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Christians in Bahrain

In October 2011, a fact-finding mission of HRWF visited Bahrain and published a preliminary report that was presented at the European Parliament on 9 November 2011. During the mission, HRWF team met with church leaders in Bahrain and collected data about their situation. HRWF published a preliminary report on Bahrain in November 2011 following its fact-finding mission. On 26 January 2012, representatives of various Christian Churches in Bahrain testified about their situation at the European Parliament at the conference entitled “Christians in Muslim Lands: The Example of Bahrain.” This report “Christians in Bahrain” includes the data collected in 2011, relevant information contained in the testimonies of church leaders and additional research by HRWF.

Introduction

Bahrain is a small island state on the western shores of the Persian Gulf. Since the end of the 18th century, it has been ruled by the Al Khalifa royal family. Bahrain was the seat of British power and control in the Gulf until it gained independence in 1971.

Since 1999, the country has been run by Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

Some demographic statistics follow based on 2010 Bahraini census:

Population: 1,234,571, comprising 568,399 Bahrainis and 666,172 non-Bahrainis. Of the latter group, 562,040 were Asians (433,756 were male)¹.

*Religious breakdown*²: 866,888 Muslims (567,229 Bahrainis – 299,659 Non-Bahrainis) and 367,683 Others (1,170 Bahrainis³ – 366,513 Non-Bahrainis)

According to the U.S. Department of State 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, Christians, Jews, Hindus, and Baha'is are said to number 1%⁴ and half of the expatriates are non-Muslims, including Christians (Roman Catholic, Protestant, Syrian Orthodox, Mar Thomas from India), Hindus, Baha'is, and Sikhs.

Constitutional and Legal Framework for Religious Freedom⁵

The constitution does not explicitly protect freedom of religion but does provide for freedom of worship, and the government generally respects the right of citizens and foreign residents to practice their religion. Members of non-Muslim religious groups that practice their faith privately do so without government interference and are permitted to maintain places of worship and display symbols of their religion.

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience, the inviolability of places of worship, the freedom to perform religious rites and hold religious parades and meetings, in accordance with the customs observed in the country, and states that Islam is the official religion and Sharia (Islamic law) is a principal source for legislation.

¹ http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_ara/English/Publications/Census/Population/4.pdf

According to the Indian Ambassador in Bahrain, the Indian community numbers about 400,000 people (mainly male).

² http://www.cio.gov.bh/cio_ara/English/Publications/Census/Population/6.pdf

³ The majority of these Christians are more recent emigrants to Bahrain, most of whom came to Bahrain between 80 and 60 years ago. They eventually received Bahraini citizenship. Primarily, they are originally from Palestine, Jordan, and Iraq although there are smaller numbers from Lebanon, Syria, and India. See Christians in Bahrain at <http://voices.yahoo.com/christianity-bahrain-7878832.html>

⁴ These religious statistics are purely speculative as there is no official census of such categories. There are no official statistics concerning the sectarian subdivision between Sunnis and Shiites or any other confessional subdivision. The Bahrain census only examines the broader gender, national and religious affiliation.

⁵ Source: 2010 International Religious Freedom Report of the U.S. Department of State

http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168261.htm

The constitution imposes no restrictions on non-Muslims' right to choose, change, or practice their religion of choice, including the study, discussion, and promulgation of those beliefs but in declaring Islam as the state religion and Islamic law as the source of legislation, the constitution implies that Muslims are forbidden to change their religion. Although there are no laws criminalizing the conversion of a Muslim to another religion, such a restriction is rather imposed by the family and society in general. A religiously mixed marriage will not be allowed by the Sunni and Shiite religious bodies (which register marriages) in the case of a Muslim woman wanting to marry a man from another faith.

The constitution imposes no restriction on the right to choose, change or practice one's religion.

The constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion or creed, including by private actors.

No civil laws specifically target blasphemy, apostasy or proselytizing.

The law does not prohibit, restrict or punish the importation, possession or distribution of religious literature, clothing or symbols. The law does not impose a religious dress code.

