Minority report: Christians in Jordan

by Jason Byassee in the February 6, 2007 issue

At the top of the short list of Western-friendly Arab nations is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. This relatively modern Muslim country, led by the articulate, handsome King Abdullah, is officially at peace with Israel. Jordan is bent on stopping terrorism within and outside its borders while generally maintaining respect for civil liberties. It has a cosmopolitan capital, Amman. Though a monarchy, the nation has a pinch of democracy (however, its elected parliament has little real power).

The country includes some fabulous sites: ancient ruins like Petra (featured in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*), natural wonders like the Dead Sea, the Red Sea and the Wadi Rum desert region (which Lawrence of Arabia famously called "vast, echoing, godlike"), and significant places in biblical history. Um-Qais is said to be the site where Jesus sent a legion of demons into a herd of swine. From Mount Nebo one can behold the Promised Land, as Moses once did, and can even see Jerusalem on a clear day. Jordan also claims to have the real site of Jesus' baptism. Though two sites in Israel make the same claim, there is strong Byzantine-era evidence for Jordan's claim. And Jordan is eager to get its share of the Holy Land tourist dollar.

Jordan's indigenous Arab Christians trace their history to Pentecost, when "Arabs" were among those who heard preaching in their own language (Acts 2:11). But the Maronite, Coptic, Latin Rite, Greek Orthodox, Syrian Orthodox and Arab Latin churches are all struggling; none has enough priests to serve even its dwindling flock. The birth rate among Christians is lower than that of their Muslim neighbors, and many with the means to do so have left for economic opportunities in the West.

Recognizing that at this rate the country would eventually have no Christians left, the Jordanian government in 1994 began the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies to document and encourage Arab Christian culture. RIIFS deputy director Baker al-Hiyari worries that "multicultural participation could be threatened" in Jordan and says, "We don't want our society to have only one color." He laments that while as a child he had some 20 Christian friends, now he counts only six or seven. He gives the standard figure—that Christians constitute 5 percent of Jordan's population. Others insist that that figure is too high and is maintained mostly for political

purposes. The real figure may be more like 2 or 3 percent.

To test the country's openness to Christianity, I suggest to al-Hiyari that the country might open its doors to Western evangelical missionaries. He looks displeased. "We don't want to bring in new colors—we want the colors we grew up with." He explains that the Prophet Muhammad made clear that Islam is the last block in the building. Al-Hiyari uses another analogy for computer-savvy Westerners: "If you have updated from a 1.0 or 2.0 operating system to 3.0, why would you want to go back?" The policy of RIIFS and the Jordanian government is not to encourage non-Muslims to proliferate; it is, in fact, to encourage them to "update"—that is, to become Muslim (despite al-Hiyari's seeming affirmation of multiculturalism).

As with most Muslim countries, Jordan's legal system is based on Shari'a law. It is technically illegal to convert to Christianity from Islam. Groups that would seek to convert people to Christianity are naturally suspect. The traditional churches in Jordan—the ancient ones mentioned above plus Lutheran and Anglican communities—do not proselytize, according to al-Hiyari. Some of the most adamant supporters of this nonproselytizing policy are the traditional Christian communities themselves. Al-Hiyari explained the reason for their antagonism to proselytizing Western evangelicals: "If [evangelicals] target 1,000 Muslims . . . they might get five converts. If they target 1,000 Jordanian Christians, they'll get 20."

Al-Hiyari is also made uneasy by the strict Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam, which dominates much of Saudi Arabia, and whose most famous adherent is Osama bin-Laden. He says Jordanians know which mosques preach Wahhabism. Its influence is limited but growing, he says. "People are very religious. It is easy to make them more religious. The Wahhabis don't preach violence, they just ask people to be more Muslim." Jordan is overwhelmingly Sunni, and since Sunnis have no religious hierarchy, the government must provide, in al-Hiyari's words, religious "quality control." "The system seeks to combat any extremists—to keep the moderate system we value."

As al-Hiyari's words indicate, the government does curtail religious freedom. That's also the impression I got from the American evangelicals with whom I spoke. They were extremely nervous about speaking with a journalist and would not tell me their last names or where they planned to serve. Why? "The Mukhabarat [intelligence bureau] knows you're here," one asserted.

