

Echoes of Jesus in Sweden

Aramaic-speaking Syrians find a home, writes Mikael Oez

If you want to hear the language spoken by Christ, all you need to do is to take a short bus ride from Stockholm to the town of Södertälje. There you will find thousands of Syriac Christians speaking Aramaic as it was spoken in the time of Jesus.

These are some of the 120,000 Syrians from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq who have found a haven in Sweden. They have fled persecutions and massacres, from the Ottoman period through the 20th century until today. In April last year, the archbishops of Aleppo, Mor Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi, were kidnapped and are still being held captive. This preceded the ethno-religious cleansing of Syriac Christians from the Iraqi city of Mosul, which is underway in a gruesome campaign by ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria now known as Islamic State.

The first generation of Syrians who arrived in Sweden in the 1960s established small family businesses. Second generations pursued professional careers. Originally they were randomly distributed among Swedish cities, but Södertälje proved to have a strong attraction because it was the seat of the Syriac archbishopric. The two most successful Syriac football teams, Assyriska Föreningen and Syrianska FC, are based in the town. Having no nation of their own, the Syrians take pride in these teams.

Syriacs have excelled in

politics; today there are six ethnic Syriac members in the Swedish parliament, something which could not have been achieved in most countries of their 'homeland'. They work hard for the community to be fully integrated while preserving their cultural heritage and identity. Such inter-cultural exchanges have nurtured a special understanding in Swedish society for the value of religious freedom and the vital importance of addressing the consequences of religious discrimination. The Swedish parliament was among the first to acknowledge the 1915 massacre of Christians under Ottoman rule, known as the *Sayfo*, as genocide in 2010.

Unlike other migrating nationalities in Sweden, Syriac Christians have no hope of returning to their homeland. This has meant that newer generations are steadily accepting Sweden as their homeland, although older generations would like to maintain their ties with their native lands. Some are renovating their former houses and vineyards in Tur Abdin – the Mountain of Worshippers in Syriac – in southeast Turkey, which they were forced to abandon under

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A Syriac leads a religious procession through Södertälje

duress. These houses are used for holidays or even retirement homes.

Sweden has embraced Syrians. They have been given full privileges as Swedish citizens and are today in a position to practise religious freedom and to teach their precious Syriac culture and language. The community is now served by more than 50 newly built Syriac Orthodox churches, which are flourishing all over Sweden.

Demand for church buildings is on the increase as the younger generation have started to have their own families and are slowly discovering their roots together with their own children.

At the same time, sporadic waves of new Syriac immigrants are joining their relatives in Sweden.

Churches have provided vital meeting points for the Syriac community. Women and men, young and old, can attend religious services, receive spiritual nourishment

in a relaxed and secure environment, and establish networks. They practise and revive their language and religion.

The church environment also has a role in keeping a fine balance between the cultures, heritages and languages of its immigrant community. Members of Syriac communities, who are naturally multilingual speaking Swedish, Syriac, neo-Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish and English due to their exceptional circumstances, enjoy the riches of the cultural heritage of both their old and new homelands.

The question still remains, however: can the endangered Aramaic language survive if the indigenous Syriac-speaking community is subject to a mass exodus and considered a demographic surplus in the future of the Middle East?

Dr Mikael Oez is lecturer in Eastern Christianity at SOAS, University of London