

What Native Christians in the Middle East Continue to Face: Why it Matters for Both the Caring and the Unconcerned

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There have been Christians and Christian communities living in the Middle East since the dawn of Christianity. After the better part of twenty centuries in and around the Land of the Lord's Incarnation and Resurrection, however, the presence of these native Christians is threatened with nothing less than termination. What exists today of these communities are the few tenacious remnants scattered throughout the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt of the earlier far larger and more geographically prevalent ones that have steadily dwindled over time due to sustained stresses and pressures brought on historically for the most part from the encounter with Islam. Today, in the early 21st century, the rise of militant and violent Islamism combined with a pervading apathy in the wider world as to the plight of these beleaguered Christian communities threaten to hasten the final demise of Christianity in and around its original birthplace.

The bleak future for Christians native to the Middle East, I submit to you tonight, relates organically to the state of Christians and Christianity in today's largely post-Christian secular Europe, and in the West as a whole. Many will dismiss this alleged connection out of hand, but it continues to impose itself thunderously in the face of all such denial and disinterest. The ongoing refugee crisis afflicting Europe, for instance, which is bringing in considerably more than any displaced Christians from the region, has not been merely an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe; it represents a challenge with far-reaching cultural and civilizational and values implications on the profoundest levels. In the West we come across islands displaying genuine comprehension of, and concern for, the real scope of the problem brought about by these incoming refugees, and by extension of the travails besetting Middle Eastern

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Christians, yet these same islands rest uneasily amidst oceans of lack of appreciation, superficiality, and neglect.

Much of the hatred latent in parts of the Middle East's Islamic societies and directed specifically at the West stems from relatively recent historical developments like the legacy of colonialism with its perceived Western imperialist incursions. Chief among the West's registered offenses in this context have been the establishment of the state of Israel, the acquiescence in Palestinian dispossession, and continued unflinching support for the Jewish state. A parallel and common refrain echoing in many Middle Eastern quarters is that the predatory West has been sucking dry the region's resources and is constantly plotting to deplete its wealth, divide its peoples, and sow chaos. Other issues of an urgent nature plaguing the Arab and Islamic scenes throughout today's turbulent Middle East may be eclipsing temporarily the centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian wound, but this unresolved problem remains alive always on some level in the regional Islamic psyche.

At one layer beneath these familiar sources of resentment harbored against the West lurks a subconscious—but also at times a starkly articulated—identification in the Islamic mind between the West and Christianity. Although violent Jihadi groups like the Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, or *Daesh*)¹ make of this the standard centerpiece of their belligerent discourse against the West, which is painted by them as infidel and crusader, Islamic thinking more broadly is never completely free of this intimate association between what is Western and what is Christian. This is a deep-seated and centuries-old outlook stemming in part from the original posited Islamic dualism, a martial or military one in essence, which sees the world divided into two opposing armed camps: the Abode of Islam where Muslims exist as a majority and rule, and everywhere else which is the Abode of War and Confusion and Infidelity at whose expense Islam is destined to expand and triumph.² Historically, this other enemy abode has been predominantly Christian to the west and north, and Hindu or Buddhist to the east. Simply put,

¹ The Islamic State (IS), as it calls itself, goes also by a number of acronyms in English: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); and the Anglicized Arabic acronym, *Daesh*. Throughout this presentation they will be used interchangeably.

² On the dualism represented by the Abode of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) and the Abode of War (*Dar al-Harb*) see *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (new edition), edited by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, Vol. II (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), pp. 126-128; see also Majid Khadduri, *War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), pp. 52-53 (the Two Abodes), 155-169 (*Dar al-Islam*), and 170-174 (*Dar al-Harb*).

when this ingrained Islamic attitude contemplates the West it hardly factors in the 200-plus years of steady secularization that Western civilization has undergone, nor does it take into account the related Western separation of church (religion) and state (politics), but instead views the West as a mirror image of itself where no enduring secular developments have occurred and where religion and politics remain firmly and inextricably fused.