Jordan does not have Iranian or Saudi-style policing of religion. American evangelicals are allowed into the country. No one directing my tour group—on a trip sponsored by the Jordanian government—objected to my meeting with evangelicals. Nevertheless, American missionaries are nervous about their place in Jordan.

Evangelicals play the role that Jordan has given them: providing social services, like job training for the poor. “We’re not here to change anyone’s religion, we’re here to help people,” said one. Some think that witness is effective. “Muslims may have barriers against Christians, but there’s the food and heaters and clothing [that Christian relief efforts have brought], and they never see anything from their fellow Muslims.” Al-Hiyari confirmed the view that Christians are generous and praised them for the inclusiveness of their social work in contrast to that of Muslims, whose beneficence generally doesn’t include Christians.

Then, lest I think evangelicals have lost all interest in evangelism, one of them added, “Now, don’t get me wrong—if I get five minutes with someone I’m going to share the gospel, that’s just the way I am.”

These evangelicals are keen to avoid activities that could invite government suspicion—like preaching or distributing Bibles. Even speaking off the record, they offer few stories of Jordanian Muslims converting to Christianity. Some talk with the weary tones of missionaries who have to explain meager results to supporters back home: “It’s hard, it takes time, you have to plant seeds.” They also seem frustrated that the Jordanian government hasn’t recognized evangelicals’ efforts to moderate their language and behavior.

One tells me he knows of several evangelicals who’ve been dragged into the police station for hours of questioning. Another speaks of a long-planned church festival for which the permit was revoked after Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg speech in which he made negative comments about Islam.

I am also told about an evangelical whose visa was revoked without cause. A minister in one of the traditional churches confirms that such events happen: foreign church leaders can be unceremoniously hauled in for questioning by the Mukhabarat, and Jordanian converts can be physically mistreated.

Not surprisingly, the Jordanian (as opposed to the American) evangelicals are the jumpiest of all. They clearly think that talking to me will cause trouble.

Despite the obstacles to missionary work, American evangelicals obviously like being in Jordan. The face of one of them lights up when I ask him about raising children in the Middle East: “Actually it’s easy. It would cost $20,000 to have a kid back home. My wife had our kids for less than $500 each. They even have apartments for dads just off the recovery room,” he marvels. Others express more enthusiasm about the prospects for missionary success. Back in the U.S., a recent college graduate fresh from a short-term trip to Jordan tells me that Arab young people are “grabbing up Bibles like candy.” One evangelical in Jordan expresses enthusiasm for small-group outreach in which the Qur’an is studied alongside the Bible—presumably to show the superiority of the latter. Our group flies home in the company of 100 or so fundamentalist missionaries, each wearing a name badge with a Star of David and the title “Jerusalem School of Ministry.” They pray when the plane hits pockets of turbulence and shout “Hallelujah!” when it lands.

Another American evangelical praises Jordan’s conservative culture: “There are standards about what’s seen on TV. Families are tight. Deviant behavior is not approved of. No one expresses pride at being an atheist here. Children don’t disappear from the street. A lot of what goes on in the States wouldn’t happen here.” The evangelicals make it clear that U.S. foreign policy and Western criticism of Islam make their frontline work more difficult. “Brother Falwell does not make our lives easier,” said one.

While the evangelicals are virtually in hiding, the Christians who worship at Amman’s Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, with its magnificent limestone edifice, hardly seem under siege. Far from being jumpy, these Christians seem a little bored. The rag-tag congregation straggles into the pews, only half filling the church. The religious art is tacky (and a shock after only a few days of visiting austere, image-free mosques), the hymns are badly sung, and the learned pastor preaches to a barely attentive congregation. However, al-Hiyari praises the church’s social outreach and development work.

The energetic pastor Samer Azar, who was educated not in the West but at a Lutheran university in Tanzania, seems like he should be what the church needs. His associate is Pia Ruotsala, a minister-in-training from Finland. They insist that we attend the social hour, where they serve Jordanian sweets (Islam’s ban on alcohol seems to have led to everyone having a sweet tooth). Good Shepherd’s flock appears wealthy. One man tells me about his luxury car dealership, where he sells Hummers to Saudis who drive them back home across the desert. Most have been to

America and some have lived there. The woman who drives us back to the hotel has a Filipino maid—not unusual for Jordan's upper class.

