Copts declining in numbers in public administration and the parliament; it is nearly impossible to restore or build new churches at a time while many thousands of new Islamic buildings have been sanctioned by the state. Identity cards note the bearer's religion, Christians are frequently ostracized or insulted in public, and laws prohibit Moslem conversions to Christianity. Most frightening of all, Islamic radicals have frequently launched physical attacks on Copts.

In several other Islamic countries, the condition of Christians is even worse. In Saudi Arabia, Islam is the state religion and there are no native Christians; indeed, all citizens must be Muslims. It is illegal to import, print or own Christian or non-Muslim religious materials, and Christians have been jailed and deported.

Sudan has followed shari'a law since 1983 and declared itself an Islamic Republic in 1991. A brutal civil war waged by an Islamic Arab North against the Christian and animist black African south (1955-1972, 1989-present) has killed over two million people and uprooted the majority of the population in the South. Scorched earth policies, enslavement, massacres, forced conversions, closings of churches and persecution of Christians have been the norm.

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In Taliban Afghanistan the application of harsh shari'a law bred such hatred of Christians that there were no longer any open churches or significant numbers of avowed Christians in the country. Conversion to Christianity could bring death and even friendship with Christians was considered taboo.

In Iran, Christians form a miniscule .4 percent of the population. The tiny Christian population has been treated as second class *dhimmis*–people of the Book who are theoretically protected while officially marginalized. The printing of Christian literature is illegal, converts from Islam are liable to be killed and most evangelical churches must function underground.

The collapse of Christians in Turkey occurred earlier than in some nations, but is no less dramatic fashion. In 1900 there were over 3 million Greek and Armenian Christians in Turkey. Today, after massacres and population exchange in the 1910s and 1920s, barely 100,000 Christians remain in Turkey, and only 2,000 Greek Orthodox souls in Istanbul's Ecumenical Patriarch. Christians made up almost 50% of Istanbul's population in 1900; today exactly 1%.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF THE PALESTINIANS

Finally, there is the special case of the Palestinian Authority. Yasser Arafat has repeatedly proclaimed himself a defender of the Christians; he met with the Pope and appointed a Christian, Hanan Ashrawi, as one of his leading spokespeople. But, his deeds belie his words, and ever more so with the rapid Islamization of the Palestinian movement.

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Since 1975 Arafat has tried to erase the historic Jesus — a Jewish rabbi whose person and teachings would give rise to Christianity. Arafat has done this by depicting Jesus as the first radical Palestinian armed fedayeen (guerrilla). Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has adopted Islam as its official religion, used shari'a Islamic codes, and allowed even officially appointed clerics to brand

Christians (and Jews) as infidels in their mosques. The militantly Islamic rhetoric and terrorist acts of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah – all of which Arafat has tolerated and even encouraged — offer little comfort to Christians.

Since the December 1995 Palestinian takeover of Bethlehem, Arafat has placed the Church of the Nativity and other key Christian sites not under Christian control but under his direct political supervision. Palestinian converts to Christianity have been harassed, Christian cemeteries have been destroyed, monasteries have seen their phone lines cut and convents have been broken into. By December 1997 *The Times of London* could report: "Life in (PA ruled) Bethlehem has become insufferable for many members of the dwindling Christian minorities. Increasing Muslim-Christian tensions have left some Christians reluctant to celebrate Christmas in the town at the heart of the story of Christ's birth."

In May 1999, Sheikh Yussef Salameh, the Palestinian Authority's undersecretary for religious endowment, praised the idea that Christians should become *dhimmis* under Muslim rule. The Christian leader, Father Marun Lahham, in Ramallah protested that "contemporary Palestinian Christians reject the idea," adding that "the frequent Muslim declarations that Palestine is an Islamic Waqf (religious endowment) and that Jerusalem is (an) Islamic city trouble Christians."

The Catholic archbishop of the Galilee, Butrus Al-Mu'alem, also rejected the notion of *dhimmi* status, stressing the deep Christian roots in Palestine. Christians in the Holy Land, he noted, are not "residues, foreigners or beggars of mercy...It is strange to me that there remains such backwardness in our society...there are still those who amuse themselves with fossilized notions."

In response, Sheikh Khatib denounced "the Archbishop's curses." A week later he declared that, "on the birthday of your Jesus...the fools who claim to be of relation to him (the Christians) celebrate by committing

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deeds that he (Jesus) himself denounced, loathed and forbade (like) drinking wine, playing games of chance, cursing and screaming. They think that by doing so, they become closer to Him. Oh, how wretched they have become…"

The second intifada, which began in October 2000, provoked even more sweeping condemnations of Christians – such as this broadcast sermon from a Gaza mosque by Dr. Ahmad Abu Halabiya: "The Jews are the allies of the Christians and the Christians are the allies of the Jews…Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them—and those who and by them—they are all in one trench against the Arabs and the Muslims…Allah, deal with the Jews, your enemies and the enemies of Islam.

Deal with the crusaders and America, and Europe behind him)."

Calls for turning Christians and Jews into *dhimmis* under Muslim rule have resurfaced since then – for example, by Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Mahdi, who appeared on Palestinian television endorsing the idea.

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Perhaps most ominously for the future of Christians in the Holy Land, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who is a favorite of Arafat, has declared that there are no Jewish stones in Jerusalem and "not even the smallest indication of the existence of a Jewish temple on this place in the past."

From where, then, had Jesus chased the moneychangers and at what had he looked up when he lived in Jerusalem? The Grand Mufti did not say, but it is no wonder, given such an atmosphere, that long-awaited global celebrations of the second millennium anniversary of Jesus in Bethlehem had to be cancelled in 2000; nor is it surprising that Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem have been cancelled this year for the second time in a row.

The result of all this maltreatment? The exodus of Christians continues apace from the Palestinian Authority controlled areas. Within a generation Christians may comprise less than 1% of the population of the ground sacred to their faith.

THE TREATMENT OF CHRISTIANS IN EARLIER CENTURIES

None of this is to suggest, of course, that Christians always fared well under Islam in earlier centuries. The difference is that the brutality characteristic of much of Islam's early history was also typical of most of the rest of the world's major civilizations at that time – whereas the Islamist intolerance today has no significant counterpart in the West. There is no doubt, nonetheless, that the birth of Islam in the seventh century had a disastrous impact on Christianity (as on Judaism) in the Middle East from Arabia to Mesopotamia to Egypt. Indeed, the Eastern Mediterranean at the time was almost totally Christian and the Levant was Christianity's heartland. More than 90 percent of all Egyptians were also Christians; even in the eighth century only 10 percent were Muslims. The Middle East and Christianity were almost synonymous.

Over the coming centuries (save for the brief Crusader interlude)

Passively accepting abuse and humiliation, they witnessed their dhimmi women made available to Islamic men.

massive wars of Arab and Turkish jihad and conquest, nomadic depredations, persecutions, expulsions, forced conversions, assassinations, border raids, enslavement, *devshirme* (the levy of Christian children to be forcibly converted to Islam), confiscation of Christian religious property, the flight and ruin of Christian communities all left a vivid imprint on the once powerful Christian communities. By 1580 Christians made up only 8 percent of the new Ottoman Turkish Empire.

For 1,200 years Christians, like Mediterranean in which Christian communities are now on their heels or in virtual flight.

Those in the West who seek to understand the events of Sept. 11 and the struggle now taking place between the West and a radical "Jihadist" ("Holy War") movement must not forget that the scars of radical Islam are also visible in the Middle East itself.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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