

THE “NEW YEAR”



As we begin a new year, we place much emphasis on our dependence on God to guide us as we embark on this untried year. But did you know that God clearly established the start of the year at a specific time and that this does not coincide with January 1st?

As members of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church one of our basic tenets is that we observe the principles set out by God to mark ‘times and seasons’. Thus we are firm about the day of worship being the seventh day Sabbath, and we consider the day to begin at sunset. The beginning of the year according to God’s timing has, however, been lost. Why is this?

The Bible prescribes a day as going from evening to morning (Gen. 1:1-5), a week as seven days (Gen. 2:3, Lev. 23:15) and a month as 30 days (Gen. 7:11, 8:15) which runs from one new moon to the next (Is. 66:23). A year is 12 months and **Gen 12:2 identifies the start of the year** “This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you” - this month, called Abib in the Bible, would be in April.

Israel observed the God-given times and seasons which were aligned to the ordained religious festivals and also to their agrarian economy. However,

they also gradually incorporated Canaanite and Babylonian elements of time keeping into their calendar. This involved having a civil calendar in which the year began in the month corresponding to September, in addition to their religious calendar.

The calendar of the first Christians was merged with that of the Roman Empire under whose sovereignty they lived. Changes instituted by Rome included months named after emperors: Julius – July and Augustus – August; the insertion of January and February into the calendar by Rome’s second king around 700 BC; and changing the start of the year first to March then to January. The latter meant that September to December were no longer the 7th to 10th months in keeping with their names (Sept = 7, Oct = 8, Nov= 9, Dec = 10). The “Roman Calendar” was modified into the “Julian Calendar” in 45 BC by Julius Caesar, and finally in 1582 Pope Gregory XIII instituted the “Gregorian Calendar” that is now in use by the majority of the world.

This is only an outline of some of the numerous changes to the Biblical calendar that account for the loss of God’s timing for the start of the year, thereby fulfilling one aspect of the prophecy “And he shall think to change times and laws: ...” (Dan 7:25). So, while it may be difficult or impossible to disregard the Gregorian Calendar, we should also remember that it was not given to us by the Creator.

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In this edition the spotlight is turned on: the possibility of terrorism in the Caribbean; the escalation of Christian persecution worldwide; and the origin of the New Year.

MUSLIM PRESENCE IN THE CARIBBEAN

Since ISIS claimed responsibility for the November terror attacks in Paris, the world has been on edge trying to anticipate the place and time of the next major attack. There was much nervous speculation during the recent holiday season, and security was heightened wherever large crowds were expected to gather for celebrations worldwide.

In the Caribbean there has been reluctance to implement stringent security because of the impact on tourism, “Security has never been

considered a high priority for the industry in the region, making it a soft target for ISIS. Many Caribbean countries do not want their tourism product debilitated by menacing security measures.” said Joseph Simpson, formerly of the Caribbean Hotel and Tourists Association (CHTA).

ISIS recruitment also poses equal or greater concern for the Caribbean. With many Caribbean countries thus worried about their nationals being recruited as Muslim terrorists and returning home to conduct terror attacks, a major question is whether their governments have the ability to track or monitor terrorists.

The FBI has expressed concern about the increasing presence of radical Islam and ISIS in the Caribbean, and the United Nations has warned that **Trinidad & Tobago** (where radical Islam rose to prominence

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with an attempted coup in 1990) is a proven fertile ground for ISIS. **Trinidadian security officials have also acknowledged that during 2012 to 2015 some 89 of their nationals have joined ISIS.**

Trinidadian Abu Zayd al-Muhajir left his country to join ISIS in Syria and, in a video released early in 2015, said that as a Muslim in the Caribbean territory he was unable to conform 100 per cent to the Islam faith. Another ISIS loyalist from Trinidad who believes in Sharia law has said that he would like to see the spread of Islam throughout the Caribbean and maintains that Trinidad & Tobago should be a caliphate and lead the region.

