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Christianity in Somalia (87A)

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(87A) CHRISTIANITY IN SOMALIA

Bob Hedley

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	4,500	0.0%	4,100	0.0%	-0.5%
Independents	400	0.0%	400	0.0%	0.0%
African initiated	400	0.0%			
Orthodox	1,800	0.0%	1,300	0.0%	-2.1%
Protestants	2,000	0.0%	2,200	0.0%	0.6%
Roman Catholics	100	0.0%	100	0.0%	0.0%
Evangelicals	550	0.0%	700	0.0%	1.6%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	450	0.0%	500	0.0%	0.7%
Muslims	9,558,000	99.8%	14,315,000	99.8%	2.7%
adherents of traditional African religions	7,000	0.1%	9,000	0.1%	1.6%
Hindus	5,400	0.1%	7,500	0.1%	2.2%
Baha'is	2,800	0.0%	3,600	0.0%	1.8%
people professing no religion	4,200	0.0%	5,000	0.0%	1.1%
Total population	9,582,000	100.0%	14,344,000	100.0%	2.7%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Somalia has an estimated population of about 11 million people. Most Somalis are Sunnis, based on Ash'ariyah theology and Shafi'i jurisprudence. There has been a history of Sufism, and in recent years Salafism has been growing. It is believed that Islam was introduced into Somalia very soon after the Hijra in 622 AD. The oldest mosque in Somalia is said to date from the seventh century. Many believe that conversion from Islam to another religion, or a different branch of Islam, is equivalent to apostasy (Arabic: *ridda*). Muslim scholars have different views on the punishment which should be meted out to apostates, basing their arguments on the Qu'ran and the Hadith. According to different interpretations, punishment will either be in the after-life, or should be dealt with by imprisonment, beating or the death penalty. There are also different prescriptions for men and for women, but generally a period of three days' imprisonment is allowed for the apostate to return to Islam. The death penalty is the common punishment meted out in many Islamic communities. As Islam is considered by many Somalis to be the 'religion of Somalis', any person converting to Christianity is considered to be an apostate, and deserving death. At the very least, a convert can expect to be 'considered dead' by their clan and family members, and shunned by them. Thus Somali Christians tend to keep a very low profile, and keep to themselves.

There is no record of Christian mission in Somalia before 1881, although Christian Ethiopians must have traded with Somalis before that. In the 1880s, present-day Somalia was taken from the various ruling sultans, and was divided between the British, who established a protectorate over what is known as Somaliland, and the Italians. (Other Somali groups were also present in modern-day Djibouti, north-east Kenya, and south-east Ethiopia.) During the colonial period, Christian missionary activity started to take place, with Christians carrying out diaconal work, as well as serving predominantly the expatriate

community. The first Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in 1881, and began serving the expatriate community, establishing missions in Berbera, Mogadishu and Kismayo. Swedish Lutheran missionaries followed in 1889. The Swedish Lutherans record baptising 350 Somalis during their time in Somalia. At the end of World War I, the Italians forbade the Lutherans from operating in their territory, and expelled the Protestant missionaries. Somalia was established as a Vicariate Apostolic by the Holy See, and a cathedral was built in Mogadishu in 1928. The Catholic missionaries worked predominantly among the 'Bantu' Somalis, a minority ethnic group which descended from Bantu ex-slaves who were brought to Somalia as a work force for their Somali overlords.¹

The Anglicans also had established work, predominantly in Somaliland. The work of the Anglican Church fell under the Anglican Diocese of Egypt. Mennonites and the Sudan Inland Mission both began social service projects in Somalia. By 1950, a population of about 8,500 Somali Christians was recorded.

In mid-1960, both (Italian) Somaliland and (British) Somaliland gained independence and joined together as Somalia, under an elected government. The first constitution was accepted in 1961. In it, Somalia is declared as an Islamic state. The government was overthrown in a military coup in 1969, following the execution of the second President, Abdirashid Ali Shermarke, and Siad Barre took power. Siad Barre promulgated 'scientific socialism' which, despite his assertions that it was compatible with Islam, alienated many Somali Muslims, particularly after the execution of ten Muslim leaders following a protest. A new constitution was put in place in 1979.²

Siad Barre did not allow the missionaries to proselytise, but did allow them to carry out humanitarian work. The Catholic Relief Services began work in Somali in the 1960s. Apostasy was still legally considered a crime.

On 16th March 1976, the Holy See consecrated Bishop Pietro Salvatore Colombo, OFM, as Bishop, and established the Catholic Diocese of Mogadishu on 20th November that year. The Roman Catholic Church carried out diaconal work through Caritas Somalia. In the same year, the Mennonites and SIM missionaries were expelled from Somalia.

Civil war broke out in 1988, and Somaliland declared independence from the rest of Somalia in 1991, an ambition which it is still pursuing. The Anglican Church in Hargeisa was destroyed by bombing in 1988. Puntland, situated to the south of Somaliland, was relatively stable.

The ensuing inter-clan chaos, often referred to as 'the period of the warlords' caused immense suffering. In response, the first UN humanitarian mission, United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM I), took place. In November 1992, in response to a widespread famine which claimed about 300,000 lives, the UN began a second mission, the Unified Task Force (UNITAF), from December 1992 until May 1993 under the title 'Operation Restore Hope', and this was replaced by a third UN mission (UNOSOM II). Christian relief agencies were active in the humanitarian aid efforts.

