



IS CHRISTIANITY IN THE LAND OF THE CRADLE IN DEMISE?

Review and Analysis

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The Christians of the Middle East have been considered one of the most silent victims of the dangerously destabilizing events of the twentieth century with a dismal record of Christian loss. This small religious community is deeply immersed in a series of serious global changes that is unable to influence or reshape. In this four parts article, we shall identify this community fears, discrimination, emigration, and plight. Possible problem solving and solutions will be also discussed.

Part I

At the present time more than 1.7 billion Christians make the world's largest religion, outnumbering many popular religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Even though Christianity was born in the Middle East, Christians in the region are having many problems that did not begin recently but has deep and antique historical roots. The massive Muslim conquests of the 7th century caused a dominant population to be rendered first powerless and then turned into a minority. Since the birth of Jesus Christ and until the first advent of Islam, there were more than 17 million Christians in the region: 9 million in Iraq, 4 million in Syria, 2.5 in Egypt, and about 2 million scattered in the land of Mesopotamia and the Arab Peninsula. It is no doubt that the European Crusaders in the 12th century put Christians of the area in a very unenviable situation of having to choose between their coreligionists and their compatriots, this by itself ushered Christianity in the area into a dramatic decline. The Christian population dramatically dropped again during the period of the Ottoman conquest around the middle of 16th century. In addition, the significant drop in this population was resulted from the rise and fall of the indigenous and conquering empires, massive emigration and the European formation of many Arab States with constitutions based on the strict ruling of Islam coupled with the European power abandonment of their religious brethren.

Today, there is less than 12 million Christians live in the Arab countries; numerically significant Christian minority groups include: the Chaldeans and the Assyrians of the Mesopotamia, the Maronites of Lebanon, the Copts of Egypt, the Syriacs of Syria, the Greek Orthodox and Diaspora Armenians, and some of the tribal members of southern Sudan. It is feared that the Christian population in this region could decline to less than 6 millions by the year-end 2025, or just half of their numbers today. This steep decline could accelerate leading to a total demise of Christianity in its land of birth.

WHAT MIDDLE EAST CHRISTIANS FEAR:

The legacy of discrimination against Christians has culminated in a series of bloody confrontations over the past centuries served to pull Muslims and Christians further apart making this religious segregation to yield a significant fear into Christians of the area. In the absence of the rule of law as established in the Western Democracies, Christians in the region tend to fear the superiority of the other religions. In many cases, Christians feel that Muslims associate them with the West, a very perceived identification that makes Christians very vulnerable in times of international crisis as the anger of the fanatic Muslims directed to their powerless Christian neighbors.

The falling of Constantinople and the destruction of invaluable Christian art beside the conversion of churches to mosques and the slavery of Christian children by the Ottoman Sultans makes a few of many atrocities against local Christians not to mention the massive killings (massacres) of Armenians, Assyrians and the Chaldeans in the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Christians developed a good relations with the Mongols in the 13th century, in addition the region's Catholic, Maronite and Protestant acceptance of the Western secular education and cultural values as well as economic collaboration were good reasons to aggravate area dominant Muslims. Ironically these factors severely strain their behavior and keep them continuously conscious about the possible implications of their actions. Unfortunately many Muslim clerks in the Middle East turned away from their own religion teachings because of their role in supporting war and fanatics. As a result many Christians became threatened and shaken compounded by their sense of insecurity.

The life style of Christians in the Middle East is under the chaotic ruling system of Islam. Their freedom in many countries of the region



is suppressed in one way or another and they are under constant cultural genocide. They are alienated, dispossessed and placed under the blanket of silence insulated from the world media. They are under pressure to either adapt to the Islamic rule and accept the fate or parish. The spiritual buoyancy and political rule of Arab Muslims, along with the extraordinary reproduction rate, deny smaller communities the resources required for independence. An ethic of conquest and self-confidence in their right to rule have propelled the majority Muslims forward reflecting their all times belief that Islam is the religion of power.

The other problem is that Western culture tolerates religion but is known to have certain groups that discriminate against race and color, whereas in the Islamic world, they are more likely to tolerate race and color but discriminate totally against religion, the recognition and practicing of other than Islam is very limited. In addition, the Middle East is a region largely defines not just the faith of the people but also their personal identity; this by itself had a vigorous impact on the region societies. This also set different population groups apart and reinforced tensions leading some church leaders to worry that Christian life in the area will be reduced to empty churches and congregation-less hierarchy while making the region a non-reassuring place for Christians.

What one must realize from the history of the region; from its founding to the present time, the religion plays a significant role in the lives of people and any misinterpretations or abuse of the word of God can lead to total chaos and destruction of the local communities. We need to remind our selves that freedom of religion is the most sacred right of a citizen without infringement on the freedom of others. What a person believes in, and how he serves his God, is his business as long his religious practice is not disrespectful or dangerous to others. Imposition of any person's will by coercion on others is one kind of persecution and one form of repression.

The other fear is the possible threat of a biological terrorism that this oppressed regional Christian community might face. Recently, it was speculated that the scientists in the Middle East have developed a microbial genetic weapon named "ethnic bullet" a type of biological weapon designed to attack specific ethnic groups only. This microbial weapon can produce a series of silent unexplained illnesses able to wipe the whole targeted ethnic community within short period of time. The still surviving ancient Christians of the Middle East have undergone a terrible experience of almost unrelieved loss and suffering since the Muslim conquest their land, then ruled, discriminated, and persecuted them. It is time for the true democracy and the rule of law to cast a ray of hope on the land of the world's best religions and great civilizations.

To be continued