There is disagreement within Trinidad over how to respond to the threat of terrorism. The Minister of National Security acknowledges that there is no law in place to stop citizens from returning to their homeland, and has stated “If they have committed an international crime, we will work with our international partners to bring them to justice but for now they are still citizens of Trinidad & Tobago.” However, other government officials are calling for legislation to prevent free travel of Trinidadian-born terrorists.

In the summer of 2015, hackers claiming allegiance to ISIS infiltrated websites hosted by the governments of **St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Jamaica.** The former President of the Islamic Council of Jamaica (ICOJ), Mustafa Mohammad reported that

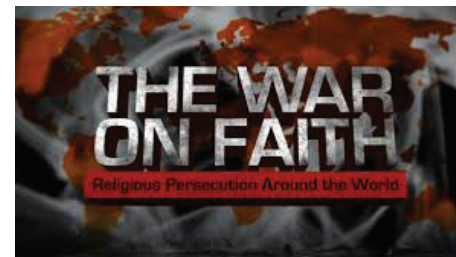
there are well over 6,000 Muslims in Jamaica with 12 places of worship besides the main Masjid Mosque in Kingston. New adherents to this mosque are said to number 5 to 7 monthly. He explained that **Jamaica is becoming “a haven for Muslims”, because of the country’s “high level of religious tolerance”!**

What is the likelihood of ISIS drafting Jamaicans to join their ranks? The current head of ICOJ, Sheikh Musa Tijani, claims that there is no likelihood of Islamic terrorism in Jamaica. He explains that while in most countries each mosque is an independent community, in Jamaica all mosques come under ICOJ, and he asserts that local Muslims are all peace-loving. However, in sharp contrast, news media reports that an internationally known and outspoken **Jamaican radical Muslim cleric, openly supports and defends ISIS** and issued public statements condoning the horrific attack in Paris. Against this background, it may be foolhardy to believe that there is nothing to fear from Muslim extremism in the Caribbean.

ESCALATION OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

The current global scale of the **denial of religious liberty** is alarming. This is multi-faceted, taking place not only between religious groups, or by authoritarian governments but within

religions such as between Muslim and Christian sects. Thus minority groups in countries worldwide are facing serious levels of persecution. Some of the world’s most repressed religious minorities include Egypt’s Christian Coptic minority; the Baha’i in Iran; the Ahmadis in Pakistan; and Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Shiite Muslims in Saudi Arabia. **The persecution of Christians tops this list,** however, particularly in Muslim-majority countries and the Islamic State of Iran and Syria (ISIS) spearheads the attack.



In Iraq, where Christians are being butchered in mass executions, their number has plunged from one million to just 275,000 in the last 12 years alone.

In Syria, which is plagued by civil war, ISIS atrocities and separate bombing campaigns from the West and Russia, Christians (which include refugees from Iraq and comprise 1.5 million) have fallen into severe financial hardship, primarily because they are too afraid to leave their homes to go to work. A shortage of basic supplies such as gas, electricity, and food has contributed even further to the desperate situation.

Although the Syrian Christian church

has historically enjoyed peace and religious freedom under President Assad, the current situation has destabilized that peace, since Christians are now perceived by powerful extremists as supporters of the government. One of the mass killings in Syria involved the 12-year-old son of a Syrian ministry team leader who had planted 9 churches. The martyrs were faithful to the very end; right before one woman was beheaded, she seemed to smile as she said, “Jesus!”

Besides being killed Christians are leaving Iraq and Syria in large numbers with nothing but the clothes on their backs. **The church is being ‘silenced and driven out of its ancient biblical heartland’.** The crisis is so severe that barring significant interventions on the part of world powers, the Christian presence in Iraq and Syria may disappear completely within a decade or even sooner.

Will we sit idly by and await our turn? There is a work for us to do. We are called to be our brother’s keeper. There are many ways that we can give help. There are organizations such as “Open Doors”, “International Christian Concern” and the “Voice of the Martyrs” which mobilize aid for persecuted Christians via prayer, donations, advocacy etc. These can be reached at their websites below.

<https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>;
<http://www.persecution.com/>; <http://www.persecution.org/>
