Religious registration

Blessing or curse for the Church in the Middle East?

Jonathan Andrews[1]

Religious registration is the concept that each citizen is assigned a religion at birth which is recorded on official legal documents, notably birth certificates and identity cards, and also within government computer systems. In many countries, the registration cannot be changed to reflect an individual's decision to follow another faith.

Having worked for Middle East Concern (MEC) for nine years, I have seen many individuals adversely affected by the religious registration system. MEC regards this as an important structural issue underlying numerous cases of religious persecution in Middle Eastern countries.

The issues are different for those whose religious registration is "Christian". For some, problems arise because their religious registration is changed, including by administrative error, and reverting can be problematic. We must note that there are benefits, notably an affirmation of identity and belonging to a defined community, as well as problems.

I am exploring a PhD thesis that would examine the impact of religious registration on the Christian communities of the Middle East. What are the benefits and challenges for legally recognised churches? What impacts are there on converts to Christianity? How is the Christian faith spread? How is the Church of Jesus maintained?

1. Initial research focus

In addition to looking into the historical origins, I propose to look at the situation within four countries in particular:

➢ In Egypt, there have been court cases in progress challenging the refusal of the authorities to change a person's religious registration from Muslim to Christian.

➢ In Jordan, where several converts from Islam to Christianity have had all their legal documents annulled.

➢ In Lebanon, where there is freedom to change religious registration, but some church leaders reportedly use the system as a control mechanism.

➢ In Turkey, where there is freedom to change one's religious registration but its retention on identity cards continues to be a source of discrimination, for example, in job applications.

2. Outputs

First, I propose to write a history of religious registration, its origins and the reasons why it was established. My starting assumption is that it is a legacy of the

[1]   Jonathan Andrews (*1958) is Research Manager for Middle East Concern (www.meconcern.org), a position he has held since 2003. He lives in Cheltenham, UK; Email: Jonathan@meconcern.org.

Ottoman Empire's millet system as a means of ensuring social harmony amongst diverse ethnic groups.

Second, I propose to write a summary of the use of religious registration by governments and religious leaders. My expectation is that this will illustrate the role religious registration plays in identity and its continued use as a control mechanism.

Third, I propose to write a description of the possible consequences of the system's removal or radical reform. This requires much more than the removal of religious registration from identity cards, notably the removal of registration from government computer systems and the establishment of civil family law for those wishing to opt out of religious systems for family law. Implementing this is likely to prove very difficult.

Therefore, I propose exploring an alternative that respects religious freedom within the Middle Eastern cultural context. Converts from Muslim backgrounds are the primary focus here. Of note is that legally recognised churches should be able to provide services to converts from Islam in the same way that churches do for those registered as Christian. One motivation is to facilitate the integration of converts from Islam into churches. At present, in most places, this can at best be done discreetly and in some places not at all. One consequence is the emergence of churches that are not legally recognised. If present trends continue then, in some places, the established churches will decline and the convert church will become predominant, as is the case in northern areas of Iraq.

3. Who is this research intended to influence?

MEC's ethos is to facilitate Christians facing religious persecution in making informed choices about how to address their challenges and to support them in implementing the decisions they make.

This research is primarily intended to inform Christians in the Middle East, together with those supporting them, about religious registration. It will endeavour to exemplify its strengths, benefits, and positive effects, and to describe its weaknesses, costs, and hindrances. Within this audience there are several sub-groups, notably leaders of legally recognised churches, leaders of emerging convert churches and outside agencies seeking to support indigenous Christians. Particular audiences include those interested in human rights and justice issues in general and religious freedom in particular. Secondary audiences are those with influence on Middle Eastern leaders such as Western governments, business leaders and international institutions such as the EU.

Conclusion

Religious registration is a complex dynamic, with elements of identity, inter- and intra-communal harmony and religious freedom. This study aims to ensure that its implications and effects on the church in the Middle East are better understood.