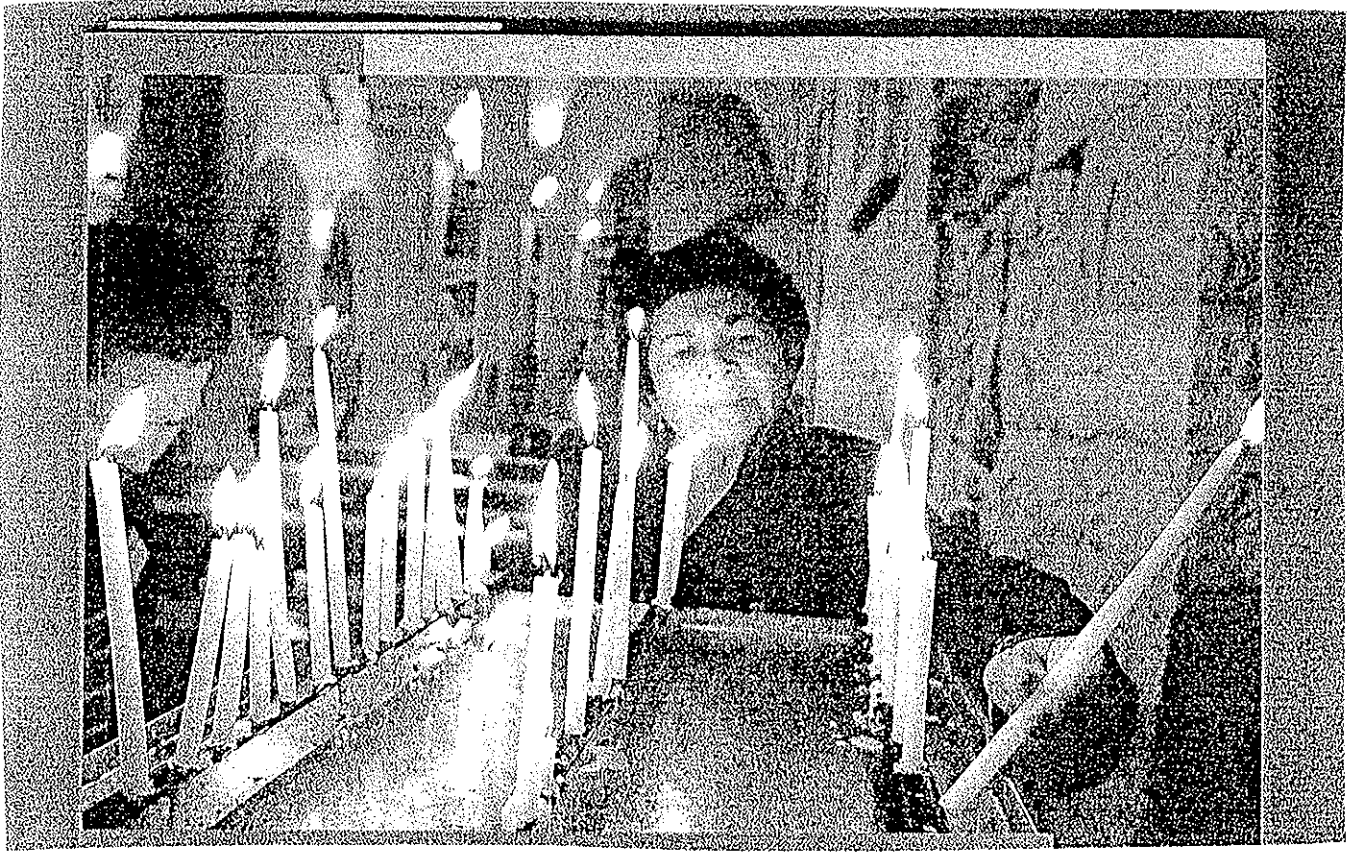


Who Are the
Christians in the
Middle East?



“Heirs of Pentecost ...”
(Acts 2:6-12)

Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?

Christians have been in the Middle East since Pentecost. Estimates are that there are perhaps 12-13 million today ... or about 5-6% of the total population. A Christian can be of any ethnic group and may speak Arabic, Turkish, Kurdish, or Persian and may refer to his/her God as "Al-lah," "Jehovah," "Holy Father" or some other linguistic equivalency.