Construction of places of worship requires approvals from a number of national and municipal entities.

The government does not designate religion on national identity documents and although it is identified on birth certificates, sectarian affiliation is not.

Altogether, about 15 Christian Churches are registered with the Ministry of Social Development. The Bahraini authorities have failed to register a number of other Christian groups, which puts them in an uncomfortable situation from a legal point of view.

Holding a religious meeting, or indeed any public meeting of five or more persons, without a permit is illegal. However, according to the U.S. Department of State, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report, the government did not deny religious groups a permit to gather and there were no reports of forced religious conversion.

According to several non-Muslim religious groups, the Ministry of Social Development's (MOSD) restrictions on contact with "foreign" entities caused significant operational difficulties

for some churches and other groups. These groups relied on guidance and funding from umbrella organizations based overseas for their operations. The groups reported that the MOSD often did not respond to their requests for permission to interact with their umbrella organizations.

Roman Catholics in Bahrain⁶

Until 1938, the small Catholic community of Bahrain (numbering 150 at that time) was visited from time to time by a Carmelite priest from Baghdad. However, the community continued to increase in such a way that the Carmelite Fathers were unable to provide adequate spiritual assistance in Bahrain.

On January 15th, 1938, H.E. Giovanni Battista Tirinanzi, Apostolic Vicar of Arabia, then based in Aden, went to Bahrain to meet the then Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa with plans to build a church in Bahrain. There were then 426 Catholics on the island. The majority were Indians, who had left their families to work in the oil industry.

Fr. Luigi Magliacani, a Capuchin from Tuscany, whom Mgr. Tirinanzi knew as an expert in the building of churches was called to Bahrain and given the responsibility of building the church. He arrived in Bahrain on May 14th, 1939 and the foundation stone for the new church was laid on June 9th, 1939. Within a few months, the church, the priests' residence and a small school were built. It was formally blessed on March 3rd, 1940. The parish was the first of its kind in the Persian Gulf. In December 1941, Fr. Magliacani, who was from Italy, a country at war with England, was arrested and sent to a concentration camp in Arem Nagar (Dehra Dun) in India where he spent three and a half years. In 1950, he was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Arabia and took a special interest in the parish in Manama.

In May 1953, the Comboni Sisters were invited by the Apostolic Vicar to take care of the Sacred Heart School which was founded alongside the church, in the 1940s. The school has now shifted to new premises at Isa Town. As the Gulf region began to experience the oil boom, more and

⁶ Sources : Sacred Heart Church (Manama, Bahrain)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_Heart_Church_\(Manama,_Bahrain\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacred_Heart_Church_(Manama,_Bahrain))

The Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia

http://www.avona.org/bahrain/bahrain_about.htm

more Catholics arrived in Bahrain. To cater to their needs, St Barth's Hall was built in 1958 to provide a place for social gatherings. This building also included the residential accommodation for the priests.

Throughout the next 30 years as the number of Catholics dramatically increased, the church underwent a major expansion under the leadership of Fr. Felicio Diniz, the previous parish priest of the church. He built the Main Church which opened in 1990 and which is still used today. Other major developments include the building of the parish community centre and the Third Millennium building. The Sacred Heart Church currently serves about 100,000 Catholics. It is one of the two churches of Bahrain, the other one, the Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Visitation, is located in Awali, ten miles south of Manama, and is shared with the Anglican community. The worship centre which is patronized and owned by the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO) has been in existence for almost as many years as the Sacred Heart Church to meet the spiritual needs of Catholics at Awali, Riffa and the surrounding districts.

Most of Bahrain's Catholics are Indians (approximately 60,000) and Filipinos (approximately 30,000). The others are Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Italians, Spaniards, French, Arabs from various countries of the Middle East (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt) and Asia. Many Catholics are unable to go to church on Sunday because they work in the building sector, as housemaids, in malls, in restaurants and in shops with odd working hours.

In 2003, the Sisters of the Apostolic Carmel Congregation from India took charge of the Sacred Heart School.

