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Middle East

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# Forgotten Christians in the Holy Land

**The indignity of American Christians who conveniently drop from their memory tales of oppression experienced by their Palestinian Christian compatriots is striking. The term 'conveniently' may be explained by the following unforgettable experience: I once engaged in a conversation with an Anglo-Christian missionary on a bus trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem prior to the 1967 War. As a Christian born in Bethlehem, I expressed how privileged I felt to proclaim the honour of my birth place. Gasping with a subdued expression, the missionary muttered: 'And when exactly did you convert to Christianity?'**

It was virtually a 'mission impossible' to convince my interlocutor that our 'native' Christian beliefs were not due to missionary work, nor were they due conversions from Muslim beliefs at the times of the Crusades. Palestinian Christian churches and their communities have dotted the Holy Land since the time of Christ. During the last three weeks of January 2001, American (and Australian) public and religious papers alike have failed to acknowledge the presence of Palestinian Christian Arabs, preferring instead the resurrection of cultural, historical and religious divides between Muslims and Jews. A total of 400,000 Palestinian Christians worldwide (approximately 7% of the total Palestinian population) have received no mention: neither in the electronic media, nor in popular or acad-

emic discourse. The sense of betrayal has been no less than that perpetuated by Judas.

Again I refer to the term 'conveniently' in the sense that the politics of omission has served its architects in making their subjects endure historical stereotypes and religious misnomers which the Anglo media and churches forced upon them, and made them pay the price for their guilt feelings beginning with WWII atrocities.

As the Christian Palestinian community is destroyed through desperation, forced emigration and spiritual dissolution, their churches have become the 'authentic' caretakers for the tourist museums without worshippers. For example, before 1967, the Sunday service at my Lutheran church in Bethlehem attracted 800 worshippers – today only 25 maintain the tradition.

As the remaining Palestinian Christians manage to halt emigration and strengthen

themselves through consolidation with Muslim Palestinians under a nationalist umbrella, unsympathetic and unavailing Western missionaries will find themselves with no pastoral role to play.

The holy sites and monuments cluttering about them like limpets no doubt give the land salience to (Western) Christian pilgrims. For us 'native' Christians, the continued presence of fellow worshippers living in the land, whether or not in association with these sites, is our last breath of life.

We still find it hard to forgive the failure of Christian pilgrims to resist the Western war of propaganda against the 'native' Christian population. Just like our Muslim neighbours, we see the collusion of Christian pilgrims as a long-standing continuation of the march of the Crusaders. After all, it was largely the churches in the West, particularly Australian, which fought for the liber-

ation of the oppressed Christian population in East Timor, Ireland and South Africa.

Perhaps it is more 'convenient' to remain silent with respect to the injustices perpetrated against Palestinian Christians. We ought not forget though that reconciliation demands repair, that peace requires speaking out against injustice. Now is the time for American Christians to reach out for their Christian brothers and sisters in the Holy Land. ◀

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