Mideast Christian fear

by Philip Jenkins in the August 9, 2011 issue

A century ago, a wide-ranging *Catholic Encyclopedia* tried to give believers an alternative to secular reference works like the *Encyclopædia Britannica.* Now available online, the Catholic work offers wonderful browsing for anyone interested in Christian history or theology. But reading some of the entries on the Middle East is heartbreaking.

As recently as the start of the last century, Middle East cities celebrated since patristic times could be listed as thriving Christian centers. Denominational loyalties and hierarchies—that of the Greek Orthodox and the Melkites, the Assyrians, Jacobites and Armenians, the Catholics and even the Protestant missionaries—were lovingly described in the *Encyclopedia.* Such accounts make for poignant reading now, when we know that many of these Christian communities were slaughtered or uprooted in the extraordinary violence of the decade after 1915. A million Armenians and Assyrians perished, and millions more Greeks were expelled from what became the nation of Turkey.

The religious cleansing did not sweep the whole region. Christians survived in strength in Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Iraq. But the other communities could never forget the years of massacre, which profoundly shaped their later actions. In fact, we cannot understand the modern history of the Middle East without acknowledging those distinctively Christian politics. When we look at the recent upsurges in Syria, Egypt and elsewhere, we repeatedly hear the distant echoes of the bloody events

that occurred during and immediately after the First World War.

That war transformed the Middle East, creating a new structure of states and igniting new forces of Arab nationalism and Muslim reform. As Christians were among the better educated and more prosperous groups, they naturally played a major political role. But they had to strike a delicate balance. They were understandably nervous about the rise of Islamic movements, all the more so when Muslim birth rates were so much higher than their own. As the Christian minority shrank in size and influence, it faced an increasing likelihood of persecution by a Muslim majority—and conceivably something like a repetition of 1915. The question was: How could Christians help create a strong and independent Arab world without awakening the Islamic giant?

Christians responded by espousing movements that could gain mass popular appeal, while remaining strictly secular and religiously neutral. This was in no sense a cynical strategy; it simply made sense for Christians to lead their societies in secular directions. Christians were among the founders and most visible militants of the region's once-thriving leftist, socialist and communist groups.

Others became enthusiastic patriots for secular nationalist causes, including pan-Arabism. The pioneering theorist of modern Arab nationalism was the Damascus-born Orthodox Christian Constantin Zureiq. Another Christian son of Damascus, Michel Aflaq, was cofounder of the Ba'ath ("Renaissance") Party that played a pivotal role in the modern history of both Iraq and Syria. Coptic Christians, meanwhile, were enthusiastic supporters of Egypt's nationalist and secular Wafd Party.

By the 1950s, such Christian-founded movements were offering idealistic followers a heady mixture of socialism, secularism and nationalism that was all the more tempting as Arab thinkers struggled to come to terms with humiliating defeats at the hands of Israel. Palestinian Christians like George Habash and Nayef Hawatmeh emerged as the most stubborn and resourceful foes of the Zionist state and the most effective guerrilla commanders.

Although nationalist and Ba'athist movements appealed to Muslims as well as Christians, they were most popular with minority groups that stood to lose everything from an assertion of power by mainstream Sunni Islam. These movements appealed to Christians, but also to controversial Muslim groups like Syria's Alawites. Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath regimes suppressed Islamist movements with a brutality that is

difficult to understand except as the response of minorities who desperately feared for their own fates should they ever lose their grip on state power. Even Saddam Hussein's Sunni clique took its secularism very seriously.

Since the late 1980s, secular regimes and movements in the Middle East have suffered repeated blows, and this trend has been cumulatively disastrous for Christian populations. Rapid demographic change combined with a global Islamist revival to fuel the success of potent movements such as Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, which eclipsed secularism. Meanwhile, Saddam's lunatic invasion of Kuwait in 1990 set the stage for the destruction of his regime and the expulsion or exile of most Iraqi Christians. It remains to be seen whether Syria's minorities will suffer a comparable fate in the coming years.

The main mystery in this story is why Western Christians seem neither to know nor care about the catastrophe that has unfolded before them in the ancient heartlands of their faith.