In 2008, relations between the Holy See and the Gulf Kingdom saw significant progress. The Vatican received the first ambassador from Bahrain. In addition, King Hamad met Pope Benedict XVI and invited him to Bahrain.

On May 31st, 2011, according to a decree of the Holy See, Bahrain was detached from the Apostolic Vicariate of Arabia and included in the newly-formed ecclesiastical territory of the Apostolic Vicariate of Northern Arabia, which is under the spiritual care and guidance of Bishop Camillo Ballin, MCCJ.

In May 2011, the King met the newly appointed Apostolic Vicar, Bishop Camillo Ballin, MCCJ, and the outgoing Apostolic Vicar, Bishop Paul Hinder, OFM Cam. On that occasion, the King reiterated his invitation to Pope Benedict XVI.

Anglicans in Bahrain⁷

The first Anglican to settle in Bahrain was an English woman: Amy Elizabeth Wilkes, born in Wolverhampton in 1865.

At the age of 27, she decided to become a missionary. She went to the Training School for Deaconesses in Sydney and was then appointed by the Church Missionary Society to work in Baghdad. On her arrival in Basra on April 1st, 1895 en route to Baghdad, she was met by Samuel Zwemer who was the American co-founder of the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America. They married at the British Consulate in Baghdad on May 18th, 1896. In December 1896, they went to Bahrain to help a group of local missionaries. Simple non-sectarian church services were held in a room of her rented house for themselves, their helpers and any others who wished to attend.

St Christopher's Church

In 1904 Dr. Hutton, the President of the Board of Trustees of the Arabian Mission, visited Bahrain where he realised the need for proper church building. Plans were drawn up by a Mr. Moerdyk and in 1906 a chapel was erected, which came to be known as the American Mission Church.

By the mid 1930's there were a number of Anglicans in Bahrain - some in Manama but most in the Oil Camp (named Awali in 1938). However, there was no specific buildings designated for their use; no specific services by a clergyman were held and there was no organised body of church members.

⁷ Source: St Christopher's Cathedral and Awali Church
See <http://www.sthcathedral.org.bh/contact/whoswho/whoswho.htm>

As a result, a Church Council was formed in 1937. On November 8th, 1951 the Bishop in Jerusalem appointed Rev. Rickells from New Zealand as the first Anglican chaplain in Bahrain. He held his first service on the same day with a congregation of 18 people.

In August 1949, Shaikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, the Ruler of Bahrain, gave a plot of land measuring 326' by 120' to the Jerusalem and East Mission to build a church.

In 1952 plans for the building of a church were again discussed and construction started in August. In November the Bishop laid the foundation stone. A meeting of the Council chaired by the Bishop on the same day, decided to adopt the name of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, as most of the parishioners were travelers. The building was completed and the Church consecrated on March 13th, 1953.

St Christopher's School

In 1961 there were no schools for expatriate children in Bahrain - any teaching being conducted informally in private houses. The then Chaplain, Alun Morris, was most anxious that education be provided on a larger scale and thus, a school was opened with 30 children.

At the end of 1962 it was decided to build a proper school and a single storey building was completed by the end of 1963. When Mr. J. Adler was appointed Headmaster in 1967 the number of pupils had risen to over 200 and a second storey had been added to accommodate the demand.

Discussions began about building a new block and in the interim a temporary annex was rented near the old palace. In March 1971 a new six classroom building had been completed but the number of children had increased again and there was still a shortage of space.

In 1972 it was decided to move the school away from the Church Compound entirely and this has enabled the school to expand continually since then. In 1989 there were four schools in three different premises with a total provision for more than 1600 pupils. Now, there are over 2000 students representing more than one hundred different nationalities. This brings about a tremendous amount of understanding and tolerance between different nations and it breaks down barriers.

St. Christopher's Church handed over control of the school to the local community in 1975, but the connection between Church and school is still maintained, not merely in name, but through the Chaplain who remains one of the Governors.

From Church to Cathedral

Under Rev. Michael Roemmele and Canon John Parkinson in the 1980s, St. Christopher's Church was elevated to the rank of a Cathedral.

