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Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Blood of Martyrs

It was the ancient Christian writer Tertullian who wrote that the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church, and his saying has echoed down through the ages. Tertullian's North African homeland became officially Christian about a century after his death, but four hundred years after that, it fell to the armies of Islam and has been almost entirely Muslim ever since. By Arab standards, modern Tunisia is an open and tolerant place, but it is part of a world where Christians and the church are suffering in ways that are hard to parallel elsewhere. It is true that there are more repressive regimes – North Korea, for example – but they are few, and in those countries Christians are not the only target. What makes the Muslim world different is that the church is being persecuted, not by declared atheists who oppose all religion on principle, but by people who claim to share a similar belief in the One God. Muhammad himself ordained that the 'peoples of the Book', by which he meant Jews and Christians, should be tolerated, if only as second-class citizens, so in that sense, what is going on in these places is deeply un-Islamic.

In a recent book that is chilling for its widespread coverage and detail, Rupert Shortt has chronicled the persecution of Christians across the world, and has reluctantly concluded that most of it is to be found in Muslim countries, including ones that are officially secular (*Christianophobia*, London: Rider Books, £9.99). For those who want a good grasp of the current situation, Mr Shortt's book is a must-read. He demonstrates that even in relatively open and tolerant Muslim countries, like Turkey and Egypt, Christians suffer appalling discrimination, and not a few have paid for their faith with their lives. In less enlightened countries like Iran, the situation is often far worse.

Church leaders have known these things for a long time, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is particularly well-aware of them. To his credit, he has raised the problem publicly, and has been joined in this by many other spokesmen, including the present pope. Unfortunately, their cries of alarm have not been picked up by the Western press or by Western governments to anything like the extent that they deserve to be. The Western media have paid great attention to the isolated killing of journalists and television reporters, as well as of some humanitarian

aid workers, though few of these have been connected with the church. What has gone under-reported is the much more widespread decimation of local Christian communities, many of which have survived in the Middle East since New Testament times. The statistics are mind-numbing. The once flourishing Christian villages of Palestine, Syria and Iraq have almost disappeared. Bethlehem, which only a generation ago was almost entirely Christian, has now become a Muslim town, where the remaining Christians live in a kind of no-man's-land between them and the Israelis. Countries that a generation ago numbered their Christians in the millions now have only a handful left – Iraq being perhaps the most extreme example. In Saudi Arabia there are officially no Christians at all, and any Muslim who converts is unlikely to enjoy his new faith for long.

On the whole, Christians in Muslim countries have not been killed outright, but they have often been forced to convert to Islam or flee. This is one reason why refugee camps in the Middle East contain a disproportionately high number of Christians, who have little prospect of ever being able to return to their homes, even if they want to. It is entirely possible that within twenty years, there will be no Christians left in most of those countries. Only in Lebanon and Egypt, where their numbers are high enough to make it almost impossible to get rid of them all, is there much chance that viable Christian communities will survive, but even that cannot be taken for granted. Voluntary emigration is high, and there seems to be little prospect of the trend reversing in the foreseeable future.

Commentators like to point out that this persecution is the work of a minority. They tell us, quite rightly, that many Muslims are just as opposed to the activities of these Islamists (as they call them) as anyone else. At the same time though, it is an open secret that the extremists are financially backed by Saudi Arabia, whose regime is propped up by Western governments fearing chaos in the oilfields and mayhem on the streets of London, Paris and New York, if it should fall. The perceived need to keep strategic allies happy ensures that the plight of Christians in places like Pakistan often goes unreported, even though the facts are readily available to anyone who cares to look into them.

Muslim extremists sometimes claim that their actions are a reflection of the sufferings endured by their own co-religionists in the West, but this is absurd. The worst that can legally happen to a Muslim in Britain or the United States is that a woman may be required to uncover her face, which hardly amounts to anything that can be called persecution. Far from being a repressed population, there are reported instances of vast prostitution gangs, run by and for the benefit of Muslim men, who have been allowed to operate under the noses of the authorities in Britain, largely out of fear that any attempt to deal with them will be met by terrorist violence. The truly remarkable thing about this is that there has been so little reaction in Western countries – so far at least. There are very few reports of mosques

being destroyed, or of Islamic institutions being attacked. This stands in sharp contrast to Pakistan, where only a few years ago something like 300 churches were torched because a misguided (and free-lance) Florida preacher decided he was going to burn the Qur'an.

