

## WESTERN MEDIA SHUTS ITS EYES TO PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

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There is one minority group that is more persecuted than any other in the world, persecuted more frequently, more widely and with more intensity. There is indeed in one substantial region an explicit campaign of genocide being carried out against this group. Yet you will hardly ever hear about it in the Western media. The minority group in question is Christians. A terrible process of ethnic and religious cleansing of Christians from the Middle East is strongly in train. Although especially acute in Syria and Iraq, this reflects, and is a kind of grim culmination of, dynamics at work for decades, indeed for centuries. But the active persecution of Christians extends far beyond the Middle East.

The Western media is imprisoned in a kind of psychotic fantasy loop that makes it all but ignore this historic drama. The postmodern ideological mindset of most Western media attributes all the world's international ills to Western colonialism, neo-colonialism, capitalism and militarism, and in all instances (except Israel) the villains are nominally, or formerly, Christian states of the West. Therefore the Western media cannot bring itself to describe, much less make moral judgments about, the savage persecution of Christians. According to a study by the non-partisan Pew Research Centre, Christians are the most persecuted minority in the world. In 2014, according to this study, Christians were persecuted and harassed by government or the general society in 108 countries, an increase from 102 the year before.

Assuredly, Christians are not the only religious group being persecuted. In the Middle East, all religious minorities, such as the Yazidis and others, face very tough times. Sunni Muslims are persecuted in some Shia Muslim lands while Shia Muslims are persecuted in some Sunni Muslim lands. Even if the world cannot stop this persecution, it at least discusses such issues. There is very little open discussion of the systematic persecution of Christians. The most terrible and famous anti-Christian outrages have been carried out by Islamic State in Syria, Iraq and Libya, and by Boko Haram in Nigeria. But it is wrong to see today's atrocities in isolation from the historical trends, especially in the Middle East.

A century ago, about one in seven people in the Middle East were Christian. Today the figure is less than one in 25, and the proportion continues to decline. The process resembles the savage persecution that led to the exodus of nearly a million Jews from Arab and Muslim countries in the region after World War II. The modern phase of this process began with the famous Nazi-inspired anti-Jewish Farhud pogrom in Baghdad in 1941. Now, outside of Israel, there are only a few tiny Jewish communities in the Middle East. They exist as museum pieces or sometimes as highly protected species, Potemkin villages that local regimes can use to demonstrate their openness, although the communities are so tiny as to have no effect on national life.

The eradication of Christians across the Middle East is well under way. The killings 100 years ago of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians in what is now Turkey were indeed a complex matter and are much debated historically. But there is no denying that these killings, of perhaps 1.5 million people, resulted in the effective elimination of the Christian population of Turkey. It survives now as a few tens of thousands of people, demoralised and fearful, in a nation of nearly 80 million people which even 150 years ago was home to a big, thriving Christian community. And of course historically Istanbul, when it was Constantinople, was for centuries the centre of Christendom. No atrocities today are more savage than those committed by Islamic State.

It is right that its atrocities against all the people it regards as its enemies should be recorded, have proper attention paid to them, and be opposed. But there is no doubt also that it is attempting to commit genocide against Christians. The acts of Islamic State barbarism recall the worst stages in human development. The world has witnessed horrific videos of its efforts, such as when Islamic State captured dozens of Coptic Christians, civilian workers in Libya, and took them to a beach and beheaded them on video. In parts of Iraq, Islamic State systematically went through towns and

villages with substantial Christian populations and wrote the Arabic letter N on the homes of Christian families.

The N stood for Nazarenes. In most cases, the male inhabitants of such homes were killed, although in some cases they were offered the chance to convert to Islam. The women were typically taken as sex slaves and the children given as labourers, or worse, to whoever wanted them. Amel Nona was the Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Mosul from 2010 to 2014. He now lives in Sydney. His predecessor in Mosul was assassinated by persons unknown. Mosul 15 years ago was home to more than 100,000 Christians. Now, he tells me, there are none. While Saddam Hussein was a bloodthirsty dictator, he did not persecute Christians. The nature of Islam in Mosul, the archbishop says, was always very conservative.

After the breakdown of government authority from 2003 onwards, Muslim aggression against the Christian minority began to accelerate. "Many Christians were killed by Islamist groups," he says. "They said the Christians were allies of America. They said this is the land of Islam and you have no reason to be here. "There was also a great deal of economic crime. They know we don't use guns and violence in our lives so they would come with letters of authority and take Christian property. "The problem is that in the Koran there are many verses that are kind to Christians and Jews, but also many verses against Christians and Jews. So people who want to be kind to us can use one set of verses and people who want to persecute us can use another set of verses."

In 2010 a new level of atrocity was set. Six suicide jihadists, from Islamic State's predecessor, which was then called Islamic State in Iraq, attacked Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad during evening mass. They began systematically killing the worshippers, and murdered more than 50 before they themselves were killed. "Really it was unexpected to us," the archbishop says. "It was something very crude and very violent against Christians. They tried to kill everyone, starting from the babies. They had killed Christians separately before that. But from that time many of our people started to lose faith in our country. It was the beginning of the end of Christians in Iraq." Christians have been in Iraq for 2000 years. Nona is deeply grateful to Australia for the opportunity it has offered the 50,000 or so Chaldeans who have come here.

