

Is This the End for Mideast Christianity?



For Christians in the Middle East, 2014 has been a catastrophe. The most wrenching stories have come from Iraq, where the nascent Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL in news reports) has savagely persecuted ancient Christian communities, including Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syrian Orthodox. Iraqi Christians have declined rapidly in number since the first Gulf War in 1991, but survivors long believed they could maintain a foothold around Mosul.

This past summer, that hope collapsed. In a ghastly reminder of Nazi savagery against Jews, Christian homes were marked with the Arabic letter ن for Nazarenes—Christ followers—or R for Rwafidh, a term for Protestants, and inhabitants were targets for abuse or murder. Islamist militants have controlled Mosul since June 10. Even if the total extermination of each and every believer is not the goal, those ancient communities and churches face the prospect of utter ruin. To that extent, the end of Christianity in Iraq is within sight.

The current battles are part of a lengthy story. Islam gained power over the Middle East in the seventh century, but it was several centuries before Muslims became an overwhelming majority. Christians operated under Muslims' political rule, but the Coptic Patriarchate of Alexandria, Egypt, and the Baghdad-based Church of the East remained mighty forces of global Christianity. They retained that position for

more than 500 years. Not until the 14th century did persecution become systematic and violent.

Long after that date, though, minorities survived and even thrived in substantial numbers. As recently as 1914, Christians still made up 10 percent of the whole region from Egypt to Persia (Iran), and most large cities were homes to multiple faiths and denominations. That did not mean that the Ottoman rulers were tolerant in principle; rather, they accepted what seemed like the natural order of things.

Disappearing Faith

Matters changed swiftly during World War I. Massacres and expulsions all but removed the once very large Armenian and Greek communities in Anatolia (now Turkey). Counting Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks together, murder and starvation killed more than two million Christians between 1915 and 1922.

Emerging Arab nations also targeted Christians. Iraq's slaughter of Assyrians in 1933 gave lawyer Raphael Lemkin a basis upon which he defined the concept of genocide. The partition of Palestine and subsequent crises in the region massively shrunk other ancient Christian groups. The modern story of the Christian Middle East is one of contraction and collapse.

By the end of the past century, Christianity in the Middle East had two great centers: Coptic Egypt, and the closely interrelated lands of Syria and Lebanon. They are now home to many refugee churches.

Today, Syria's continuing civil war threatens to extend Islamist power still further. Islamic State flags have appeared in Lebanon. Lebanese politician Walid Jumblatt has warned that both Christians and his own Druze people stand "on the edge of extinction."

How bad could this get? All local Christians know the answer. They look back at the experience of Jews, who flourished across the region just a century ago but have now vanished from virtually every Mideast nation outside Israel. Since 1950, Egypt's Jewish population has shrunk from 100,000 to perhaps 50; Iraq's, from 90,000 to a mere handful. Christian Aleppo or Damascus could easily go the way of Jewish Baghdad. In 2013, Iraq's Chaldean (Eastern-rite Catholic) patriarch Raphael Sako warned, "If emigration continues, God forbid, there will be no more Christians in the Middle East."

The only Christian community that seems secure is the Copts, perhaps eight million strong, and a solid majority in some of Egypt's southern districts. Even so, after the crisis there of the past two years, the potential remains for imminent civil conflict and Islamist violence.

Killing Churches

If the vision of a Christian-free Middle East is too pessimistic, the scale of the disasters that have overtaken some countries is beyond doubt. That experience offers many lessons for us in the West.

It is obscene to complain about a “war on Christmas” in the United States when there are Syrian cities without Christians to commemorate their holy days at all for the first time in some 1,900 years. That’s an authentic war on Christmas.

More broadly, these events teach us about the long-term trajectories of Christian history. They show how churches vanish and, more important perhaps, how they survive under the direst of circumstances.

One lesson emerges strongly: However often we talk of churches dying, they rarely do so without extraordinary external intervention. Churches don’t die because their congregations age, their pastors behave scandalously, the range of programs they offer wears thin, or their theology becomes muddled. Churches vanish when they are deliberately and efficiently killed by a determined foe.

That opponent looks different over time. The destructive enemy might represent a rival religious creed, as we now see with radical Islamism in Iraq. More commonly, the persecutor is inspired by a radical secular ideology that exalts the state and condemns any group that pledges loyalty to some other absolute, whether on earth or in heaven. That was the defining attitude of Soviet and Chinese communism. Similarly, the murderous Ottoman regime during the Great War acted as it did because of ferocious nationalism rather than any Islamic belief.

The Church of the East, the ancestor of the Assyrians and Chaldeans, perfectly illustrates that long survival—and profound current crisis. The disasters of the 14th century reduced that once transcontinental body to a much smaller remnant. That vestige continued within Iraq, Syria, and Anatolia for seven centuries. Throughout that latter period, hard-line Muslim jurists and demagogues competed to invent new humiliations to inflict on Christians: limits on what those believers could wear, the houses they could own, and the horses they could ride. At the worst of times, Christians wore rags to avoid giving any impression of wealth, which invited others to take their property.

