

Who are the Christians in the Middle East?

By Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey.

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Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

The Middle East is constantly in the news. Regrettably, many Canadians and Americans think about that region only in terms of Muslims and Jews. They seem to be unaware that the first Christian communities originated in the Middle East (cf. Acts 1:8). The neglect of Eastern Christianity by the Western media has greatly affected the content, accuracy, and the approach of treatment on issues such as: the generally unexamined conflicts in Lebanon and of Christian minorities in Sudan, Egypt, Iraq and Iran. If these Christians are mentioned, they are treated with contempt or condescension. The experience Christians living under Islam has yet to be properly addressed both by the Western secular media and Western Christians. Deprived of state patronage, of a public voice, of equality and of the right to proclaim the Gospel, they need understanding and support.

Since the death of Muhammad (632 AD) Christians were oppressed or persecuted by Muslims. For example, non-Muslims were prohibited from missionary activity and Muslims were prohibited from converting to Christianity. Although Islamic scholars boast of the great strides made by their religion in the sciences and so on, their achievements cannot be understood apart from Christianity. It is well documented that in the first centuries of Muslim rule Christians remained prominent in state administration, cultural and intellectual life. Christian ministers, civil servants, scholars, teachers and doctors played a significant role in shaping Islamic civilizations.

For Christians in the West it is important to recognize the existence and the role of the churches in the Middle East. In our evaluation we should realize that these churches did not experience the 16th century Reformation that resulted in the great diversity of Protestant churches in the West. But the reformation had an impact on Eastern Christians and continued to do so. And they were not affected by evangelicalism until the early 19th century when Western missionaries became active in the Middle East. Eastern Christianity is strongly traditionalist. It is communal rather than individual. However, monasticism and asceticism are important elements in their faith and practice.

A basic knowledge of Eastern Christianity will also help us better understand the dilemma the Palestinian Christians face.

Unconditional support by evangelical Christians in North America has not benefited their relationships with either their Jewish or Muslim neighbours. They not only suffer discrimination and second-class citizenship at the hands of Israeli officials but also recognize that living in a Muslim-dominated Palestinian state would bring a whole new set of dangers. Furthermore, since there is a steady exodus of Christians to the West because of war, persecution, and oppression and by the hope of economic betterment, it behooves us to learn about their faith.

The authors of *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* are ordained ministers in the United Church of Christ. Their timely book is based on personal experiences, official documents, and extensive interviews. It offers valuable information and statistics on the Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Protestant and Assyrian churches presently active in the

Middle East. It provides insights into the history and the diversity of their beliefs. Country-by-country reports are also given on today's situation and the many challenges they face from Islam and the secular West. Profiles of various church leaders, web sites and email addresses are also included. Although I recommend the book as a sorely needed resource, I do have some reservations. The authors reveal an anti-Israeli bias and a one-sided view of the Palestinian question. They also give the impression that the Lord's Great Commission is "go into all the world and dialogue with other religions." They claim that the evangelical mission efforts from Asia and the United States put a strain on positive relationships between Muslims and Christians, and hinder dialogue with other religions. I believe we should pursue inter-religious dialogue for the purpose to reach a better understanding of the beliefs and practices of other religions, but always out of the deep conviction that Jesus Christ is the only Saviour, the only way to God the Father. "There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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