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No More Christians in the Holy Land?
Paul Flesher

Since the birth of Christianity, there have always been Christians living in the territory where it began -- Israel. The vast majority of these Christians have been native Palestinian families and communities who lived there because it was their home, rather than the priests, pilgrims, and other Christians who were attracted to Israel because of the holy sites associated with the Bible.

Now, at the dawn of Christianity's third millennium, native Christianity in the Holy Land is in danger of dying out. The numbers of native Palestinian Christians have dwindled alarmingly over the past few decades and the trend is continuing.

In general, the cause of this trend is the Israel-Arab conflict. But what is interesting is the way the different religious communities view that conflict and how the pressures those views generate have impacted the Arab Christians of Palestine.

Starting with the Christian community of the United States, we find that our country is strongly pro-Israel, which means that it supports the Jewish belief that the Jews have a right to settle, colonize and live in Israel. Although this policy is supported by many different religious and nonreligious groups in America -- including Jewish Americans -- the policy is perceived as "Christian" because of the United States' strong Christian heritage and because most of the Americans who visit Israel go there to see the religious sites.

The Jewish community of Israel is divided into two different views. The minority view of the Orthodox Jews sees Christians as religious upstarts who should be tolerated at best and kept away at worst. The majority view, held by less-religious Israelis, is to encourage American support of Israeli claims to the Holy Land. This group has even noticed that the most vocal supporters of Israel, after American Jews, are born-again Christians, especially those who believe in Christ's second coming.

The Israelis have played to these beliefs not only politically, but also with regard to tourism. For the year 2000 celebrations, for instance, Israel's government built a "Millennium Park" at the site of the ancient Canaanite and Israelite city of Megiddo, which the Book of Revelation identifies as the site of the final apocalyptic battle before Christ's appearance.

This political identification between Jews and Christians has been noticed by the Islamic community of Palestine, the Arabs who are struggling to keep their ancestral homeland despite the Jewish presence. They see Christians as allied with the Jewish Israelis in working to keep the Arabs from what they consider to be their rightful place.

Moslem dislike of American Christian politics thus becomes, in their view, dislike of Christianity. This general view of Christianity then spills over onto Arab Palestinian Christians. The shared Palestinian identity of the Palestinian Arabs continually struggles with Moslem suspicion of Christian Arab cooperation and alliance with Israel.

So how has this situation led to the declining numbers of Native Christians in Palestine? The answer is surprisingly straightforward. The Christian Palestinians want to keep their ancestral lands, villages and homes just as much as the Moslem Palestinians. Despite the Moslem distrust of them, they dislike the Israelis as much as the Moslems do. To demonstrate their allegiance to the Palestinian cause and to eradicate the suspicion against them, more and more Palestinian Christians have converted to Islam. This places them above suspicion and enables them to join fully with their fellow Palestinians in the struggle against the Jewish Israelis. If the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not settled soon, native Christianity in the Christian Holy Land may be lost forever through conversion.