

Religious Minorities of the Middle East
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Overview

The Middle East is home to many of the world's major religions, including the three abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In such a diverse religious atmosphere, many citizens of the Middle East can be said to belong to a religious minority of some sort.

Zoroastrianism

Historical Context

The exact date in which Zoroastrianism can be said to have been started is almost impossible to know, but many experts believe that Zoroaster, the founder of the religion, was said to have lived roughly around 1000 BC in what is now modern day Iran, and then known as Persia. Before Zoroastrianism took hold as the major religion in Persia, local deities in the fashion of the Babylonian gods were prevalent. Zoroastrianism took many ideas and a lot of inspiration from Judaism and ultimately would influence Judaism itself. Zoroastrianism would be the official state religion of the Persian Empire until the fall of the Sassanids and the coming of the Muslims. Under Muslim rule, Zoroastrianists were considered to be 'de facto' people of the book, that is that they were given protected status and were not to be given the dire choice of Islam or the sword. This is interesting, considering that Zoroastrianism has several concepts that would grossly offend the notions of strict monotheism held by most Muslims, and is not an abrahamic faith like Judaism or Christianity. With the collapse of the Zoroastrian government and the ceasing of all government support, Zoroastrianism imploded in the face of the new faith. People swiftly converted to Islam, and those remaining Zoroastrianists faced occasional persecution. Facing increasingly severe persecution, most Zoroastrianists fled to India to form what is now called the Parsi Community, and is the most prosperous Zoroastrian community in the world today. Now, Zoroastrianists are spread around the globe and communities of Zoroastrianists in any large number are rare outside the United States and India. Zoroastrianism in Iran is persecuted occasionally, but sometimes severely, by the Iranian government, and very few Zoroastrianists live in the homeland of their religion.

Doctrines, creeds, and holy books

The basic concept of Zoroastrianism as stated by the Gathas, the only Zoroastrian writings that Zoroaster was directly involved with, is that there are two spiritual natures in the world: One good, and one evil. Each nature has a 'godhead' or spiritual embodiment of the concept, Ahura represents ultimate good, and Ahriman represents ultimate evil. As lesser beings to the twin gods, we as humans must choose to serve one or the other. In the end of one's life, one is said to have to cross a bridge the width of razor wire, and the evil deeds you have done weigh down heavily on your soul and the good deeds you have done make your soul lighter, and souls either fall and descend to hell, or make it across and ascend to heaven. In the end times, Ahura, the good god will triumph

over Ahriman, the evil god, and the universe will be cleansed by molten lead, and all souls in hell will be freed by Ahura's benevolent and victorious rule.

Basic tenets of Zoroastrianism are as follows:

Equality of the sexes, in all social and spiritual situations women and men are to be considered equal.

Benevolent treatment of animals, animal cruelty is looked down on heavily, although Zoroastrianists are not vegetarians.

The purity and cleanliness of the natural world is to be held as glorious

Zoroastrianists do not proselytize at all; it is thought that you must be born a Zoroastrianist to be one.

The disposal of the dead is also noteworthy. In the traditional 'funeral' of the Zoroastrianists, towers of silence, open topped enclosures, are left out in the desert, and the body is cleaned of all flesh by weather and vultures until there is only bones left. Only the Parsis of India really practice this anymore, it's much more common for cremation to be the norm in many Zoroastrian communities.

Other Notes

There are between 250,000 – 350,000 Zoroastrianists in the world today, spread out in the world. Figures from the Iranian government on the religious nature of its population are largely considered untrustworthy, so knowing truly how many exist in Iran is problematic.

Freddie mercury, front man of the British band *Queen* was a Zoroastrianist.