On April 23, 1986, St. Christopher's Church was proclaimed by Bishop Harry Moore as "our Cathedral in the Gulf", and as a result of this change of status, the Chaplain became the Provost. The Ven. Michael Mansbridge (Archdeacon in the Gulf) and the Rev. Ian Young (Chaplain in Qatar) were appointed as the first Canons of the Cathedral.

St Christopher's Cathedral, which is part of the Diocese of Cyprus and the Gulf, is home to an international community drawn from all the continents of the world: a diverse mix of people of many nationalities, ages and backgrounds. Within the cathedral complex, 51 different Christian groups share the facilities, comprising myriads of nationalities spanning five different continents.

Rev. Christopher Butt, Bishop of Cyprus and the Gulf, was installed as dean in October 2009.

The Anglican Church has some 10 congregations with as many as 1800 members.

Other Protestants in Bahrain

National Evangelical Church⁸

The name of Samuel Zwemer, the American co-founder of the Arabian Mission of the Reformed Church in America, is closely associated with the Protestant implantation in Bahrain at the end of the 19th century. His first visit to Bahrain took place in 1892. He was then followed by his wife after their marriage in 1896. The first religious activities for expatriates started in a house church. One of the oldest records of worshipping activities is dated June 30th, 1899. It was on June 10th,

⁸ See History of the National Evangelical Church

http://www.necbahrain.org/nec/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=7&28e5bbf660cb545fc854f5c048c7be7c=c146d140bb07de9f35334eeb3f36bc96

1906 that the first “Church-School” building in Manama was used for religious activities⁹. The services were both in English and in Arabic.

The American Mission Hospital was a remarkable starting point for the Reformed Church of America missionaries in 1893 as it served Bahrainis and provided healthcare to the underprivileged and indigenous inhabitants¹⁰. It is affiliated with the National Evangelical Church and has operated continuously in Bahrain for more than a century. The Bible and the Koran are both available in all hospital rooms and the manifestation of Christian symbols and literature throughout the hospital does not pose any problem.

The first Christian bookshop in Bahrain opened in 1893.

In 1899, Amy Zwemer created the American Mission School in Manama in connection with the American Mission Hospital. It is the oldest private school in the country. It was renamed Al Raja School in the 1970s.¹¹

Between 1900 and 1910, 21 long-term missionaries and one short-term doctor were appointed. They were from various Protestant denominations: Reformed, Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, Congregational and Presbyterian.

In 1940, BAPCO, Bahrain Petroleum Company, built a church for Christians working in Awali. It was called the Awali International Church.

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, expatriate influx into Bahrain changed the composition of the church's membership. New linguistic congregations appeared as follows: Malayalam (1959), Tamil (1964), Telugu (1965), Urdu (1969), and also Korean (mid-1970s). All these communities of Christians or converted Christians had separate services in their indigenous language.

The various Evangelical churches affiliated to the National Evangelical Church mainly develop their missionary activities among non-Muslim migrant workers.

⁹ It had been built on a plot of land bought for 4,000 rupees from the Ruler, Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al-Khalifa.

¹⁰ See history of the American Mission Hospital at <http://www.amh.org.bh/en/who-we-are/history.html>

¹¹ Most of the students are of Bahraini nationality and the teachers are a mix of nationalities from around the globe. The school graduated its first 12th grade class in 2008. It gives diplomas approved by the Ministry of Education in Bahrain.

Pentecostal Churches

Various Pentecostal Churches are also present in Bahrain. One of them, the Good Shepherd Foursquare Church, in Manama has a multi-national membership¹² ministered by pastors speaking English, Urdu, Tamil and Sinhala.

Other Churches

It is also worth mentioning the Church of South India, the Mar Thoma Church, the New Apostolic Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the Brethren Assembly and the Malayalee Christian Congregation.

The Orthodox community in Bahrain

The majority of Bahraini Christians tend to be Orthodox Christians, with the largest church by members belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church.