In the Middle East, where for better or for worse ultimate personal and group identities as well as allegiances continue to be defined primarily in religious or sectarian terms, most of the native Christians have occupied a precarious gray zone in this dualistic posited confrontation between the two opposed abodes—that of Islam versus that of all the rest. According to Islamic law (*shari'a*), Christians are viewed at best as *dhimmis*, or second-class citizens subsisting under Islamic “protection”, based on their Quranic designation alongside Jews as “People of the Book”.³ This supposed shielding *dhimmi* status, however, imposes various stifling restrictions on them that over time have acted collectively to precipitate their gradual liquidation as distinct communities. Dhimmitude is in fact little more than slow yet relentless extinction stretched over centuries.

Now, with the emergence of the latest crop of violent Jihadis, the choices presented to Iraq’s and Syria’s Christians have boiled down to forced conversion, or humiliation under dhimmitude, or exile, or a horrible death. In a number of notorious cases such as in Mosul, Sinjar, and Raqqa, to name three, these ghastly alternatives were not even invoked but instead wholesale destruction, slaughter, and enslavement mainly of the sexual sort befell the Christians making the accusation of genocide against *Daesh* compelling.⁴ Is this what awaits parts of the West should the toxic two-abode dualism play itself out to the full?

³ The best and most authoritative analyses of the *dhimmi* category and of dhimmitude’s relations to Jihad remain those of the scholar Bat Ye’or (Gisele Littman). See her *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*, translated from French by David Maisel (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985); and *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude, Seventh-Twentieth Centuries*, translated from French by Miriam Kochan and David Littman (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996); see also a collection of her lectures on dhimmitude entitled *Understanding Dhimmitude* (New York, NY: RVP Press, 2013).

⁴ Since this writing the Obama Administration, in the words of Secretary of State John Kerry, has officially labeled as genocide what Christians and other minority communities in parts of the Middle East have endured under *Daesh*. See John Kerry’s remarks on *Daesh* at a Press briefing at the State Department on 17 March 2016. <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/03/254782.htm#>

Watching what unfolded in the main square of the German city of Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015 one can say it was a version of this hostile two-abode outlook in action. That night men of Arab and North African features belonging clearly to the latest wave of migrants and refugees from the Middle East surrounded, attacked, and raped a number of local girls. The frightening thing was the calm and confident sense of entitlement these Muslim men displayed in perpetrating their dastardly assaults: you see it is always open season in the Abode of *kufir* (infidelity). And far more unsettling was the mayor of Cologne Henriette Reker's reaction, which effectively chalked up the outrage as merely an expression of "cultural diversity", and then proceeded to blame the assault victims.⁵ This is political correctness gone utterly mad; it transcends being just another instance of secular Europe's dhimmitude, ("Eurabia", as the scholar Bat Ye'or has called it⁶), something we have been witnessing quite a bit of lately. How can Europeans be expected to fathom what Middle Eastern Christians have been enduring when they cannot even comprehend the identical phenomenon as it invades the very heart of their cities?⁷

God forbid that any observer should insinuate these Muslim men hail from backgrounds rife with sexual repression and very little respect for women or acknowledgement of their rights. Such a line of reasoning, though fully in accord with the facts, is guaranteed to enrage the leftist critics who would then hurl their post-colonial, anti-Orientalism, Edward Saïidian invective at these observers and start screaming "cultural imperialism", "Western chauvinism", "outmoded culturist prejudices", and the like. But in this case the truth of the matter is that pointing out what is objectively verifiable is neither an expression of crazed far-right hatred, nor an example of irrational xenophobia, nor the fueling of a divisive clash-of-civilizations posture, nor

⁵ On the Cologne rapes see the BBC News report of January 5, 2016, entitled "Germany Shocked by Cologne New Year Gang Assaults on Women". <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35231046>

On Mayor Reker's reaction and the outrage it sparked see the piece in *The Independent* by Rachael Revesz, 5 January 2016. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/mayor-of-cologne-says-women-should-have-code-of-conduct-to-prevent-future-assault-a6798186.html>

⁶ See Bat Ye'or, *Eurabia: The Euro-Arab Axis* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005).

