Christians in the Gulf

by Philip Jenkins in the March 16, 2016 issue

Dubai Evangelical Church Centre, Jebel Ali Village. Some rights reserved by Nepenthes.

The Persian Gulf emirate of Abu Dhabi recently made history. On the tiny island of Sir Bani Yas, archaeologists discovered the remains of a Christian monastic complex dating from around 600. After some restoration, authorities opened the place to the public as a tourist attraction and heritage site.

This decision may not sound surprising, but it stands in stark contrast to the embarrassment and contempt with which other nations in the region—above all, Saudi Arabia—treat their own pre-Islamic heritage. And that same relative tolerance also applies to the practice of faith today in the Gulf states. If the smaller Gulf nations do not practice freedom of religion in anything like the Western sense, Christianity has nevertheless secured a surprisingly strong foothold in these coastal states.

When the monastery of Sir Bani Yas was built, Christianity had a strong presence throughout eastern and southern Arabia, mainly through the ("Nestorian") Church of the East. No later than the fifth century, a diocese covered the lands that we would today call Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain had a major church. In Muhammad's time, five sees covered the Gulf's western shores. By the end of the first millennium, that Christian history had come to an end, leaving the churches in ruins.

In very recent times, however, Christianity has returned to the Gulf—though with no consciousness of that ancient history. To understand this story, we might compare it

to better-known developments in Western Europe. As European nations prospered from the 1960s onward, they desperately needed to expand their labor force. That need became all the greater as the birth rates of native populations dropped sharply. Immigrant labor did indeed arrive, but that had the unintended additional consequence of importing the religious beliefs of the newcomers. Quite unintentionally, Europe acquired a sizable and growing Islamic minority.

Changing only a few details, that is exactly what happened to the Arab nations of the Gulf. Oil wealth brought immense prosperity across the region, and tribal societies quickly evolved into extremely rich urban communities. Meanwhile, birth rates fell to near European levels. Much like contemporary Europe, the Gulf nations urgently needed immigrants to do the jobs that locals would not or could not do. Christians were well represented among newcomers from India, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, while many Arab migrants were also Christian. Cities like Dubai (in the UAE) attracted other types of expatriate, including traders and business people. In just a few decades, the Gulf states became strikingly diverse in terms of ethnicity and religion.

Just as Europe found itself home to many Muslims, so the Arab Gulf states have become home to many Christians. Unlike Saudi Arabia, moreover, these nations do not prohibit the practice of other faiths, and so we can form an accurate picture of their numbers. Christians make up 17 percent of the total population of Kuwait, 14 percent of Bahrain, and 9 percent of the UAE and Qatar. In terms of the whole Arab Gulf region, the Christian population is between 5 and 10 percent. For the Arabian Peninsula, traditionally the heart of the Islamic world, these represent significant minorities.

Governments have responded sanely to this new reality. Christians are not allowed to evangelize or to offer prominent displays of their faith, and any attempt to convert Muslims would be highly provocative, but Christians are free to worship and to build churches, some of which are impressive. In 2011, the Roman Catholic Church organized a new vicariate to serve the 2.5 million faithful living in Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia. The episcopal seat is in Bahrain, where a new cathedral of Our Lady of Arabia stands on lands granted by the nation’s devoutly Muslim king Hamad. The cathedral seats 2,600.

Gulf nations also have charismatic and evangelical churches of the kind found in India or the Philippines. In the UAE, the Dubai City Church and the United Christian

Church of Dubai each serve over a thousand ethnically diverse worshipers, giving them the flavor of classic megachurches.

One of these thriving congregations demands special attention: St. Thomas's Orthodox Cathedral in Dubai, with 3,500 parishioners. The cathedral is part of a truly ancient denomination called the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, which traces its origins to Christian missions in southern India during the first or second century. Following as it did the Syriac rite, it long formed part of the Church of the East. In modern times, the Malankara church is strongest in the province of Kerala, from which throngs of migrants traveled to work in the Gulf.

Thus the Malankara church in Dubai is a living heir to the very same tradition that built the monastery at Sir Bani Yas some 1,400 years ago. The Christian story in the region has come full circle.