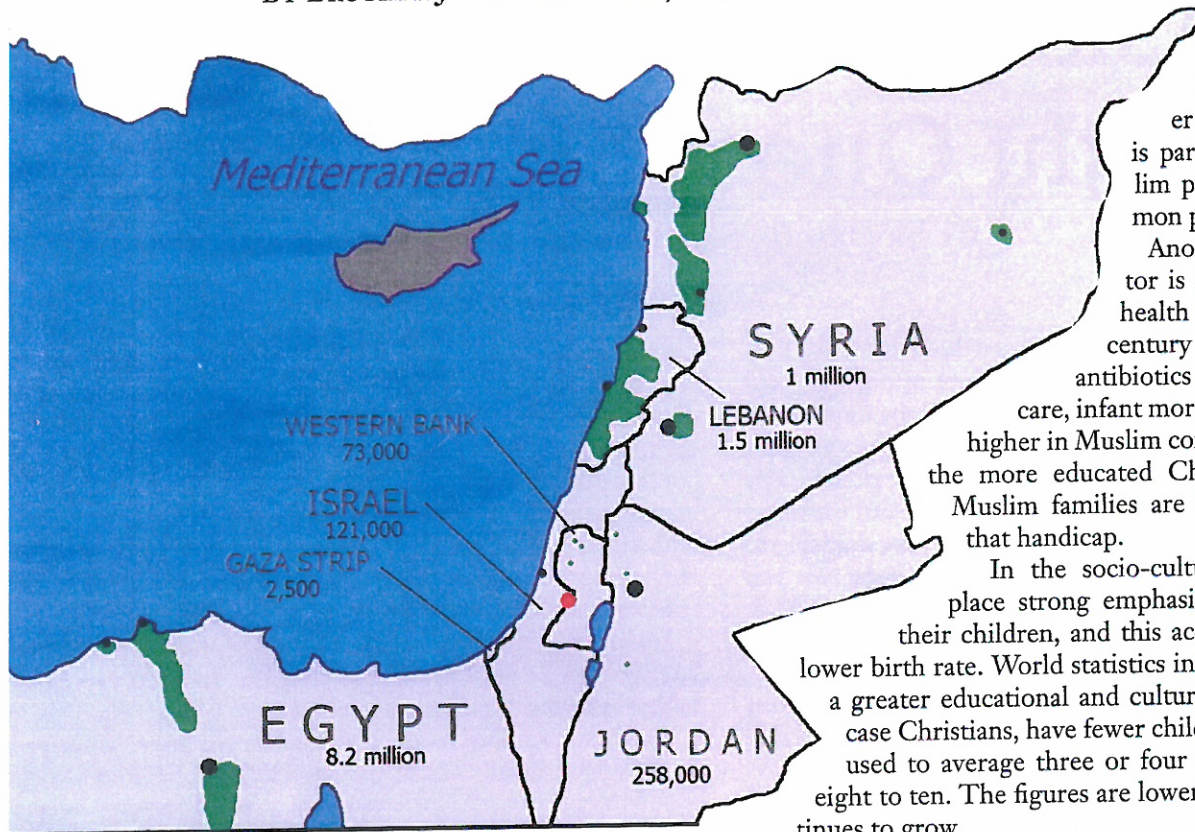


# Why are CHRISTIAN POPULATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST DECREASING?

BY BROTHER JOHN M. SAMAHA, S.M.



### Demography

Muslims multiply faster than Christians. This is partially because of Muslim polygamy, a fairly common practice in rural areas.

Another contributing factor is improved hygiene and health care. Until a half-century ago, before the use of antibiotics and advanced medical care, infant mortality in these areas was higher in Muslim communities than among the more educated Christian families. Now Muslim families are no longer plagued by that handicap.

In the socio-cultural realm, Christians place strong emphasis on the education of their children, and this accounts for a somewhat lower birth rate. World statistics indicate that groups with a greater educational and cultural achievement, in this case Christians, have fewer children. Christian families used to average three or four children, and Muslims eight to ten. The figures are lower now, and the gap continues to grow.

### Emigration

Worsening social and political factors have caused increased Christian emigration. Christians occupy an inferior position in Islamic society. This is stipulated both in the Qur'an and in historical tradition.