⁷ The British philosopher Roger Scruton put it this way: "There is no doubt in my mind both that Europe is now profoundly threatened and also that the approach of the European Union to the threats is informed by a comprehensive failure to understand them." See Roger Scruton, "The Future of European Civilization: Lessons for America", published 9 December 2015 by The Heritage Foundation in Washington DC as the Russell Kirk Memorial Lecture (delivered 13 October 2015), <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2015/12/the-future-of-european-civilization-lessons-for-america>.

gratuitous fear-mongering. It is simply a sobering reality that a beguiled secular Europe, and one governed by what former Pope Benedict XVI has termed the “dictatorship of relativism”⁸, will continue to ignore at its grave peril.

Needless to say, by far the vast majority of Muslim refugees streaming into Europe are not composed of rapists and terrorists, just as not all Christians in the Middle East—at least not yet—have fallen victims to rape, terror, and expulsion. But in the case of these regional Christians the developments of the last few years since the mis-named Arab “Spring” first erupted have been ominous. They represent an acceleration of a process of emasculation that was first visited upon Lebanon’s Christians starting in 1975, only to become one of decimation that afflicted Iraq’s Christians following the 2003 American invasion of that country. The Middle East’s Christians before the onset of the Arab “Spring” numbered between 10 and 12 million, the vast majority being Egypt’s Copts. Today, their numbers have shrunk by at least 20 percent overall.⁹

⁸ Pope Benedict XVI first coined the expression “dictatorship of relativism” just before the conclave in April 2005 that elected him to the papacy, in a homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, meaning “for the election of the Roman Pontiff.”

⁹ A simple calculation from the available figures for the drastic declines in numbers of Christians in both Iraq since 2003 and Syria since 2011, and a region-wide averaging out of the results for native Christians, will reveal that the overall 20% figure of shrinkage given here is actually a conservative one. For more on the figures for the two hotspots of Iraq and Syria where Christians have been deliberately targeted see the piece by “Daniel” of Open Doors entitled “Persecution of Christians Reaches Historic Levels, Conditions Suggest Worst is Yet to Come” (7 January 2015). <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/take-action/pray/>. See also Simon Tomlinson, “Christians face being wiped out from the Middle East within ten years as they are killed by ISIS or forced to flee persecution, warn Catholic aid groups” (10 November 2015), Mail online. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3311716/Christians-face-wiped-Middle-East-TEN-YEARS-killed-ISIS-forced-flee-persecution-warn-Catholic-aid-groups.html>. See also Walter Russell Mead, “The Plight of the Middle East’s Christians,” in *The Wall Street Journal* (15 May 2015). <http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-plight-of-the-middle-east-christians-1431700075>. See also Edwin Mora, “Report: ISIS has Crucified, Tortured Thousands of Christians in Iraq, Syria” in *Breitbart* (29 September 2015). <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/09/29/report-isis-crucified-tortured-thousands-christians-iraq-syria/>. According to the *Oeuvre d’Orient* Catholic association, 10-13 million Christians reside in the Middle East region including Arab Christians and expatriates; see Hyacinth Mascarenhas, “What you Need to Know About the Millions of Christians Under Threat in the Arab World”, in *World.Mic* (23 January 2014). <https://mic.com/articles/78967/what-you-need-to-know-about-the-millions-of-christians-under-threat-in-the-arab-world#.ic9PluMw6>.

