

## Reversing Christian disappearance from the Middle East: Three legal proposals to consider

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The Vatican's call for a Synod on the Middle East reflects the dire case of the region's Christians, the victims of continued sectarian extremism and of the persistent lack of democracy. Like their fellow Muslim compatriots in Palestine, like Jews in Arab and Muslim countries since, they were victims in 1948 and in 1967 of ethnic cleansing.

Christian extinction in Palestine is chiefly owed to a particular form of militant and exclusive Judaization policy embodied in the logic of the "Jewish and democratic" state as understood and practiced by Israel's leaders since the establishment of the state of Israel. It has now been aggravated by the rise of Muslim extremists in Palestine and elsewhere.

In Iraq, Syria and Egypt, significant Christian communities are dwindling toward extinction under intolerant practices, while they are completely marginalized politically by the prevailing brutality and their increasingly small numbers.

In Lebanon, the mediocrity of Christian leadership and the internecine fighting between extremist factions from 1976 through 1990, which was repeated in 2005, has led to the distinct weakening of the community. The Christians of the Middle East are threatened with disappearance. It is high time for this Synod.

The Vatican guidelines, as subtly argued by John Donohue on this page, go in the wrong direction. It is not sufficient to rely on spirituality to reverse the dramatic trend. The required message is political and egalitarian, at a time when the message of nonviolence which Christ ultimately embodies may be gaining ground against extremists of various hues, on the streets of Cairo and Iran, and in Palestinian government under Salim Fayyad. Retrenchment into spirituality is insufficient, and the message we expect from the Synod is the celebration of nonviolence, in the model of Christ, as the necessary outward expression of all politics in the Middle East, and the insistence on basic democratic values: equality and liberty, and their translation into democratic government.

Solid proposals are required to translate nonviolence into effective action. Here are three legal avenues which I have developed over the years to confront the extremist anti-Christian, anti-democratic message prevailing in the region.

The first concerns the importance of reciprocity, and must be directed primarily toward the government of Saudi Arabia, which represents the most brazen form of intolerance toward Christians in the Arab and Muslim world. In Saudi Arabia, Christians, indeed any Muslim not of the stricter Wahhabi persuasion (for instance Shiites and Shafii Hijazis), are the victims of open discrimination. Worse, Christians are considered so "impure" as not to be allowed to set foot in Mecca, let alone build churches or exercise basic rights. Although all Saudi denizens are humiliated by a repressive and intolerant government, the plight of Christians and other religious minorities is simply unacceptable.

The Vatican should call for a thorough revision of governmental attitude to Christians in Saudi Arabia, and break the deafening Western silence that has descended on the kingdom because of oil. This does not need to remain rhetorical. Considering the callous haughtiness of Saudi leaders, it is time to put some teeth in that policy, by singling out a number of those top leaders and increasing the pressure in terms of visas and visits first, as Switzerland recently did for the Gadhafi entourage. Next time the Saudi king is in London, Rome or New York is a good occasion to start. He should not be allowed to pray in

the local mosque, let alone visit a church, so long as reciprocal measures for Christians are not established in the kingdom, starting with lifting the ban on Christian visits to Mecca and Medina outside the period of the Hajj. This would send the right message of basic human rights and the principle of reciprocity across the Middle East.

Jerusalem is another critical case for the Christians in the Levant. I argued in these pages 10 years ago, after a discussion with former Nuncio Antonio Veglio, that the Vatican policy toward Israel, and Jerusalem in particular, is wrong ("Whither Christian Jerusalem? The City is holy to three religions, not just two. The Daily Star, August 4, 2000). An endearing fellow, Veglio wrote that I "should not be more popist than the Pope." He has since been more attuned to the plight of the Holy Land Christians, but a radical reconsideration is presently needed. The treaty between the Holy See and Israel, passed in 1993, was both poorly drafted and poorly applied. It must be revisited with an emphasis on the right for Palestinian Christians to be an integral part of the Jerusalem fabric in a decision-making capacity. To restore Jerusalem as the city of Christians, Muslims and Jews, in conformity with international law that established Jerusalem as Corpus Separatum in 1948-9, an altogether new approach is needed moved by the consideration of a united, federal Israel-Palestine with the status of an inclusive Jerusalem at its heart. The Corpus Separatum, which was entrenched by the United Nations in a sophisticated legal regime, has been tragically ignored by the Vatican. It needs to be revived to save the Holy Land Christians from obliteration.

A word on Lebanon. I have been a strong advocate for the right of Lebanese citizens to vote abroad, owing to the country's large emigration. Emigration has affected Lebanese Christians in particular, leading to a real imbalance within the country. As presidential candidate, I have defended the policy as a natural right for all Lebanese, and I am glad that the New York Consul, Antoine Azzam, has now taken it up and established the system for the Lebanese in the United States to vote in 2013.

However, I now believe that the policy should be conceived in a more radical way, one that openly seeks to reverse the demographic imbalance in the country between Christians and Muslims. Lebanon will not survive without the institutional collaboration, on a par, between its Christians and its Muslims. This should be part of a serious reflection on the constitutional set-up in the country that has moved steadily in recent years from a Christian-Muslim dual system to a tripartite system of Christian-Shiite-Sunni power-sharing. This shift is unacceptable, which marginalized Christians against a principle of parity that has guided the country since the early 1800s, as underlined in a 1833 document published by Hyam Mallat last week in the Nahar. The importance of the Vote Abroad initiative becomes therefore not only in its strict democratic vocation, that is to get all Lebanese citizens to vote, it must be directed openly toward restoring demographic parity by enhancing the Christian vote to the extent possible.

With an emphasis on nonviolence and democracy, the Vatican can take the lead on all three initiatives: push back Saudi intolerance, save Christian Jerusalem, and restore Christian-Muslim parity in Lebanon's governance.

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