A multinational military force led by the US tried to restore peace by defeating the warlords, and capturing Mogadishu under the title of 'Operation Gothic Support'. Notable among the warlords were Mohamed Farrah Aideed and Ali Mahdi Muhammed.

Many Somali Christians tried to leave and be resettled in other countries. The number of Somali Christians recorded in 1990 had dropped to about 2,000. Christians still remained active in diaconal work. The Roman Catholic Church had established a hospital at Mela, and a Nursing School in Mogadishu. Bishop Pietro Salvatore was assassinated in the cathedral in Mogadishu on 9th July 1989, and Bishop

¹ Jason Mandryk, *Operation World: The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 575; David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 672-673.

² See Janice Hamilton, *Somalia in Pictures* (Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2007), 30-32; Mohamed, Iman Abdulkadir. 'Somali Women and the Socialist State.' *Journal of Georgetown University-Qatar Middle Eastern Studies Student Association*, 2015, 4.

Giorgio Bertini of Djibouti was consecrated as the Apostolic Administrator after that, and still holds that position. In 1990, the Catholic hospital at Mela was destroyed.

In 1991, Siad Barre's regime was overthrown, and the Islamic Courts Union was founded, to restore a semblance of peace in Somalia, under the banner of Islam. In July 2006, with US support, Ethiopia invaded Somalia and the Islamic Courts Union was ousted, and a transitional federal government was set up, which was sited first in Nairobi, and later in Baidoa. Many Somalis perceived the invasion by Ethiopian forces as a 'Christian' country attacking a Muslim state (despite Ethiopia having a secular government, and having a Muslim population of about 40%.) By December 2006, the Islamic Courts Union had been ousted from Mogadishu. In 2007, the African Union, supported by the United Nations, set up the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM), consisting of troops from six other African nations and a police force from five others. Part of the youth wing of the Islamic Courts Union developed into the Islamist movement, Al-Shabaab, which controls large swathes of Southern Somalia, and has linked itself with Al-Qaeda. Al-Shabaab promotes a strict interpretation of Sha'riah, and considers as apostate any who do not follow their interpretation. They consider the US and its allies, especially Ethiopia and Kenya, as 'crusaders against Islam'. Needless to say, the situation of the Christian minority continued to worsen, with Al Shabaab encouraging people to spy and inform on their neighbours. Sr Leonella Sgorbati, a Consolata Sister, and the head of the Nursing School, was shot dead on 17th September 2006, just four days after she had returned from Kenya. In 2008, the Catholic Cathedral in Mogadishu was destroyed by Islamists. It is reported that, in Al-Shabaab-held areas, apostasy from Islam or being found to be a Christian, results in immediate execution.

Diaconal work in Somalia continues through Caritas Somalia and the ACT Alliance. There is a Somalia ACT forum, which includes Christian Aid, Norwegian Church Aid, the Lutheran World Federation and Diakonie Katastrophenhilfe, which is based in Nairobi. Finn Church Aid has also been active in Somaliland. Most ACT partners work through local Somali partners and, for security reasons, no Christian symbols are used on vehicles. There have been some moves from the Somalia Government to request 'Christian' organisations to start to rebuild Christian sites, not as churches, but as various diaconal institutions (such as a library on the site of the Anglican Church in Hargeisa). Other organisations, such as the American Friends Service Committee, work in peace-building, through local Somali organisations.

However, the new Provisional Constitution, adopted on 1st August 2012,³ and which came into effect on 19th September 2012, has the following to say about 'religion':

Article 2 – State and Religion

1. Islam is the religion of the state.
2. No religion other than Islam can be propagated.
3. No law can be enacted that is not compliant with the general principles and objectives of Shari'ah.

Article 17 – Freedom of Religion and Belief.

1. Every person is free to practise his or her religion.
2. No religion other than Islam can be propagated in the Federal Republic of Somalia.

Christianity has been known as a 'minority religion' in Somalia, with the exact number of Somali Christians in Somalia currently unknown, but estimated to be between one hundred and one thousand.⁴ Most are thought to belong to the Wesleyan Church of the Nazarene or the Roman Catholic Church. However, denominationalism has little meaning for such a small, persecuted minority. Many Somalis have

³ The Federal Republic of Somalia. Provisional Constitution adopted August 1, 2012, Mogadishu, Somalia. Website: www.constitutionnet.org/vl/item/federal-republic-somalia-provisional-constitution-adopted-august-1-2012-sep-19-2012 (accessed 19 December, 2015).

⁴ According to Christian Aid Missions, it is estimated that Christians in Somalia add to only 0.3% while evangelical Christianity is estimated to 0.0%. Website: www.christianaid.org/Interactive_World/countryPages/Somalia.aspx (accessed 19 December, 2015).

come into contact with Christians during the time they have lived overseas, as migrants or as refugees, as well as through the work of humanitarian aid agencies. As peace is restored to Somalia, some of the diaspora have started to return and perhaps there will be a more open and tolerant attitude to the Christians of Somalia in the future. For the time being, however, Somali Christians in Somalia have to continue to live in hiding.

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