The influx of Syrian Orthodox Christians from Kerala (India) to Bahrain began in the early 1940s. Most of them were employees in private companies. The main place of worship for Christians after WW II was the American Mission Church.

Several schisms in the Syrian Orthodox in India led to the splitting of their community in Bahrain.

St. Peter's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church was registered with the Ministry of Labour & Social Affairs in 1978 and is directly under the rule of Patriarch of Antioch & All the East. The church was built by members of the Malankara Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, on a plot donated to the Patriarch H.H. Ignatius Yacoob III in 1964 by Shaikh Isa Bin Salman Al-Khalifa.

The Malankara Orthodox Church¹³ received from Shaikh Isa bin Khalifa a plot of land for the construction of a church. The first stone was laid down on November 2nd, 2001. St. Mary's Indian Orthodox Cathedral claims to serve about 5000 people in Bahrain.

¹² 46% Pakistanis, 34% Sri Lankans, 7% Indians, 7% Ghanaians, 4% Filipinos, 1% Kenyans, 1% Bahrainis.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Bahrain numbers around 800 members in a single congregation. It should be noted that Christians from Saudi Arabia go to Bahrain to attend religious services as they do not enjoy freedom of worship there.

A brief history of the Christian Cemeteries in the Kingdom of Bahrain¹⁴

The 'Old' Christian Cemetery

The first of the two Christian cemeteries in the Kingdom of Bahrain, known as the 'Old' cemetery, is in Manama, the capital, at the junction of Zubara Avenue and Al-Maarif Avenue (Road No. 806).

It is believed that the original plot of land for this cemetery was a gift from the Ruler of Bahrain, Shaikh Isa bin Ali Al Khalifa, in response to a request from the British Assistant Political Agent, Mr. John Calcott Gaskin. The title deed was dated June 1901 (12th Rabia Thani 1319).

The first burial was made on July 19th, 1901. The deceased was a child, the son of a Christian convert.

A total of 52 seamen of various nationalities were buried in the cemetery between 1917 and 1966. These men and women had died aboard merchant vessels visiting or passing the island or who had landed in Bahrain for medical treatment.

In 1932, further land to the West and East of the original plot was granted by the Ruler, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa.

From 1901 to 1966 there were more than 500 burials. The last burial in this cemetery, took place on December 3rd, 1966. The cemetery was then closed.

The Eastern wall of the cemetery is now shared with a Shia Moslem ma'atam (meeting place). At the South West corner, separated by an alleyway lies the Jewish cemetery.

¹³ The Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, also known as the Indian Orthodox Church, is an autocephalous Oriental Orthodox Church located in the Indian state of Kerala (India). It is one of the churches of India's St Thomas Christian community, which traces its origins to the evangelical activity of Thomas the Apostle in the first century.

¹⁴ Source: <http://www.sthcathedral.org.bh/history/christiancemeteries/cemeteries.htm>

From its establishment, the stewardship of the cemetery originally rested with the American Mission Hospital. This continued until at least 1950.

At some point (presently unknown but certainly post-1950), the stewardship of the cemetery passed to the Christian Community Cemetery Committee, a voluntary organization made up of representatives of the various Christian churches and congregations on the island under the Chairmanship of the British Ambassador. The churches include: St. Christopher's Cathedral (Anglican), the Sacred Heart Church (Roman Catholic), the National Evangelical Church, the Bahrain Malayalee Church of South India, St. Mary's Orthodox Church (Greek Orthodox), St. Peter's Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church and the Mar Thoma Church. The Royal Society of St. George is also represented.

On the night of May 15th, 2002 a number of unknown individuals climbed the cemetery wall and caused severe damage to the South Eastern quadrant of the cemetery. The damage included the uprooting and smashing of wooden crosses, concrete grave surrounds, crosses and plaques and damage to the roof of the War Memorial and brass plaques. In all, approximately 100 graves were damaged.

The public reaction to this incident was one of shock and horror that such a thing would happen in Bahrain, particularly given the country's long history of peace and religious tolerance. Expatriates and local people alike immediately made generous donations to help with the repairs.

