



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From Professor Abe Ata

Sir,

Exodus of the Palestinian Christians

The Palestinian Christian is an endangered species. When the modern state of Israel was established there were about 400000 of us. Two years ago the number was down to 80000. Now it's down to 60000. At that rate, in a few years there will be none of us left.

Palestinian Christians within Israel fare little better. On the face of it, their number has grown by 20000 since 1991. But this is misleading, for the census classification 'Christian' includes some 20000 recent non-Arab migrants from the former Soviet Union.

So why are Palestinian Christians abandoning their homeland?

We have lost hope, that's why. We are treated as non-people. Few outside the Middle East even know we exist, and those who do, conveniently forget.

I refer, of course, to the American Religious Right. They see the modern Israel as a harbinger of the Second Coming, at which time Christians will go to Paradise, and all others (presumably including Jews) to Hell. To this end they lend military and moral support to Israel.

Even by the double-dealing standards of international diplomacy this is a breathtakingly cynical bargain. It is hard to know who is using

whom more: the Christian Right for offering secular power in the expectation that the Jewish state will be destroyed by a greater spiritual one; or the Israeli Right for accepting their offer. What we do know is that both sides are abusing the Palestinians. Apparently we don't enter into anyone's calculations.

The views of the Israeli Right are well known: they want us gone.

Less well known are the views of the American Religious Right. Senator James Inhofe (R-Oklahoma) said: 'God Appeared to Abraham and said: "I am giving you this land, the West Bank. This is not a political battle at all. It is a contest over whether or not the word of God is true.'

House Majority Leader Dick Armey (R-Texas) was even more forthright: 'I'm content to have Israel grab the entire West Bank. I happen to believe that the Palestinians should leave.'

There is a phrase for this. Ethnic cleansing.

So why do American Christians stand by while their leaders advocate the expulsion of fellow Christians? Could it be that they do not know that the Holy Land has been a home to Christians since, well, since Christ?

Do not think I am asking for special treatment for Christians. Ethnic cleansing is evil whoever does it and to whomever it is done. Palestinian Christians, Maronite Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Armenians, Baptists, Copts and Assyrians have been rubbing shoulders with each other and with other religions

Muslims, Jews, Druze and (most recently) Baha'is for centuries. We want to do so for centuries more. But we can't if we are driven out by despair.

What we seek is support, material, moral, political and spiritual. As Palestinians we grieve for what we have lost, and few people (the Ashkenazi Jews are one) have lost more than us. But grief can be assuaged by the fellowship of friends.

Abe W. Ata
University of Melbourne, Australia.
a.ata@asian.unimelb.edu.au

Dr. Ata is a 9th generation Christian Palestinian born in Bethlehem. He is the author of 11 books including *Intermarriage Between Christians and Muslims: The Case of the West Bank* (Melbourne, David Lovell Publ. 2000).