If there was a single penalty that stung more than any, it was losing control of the soundscape. In a Muslim-ruled land, the only public voice of religion was the cry of the muezzin from the minaret; ringing church bells were utterly forbidden. The starkest division between Christian and Muslim societies was literally in the air.

But Christians endured century through century. They maintained their faithful witness while recognizing their severe limits. Through bitter experience, they learned to identify the irreducible core of their faith

while setting aside additional practices. They abandoned the bells and whistles, literally. Christians could not evangelize, but they kept up the worship that stood at the heart of their spiritual life.

Critically too, they could support monasteries where spiritual warriors maintained prayer and study. As long as monks prayed and priests said the liturgy, the church was intact, and that situation could last, in theory, until Judgment Day. Surviving monasteries tended to be in remote and highly defensible places, and their fortifications were formidable. Egypt still has such legendary fortresses of prayer, such as St. Antony's monastery and St. Catherine's in Sinai. Until our own times, Iraqi Christians clustered around Mar Mattai (St. Matthew) and Rabban Hormizd, both dating from late Roman times.

Some believers hoped that powerful Western churches would send aid, although foreign Protestants in particular could rarely grasp the distinct patterns of local religious practice. Worse, Westerners aroused the suspicion of local nationalists.

No less dangerous was the temptation to support secular nationalist parties that promised to govern regardless of faith or denomination. Such alliances were always something of a trap, as they intertwined local churches with dubious regimes, most notoriously the Ba'athists of Iraq or Syria. At least for some years, though, these policies removed the danger of active persecution.

The church persisted stubbornly until modern times, when new militants emerged to tear it up, root and branch. Believers were killed en masse, leaving survivors to flee the country for a time or altogether. Only at that point did churches cease to function. That is what happened to the Armenians during the Great War, and has started to happen to Iraq's Syriac Christians over the past two decades.

The Greater Plan?

In the darkest years of the Middle Ages, when European Christians fled from barbarian invaders, their obvious refuge was the neighboring monastery. This past summer, that was exactly the course taken by the Christians of northern Iraq to escape the Islamic State.

Some of the remnants of Mosul's Christian community took shelter in the ancient cloisters of Mar Mattai. As the Islamic State has recently demonstrated, the practical logistics of destroying a church are not terribly difficult: You occupy a region militarily, and kill or expel all its inhabitants who practice the offending faith. Quite separate, though, is the question of how those persecuted believers understand that destruction.

Over the past thousand years, Christians have repeatedly had to ask: Why would God allow his followers

to suffer defeat, subjection, exile, and enslavement? They find some answers in biblical precedent, looking to the Hebrew prophets who saw their own kingdom defeated for lacking faith and betraying the national covenant. Seen in this light, even the worst disasters can be seen as God's scourge on his sinful people, although no clear evidence suggests that the churches in question are any worse than others that have enjoyed far greater success and safety.

But deeply embedded in Jewish and Christian thought is the idea of the righteous remnant, the community that survives tribulations only to follow God's commands still more exactly. Perhaps the exile that initially seems a nightmare might form part of this greater plan, as dispossessed believers carry their witness to other lands. You cannot read the Bible without realizing how the Exile and Diaspora experience could powerfully spread faith into distant corners of the world. Around the Western world, growing communities of Christians from the Middle East are quite prepared to sing their song in a strange land.

Far more challenging is the question of why God would permit Christianity in a particular land to vanish altogether. Yes, churches move to new pastures where they might prosper. But what about their homelands? What about churches that are altogether destroyed, no remnant remaining? This theological dilemma might well be much discussed in 2015, when the long-awaited film version of Shusaku Endo's 1966 novel, *Silence*, is set to release.

Endo was exploring the fate of the Catholic Church in 17th-century Japan as vicious persecution was snuffing it out. While the Catholic Church commemorates 200 named martyrs, tens of thousands more ordinary believers were beheaded, burned, and crucified. The Japanese used a singularly cruel tactic of water crucifixion at the seashore. Nailed to a cross at low tide, a priest would almost be wholly submerged as the tides came in over several days, finally drowning him.

As the last living priest in *Silence* muses over all the persecution and terror, he notes one fact: "In the face of this terrible and merciless sacrifice offered up to him, God has remained silent." No, says the priest, God never intervened miraculously to protect his flock. No angels descended to conceal and protect fleeing victims; no persecutors were struck blind as they proclaimed their sentences or erected their crosses; the persecutors suffered neither plague nor military defeat as punishment for their actions. As in modern Iraq, the persecutors carried on their path unchecked until they achieved their monstrous goal.

Did God care so little for his faithful? Was there simply no God to care?

Eternal Timeframe

God may seem silent on occasion. At other times, people simply don't trouble to hear his voice. Those

previous cases of church extinctions are dreadful enough, but rarely are they as total as they initially appear. So much depends on our perception of time.

What to us may seem like a definitive act of annihilation seems quite different when located upon a divine timescale. As we are often told, extinction is forever; but humans should be very cautious about using the language of eternity. Forever changes.