The full contours of the tragedy characterizing Christian existence in the Middle East become apparent when some of these communities find themselves thriving best in the shadow of repressive secular regimes like those of the Iraqi Baath under Saddam Hussein, or the Syrian Baath under the rule of Hafiz Assad and then his son Bashar. It is a fact that as long as Sunni Islamist extremism in these two countries was kept at bay and not tolerated by these regimes the Christian communities there fared relatively well in the sense of escaping any serious molestation on a large scale. The cynical opportunism of these Middle Eastern Baath versions of imported socialist dictatorial templates may have spared Christians and other vulnerable minorities any outright assaults, but they also contributed to the cultivation of a seething subterranean resentment within Sunni circles directed against these same communities. As soon as the inevitable transpired and Jihadi militancy rose up to confront first the tyranny of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq, Saddam Hussein's Shiite thug replacement, and then Bashar Assad's Alawite brutality in Syria, tiny exposed minority communities like the Christians in those two countries became targets of convenience and vengeance. Scapegoating these Christians as avid regime supporters, and subsequently as fifth-column agents of Western imperialism or Trojan Horse-like implants of crusader aggression, became familiar hallmarks of the daily parlance of these extremists—and they proceeded to act violently upon these trumped-up assumptions, leaving the Christians with the tragic choice between the untidy and the dark.

Frustratingly absent in this unfolding drama have been any concrete signs of courageous and assertive Sunni Islamic moderation capable of confronting, discrediting, and ultimately defeating the violent extremists. To be fair, some have been vocal. King Abdullah II of Jordan, for instance, has said on more than one occasion that the extremists had hijacked Islam and it was incumbent on the mainstream moderates to take back their religion from those who have perverted it;¹⁰ however, his call has not been widely heeded, and Jordan itself has done little beyond some token military strikes as part of the anti-ISIS coalition. The Chief Mufti of al-Azhar in Cairo, Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyeb, reputedly the highest religious authority in Sunni

¹⁰ Speech by King Abdullah II of Jordan given before the United Nations General Assembly, 16 November 2015. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/king-of-jordan-calls-for-muslims-to-lead-fight-against-terrorism-a6736586.html>.

Islam, has spoken out repeatedly against the extremists,¹¹ but he is yet to issue sweeping and authoritative *fatwas* (official religious rulings) with binding powers that would decisively delegitimize their bloody Islamist brand. For the Saudis and the Turks to threaten openly, as they have done on several occasions, to launch a ground attack against ISIS has raised more worries than offered solutions. Saudi Wahhabi ideology is actually identical to that of ISIS and was in recent years, both directly and indirectly, one of the main tributaries of inspiration for both al-Qaeda and *Daesh*; the arsonist cannot double as the fireman. President Erdogan's Turkey has engaged in documented underhanded dealings with ISIS in terms of buying on the black market their illicitly extracted oil, funneling arms and fighters to them across the porous Turkish border with Iraq and Syria, and facilitating the passage of their terrorists to Europe.¹² It has become crystal clear in recent months that Ankara's top priority is fighting Kurdish separatism in northern Syria and Iraq with all else being subordinated to this single strategic end.

Where does all this leave Islamic moderation? Following the fall in 1979 of the Shah of Iran the Shiite world has experienced a persistent radicalization with the coming of Ayatollah Khomeini and his *Wilayat al-Faqih*¹³ millenarian eschatology, spillovers of which have manifested themselves in the destabilizing activities around the region of Iran's militant Revolutionary Guards and the rise of their Lebanese military extension, Hezbollah. On the Sunni side, in addition to Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism and Erdogan's assertive Islamist streak a survey of the mainly Sunni Syrian opposition to the Assad regime reveals their ranks over the past five years being steadily infiltrated by Jihadists of various stripes including the al-Qaeda offshoot *Nusra* Front (*Jabhat al-Nusra*). Amidst this cacophony of violent extremism Islamic

¹¹ "Top Muslim Cleric Ahmed al-Tayeb Urges Education Reform to Counter Extremism", in *The Guardian* from Agence-France Press (23 February 2015) in reference to a speech he gave the day before at a conference to combat terrorism held in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/23/top-muslim-cleric-ahmed-al-tayeb-urges-education-reform-to-counter-extremism> .

