

Religion

West Bankers are of two major religions, Islam and Christianity. According to the 1967 Census, Moslems constituted a majority of 93.3%, while Christians amounted to 6.1%.¹ Christians are mostly concentrated in urban centres, mainly in Ramallah, Bethlehem, and Jerusalem. There are, however, several villages where Christians constitute a majority of population. Prominent examples are Beit Sahour, Beit Jala (Bethlehem District), Birzeit, Jifna, Taibe, Aboud (Ramallah District), and Zababdeh (Jenin District). In total the Christian rural population hardly exceeds 30,000, which is less than 7 percent of the total rural population in the West Bank.

Religious and social constraints to agricultural development

The process of agricultural development in the West Bank bears heavily on a wide range of religious, social, and demographic factors. Some of these values may facilitate development, whereas others may be indifferent or hostile to it. In this section we shall evaluate the interaction of two social structures on economic and agricultural development; the role of the Islamic faith in development motivation and the attitudes of local communities to manual professions. In later sections we shall discuss the role of women in agricultural labour and the impact of demographic attributes on the dynamics of the labour market.

Islam and development motivation

The role of religion in the development process in underdeveloped countries is complex and controversial. Empirical evidence, for instance, shows that poverty and underdevelopment are pronounced

1. IDF Census of 1967 for West Bank (p XII) and East Jerusalem (p XIII).

in Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, where adherence to religions is strong. This is in sharp contrast with the high rates of development and affluence in European and American countries, which have a lesser role for the churches.

Obviously the interaction between religion and development, whether in poor or rich countries is too complex to permit any easy conclusions. This is an area where there is room for further research, particularly in Moslem countries. For our purposes, however, it is fitting to examine briefly the impact of religious affiliation on development efforts in the West Bank, especially in rural areas.

Western economists and thinkers do not hesitate to refer much of the economic and social ailments of Moslem countries to their religious beliefs. Most of them would subscribe to Vivian Bull's assessment that "Islamic tradition appears to offer little to support the necessary preconditions for development."¹ Truly enough, the casual reader of the Koran will find plenty of connotations which degrade material well-being and conceive of worldly life as merely an interim test period for the human being. Believers who pass the test are rewarded with an eternal life in "paradise", and those who do not are to be punished in "hell".

While it is true that Koranic injunctions place excessive emphasis on observance of patterns of behaviour which would qualify the "good" Moslem for his other life, it is equally true that Islam has utterly forbidden its followers to devote their lives to practising religious rituals. This message is clear in many

1. Vivian Bull, op cit, p 32.