If Jordan feels dangerous to the evangelicals, it seems tame to the members of the Mennonite Central Committee with whom I meet. They used to work in Iraq, and wish they still did. A few years ago, however, the MCC's Iraqi partners said that the security risk was too great for the MCC to stay in Iraq. Until their pullout, the Mennonites were working on conflict-resolution training and distribution of relief supplies and in support of a theological school in Baghdad. They also invited Iraqis to a summer peacebuilding institute back home at Eastern Mennonite University's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. A retirement-age Canadian couple tell me of traveling to Iraq just after the start of the war with medicine for children who had contracted leukemia after coming in contact with radioactive depleted-uranium shells from U.S. weapons.

Here on the East Bank, as Jordan is called, the MCC concentrates on peacebuilding, addressing water scarcity and fighting HIV and other diseases. It partners with organizations that provide microcredit in agricultural areas. It supports an innovative school that integrates blind and seeing children. The group's nonproselytizing focus makes it precisely the sort of group the Jordanian government likes to have.

Toward the end of my visit with MCC members, a Palestinian Christian named Nada speaks up. She wants to be sure I know about the MCC's work in Palestine. Some 50 percent of people living in Jordan are actually Palestinian, many of them still living in refugee camps set up after the 1948 and 1967 wars with Israel. The number would be higher except that refugees' children who are born in Jordan are counted as Jordanians.

A rift between native Jordanians and Palestinian refugees runs right through Jordanian society—the two sides even pull for rival soccer teams. Nada tells me that the millions of Palestinian refugees in Jordan have never accepted Jordan's 1994 peace with Israel. They want the Israelis "out of our country," she says. Others in the room approach the issue the way that the MCC prefers to address it—by asking, "How can all, Jews and Arabs, have meaningful access to the land that's important to them?"

But Nada is not finished with her analysis. She expresses resentment that the 700,000 Iraqis in Jordan are called refugees. Any Iraqis with money have made their

way to Amman, and they emptied their bank accounts before coming. Real estate values have spiked in Amman since 2003: “Rent for my flat has doubled!” she grumbles. In her view, Palestinians—who often were forced to leave their homes with no warning and only the clothes on their backs—are the real refugees. Others squirm nervously in their seats during Nada’s remarks. They had told me previously that the biggest problem in Iraq is that each group sees itself as the sole victim. A recent *New York Times* article highlights growing tensions between Iraqi refugees and Jordanians and suggests that Iraqi Sunnis are far less likely to be refused entry than Iraqi Shi‘ites. Most Iraqis in Jordan are poor and in the country illegally, and so vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

One of the ministries that the MCC is most proud to support is the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf (HLID) in Salt, Jordan. The school is a remarkable social service, boarding 60 deaf children, teaching 150 in its school, training hundreds of students from across the Middle East, and addressing the needs of deaf people in communities throughout the region. It also offers a unique vantage on peacemaking. “Conflict is for hearing people,” its director, Brother Andrew de Carpentier, tells us.

Brother Andrew is a 57-year-old Dutch-born Anglican priest and Benedictine monk. “The deaf don’t think parochially or as patriots. Killing for religion is lost on them.” He makes an analogy close to the Middle East’s heart: the deaf are like the Jewish community worldwide. “There is a cohesion there, a bond from India to the U.S. to Ethiopia. It’s similar and even stronger in the deaf community—the cultural sharing among the deaf is stronger.”

He claims to feel no antagonism from the wider Arab community, even as he wears his Benedictine habit wherever he goes in the region: “I’m known as the priest with the apron,” he says proudly. Indeed, even in photos showing him with visiting royalty and other dignitaries, Brother Andrew has his habit on; his belt is battered, his shoes worn, his long gray hair swept back beneath his monastic skullcap. There is an aura of holiness about him. Children naturally gravitate to him. He holds their hands, gently strokes their hair, and laughs and signs with them, fatherlike. When one child clutches at a visitor’s camera, he rebukes him firmly but gently. The playground where they swarm around him is silent except for the sound of their snack wrappers. If their smiles made noise, it would be deafening.

