

# Multi Faith Tolerance - an endangered species in the Middle East

*Michael Kuttner and Kirsty Walker*

The recent Papal visit to the Middle East briefly turned international attention on to the plight of the Christian communities in the Holy Land and the wider Middle Eastern region. Adherents to the faith that was birthed in Galilee and Judea are under increasing pressure in those same places, as the Christian populations dwindle in the towns of Nazareth and Bethlehem. During the Pope's visit to Israel and areas under the control of the Palestinian Authority, blame for the decline of these Christian communities was placed squarely at Israel's door. The Israeli security fence, checkpoints, settlements and the recent conflict in Gaza were blamed for the social, economic and spiritual woes experienced by Palestinian Christians. However, during the Papal visit no one was willing to name the primary cause of the exodus of Christians from the Holy Land and the Middle East – the rise of Islamic Fundamentalism. The spread of radical Islamic fundamentalism and the violence and civil unrest that accompany it, have led to the steady decline of Christian communities in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world.

In the democratic, secular West, freedom of worship and religion are taken for granted as basic human rights. Yet it is a sobering fact that institutionalised religious discrimination and persecution against Christians and people of other non-Islamic faiths is commonplace throughout the Muslim world, while the secular West turns a blind eye. Among Middle Eastern nations, only Israel allows freedom of religion and worship to its citizens, whether they are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or adherents of any other faith. Ironically, only Israel is openly accused of causing the decline of a Christian community in the Middle East.

In Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, no non-Muslim is allowed to enter the cities of Mecca or Medina. No Jew bearing an Israeli passport can enter Saudi Arabia at all. Although Jewish and Christian communities existed in the Arabian peninsular centuries before Mohammed's birth, today Christians are forbidden from congregating for worship, wearing a cross or crucifix or even carrying a Bible into the country. Yet there is no international condemnation of Saudi Arabia for its racist and repressive religious regime.

Following the Islamic Revolution in Iran, minority religious groups were ruthlessly controlled and persecuted. Iranians who adhere to the teachings of the Baha'i movement have been tortured, murdered and denied freedom to follow their beliefs. Ironically the followers of this religion, which was founded in 19<sup>th</sup> century Persia by Mírzá Husayn-`Alí Nuri (Bahá'u'lláh), have established their world headquarters in Israel, the only country in the Middle East in which they can practice their faith openly, without fear of persecution.

In Iraq, home of one of the world's oldest continuous Christian communities, "Islamic insurgents" target Christians in their homes, churches and businesses as they attempt to remove all trace of Iraq's Christian heritage from a modern, Islamic Iraq. Iraqi Christians have become targets for violence, kidnapping, rape and murder by Islamic factions, and thousands have fled their homeland as refugees. While there has been widespread condemnation of western forces for their presence in Iraq, there has been a resounding silence about the Islamic ethnic cleansing of Iraqi Christians.

Egypt's Coptic Christian community pre-dates Islam's conquest of Egypt by more than 800 years, yet Egypt's constitution gives preference to Muslims. Coptic Christians are treated as second-class citizens, denied political representation and discriminated against in employment. Christians are frequently targets for intimidation and persecution by militant Muslims.

In Palestinian Authority controlled areas of the West Bank, Christians are harassed, intimidated and have their property damaged or confiscated by their more militant Muslim neighbours. This ongoing abuse by Muslim Palestinians, more than the presence of the Israeli security wall, is a primary reason for Christian Palestinians choosing to leave "Christian" towns like Bethlehem and Nazareth. In Gaza, under Hamas control, Christians not only suffer abuse, but they have been murdered and their property confiscated or destroyed by members and associates of the ruling Hamas.

Increasingly, even moderate Muslims are targeted by their more extreme co-religionists, and pressured into adopting more rigid, fundamentalist forms of Islam. The financial benefits associated with becoming actively involved in extreme Islamist groups in the Middle East appeal to the young and impoverished, and intimidation is used to persuade the reluctant to conform to the codes of behaviour prescribed by fundamentalist and nationalistic versions of Islam.