Within the Abrahamic community of Christianity, there have been enormous struggles and a long history of divisiveness. Ignorance, misunderstandings, and a lack of dialogue have resulted in bitter struggles as evidenced in the slaughter of more Eastern Christians during the Western Crusades than of all Muslim, Jewish, and other religious populations combined.

The following information owes credit to several lectures on Eastern Christianity provided by the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University and to the book by Betty Jane and J. Martin Bailey (2003): Who Are the Christians in the Middle East? Here are some things to consider about our Abrahamic brothers, sisters, and cousins of the Eastern Churches of Christendom.

Eastern Christians are the true "Heirs of Pentecost ..." (Acts 2:1-12)

"... And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs --- in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'"

Eastern Christians have their beginnings in Apostolic teachings

Paul and Barnabas carried the Gospel to the Mediterranean regions.

Thomas preached among the Parthians, Medes (Kurds), Persians (Iranians), Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia (Iraq, Syria, and Jordan), and then traveled on to India.

Mark is said to be the founder of the Coptic Christian Churches and is honored by the Christians of Egypt as well as parts of Libya. Mark's tomb rests in the first Coptic Christian Church established in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1st century.

Thaddaeus (known as **Jude** in the East) was sent by Thomas to Edessa in northern Mesopotamia (Iraq).

Armenians claim **Thaddaeus**, along with **Bartholomew** as the first Apostles to bring the gospel to Armenia. The oldest quarter of the Old Walled section of Jerusalem belongs to Armenian Christians.

James, the brother of Jesus, has the distinction of establishing the Syriac Orthodox Christian Church, whose liturgy is in Aramaic. **James** was also the leader of the early church in Jerusalem.

Liturgies are still in the cultures and languages of the people

As on Pentecost, the words take on a unique meaning when they are understood in the contexts of culture and language for each group. These ancient liturgies are hauntingly beautiful and reflect the origins and collective wisdoms of each community's own history and heritage.

The spread of Christianity came as whole nations adopted the faith.

As Christianity became established among peoples, faith became the anchor for identity. As "collectivist" people, whole groups of Middle Eastern families, ethnicities, and tribal affiliations were often "baptized" together (Acts 2:41). When people lost their political statehood, the churches they established remained as guardians of their nation's and/or their group's collective identity.

Emphasis on the beauty and loving nature of God

Generally, Eastern theology tends to emphasize the beauty and holiness of God rather than fear and punishment. Icons for worship seek to bring one into the context of that beauty, as well as the architecture of beautiful churches with gilded arches and giant spirals to lift one's awe and desire to reach toward the heavens.

The daily practices and traditions of Eastern Christianity are largely expressed through maintaining very close relationships and communion with others in one's church. A common analogy that Christians in the East use to compare an important distinction between Eastern and Western Christians says:

"You (in the West) can choose on your own whether you go to heaven or to hell; we (in the East) can choose to go to hell on our own, but we can only go to heaven with our church!"

Impact of Christianity on the history and cultures of the Middle East

Eastern Christians are very much integrated with the histories, cultures, and politics of Middle Eastern life. For centuries, Christians have been close neighbors with both Jews and Muslims, as well as with Zoroastrians, Baha'is, and other religious groups. Christianity was the social and cultural environment into which Islam was born around the seventh century C.E. Arab and Persian Christians in particular have made significant contributions to Muslim culture and theology.

Christians in Jerusalem were the most numerous they had been since 70 C.E. when the Israeli state was created in 1947. Dialogue with both Jews and Muslims has been essential for their survival there. They have been exemplary in practicing patience, tolerance, and love among all their neighbors. In so doing, Middle Eastern Christians can be said to serve as a model for peaceful co-existence in the world today.