That incident was particularly noteworthy because Christian leaders all over the world rounded on the misguided pastor and eventually persuaded him to desist. Muslim leaders, by contrast, have shown little willingness to deal with their own extremists in similar fashion. They may deplore what is being done in their name but they make little effort to stop it, and perhaps they cannot. It is still relatively easy for a Muslim cleric in London to preach holy war against infidels without being disturbed, and hundreds of Muslim teenagers have decamped from Western Europe to Syria, in order to join the Islamic revolution there. Their distraught parents appear on television to plead for their return, but how did their children get away in the first place? How was it possible, for example, for a fifteen-year-old Somali girl to leave her family home in Devon, get on a plane for Istanbul and then disappear, as happened in September 2014? Did nobody who saw her along the way think that something strange was going on?

There will always be odd cases that are hard to fathom, and child disappearances are not confined to Muslims. But when hundreds of young people who ought to be at home with their parents manage to leave Britain and France for Syria, questions have to be asked. The figures are too high to be accounted for by eccentricity or teenage alienation from society. It is extremely hard to believe that movement on that scale is not being facilitated by an organised network of some kind, and equally hard to imagine that the police are totally ignorant of it. We know that they were aware of the activities of the pimps in Rotherham for years, but did nothing about them, and the suspicion must be that a similarly blind eye is being turned in this case as well.

Faced with a crisis of such proportions, the churches are caught in an unenviable position. On the one hand, they cannot condone any kind of discrimination against Muslims, let alone the persecution of wholly innocent people. Their fear of being caught up in a backlash sponsored by extreme right-wing groups promoting 'British values' or the equivalent is a real one, and Christians must do everything they can to avoid that scenario. On the other hand, every time an Islamist outrage occurs – and they are becoming more frequent, whatever our politicians may claim – there is an outcry against 'religion' which often ends up affecting Christians more than anyone else. This can be seen quite clearly in the case of so-called 'faith schools'. Most of these are what used to be called 'church schools', institutions that generally provide a good education free of charge to children who are supposed to be associated with one of the churches. Critics have claimed that they are elitist, that parents profess a

religious belief that they do not actually possess in order to secure places for their children in them, and so on. It is hard to know what to make of such claims, but it is noteworthy that nobody has ever complained that fanatically religious parents are sending their children to church schools in order to reinforce their Christian faith.

Rarely if ever does one hear that a church school has been indoctrinating its pupils in Christianity, and with good reason. It would be a very strange church school indeed that produced large numbers of militant Christian youth, as even their fiercest enemies must admit. On the contrary, it is far more likely that a recalcitrant child will be put off churchgoing for life after having attended such an institution, as any number of adults can testify. Yet church schools are in danger because they have been lumped together with their Muslim counterparts, which are completely different in the way they function. Islamic schools exist for the purpose of retaining the loyalty of Muslim youth, and that can only mean a certain level of indoctrination, even if it is gentler and less confrontational than that word makes it sound. The result is that Christians are quite likely to suffer discrimination from a secular state that is motivated by the threat of Islamic extremism more than anything else. What should the churches do when faced with a dilemma like this one?

Perhaps the only thing that can be done is to educate the public in the nature of 'religion' and in the fundamental differences that there are among the many creeds that share that label. Inevitably there will have to be a certain focus on Islam, both because it poses the main threat to Christians and because the number of Muslims in Western countries is growing substantially, largely through immigration and the resettlement of refugees.

Christian leaders could start their task by facing up to the historical reality that Islam is different from any other religion in that it was specifically anti-Christian to begin with. It is all very well to point out that Muhammad wanted a special status to be accorded to Jews and Christians, but this overlooks the fact that he was aware of them in a way that the ancient Hindus and Buddhists (for example) were not. Whatever we think of the Buddha and his principles, he cannot be accused of having developed his thought in conscious opposition to either Judaism or Christianity, neither of which was known to him. Muhammad, on the other hand, could have become a Christian quite easily (or a Jew, though rather less easily) but he deliberately refused to do so. Instead, his Qur'an contains references to Biblical figures, and especially to Jesus, which are factually wrong. For example, according to him, Jesus was not crucified. He was too good a man for that – instead, it was Judas Iscariot who died on the cross!