Conversion from Islam to any other faith is against Islamic law, and in some Muslim states it is a capital offence. Since, under Islamic law, being born to Muslim parents automatically makes one a Muslim, any person born in an Islamic state cannot freely choose to change their religious affiliation without incurring serious, and sometimes fatal

consequences. The Christians in the Middle East who experience the most severe persecution are those who have “converted” from Islam to Christianity.

Despite this universal discrimination and persecution against Christians and other religious minorities in Muslim states, Israel is the only state to be publicly accused of causing the decline in the Middle’s East’s Christian population. The irony is that, of all the Middle Eastern nations, only the Jewish state of Israel upholds and defends the rights of its citizens to worship according to their individual consciences.

In recent years the World Council of Churches (WCC) has been consistently outspoken in its condemnation of Israel. However, concerning 60 years of religiously and racially inspired terror attacks by Arabs against Jews in Israel, and an increasing level of hate speech and slander directed against the Jewish state, the WCC has retreated into an awkward silence. Pope Benedict spoke sympathetically about the difficulties experienced by Palestinians living under the shadow of Israel’s security wall, while ignoring the reason for the fence’s existence, namely, ongoing Palestinian Islamist terror attacks on Israeli civilians. Senior Palestinian clergy denounce Israel but remain silent about the threats and abuse Arab Christians receive from Arab Muslim neighbours. Both the World Council of Churches and the Vatican have been muted in their response to the religious abuse that occurs under Islam and to desperate plight of Christians in Muslim dominated countries. In the face of “honour killings”, persecution of non-Muslims and the rise of religiously inspired Islamic terrorism, the international church has been noticeably reticent. Anglican Bishop of Rochester, Dr Michael Nazir-Ali, resigned from his position as Bishop in order to be allowed to speak freely and openly in defence of Christians persecuted by Islam.

While many Western church leaders remain silent about human rights abuses committed throughout the Middle East in the name of Islam, for fear of provoking retaliatory violence, Israel, where religious freedom is guaranteed, is boycotted, pilloried and blamed for the plight of its flagging Christian communities. This hypocrisy occurs when Church leaders, clergy and laity alike, find it safer and easier to blame the small and increasingly isolated Jewish State for the ills inflicted by their Muslim neighbours.

In the current international political climate, when Christians are beaten and their property destroyed by members of the PA in Ramallah, or Hamas in Gaza, it is easier to blame the Jews. When Christians live in fear for their lives, it is politically safer and easier for the Vatican and World Council of Churches to blame the Jewish State rather than the vicious incitement of extremist Islamic Mullahs and preachers. America has a President who closes his eyes to reality, ignores history and proclaims that Islam is a religion of peace. It is no wonder that Arab Christians are beaten into silence in the face of this revisionist version of historical facts.

The Christian church claims to uphold Life and Truth. If this is the case, the church and bodies purporting to represent the church, need to tell the truth about what is happening to Christians, Jews and other minority groups in the Muslim world, rather than resorting to the shameful and age-old lies of anti-Semitism that have plagued the church for centuries. Rather than being cowed into submission in the face of militant Islam, the Church must confront the evils that are being done and the lies that are being told in the name of Islam. The Church must reject once and for all its shameful history of using the Jewish people as a religious and politically expedient scapegoat. It may be politically fashionable in some circles to blame “Zionism” and the Jewish state for the world’s ills, but to do so is to subvert the truth and to repeat the most horrendous errors of human history.

The radical form of Islam that is becoming increasingly influential through Muslim states and is spreading through Europe and secular western nations is a religious totalitarian ideology. Much of the church failed to speak the truth and defend the weak and defenceless in the face of totalitarianism last century. Most shameful of all, some European churches even aided and abetted the Nazi regime in its demonisation of the Jewish people. Faced with an international religious totalitarianism that threatens Jews with genocide and persecutes Christians and others who will not submit to its ideology, the international Church of the twenty-first century must not remain silent and inactive, and it must not falsely accuse the only country in the Middle East that safeguards and defends its Christian community. The church failed to speak the truth with courage in the past. It must not fail again.

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