Current situations of Christians in Middle Eastern Churches

- *Christians are quietly disappearing from the Middle East due to poverty, extremism, and violence, brought about from within the region as well as from outside forces.*
- *The current politicization of religions in the region (Islamic/Jewish) constitutes discrimination and persecution of Christian (and other) religious groups.*
- *Economic factors brought about by sanctions and wars are most devastating to Christian and other minority ethnic and religious groups.*
- *The overthrow of authoritarian leaders which have occurred through Western interventions ... along with the events of the Arab Spring ... have significantly reduced the protection and freedom of Christians throughout the Middle East.*

Diversity of Christianity in the Middle East

The following are some distinctions among the diversity of Christian groups within the Middle East:

Eastern Orthodox Churches (Byzantium)

**Greek Orthodox Church
Russian Orthodox Church**

The original Greek Church is said to be founded by the Apostle Andrew in 36 C.E. Other apostles who established converts in this area include Paul, Barnabas, Bartholomew, and Mark.

As Chalcedonian Christians, they believe in the dual nature of Christ. These Christians look to the Seventh Ecumenical Council as second only to the Bible as their guide. The Patriarch of Constantinople is the "first among equals" but has no ecumenical authority. The largest single membership group of Eastern Christians is the Russian Orthodox.

Oriental Orthodox Churches

***Armenian Apostolic Church
Coptic Orthodox Church
Ethiopian Orthodox Church
Syriac Orthodox Church***

The Armenian Apostolic Church was founded by the Apostles Bartholomew and Thaddeus in the second half of the first century

The Apostle Mark established the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt and Libya. The Apostle Philip established the Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The Syriac Orthodox Church traces its origins to the Apostle Peter in 37 C.E.; James, the brother of Jesus, brought the Aramaic liturgy.

As non-Chalcedonian Christians, these Christians believe in the single divine nature of Christ. The Armenians were the first nation to adopt Christianity, but had to remain hidden because of heavy persecution until 301 C.E.

Catholic Churches

***Greek Catholic (known as Melkite)
Armenian Catholic Church
Syriac Catholic Church
Coptic Catholic Church***

Melkites have celebrated the Byzantine rite for more than 1,000 years, drawing on the liturgical customs of Constantinople from the end of the 8th century. Although they have been in communion with Rome since the time of the Crusades, the church has resisted the Latin liturgy. Baptism is by immersion and leavened bread is used in communion. The faithful cross themselves from right to left in the manner of Eastern churches.

The Armenian Catholic Church uses the Armenian language liturgy, but services follow a pattern set by the Roman Catholic Church. Since 1742, all Armenian Catholic bishops have included the name "Peter" (Pierre, Bedros, Petros, etc.) in their titles.

The Syriac Catholic Church has its roots in the Syriac Orthodox Church (non-Chalcedonian). The church uses "Syriac" instead of "Syrian" in English since it refers to the language of the church and its origin rather than to the present nation of Syria.

The Coptic Catholic Church has contributed greatly to the Arab renaissance in Egypt, particularly through scholarly translation of theological books. The church places high priority on work with youth and women, as these are seen as essential elements to preserve Christian values and church traditions. The liturgy is Coptic Orthodox, from which it is derived.

Between 1552 and 1984, Roman Catholic missionaries sought to win back Eastern Christians from the "great schism" that occurred between the Eastern (Greek) and the Roman (Latin) churches in 1054 C.E.

The Assyrian Church of the East

Established by the Apostle Thomas in the 1st century, these Christians remained vibrant through the 13th century. With a strong presence in Persia (Iran) and Iraq, they made significant contributions to the cultures and societies of their time. Their systems of education and other scholarly endeavors helped shape the golden age of the Muslim Empire.

This is said to be the oldest known Eastern church ... and also is the smallest today. The church claims James, the Apostle as the first bishop.

Worship is primarily in Aramaic (the language of Jesus) and the communion bread includes "holy loaves" or "Malka," which is a piece of dough that is kept from one baking to the next, symbolizing continuity with the Last Supper when the Apostle John is said to have kept a piece of the unbaked bread.

The Assyrian Church of the East was virtually annihilated by the armies of Tamerlane in the 14th century. After years of flailing and persecution, the Patriarch and a significant number of followers took up residency in the United States in 1978.

Evangelical Churches

Anglican, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Assemblies of God, Baptists, Churches of Christ, Nazarenes, Seventh Day Adventists, and others may be found in small numbers scattered throughout regions of the Middle East.