As an example, we might look at the experience of China, which over the past two millennia has remained the world's most populous nation. The story of Chinese Christianity is a recurrent cycle of mighty boom years followed by what seemed like total annihilation at the time, an obliteration so absolute that on each occasion, it was quite clear that the church could never rise again. That cycle has occurred five times to date since the ninth century. On each occasion, the Chinese church has reemerged far more powerful than at its previous peak. Each successive "nevermore" proved to be strictly temporary.

Of course, individuals and communities suffered horrifically during those intervening centuries of disaster. We can't minimize the atrocities. But if communities perished, the church endured. Viewed in the timeframe of eternity, those years of seeming annihilation should more properly be understood as fallow times of gestation.

Even when institutional churches vanish, believers persist in many different forms. One of the most understudied facts in Christian history is that of crypto-believers, those hidden remnants who hold on to truth while superficially accepting the prevailing regime. As Anatoly Lunacharsky, the frustrated Soviet minister of education, complained in 1928, "Religion is like a nail: The harder you hit it, the deeper it goes into the wood." Sometimes it goes in so deep, you can't even see it.

In Japan, for instance, the brutal destruction of the Catholic Church described in *Silence* did not prevent large groups of Kakure Kirishitan ("Hidden Christians") from maintaining the faith underground. In fact, some survived four centuries and a few elderly hang on today. We see the same phenomenon in China and, most relevant to this article, all across the Middle East. In Syria, estimates of the size of the Christian population before the present crisis commonly varied between 5 and 15 percent, with crypto-Christians accounting for much of the difference. Underground belief and practice will be much more difficult under an extreme Islamist regime than under the secular Ba'athists, but "cryptos" have often endured for astonishingly long periods, until gentler times return.

Shall we talk about the extinction of Middle Eastern Christianity? Come back in 500 years. We'll see then.

Uncounted Christians

Even at this worst of times, Christians survive. But dare we say that, even in an increasingly intolerant Middle East, Christians as a whole are not just remaining but in places actually swelling in number?

This gets us into sensitive territory. Over the past decade, we have heard amazing claims about new Christian evangelization in Muslim countries, usually accompanied by incredible conversion statistics.

Having said that, some specific accounts are much more believable. David Garrison's recent book, *A Wind in the House of Islam*, describes the Christian appeal in diverse Muslim societies. Remarkably, Syria offers some of the most convincing examples of this trend. Garrison is a responsible and critical reporter. The problem, though, is that all such activity is clandestine, for fear of arousing persecution.

For the sake of argument, let us adopt a sweeping skepticism and dismiss all such stories. Even so, we are still witnessing a striking upsurge of Christian numbers in some of the most unlikely settings, almost entirely as a result of immigration. Look at Saudi Arabia, a land of 28 million people where Islam is the only permitted religion. Consequently, official sources list the country as 100 percent Muslim.

In reality, Saudi Arabia is only one of many Middle Eastern countries that have imported millions of poor foreigners to perform menial jobs over the years. Many of those immigrants are African and Asian Christians, including many Filipinos. As they do not officially exist as Christians, they have zero right to practice their faith, even in private. But exist they do. By some estimates, Saudi Arabia's Christian population is about 5 percent of the whole, perhaps 1.5 million people.

Other Gulf nations are more honest about just how religiously diverse they have become. Christians—mainly guest workers—probably make up 7 percent of the population of the United Arab Emirates, and 10 percent of Bahrain or Kuwait. Those are nations where Christianity scarcely existed 100 years ago.

No less surprising is Israel. Together with Palestine and the Occupied Territories, the State of Israel now includes thousands of adherents of ancient Christian denominations. Those older churches have fallen sharply in their numbers in the past half-century, but newer Christians have more than replaced them. There are thousands of Global South guest workers. Also, many Russian Christians invoked Jewish ancestry to enter Israel in the 1990s. Some were Orthodox Christians, others Baptists and Pentecostals. Israel's Russian Christian community today is perhaps 80,000 strong.

Israel and Palestine combined have a population of some 10 million, of whom perhaps 5 percent are Christians—Arab, Armenian, Russian, African, and Filipino. Together with the Arab Gulf, these are the region's new and growing centers of Christian belief and practice.

Suffering, Yes. Extinction, No.

Not for a second should such signs of growth distract our attention from the dreadful situation facing Christians elsewhere in the Middle East. Individuals are being murdered, raped, enslaved, and turned into refugees, and Western governments have no option but to intervene on their behalf—only how is a matter for debate.

Armed intervention might actually succeed in crushing the most aggressive jihadi campaigns. In the longer term, Western churches undoubtedly have their role to play in assisting fellow believers, whether in their homelands or in their new diasporas. Even with vigorous activism, though, whether military or humanitarian, it is difficult to imagine the churches of Syria and Iraq returning to the flourishing condition they enjoyed even half a century ago.

But that is quite different from saying that Christianity as such faces extinction in the region, or that the church might cease to exist.

Looking at this story, we might adapt the famous remark about Russia, typically attributed to Otto von Bismarck: “Christianity is never as strong as it appears; but nor is it ever as weak as it appears.” In God’s terms, words like strength and weakness can have surprising meanings. We must be very cautious indeed about making statements that claim to understand the goals or directions of history.

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