

Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?

Christians have been in the Middle East since Pentecost and can be found in all Middle Eastern countries. Estimates are that perhaps 12-13 million, or about 5-6% of the total Middle Eastern population today, are Christians. (These estimates vary among recent sources, largely due to on-going conflicts and the political targeting of Christians). These Christians represent many different ethnic and linguistic groups who claim origins from ancient times of the first century C.E. up to the current century of converts in evangelical Protestant movements. Christians may refer "God" in terms such as "Al-lah," "Jehovah," or "Holy Father" and to "Jesus" as "Issa," "Christo," or "Messiah."

"Eastern Christianity" may be thought of as rooted in the cultural, social, and political environments into which each have lived and in terms that have meaning for them in the context of their own histories and understanding. **Karen Armstrong** writes of the importance of understanding diversity in Christianity (and other religions) in this way:

"The statement 'I believe in God' is a statement that only has meaning in (the context of) time, culture, and personal history. There is no one unchanging idea contained in the word 'God' in terms of its inclusiveness or exclusiveness. Had the notion of 'God' not had this flexibility, it would not have survived the centuries. All the great prophets, Abraham, Noah, Daniel, John the Baptist, John Wesley (as well as) you and me have all experienced the notion of 'God' differently."

From: **The History of God**

Within the Eastern and Western communities of Christianity, there have been centuries of struggles and a long history of divisiveness. Ignorance, isolation, misunderstandings, and lack of dialogue have resulted in harsh judgments of one another, 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 over the last several years 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 Christian brothers, sisters, and cousins of the Middle Eastern Churches of Christendom.

- **Eastern Christians as 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 Christianity have their roots in the early Apostolic teachings**

***Paul** and **Barnabas** are recorded in the New Testament as having carried the Gospel to the regions of the Mediterranean.*

***Thomas** preached among the Parthians, Medes (Kurds), Persians (Iranians), Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia (Iraq, Syria, and Jordan), and then traveled on to India where he is said to have died " ... by the sword."*

***Thaddaeus** (known as **Jude** in the East) was sent by **Thomas** to Edessa in northern Mesopotamia (Iraq). Armenians also 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. **Bartholomew** is also the Apostle associated with Christianity in Turkey.*

***Mark** is said to be the founder of the Coptic Christian Churches of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Libya. He is also recorded as having preached in Cyprus, Jerusalem, and Rome. **Mark's** tomb is said to rest in the first Coptic Christian Church established in Alexandria, Egypt in the 1st century C.E. His New Testament Gospel is referred to as a "Gospel to the Gentiles."*

***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.*

*Tradition says that **Andrew**, and later "**Simon, the Canaanite**" were founders of the Georgian Orthodox Church*

- **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. All Eastern Orthodox Churches hold to the liturgies of their original language in worship.

- **The early spread of Christianity came as whole nations adopted the faith**

As Christianity became established among peoples, faith became an anchor

of 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 in teachings are on the beauty and loving nature of God**

Generally, Eastern theology tends to emphasize the beauty and holiness of God rather than focus on fear and punishment. Icons for worship seek to bring one into the context of that beauty; also, the architecture of beautiful churches with their gilded arches and giant spirals serve to arouse one’s awe and desire to reach higher toward the heavens.

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

“In Western Christianity, one can choose on their own whether they go to heaven or hell; in Eastern Christianity, we 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. “Their life blood is rooted in the soil out of which they came and into which they will return.” (Reference from lecture notes.) This is particularly true in Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Egypt where Christians experienced firsthand how Islam began to shape the new political, social, and cultural characteristics of the Middle East.

Throughout the 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 main social and cultural environment into which Islam was born around the seventh century C.E. Persian and Arab Christians made significant contributions to Islamic traditions; for example: the ritual cleansing of one’s self before prayer; traditions of fasting periods; celebrations of holidays such as “Now Ruz” (actually from Zoroastrianism) and even Christmas; and making holy pilgrimages to “sacred sites.”

Christians in Jerusalem were the most numerous they had been since 70 C.E. when the State of Israel was created in 1947. Along with Palestinian Muslims, Christians in Palestine began to experience discrimination and expulsion from their ancient homelands. Along with Muslims, Palestinian Christians represent

the painful “sword in the side” of most Arabs who perceive this “invasion of foreigners into Arab lands as “Al Nakba” (“catastrophe”).

