

Religious Persecution by Muslims? Perish the Thought!

By Doug Bandow on 1.25.11 @ 6:08AM

Religious dialogue is worthwhile endeavor. In particular, Christians and Muslims should engage one another. While miracles are unlikely to result, greater familiarity may reduce unintended misunderstanding and insult.

However, any dialogue must be based on truth. Including the pervasive Islamic persecution of Christians, Jews, and other religious minorities.

Unfortunately, truth apparently is not a concern of the Muslim side of one well-publicized engagement process with Catholics. The al-Azhar Islamic Research Council, Sunni Islam's highest seat of learning, held an emergency meeting and decided to suspend its bi-annual meetings with the Vatican.

The reason: "repeatedly insulting remarks issued by the Vatican Pope towards Islam and his statement that Muslims are discriminating against others who live with them in the Middle East." The Cairo-based Council also criticized Pope Benedict XVI's "unjustified claim that Copts are persecuted in Egypt and the Middle East." Indeed, added the Council, the Pope had "repeatedly addressed Islam negatively." Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of al-Azhar University, further denounced the Pope's "unacceptable interference in Egypt's affairs."

Even before the Council acted, the Egyptian government had attacked the Vatican's "unacceptable interference in its internal affairs" and recalled its ambassador from the Holy See. Ambassador Lamia Aly Mekhemar, who returned to Cairo for "consultation," explained that "We do not share the views that Christians are persecuted in our part of the world." Nor, he added, does his government agree that "some governments in the area have not provided protection for the Christians in the Middle East." Moreover, Arab leaders gathered for an economic summit in Sharm al-Sheikh expressed "total rejection" of foreign interference regarding Christian minorities in the Middle East.

The Council, Egyptian government, and other Middle Eastern states are angry because the Pope denounced the murder of Christians in Egypt, Iraq, and Nigeria. He spoke of "the urgent need for the governments of the region" to protect religious minorities and urged Christian communities to maintain a nonviolent response to "a strategy of violence that has Christians as a target."

Apparently the al-Azhar Islamic Research Council believes in inter-faith dialogue, but only so long as it does not include the fact that members of one side of that dialogue are busy killing members of the other side. Indeed, pointing to ongoing attacks constitutes "insulting remarks." Moreover, America's Arab allies enjoy cashing big checks from Uncle Sam, but are outraged, simply outraged, that the latter has the temerity to mention the lack of religious liberty in those same nations.

Almost makes you wonder whether adherents of the "religion of peace" think it really is the "religion of peace." Or at least that being the "religion of peace" actually requires believing in, well, "peace."

The reaction of the Council and Arab governments is extraordinarily revealing because Islamic brutality, both discrimination and violence, against Christians is so pervasive. The Pope spoke out after a bombing in Alexandria outside a Coptic Church on New Year's Eve which killed 25 people and injured more than 90 others. Christians continue to be killed in Iraq and Nigeria.

Christian converts risk judicial murder in Afghanistan. Pakistan is threatening to execute a Christian "blasphemer" in Pakistan. Iran recently initiated a campaign against Christians. Even in relatively liberal Muslim states, like Kuwait, where Christians can worship openly, proselytism is forbidden.

Egypt is a particularly apt case since the number of Christians is relatively large, constituting as much as 15 percent of a population of more than 80 million.

Violence is common. In mid-November an off-duty police officer boarded a train and opened fire, murdering a 71-year-old Copt and injuring five other Christians. Last November Muslim mobs destroyed a score of homes and shops in Qena Province. Earlier in the year six Copts along with a Muslim guard were killed and another nine Copts wounded in a drive-by shooting in the town of Nag Hammadi. Kathryn Cameron Porter of the Council for Human Rights observed afterwards: "Copts in Egypt continuously face ongoing discrimination and outright persecution, either by the Egyptian government or through its tacit approval."

Although Cairo routinely discriminates against non-Muslims, it does not directly engage in what we typically think of as persecution. But it does little to prevent private violence. Unfortunately, the effect is basically the same.

Dina Guirguis of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy testified last week before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the House Foreign Affairs Committee: "Egypt's native Christians ... are the Middle East's largest Christian minority but in the past decade have faced an alarming escalation of violence as state protection has dwindled." Yet when the Copts attempt to protect themselves, as in the city of Giza last November, the police do intervene -- against the victims.

Guirguis pointed to one case where a judge and his two sons, who were prosecutors, led a mob in destroying a Greek Orthodox church. "At least half a dozen murders of Christians by Muslims in the last four years were rendered crimes without punishment due to the refusal of the state to follow the requirements of the rule of law in prosecuting felonies," she added. The complicity of security forces and legal officials in violence as well as discrimination demonstrates to all Egyptians that "sectarian violence is a crime to be committed with impunity," Guirguis warned.

The government also routinely interferes with Copts simply seeking to live out their faith. The state often refuses to allow construction or repair of churches or other buildings, even those for social functions. Christians have been ordered to take down crosses outside of churches and even charged for private worship without a permit. Moreover, the government has discriminated against Copts when fulfilling its civil role, such as issuing identification cards.

Egypt's wretched record is well established. In its report last year on international religious freedom, the State Department observed: "Christians and members of the Baha'i faith, which the government does not recognize, face personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and their ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government also sometimes arrested, detained, and harassed Muslims such as Shi'a. Ahmadiyahs, Quaranists, converts from Islam to Christianity, and members of other religious groups whose beliefs and/or practices it deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities it alleged to jeopardize communal harmony."

For the same reasons the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom placed Egypt on its "watch list." The Commission pointed to widespread "discrimination, intolerance, and other human rights violations against members of religious minorities, as well as disfavored Muslims." Last year's Commission report cited "a significant upsurge in violence" against Copts as well as "a growing climate of impunity" for those who commit such crimes.

The group International Christian Concern placed Egypt in this year's annual "Hall of Shame." Explained ICC: "While Egypt escaped being included in the Hall of Shame in 2010, escalating atrocities committed against the Arab world's largest Christian minority forced us to include Egypt in this year's report." Indeed, last year, reported ICC, was "one of Egypt's worse years of persecution in recent memory."

One can't help but wonder where Pope Benedict came up with the silly idea that Christians face discrimination and persecution in the Middle East. No wonder the al-Azhar Islamic Research Council was upset. Tsk, tsk.

Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi responded to the Council decision: "The pontifical council for inter-religious dialogue's line of openness and desire to dialogue is unchanged." That's a truly "Christian" response, but the Vatican obviously should not expect the same in return, at least not from its Islamic counterparts.

There is much to criticize in the policies of Western governments, including of the U.S. But that has nothing to do with an inter-faith dialogue. It certainly has nothing to do with how Christians, Jews, Baha'is, and other religious minorities are, or at least should be, treated in majority Muslim nations.

Moreover, until Muslim governments treat all of their people, irrespective of faith, with respect and dignity, they have no credibility to complain about the treatment of Muslims

elsewhere. As Jesus explained, we should take the plank out of our own eye before seeking to pull a speck out of someone else's eye (Matthew 7:3-5). His advice should be widely shared and, more importantly, heeded in Cairo and throughout the Muslim world.

Mr. Bandow is a Senior Fellow in International Religious Persecution at the Institute on Religion and Public Policy.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author and editor of several books, including *The Politics of Plunder: Misgovernment in Washington* (Transaction).