New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12155

Comment: *Persecution*

That Christians are brutally persecuted in many parts of the world, or at any rate find themselves having to live under increasingly hostile pressure, is something that no one in Britain would have foreseen two or three decades ago. Even now, in Scotland, for example, the steady decline in active church membership proceeds quietly, unstoppably, attracting little interest on the part of anyone in the public arena. In contrast, the reported collapse of Mass-going in neighbouring Ireland seems to come with a measure of real anger against the Catholic Church. In Western Europe, more generally, as in Switzerland for instance, Catholics are quite likely to find themselves campaigning against redundant churches being taken over as mosques. Anyway, nobody gets killed.

As always, things are much more dramatic in the United States. Recently, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a non-profit organization that provides reproductive health care for many Americans, has been accused of selling aborted 'baby-parts', for scientific research, which (if substantiated) will of course horrify Christians and especially Catholics. Such cases show that the 'culture wars' that are conducted principally in the social media are rooted in conflicting ethical beliefs at a very fundamental level. In Portland, Oregon, back in January, in an obviously much less shocking case (though it got plenty of publicity), a judge ruled that the Christian owners of Sweet Cakes by Melissa, a home bakery, should pay $135,000 to a lesbian couple in compensation for the 'emotional suffering' they caused by refusing to supply an appropriately bedecked wedding cake. In hundreds of such cases, on this side of the Atlantic as well as in North America, some more grotesque than others, Christians routinely find themselves under pressure from unprecedentedly alien policies and value systems, and increasingly having to cope with restrictive legislation.

Some American Catholics, bishops in particular, have voiced their dismay at such 'attacks' (as they would say) on the religious liberty guaranteed by the Constitution, and which the rest of us have taken for granted (at any rate during the heyday and hegemony of the Christian churches).

We need to keep things in perspective. It is one thing to have to deal with disgusting practices and silly laws; it is another to face real persecution. Since December 2009, for example, about 43 churches

© 2015 The Dominican Council. Published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd. 2015, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA.
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12155 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and mosques in Israel have been torched or desecrated, presumably by ultra-orthodox Jews, though no one has been prosecuted, notwithstanding forthright condemnation by Israel's president and prime minister. Worse than anything likely to be perpetrated in Britain, against mosque or synagogue, without some one being arrested (and yes, we are not free of Islamophobia and anti-Semitism), such outrages, in a democracy like Israel, are obviously the work of a lunatic minority.

Think, however, of Nigeria: thousands of Christians have been abducted by Islamist fanatics (Boko Haram: 'Western education is forbidden', in Hausa dialect). Or consider the Islamist ruling elite in Eritrea: the 2.5 million Christians are regarded as a great threat in the population of 6.8 million, such that a significant number are held in prison without being charged, to cow the majority. Then again, in Pakistan and Sudan, the tiny Christian minorities suffer frequent and arbitrary harassment from their Muslim compatriots. Ironically, the even tinier Christian minority in Afghanistan advisedly keeps their faith as inconspicuous as possible, in the country supposedly liberated by the armies of the Christian West.

On another level altogether, military intervention by the Western democracies has reignited conflicts (unintentionally of course) that seem likely to lead to the extinction of the ancient Christian communities in the Middle East. Think of Syria: some 700,000 of the pre-war Christian minority of around 1.1 million are estimated to have fled since 2011. In the areas seized by the jihadists of the Islamic State (ISIS), Christians are routinely persecuted. In Iraq many Christians fled when Saddam Hussein fell under the onslaught of the Western powers — brutal as his regime was, its policies as regards religion and Christianity in particular were tolerantly secular and pluralistic. Since Mosul fell to ISIS, some 100,000 Christians have fled, mostly to safety in Kurdish territory.

Aid to the Church in Need (founded by Father Werenfried van Straaten in 1947 to aid German expellees and refugees from Eastern Europe), in a 2014 report, records that, while Muslim and Jewish communities also suffer in certain places, Christians are by far the most persecuted faith group world wide at present. It is likely only to get worse.

Fergus Kerr OP

© 2015 The Dominican Council

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12155 Published online by Cambridge University Press