Dialogue with both Jews and Muslims, however, had been essential for Christians over the centuries-long co-existence in the lands of “Abraham’s children.” Christians are indeed rooted in the soil and have helped shaped the region in many ways including: political and governmental structures; religious theologies; scholarly research; arts and architectural masterpieces; and numerous contributions to the moral and social teachings of their faith.

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 conditions of Christians in the Middle East**

Since the 1940’s, Christians in the Middle East have been quietly disappearing from the region. While some of this is due to poverty, often brought on by Western sanctions and wars, recent decades of religious extremism and violence account for the displacement and deaths of thousands of Christians across the region.

Current politicization of religious groups in the region, particularly by Muslim and Jews, has resulted in large numbers of Eastern Christians now living in a worldwide Christian Diaspora.

Unfortunately, the overthrow of authoritarian governments, many of them backed by Western leaders, has led to a loss of protection that had been offered by these authoritarian leaders. Christians in Iraq constituted between 10-12% of the population prior to the U.S. invasion of 2003. Events related to the “Arab Spring” have also greatly led to the targeting of Christians in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, thus further impacting the rapidly diminishing Christian populations of the Middle East. The on-going war in Syria is a clear example of the Middle East Christian dilemma where “politics aligned with Divine Authority” threaten to extinguish Christians from the very lands into which they were born.

References for Christians in the Middle East:

1. **Bailey, Betty Jane and J. Martin (2003):** “Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?” William B. Erdmans Publishing Co.; Grand Rapids, MI.
2. **McManners, John (2001):** The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity. Oxford University Press; NY.
3. **Parry, Ken (editor) (2010):** The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity. John Wiley; Oxford, UK.

Diversity of Christianity in the Middle East

While clear distinctions of identity are often not agreed upon, here are some general suggestions for better understanding diversity among Christian groups in the Middle East:

The Assyrian Church of the East

Established and led by the Apostles Thomas, Bartholomew, and Thaddeus in the first century C.E., these Christians remained vibrant through the 13th century. With a strong presence in Iraq, Iran (Persia) and throughout Central Asia, they were the largest group of Eastern Christians and made significant contributions to the cultures and societies of their time. Later referred to as “Nestorian” or “Chaldean” Christians, their systems of education and other scholarly endeavors helped shape the golden age of the Muslim Empire in Baghdad between 762 and 1255 C.E.

Large numbers of these Assyrian Christians were found in Iraq and Syria until recent times. The invasion of Iraq and overthrow of an authoritarian dictator who did, in many ways, protect Christians, their recent numbers have fallen to less than half what it was a decade ago. Their fate in Syria is still unknown, though most Christians favored the protection provided by the Assad regime in the early months of the war.

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 continuous flailing and persecution, the Patriarch and a significant number of followers took up residency in the United States in the 1970’s. Numbers of Assyrian Christians in the United States is thought to be around 100,000, with the largest settlements in California and the Chicago area.

Eastern Orthodox Christian Churches

*Eastern Orthodox Churches share a common belief in the “**dual nature of Jesus Christ**” as defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. Most Catholics and Protestants also embrace this theology.*

*Referred to as **Chalcedonian Christians**, these churches look to the Seventh Ecumenical Council as second only to **The Holy Bible** as their guide. The Patriarch of Constantinople is the “first among equals” and has no ecumenical authority. The largest single membership of Eastern Christians is the Russian Orthodox Church.*

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

*There are at least 15 **Eastern Orthodox Christian** communities, each of whom has its own Patriarch, though all are considered to be under the umbrella of the Patriarch of Constantinople. These Churches include four who date from the earliest centuries of Christianity:*

The Constantinople Orthodox Church (Byzantium)
The Alexandria Orthodox Church (Egypt)
The Antioch Orthodox Church (Syria)
The Jerusalem Orthodox Church

More recent communities of these churches are:

The Cyprus Orthodox Church (434)
The Georgian Orthodox Church (466)
The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (929)
The Serbian Orthodox Church (1219)
The Russian Orthodox Church (1589)
The Greek Orthodox Church (1850)
The Poland Orthodox Church (1924)
The Romanian Orthodox Church (1925)
The Albanian Orthodox Church (1937)
The Czech & Slovakian Orthodox Church (1951)
The American Orthodox Church (1970)

Oriental Orthodox Churches

Oriental Orthodoxy recognizes only the first three of the Chalcedon Councils. As non-Chalcedonians, they believe in the “single divine nature of Christ.”

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. Said to be the first nation to adopt Christianity, they had to remain hidden because of heavy persecution until 301 C.E.

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.

Catholic Christian Churches

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

***Melkite Christians** 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.

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.