Informed of the incident by H.E. Mr. Peter Ford, the British Ambassador, the Bahrain authorities expressed their shock and sadness, delegating , the then Minister of Labour, H.E. Mr. Abdunabi Abdulla Al-Shoa'la to deal with the matter. As a result, the damage was repaired by the Christian Community Cemetery Committee through funding by the Bahrain Ministry of Finance. All repairs were completed by October 8th, 2002.

A total of 407 known graves remain in the cemetery, 45 of which contain the remains of British military personnel and 27 of their dependants. [The graves of British military personnel and their dependants who die in peacetime are known as "Non-War graves" and are the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence (U.K.) and not the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.]

The nationals of 25 countries are known to rest in the 'Old' Christian cemetery, including:

| | | |
|---------------|-----|---|
| British | 121 | (of which 72 are British military personnel). |
| Indian | 119 | |
| American | 19 | |
| Italian | 6 | |
| Norwegian | 6 | |
| Pakistani | 6 | |
| Portuguese | 6 | |
| Iraqi | 5 | |
| Irish | 5 | |
| Dutch | 4 | |
| Chinese | 3 | |
| Greek | 2 | |
| Jordanian | 2 | |
| South African | 2 | |
| Seychelles | 2 | |
| Lebanese | 2 | |
| Bahraini | 1 | |
| Burmese | 1 | |
| Danish | 1 | |
| Finnish | 1 | |
| German | 1 | |
| Omani | 1 | |
| Palestinian | 1 | |
| Russian | 1 | |
| Spanish | 1 | |
| Unknown | 87 | |

In addition to Christians of many denominations, there is at least one person of the Jewish faith and a number of Buddhists buried in the cemetery.

The 'New' Christian Cemetery

This cemetery is situated at 311, Road 411, Salmabad 704. It is believed that the land for this cemetery was donated by H.H. Shaikh Isa bin Salman Al Khalifa in 1961.

Up to 2003, the nationals of 24 countries are known to rest in the 'New' cemetery, including:

| | |
|-------------|-----|
| Indian | 318 |
| British | 115 |
| Pakistani | 34 |
| Bahraini | 18 |
| Filipino | 17 |
| American | 14 |
| Lebanese | 8 |
| Sri Lankan | 8 |
| German | 5 |
| Bangladeshi | 4 |
| Seychelles | 4 |
| Egyptian | 4 |
| Chinese | 3 |
| Australian | 3 |
| Japanese | 2 |
| Burmese | 2 |
| Iraqi | 2 |
| Dutch | 2 |
| Korean | 2 |
| Iranian | 1 |
| Italian | 1 |
| New Zealand | 1 |
| Syrian | 1 |
| Uzbekistan | 1 |

The 'Old' Christian Cemetery receives no official funding and there is no longer any income from burials.

Funds for the maintenance and upkeep of both cemeteries are derived from: burial fees (New Cemetery); donations from Churches, congregations and individuals; and a small annual income from the Ministry of Defence (U.K.) for the upkeep of the graves of British military personnel and their dependants.

Societal Attitudes

For many, Bahrain has been a model of inter-religious harmony, particularly when compared with neighboring societies.

Bahrain is notable for having both Christian and Jewish communities that have lived in the country for many years. Residents of Bahrain also adhere to various other faiths, including Hinduism and Sikhism and they are all allowed to practice their religions freely. It is important to note when analyzing Bahrain and the level of religious freedom for Christian communities and otherwise, that as an island-nation of multi-ethnic communities, Bahrain remains within an overarching Islamic domain. As an Arab and Muslim country, its example of religious tolerance and pluralism can only be upheld as an important model for both the region and the world at large.

The Christian and Church leaders who visited Brussels recently came to shed light on their lives at 'home,' in Bahrain, in the middle of the Persian Gulf. Multinational and denominationally diverse, they represented the crux of the matter – their freedom, sense of belonging, diversity, shared hopes and fears and deep understanding of both their rights and limitations.

Willy Fautré

February 2012