This is not a minor error, but a deliberate rejection of the central Christian belief, which is symbolised by the cross. For that reason, if for

no other, the church can never make common cause with Islam, because Islam has rejected Christianity's most fundamental article of faith. This needs to be said, not because we want to cause trouble with Muslims, but because people have to understand why the two religions, which in some ways appear to be alike, cannot be blended into one. As Mr Shortt points out in his book, converts to Christianity from a Muslim background have been persecuted in Muslim countries because in Muslim eyes they have rejected the truth, even when that 'truth' is actually a tissue of lies and distortions about the person and work of Jesus. In the minds of the judges who decide whether a convert has apostatised or not, Islam is the full and complete revelation of God's will. This means that to be a Muslim is to enjoy complete religious freedom because it is to know the truth, and the truth sets us free.

To become a Christian, by contrast, is (in their eyes) to fall back into a lower stage of religious development, the kind of accusation that one might imagine Christians levelling against anyone who converted to Judaism, thereby abandoning the freedom of the Gospel for the bondage of the law. The difference of course is that while Christians might deplore such a move, they would not dream of putting the convert to death because of it.

The second thing that has to be understood is that violence is not as alien to the spirit of Islam as it is to the Christian Gospel. Here again, there is a danger that the truth will be concealed by verbal sleight of hand. Islam is regarded by its followers as a religion of peace (the word is related to salaam and shalom), but it is a peace that can come only by submitting to its tenets. Those outside the fold are dwelling in the 'house of war', as Muslims call it, a way of thinking that immediately opens the way to violence in the name of proselytisation. This claim can easily be corroborated by a look at the comparative history of the two religions. A hundred years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, Christians were a persecuted minority in the Roman Empire, whose supreme witness to their faith was martyrdom – the Greek word martyr means 'witness'. This was the context in which Tertullian made his famous remark. In sharp contrast to that, a century after the death of Muhammad, the Islamic empire he founded had conquered Arabia, Persia and half the ancient Roman world. It is hardly necessary to add that this did not happen by preaching in the style of the Apostle Paul, or by the witness of persecuted martyrs.

The purpose of saying this is not to pit one religious group against the other. There have certainly been times when Christians have behaved in ways that contradict the teachings of Christ, and we are rightly ashamed of that. But even the most cursory reading of the New Testament makes it clear that violence has no place in the Christian message – we are called to turn the other cheek, to put away our swords and to obey the powers that

be, even when they are hostile to the church. Deviations from this pattern have undoubtedly occurred, but they are aberrations and can be easily recognised as such. In this respect, Islam is different. Its apologists may insist that its concept of jihad ('holy war') is meant to be spiritual rather than physical, but there is no gainsaying the fact that Muhammad took up arms to further his religious movement in a way which Jesus expressly forbade his disciples to do (Matthew 26:51-54). Whether we like it or not, violence is not as un-Islamic as it is un-Christian, and one of the strengths of modern Islamists is that they know this – and use it to bolster their own cause among their fellow-believers, whom they can accuse of being lukewarm in their faith.

Young idealistic Muslims who go off to Syria are in some ways rather like equally young idealistic Christians who go to the mission field between school and university, but the similarity ends there. This is obvious from the fact that what they do when they arrive at their destination is totally different. For all their faults, the Christian churches have a long and honourable record of charitable works which go well beyond their own membership, and young volunteers often find themselves engaged in community service alongside mission. Islam has nothing comparable to this. Paddle up the Nile or the Amazon and you will not find Islamic mission stations devoted to providing education and health care to the natives. Looked at from the other end, not even in Texas will you find Christian boot camps training young men to shoot for Jesus. At the most basic level, religious enthusiasm manifests itself in completely different ways among adherents of the two faiths, and church leaders must do more than they have done to point this out to secular minds that are all too prone to confusing the two.

There is not much that Christians can do to stop the Islamist onslaught, other than pray for divine mercy. But we can at least challenge the facile assumptions that so many in the secular media are willing to make, and insist that our faith is not to be compared with Islam, or with any other religion. At the same time, we would do well to remember the words of Tertullian. Nobody would actively seek or desire martyrdom, but the fact that Christianity is so deeply opposed by so many people is not a bad sign. Jesus told us that in the world we would have much tribulation, and Paul reminded Timothy that persecution is the lot of every faithful witness. We shall not triumph by the sword (or the scimitar) but by the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ – a message that faithful Muslims believe is a scandalous and impious fiction, but that equally faithful Christians embrace as the power and wisdom of God.

GERALD BRAY