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BOOK REVIEW: 'Christian Persecutions in the Middle East: A 21st Century Tragedy'

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As the latest terrorist atrocity in Paris demonstrates, radical Islam exhibits a veritable blood lust at the retail level. While politics undoubtedly was behind the attack — French planes had been bombing Islamic State territory for more than a year — the killers deployed theology to justify slaughtering 130 common people just going about their lives.

However, the problem is far worse in the Middle East. For years Christians have been slowly exiting the birthplace of their faith; the botched U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq dramatically accelerated the process. The chaotic outcome of the “Arab Spring” further spurred the exodus. Today the Islamic State is attempting to complete a process of genocide-ethnic cleansing.

George Marlin, chairman of the Aid to the Church in Need-U.S.A., highlights the tsunami of religious persecution. Until recently the phenomenon went largely unnoticed in the West. Mr. Marlin notes, “Since the Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century, indigenous Christian communities have remained a vital part of the Arab world, with the faithful among the leading creators of that civilization.” More recently, Christians have promoted more liberal and democratic political systems.

Yet religious minorities have been rewarded for their efforts with exile, brutality and death. The violence grows out of beliefs and traditions within Islam. “Current persecution inflicted on many Christians in the Arab world is an extension of centuries of Islamic law, discrimination and societal bias, which have relegated Christians, as well as other minorities, to second-class citizenship,” Mr. Marlin writes.

Of the growth of Christianity in the Middle East he writes, “Within a generation, the new Church’s strongest community was in Syria.” The faith spread to Egypt. The Christian presence diminished after Islam’s armed conquest of the region, but survives to this day.

Islam arose in the 7th century and advanced through war. “Unlike Christ’s apostles, who preached to all nations but did not coerce or threaten non-believers, Muhammad told his

followers that they had a duty to wage holy wars,” Mr. Marlin writes. Once their faith was adopted by those in power, most notably Rome’s Constantine, some Christians also used the sword to promote their faith. However, Christianity spent its formative period as a persecuted minority faith. After conquest by Muslim armies, Christians became second-class citizens, or dhimmis, tolerated but usually far from political power.

European line-drawing after World War I made few religious changes, other than to create Lebanon with a Christian majority. Even though demography and immigration have trended against Christians, the country retains a Christian culture.

Sustained brutality turned into an epidemic after the United States ousted the secular dictator Saddam Hussein from Iraq and Syria’s secular dictator Bashar Assad lost control of much of his nation. Mr. Marlin warns, “In its reign of terror, ISIS has not only murdered Christians or driven them from their homes; it has also destroyed scores of ancient Christian shrines, churches, monasteries, relics and a host of historic documents and manuscripts.”

Nowhere in the region is the news particularly good. There is intolerance and occasional violence in Turkey. In Egypt the Copts make up a sizable proportion of the population, but remain victims of systemic discrimination and frequent violence. Which helps explain the ongoing mass emigration of Copts.

Lebanon has suffered through several sectarian revolts, a horrid 15-year civil war, Syrian military intervention, and a minstate within created by the Shia Hezbollah movement. Although Christians remain far better protected in Lebanon than elsewhere in the region, their numbers are falling. Mr. Marlin warns that “many Christian leaders fear that latent persecution and the Islamization of Lebanese society pose a growing threat to those freedoms.”

Iraq and Syria are catastrophes. Although Saddam Hussein was a tyrant, he focused his attentions on political opponents. After the U.S. invasion, “unrelenting intimidation and violence against Christians was forcing huge numbers of the faithful to flee their homes,” Mr. Marlin writes.

Syria once was a haven for Iraqi Christians, but they have been caught between the Assad dictatorship and increasingly radical insurgents. If Washington foolishly attempts to oust the Damascus government without reasonable hope of a responsible successor regime, Christians will face even greater danger.

Iran and Saudi Arabia present more conventional cases of pervasive persecution, though the latter, an American ally, is by far worse. Sudan may be the most complex case, in which a long-running civil war cost many Christian lives, but then the “Christian” state birthed in that conflict, South Sudan, itself collapsed in deadly conflict.

Mr. Marlin includes a roundtable made up of a half-dozen Christian clerics from the Middle East, followed by statements of several others. They address a multitude of issues, including the Islamic State, moderate Islam, Christianity's role and Christianity's survival.

The challenge that Mr. Marlin so ably describes is playing out before our eyes every day. Ultimately, everyone in the region will pay a high price if Christianity disappears in the face of overwhelming violence. Christians would be merely the first victims. Others, including Muslims, would not be far behind.

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