Brother Andrew makes no effort to hide his faith. As he steps into HLID’s modest chapel, he tells us, “This is the heart of what we do here.” Seven or eight of his 150

students are Christian, the rest Muslim. “There is so much garbage in the U.S. and the Middle East about other religions. Why do the fringe 10 percent set the agenda? It’s wicked.” And he’s doing something about it. “This year I’m going to read the Christmas story from the Qur’an,” he says. Not that all religions are the same, he insists. “We do diverge,” and it is Christian teaching that is presented here. “How that works out in the rest of their lives is up to them.” Whatever their religious background or future, the students listen eagerly. “They love to hear of God as a father, as a friend, who is close to them when they feel lonely or isolated.” He has one advantage as an Anglican: “I like the smells and bells. The deaf do too.”

The priest tells heartbreaking stories about one child, Ahmed, a friendly eight-year-old whom we meet—and who was found in a trash can when he was a baby. He tells us of Bashir, a deaf-blind child who was kept in a cage at his previous home—“Not out of ill will, they just couldn’t handle him,” he explains. Bashir’s not having a good day when we visit. He flails around, uncontrollable. “That’s all feeling, he just can’t express it in language,” Andrew says. “I think he sees angels. I’m jealous. I want to see them too.”

Brother Andrew’s ministry is the kind that the Jordanian government is most eager to see Christians carrying out in Jordan. It improves the lives of the children, their families, and society generally. The boys are taught a vocation. The girls stay longer, until marriage age, and are taught both employable and domestic skills. Deaf-ed teachers trained at HLID return to their homes in Yemen or Afghanistan or Ethiopia to help there. Audiology testing and nursing care are offered to the public. “We give the gospel credibility here,” he says. In a twist on St. Francis that befits a largely deaf community, Brother Andrew says, “We preach the gospel at all times—we just use our hands.”

As with most Christian groups in Jordan, HLID’s future is precarious. “We’re broke,” he said flatly. The cash-strapped diocese of Jerusalem has 5,000 members and 27 priests, and must maintain hospitals in Palestine before it funds even ministries as successful as HLID’s. Brother Andrew relies on fund-raising networks in Europe and the U.S.

It is hard to imagine a future for any church unable or unwilling to evangelize. From that perspective, it would seem that the evangelicals, who now chafe at government restrictions, must be part of the Christian future in Jordan if it is to have a Christian future. Pope Benedict and President Bush have pressed Muslim countries for

“reciprocity”—giving Christians the same religious freedom in Muslim countries that Muslims enjoy in the West. Yet it might also be argued that as the West pushes these countries to be more open to Christians, Western foreign policy is part of what makes life difficult for Middle Eastern Christians. And indigenous Arab Christians are certainly right in maintaining that American-style evangelicalism would bring a very different kind of Christianity from the one they’ve grown up with.

We meet one more Christian on our pilgrimage—a Catholic shopkeeper in Madaba, a historically Christian town in which Christiains are still a significant minority (30 percent). It is home to the Madaba map, a famous mosaic floor-decoration from the sixth century that illustrates the entire Holy Land as imagined by Byzantine-era pilgrims. The man implores us to have tea with him in his shop. The tea comes with heaps of sugar. He is a retired banker, he says. Many in his family have moved to the West and found financial success. He tells us that the Orthodox in town and the Catholics have learned to celebrate Christmas and Easter on the same days (unlike Catholic and Orthodox elsewhere). Christmas is December 25 (the Catholic date); Easter changes with the Orthodox calendar. These two Christian groups are apparently better able to get along when both are in the minority. (Evangelicals tell the same story—bitter disputes back home between, say, Pentecostals and Southern Baptists don’t reverberate on the mission field.) The shopkeeper tells with pride of the pope’s visit in 2000, when even Muslims in the town were thrilled by his presence. “He rode right by the shop,” he says, pointing outside.

I ask him if Christianity will still exist in Jordan in 50 years. He pauses, frowns and begins shaking his head. “My [Muslim] neighbor has two wives and 10 children. My children and nieces and nephews are gone.” He lets us do the math.

We ask whether evangelicals would be welcome in Madaba. He frowns again. “They seem strange to us,” he says—clearly he has more in common culturally with his Muslim neighbors, though more in common socioeconomically with Westerners. It is a complex identity. “It is very hard for Christians here.” Then, as if just realizing he is talking with reporters, he insists: “But don’t write that. Write that the government is very good for Christians here. That’s important to say.”