

Jordan tour: A Christian town

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On Saturday I broke off from the tour group and went to Fuheis, a town of 20,000 outside Amman. Fuheis is an anomaly in Jordan: it's almost entirely Christian, majority Orthodox with many Catholics and a smattering of evangelicals. My companions for the afternoon were from the smattering, a pair of Baptist converts.

The sustainability of Fuheis's Christian supermajority is not due to it being some isolated, provincial town—it's built on premium, gorgeous land that borders the capital. How does Fuheis stay so Christian? Well, partly through an unofficial agreement to sell property only to other Christians.

For students of the civil rights movement, this will bring to mind the all-white towns that are part of our history in the States. Of course, it's not hard to see an ethical difference between a small minority protecting its enclave and a powerful majority protecting its standard-issue dominance.

As for our conversation, it was warm and wide-ranging. One topic: the problem some of the evangelical churches have had getting the governmental recognition they need to operate religious courts. In Jordan, family law and some other civil matters are handled by religious bodies. For Christians, this means they are handled with the government's approval but without its involvement—leaving a legal-recourse vacuum for adherents of unrecognized denominations. (It has also led to some conversions of convenience from a recognized denomination that doesn't permit, say, divorce to another that does.)

I was reminded of how cultural context alters some things drastically and others a lot less. Evangelicals are arguably the most powerful religious group in the States; their fears and anxieties are utterly different than those of their co-religionists who exist as a small minority of a Christian population that is itself a small minority in Jordan. But in both places, evangelicals are not really one group but several autonomous ones—an intrinsic theological feature that has much to recommend it but does not lend itself immediately to organizing for political clout. This is no doubt

a factor (not the only one) in any political struggles faced by Jordan's very many, very small groups of evangelicals, and it's a familiar one in majority-Christian countries as well.

Yesterday the tour left Amman and went on to Madaba (home of many Byzantine and Umayyad mosaics) and to Mt. Nebo. Now it's on to Petra, Wadi Rum, the Dead Sea and—what I'm most looking forward to—Bethany, where John baptized with water.

*Disclosure: The Jordan Tourism Board is covering most of the expenses for this trip, though it is not trying to tell us what to say/write/blog about it.*