But the scale of the historic tragedy he is living through does not escape him: "Really, it's very hard. It's not easy for us to think there will be no more Christians in countries where Christianity has been for 2000 years." The scale of the tragedy in Iraq and Syria is immense. Once there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq. Perhaps 10 per cent of those remain there now, and most of them would leave if they could. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Christians are not being slaughtered in such numbers, but they face severe harassment and discrimination. The two big Christian communities remaining in the Middle East are the Copts in Egypt and the Christians, mainly Maronite Catholics, in Lebanon.

The Maronites are tough, well organised and resourceful. But Lebanon was once the only Christian-majority country in the Middle East. Now Christians are a minority, perhaps 40 per cent of the population. Because the Maronites have achieved high levels of educational and business success, they have been successful immigrants to the West and many have left Lebanon over the decades to avoid the endless sectarian conflicts between Christians, Sunnis and Shi'ites. The Christian Copts of Egypt believe they make up between 10 and 15 per cent of the nation's population of nearly 90 million. They are the truest link to the ancient Egypt of the pharaohs, and the Coptic language, now used only in Coptic liturgy, contains in its alphabet six letters of the old hieroglyphic language of ancient Egypt.

Coptic Bishop Anba Suriel, born in Egypt, now oversees the spiritual Copts of Melbourne and associated dioceses. "There is no doubt the Copts suffer severe discrimination in Egypt," he says. Under Anwar Sadat's presidency there was much talk of Sadat being an Islamic leader of an Islamic country, a definition that marginalises the Copts. Hosni Mubarak didn't talk publicly like this but the state-controlled media constantly scapegoated the Copts, portraying them as being in league with America or the Zionists, in endless far-fetched conspiracy scenarios. But the most terrifying period for the Copts was the year when the Muslim Brotherhood ruled Egypt under president Mohamed Morsi. "That year was a year of disaster and turmoil for us," Suriel says.

"Then the Muslim Brotherhood blamed the Copts for their ousting and on the day Morsi was overthrown they burned down 70 of our churches around Egypt." The new government is less hostile to the Copts, but incidents of sectarian persecution and killings of Copts are still common. "I really don't think the plight of Christians in the Middle East is being noticed in the West," Suriel says. "It's being ignored by the Western media and by Western governments. The Christians of the Middle East have no voice." Of course it's not just in the Middle East that Christians are persecuted. If you go to the Christian Solidarity Worldwide website, you see a catalogue of never-ending abuse.

Fourteen evangelical Christians in Khartoum arrested for protesting at the state seizure of church property and the government announcing that no licences for new churches will be issued. In Iran, Christian pastors arrested on vague charges of "propagating against the regime". In China, where there are more Christians than Communist Party members, crosses are banned from the outside of churches. In all communist countries, from Vietnam to Cuba, Christians are routinely harassed and persecuted, most savagely in North Korea. In Indonesia, legitimately held up as a model of inclusion, Christian churches are burned and others not allowed to be built. Yet in the West, and in Australia, these things are almost never seriously discussed.

When Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher suggested a priority for Christians among the 12,000 extra Syrian refugees the Abbott government agreed to take, because it was impossible to imagine a future free of persecution for Syrian Christians, he was howled down by the secular press as though he had committed some grievous social crime. The default attitude of many ABC programs towards the Christian churches seems often to be one of mockery and accusation and an absolute presumption of guilt. Christians do not fit into the ready and simplistic ABC heroes and villains categories, so their persecution is effectively ignored. The absurdity of the culture's double standard is perhaps evident in this one trivial but revealing example.

A senior Islamic imam argues that the death penalty for public acts of homosexuality in Muslim societies is right and proper, and that homosexuals are unclean and spread disease, but there is no official complaint to a human rights or anti-discrimination body about this. The Catholic Archbishop of Hobart circulates an official church pamphlet, mild and gentle in its wording and arguments, upholding the traditional view of marriage as being between a man and a woman, and a complaint is instantly lodged with the state's anti-discrimination commission, which agrees to hear the complaint. It looks as though the gay lobby has decided that Muslims are fellow inhabitants of the victim category and therefore cannot be criticised, but Christians are part of the oppressor category and therefore must be criticised in all cases.

It is a contemporary version of the sterile, wretched "no enemies on the Left" attitudes of the Cold War. Meanwhile in the Middle East a historic crime of epic proportions is being carried out against Christians - who are certainly not the only ones suffering, but they are the only ones the West's intelligentsia is determined to ignore. In many other parts of the world persecution of Christians is a daily part of life. But you won't hear much about it at all among the hordes of conformist zeitgeist prattlers in the Western media. That's one bit of reality that just doesn't fit.

**Source:** by Greg Sheridan, Foreign Editor of The Australian Newspaper