Maronites of Lebanon

Historical Background

Maronite Christianity is said to have been founded by the hermit St. Maron in the hills of greater Syria in the earth 4th century. St. Maron preached to the surrounding mountain villages and communities and eventually won many converts in what is now Syria and Lebanon. During their history, the Maronites were often at war with surrounding nations and religious groups, and they formed mountain communities known as Al Marada that could be easily defended from enemies. In the 7th century, the Byzantine emperor Heraculius created what would be eventually known as the Monothelite heresy to try and unite all the Christians of the empire. The Maronites formally separated themselves from the Byzantine empire and began a long history of animosity between them and other Christian nations. When the Muslims conquered Syria, the Maronites received military aid and recognition from the Byzantine emperor, and they began a guerilla war against

their Muslim enemies. They eventually became such a nuisance to the Umayyad dynasty that they actually paid tribute to the Maronites to keep them away. In 685, the Maronites appointed their own patriarch, St. John Maron, who claimed apostolic succession through the holy see of Antioch. Shortly after, the Byzantine emperor Justinian declared the Maronites to be heretics, and once again the Maronites defeated their enemies on Mount Lebanon. The Maronites continued to raid their Syrian Muslim neighbors after the war against Justinian, and in 759 forces from the new Abbasid dynasty finally defeated the Maronites, although they continued to assert their independence and often acted independently in their mountain communities. The Maronites also received support from the crusader states, but when the Mamelukes came to burn their farms and homes, along with the farms and homes of Shiites and the Druze, they received no support from the crusaders. The Ottoman Empire largely ignored the Maronites until their dissolution, and the mountain communities were generally peaceful, with only occasional raids on their Druze neighbors. The Maronites received their independence from French Lebanon in 1920, and in 1948 when Lebanon became fully independent, the Maronites became active in government and business and eventually became overrepresented in the upper strata of society in Lebanon.

Doctrines, creeds and beliefs

Maronite Christianity is marked by its general conservatism of belief, even compared to Roman Catholicism. Maronite Christianity generally is similar to the Roman Catholic and eastern orthodox faiths, in that they have a definitive hierarchy and believe in the necessity of church rituals for spiritual cleanliness. Their patriarch, the spiritual leader of the Maronite church, is in Antioch and is elected by the bishops of the church in a similar manner that the pope is elected. When a new patriarch is elected, he requests ecclesiastic communion from the pope, thus recognizing, to an extent, papal authority. Priests need not be celibate, but monks are required to be celibate. Ancient Syriac is the language used in church instead of Latin.

Other Notes

There exists about 800,000 Maronites in Lebanon, where they make up about 30% of the total population. In Lebanon, the President must, under law, be a Maronite. During the Arab Diaspora, many Maronites left the Middle East to settle in Latin America, South America, and Africa. World estimate of population is between 5 and 7.5 million. The largest Maronite population is in Brazil, which is supposedly nearly 5 times the amount of Maronites in Lebanon. Many Maronites have assimilated into their host countries and have adopted Roman Catholicism.

Coptic Christians of Egypt

Historical Background

The first Christians in Egypt were mainly Alexandrian Jews who converted due to the work of Luke the evangelist. However, under the reign of the emperor Nero, the apostle Mark officially founded the Coptic church, making the Coptic church the first church in Africa. The Catechetical School of Alexandria is the oldest catechetical school in the

world, founded in 190 AD. Over 6,000 copies of the bible were scribed in Alexandria, in Coptic, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Historically, the monasteries of Egypt were considered to be the most prestigious in the early Christian world, and these same Coptic monasteries worked to translate the bible into many languages in and around the Roman Empire. The conquest of Egypt by the Arabs was an event that many people of Egypt actually were quite happy about, since during Christian times certain sects were often accused of heresy by the Roman Empire, and religious minorities were plentiful in the oldest Christian land. Considered people of the book by the Arabs, the Christians of Egypt were generally left well alone with only occasional persecution. Egypt remained a predominately Christian land until well into the 13th century. Under the Ottoman Empire, persecution of Christians became much more common, and it wasn't until the rule of Muhammad Ali and the de facto separation of Egypt from the Ottoman Empire that Christians would be able to breath easily and not worry about persecution. Despite the assertions of the patriarch of Alexandria, the Coptics of Egypt do occasionally feel discrimination from the greater population of Egypt.

Doctrines

The Coptic church is generally similar to the catholic church, although priests can be married provided that they are married before they are ordained. The Coptic church is in full communion with the oriental orthodox church and the tehwadaeo church of Ethiopia.

Other

Coptic Christians are about 10 million in Egypt, making up about 10% of the population. Most coptics are in Egypt, and generally when they move they tend to convert to roman Catholicism in countries that are dominated by the religion.