According to Islam a Christian is one who pays taxes and is tolerated, but in a position subordinate to Muslims. The Qur'an actually calls for the "humiliation" of Christians (sura IX, verse 29), although the term has been interpreted differently throughout history by various Muslim rulers. In most, but not all, Muslim countries Christians have been allowed to worship freely, but were subject to diverse humiliations. In times past they had to cede to Muslims passing by, or to travel on foot while Muslims were permitted to ride horses.

### CHRISTIANS IN THE NEAR EAST COUNTRIES

*Palestine, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon*

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>PERCENT</u>
1580	8
1882	25
1914	26
1945	19
1995	9

*These figures are recognized as quite accurate.*

*Continued on page 19*

Looking into the text of Genesis 1-3, we can begin to answer these questions. Traditionally, the church has held that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible. When considering the first chapters of Genesis, it is immensely helpful to think of Moses writing these first five books as an instruction to God's people, the Israelites, as they made their way through the Sinai desert during the time of the Exodus. Rather than forcing the story of creation to answer modern scientific questions, we can begin to see Moses' (and God's) intention to instruct his people in their relationship with God.

The purpose of the creation story in the first chapter of Genesis (Gen 1) is to explain to the people, who had recently been freed from slavery, that the "gods" of the Egyptians (the sun, moon, animals, etc.) are not gods at all, but rather, the creation of the One True God. Rather than worshiping, or being spiritually enslaved to, the false gods of the Egyptians, God's people were to worship him alone and respect the created things of this world as a gift from the Creator. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

While monotheism may seem self-evident to modern Christian readers, the situation was very different for God's people at the time of the Exodus, surrounded as they were by a sea of paganism and pantheism. Throughout the entire Old Testament, Israel would struggle to be faithful to their One God and would constantly be tempted to worship the false gods of the other nations.

With this first and most important principle, we can begin to see how the intention of the divine and human authors can be

closely related and are in perfect harmony. However, while Moses' instruction must be historically tied to the particular people of Israel, because God is also the author of the Genesis creation account, we can apply the above lesson in a broader way.

Here we can see that the creation account also contains a moral lesson that God wants us to learn. Rather than being enslaved to the things of this world through an excessive attachment to lesser goods (such as our cell phones, TV, sports, etc.), we should seek to focus our life upon the One who made it and from whom all good things come.

Instead of seeing creation as a distraction from our relationship with God, we need to begin to see creation as God's revelation to us. As Saint Paul states clearly, "Ever since the creation of the world, [God's] invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20).

Let us struggle then, together with the Church of the Old Testament, to be freed from the spiritual slavery of materialism which is so rampant in our culture today. Let us struggle together to free our life from all that distracts us from placing God first. Let us, through the instruction of Moses, remember that God made all things "very good" (Genesis 1:31), so that, as Saint Paul tells us, through the things of this world we might be drawn up to meet the One in whose image and likeness we were fashioned. †

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## CHRISTIAN POPULATIONS **DECREASING?** *Continued from page 17*

In the modern era Christians in Muslim lands have worked for equal rights. In fact, in nineteenth century Egypt under Mehmed Ali Pasha, and in Turkey after Ataturk's revolution of 1923, Christians were trusted with important roles in the modernization of Muslim countries.

While some Muslim and Israeli political leaders pay lip service to equal rights for Christians, the reality is often the opposite.

### **Islamization**

Re-Islamization and intolerance have sprung up again and have been re-fueled by the current crisis in the Arab world caused by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. In this era it must be understood objectively that Israel was not founded in a just and equitable manner. For the first time in world history a state was born from nothing by external powers at the expense of another people, whose identity was cancelled as its territory was confiscated.

Because of a troubled conscience following the Shoah, the West facilitated the population of a new state with Jews from outside the area, mostly from Europe. Consequently the Mus-

lim world perceived Israel as a Western and Christian creation. Unfortunately the identification of "Western" with "Christian" persists in Muslim society.

Because of their political and military ineptitude against Israel and the West, the Muslim countries became more vengeful and bitter. With the onset of Nasser's anti-Western regime in Egypt in the 1950's the flight of Christians began.

The situation further deteriorated for Christians after the 1978 war when they were squeezed from both sides.

In addition, after the fall of Soviet communism a Muslim fear arose that the West would make Islam its new number one enemy.

As a result, the flight of Christians from the Holy Land and neighboring countries continues and even increases. Christian bishops and leaders of all persuasions—Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant—beg the émigrés to return to their homelands, but to no avail. †

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