Syrian sabbaths: A history of interfaith tolerance

by Barbara Law in the October 16, 2007 issue

The streets of Damascus are empty. No horns blare, no cars crawl through the narrow streets or crowd the intersections. I'm not darting between cars for a change, and there's hardly anyone on the street. What's going on? Where is everybody in this bustling, chaotic city of nearly 6 million? Then I remember: it's Friday, the Muslim holy day. Not until noon, after prayers, will the city start to bustle again.

Meanwhile, only a 15-minute bus ride away, stores are open, ovens are firing up in pizza and shwarma shops, and sidewalks are teeming with shoppers. Liquor stores display whiskey, vodka and local wines in their windows; butchers sell beef and ham. Women, their faces unveiled and their hair often cut short and carefully coiffed, walk casually down the streets. Here crosses are silhouetted against the sky. This is Bab Touma, the Christian quarter of the city, home to Catholic, Protestant, Anglican and evangelical churches: here the holy day is Sunday.

The media often give us the impression that the entire Middle East is a sinkhole of religious intolerance and that Christianity is an underground religion. But in Syria, Christians worship openly. Bus drivers hang crucifixes from their rearview mirrors; barber shops display pictures of Christ. In a French class I sat next to Fadia, a young Syrian. When she mentioned she was Christian and I expressed surprise, she pointed to the cross she wore and said, "Didn't you notice this?"

Villages and towns across Syria proudly proclaim their Christianity. In Ma'alula, an hour's bus ride northeast of Damascus, Aramaic, the language of Christ, is still spoken, and the government of Syria is funding and promoting its preservation. The Convent of St. Tekla, standing proudly on a mountaintop, is visited by worshipers who climb the mountain and burn fires throughout the night to celebrate the miracle of the Exaltation of the Cross. In Ma'alula, the Muslim priest was baptized to show solidarity with his Christian counterparts.

Nearby Seydnaya is home to 35 different churches. The Convent of Our Lady of Seydnaya, founded in 324 by the Emperor Justinian, was once second only to Jerusalem as an important pilgrimage site. North and east is the monastery of Dar Mar Musa, where Muslim and Christian scholars meet to address issues of interfaith dialogue and tolerance.

It is true that in Syria Christians are not allowed to proselytize and that laws dictate that the president must be a Muslim. But these laws don't constitute persecution. Christians hold public office and important positions in Syria's secular government. In this police state, sermons and Christians are closely monitored, but so are other lectures and residents.

On October 29, 2006, the Syrian Orthodox Church held a massive concert of ancient Syriac liturgical music under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. Free buses were provided. The archbishop of Antioch, surrounded by a phalanx of bishops, opened the evening by thanking President Bashar al-Assad for continuing the legacy of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in protecting Syria's unity, including the unity of religion.

After the U.S. embassy was attacked on September 12, 2006, President Bashar posted a guard at the door of Dar Es Salaam, the old French convent where All Saints Community Church, a tiny but thriving congregation, holds English-speaking services on Friday mornings. These things could and would not happen if tolerance for Christianity did not exist, and was not supported by those in power.

In the ancient city of Dayr az-Zawr stands the Church of Armenian Martyrs, named for the 1.5 million Christian Armenians who were systematically slaughtered or expelled by the Ottoman Empire in 1915. Syria took in many of the refugees. A brochure in the church says that the expatriated Armenians were "received . . . with open arms, embraced with love and affection, and rescued from their pains and miseries."

On a dusty, empty side road stands a tiny unmarked church built to commemorate the massacre. It is guarded, reverently and vigilantly, by a weathered, solemn, silent Muslim in robe and headdress. You can enter the tiny empty room, look down at the bones recovered from mass graves, then stand on the front patio overlooking the vast and empty Syrian steppe and try to understand how this massacre of hundreds of thousands could occur.

Syrians recognize that Christians, Jews and Muslims share a long and complicated history. They have more in common than they have differences. They venerate places such as Abil Wa Habil, where the body of Abel, son of Adam and Eve, is said to be buried, and in the Omayyad Mosque, where John the Baptist's head is enshrined. The Syrians are rooted to the land, this most ancient birthplace of civilization.

Not all is calm, however. The Christian population is dwindling, in part because Christians tend to have smaller families. Most Christians have between two and five children, while in the rural parts of the country, traditional Muslim families have up to 15. Another, more portentous reason is that many Christians (estimates range up to 250,000 over the past several decades) are emigrating to Christian nations.

Meanwhile, the Christians in Syria are growing more and more uneasy. The Ottoman massacre of Armenian Christians has not been forgotten; after all, Syria shares a border with Iraq that is as long as Nebraska. In Iraq, Christian women make themselves anonymous by wearing the traditional head covering, the hijab. Liquor stores have been bombed; Christians have been tortured and threatened and have disappeared. There are nearly a million Iraqi refugees in Syria, with nearly 50,000 arriving each month; undoubtedly there are militants and religious fundamentalists among them. Syrian Christians fear that as Iraq descends into terror and chaos, its terror will spill over into Syria. They pray fervently even as they shelter their Christian brothers. I asked a Christian colleague, Nibal, about worshiping in Syria and what she sees in its future. "For now we are safe," she says. "But in the future, we don't know."

When I attended a party in Qamishle, a predominantly Christian town on the Turkish border, secret police stood guard outside in the rain. Qamishle is an area of unrest and active Kurdish separatism. Yet while the police watched, Kurds, Turks and Syrians, Christians and Muslims danced together. They knew each other's traditional songs, each other's dances. They held hands and sang. No one cared who was who. Leaning over to be heard above the din of laughter and music, Nibal said, "We are all together. We all love each other. Only policy separates us."

We can admire Syrians for the tolerance and mutual respect they practice on a daily basis and pray that, in spite of the serious challenges in and around this country, tolerance will continue for another thousand years.