¹² Several credible reports have surfaced documenting Erdogan's underhanded dealings with ISIS. See as examples "Meet the Man Who Funds ISIS: Bilal Erdogan, the Son of Turkey's President", by ZeroHedge.com in Mint Press News (30 November 2015). <http://www.mintpressnews.com/211624-2/211624/> ; also David Graeber, "Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?" in *The Guardian* (18 November 2015). <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/nov/18/turkey-cut-islamic-state-supply-lines-erdogan-isis> ; also the Program on Peace-building and Rights, directed by David Phillips, at Columbia University's Institute for the Study of Human Rights appointed a team of researchers in the United States, Europe, and Turkey to investigate the allegations—see the results (15 December 2015) at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-l-phillips/research-paper-turkey-isi_b_8808024.htm.

¹³ "Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist", a doctrine in Shia Islam ascendant in the Islamic Republic of Iran after the 1979 revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini; see Ibrahim Moussawi, *Shi'ism and the Democratization Process in Iran: With a Focus on Wilayat al-Faqih* (Beirut: Saqi Books, 2012).

moderation has navigated an anomalous and pathetic course: it is generally weak, appears mostly intimidated, and exhibits a fleeting shelf-life on the rare occasions when it does try to be assertive. As one commentator has summarized it: “A main cause of the rise of extremism in the world of Islam has been the cowardice of Muslim moderates, who for decades chose not to condemn bad ideas and ugly rhetoric. Fearing that they’d be seen simply as ideological weaklings, they’ve avoided confronting the cancer in plain sight.”¹⁴

Granted the vast majority of Muslims anywhere tend to be moderate in their daily behavior and to go about their lives focusing on the mundane pursuits that define most other communities worldwide. The problem, however, is two-fold: the inclination of Muslim moderates to accept to be cowed into silence and inaction when faced with loud incitements by the militant and violent minority in their midst targeting moderates like them or any other non-Sunni groups, and the demonstrated potential as a result of such incitements for easy radicalization occurring in slippery-slope fashion within their own otherwise moderate echelons. Gradations of extremism—often latent ones—exist along this slippery slope and can be triggered into action through anger or fear or indoctrination or peer pressure or any number of possible radicalizing influences. This makes of Sunni moderation as it stands today a dreadfully mercurial and unreliable option for fighting Jihadism.

It is quite chilling to realize that the sub-bestial behavior on constant display by ISIS (the public beheadings, the mass sexual enslavement of women and children, the systematic destruction of places of worship and of archaeological sites, the terror attacks on innocent civilians, the instruction of the very young in the art of mass slaughter, the deliberate ethno-religious and cultural cleansing, and other outrages) is emerging these days only within, and out of, Islam, and is being perpetrated proudly by self-professing Muslims. The factors usually advanced to account for this phenomenon—poor educational opportunities, socio-economic deprivation, alienation of youth, and so on—fall quite short of being convincing.¹⁵ (One of the problems is that so many otherwise moderate Muslims are in a state of utter denial that all this

¹⁴ Fareed Zakaria, “Trump is a Distillation of Republican Pathologies”, in *The Daily Star* (Beirut), March 7, 2016.

¹⁵ For a survey of arguments on both sides of this divide (with the author’s own views leaning in the direction of the socio-economic and alienation explanations) see Ömer Taşpinar, “Fighting Radicalism, not ‘Terrorism’: Root Causes of an International Actor Redefined”, in *SAIS Review*, vol. XXIX no. 2 (Summer–Fall 2009), pp. 75-86. For another view that also highlights the questionable socio-economic argument in the British context see Afua Hirsch, “The Root Cause of Extremism among British Muslims is Alienation”, in *The Guardian*, 19 September 2014.

inhuman behavior can somehow be linked to, or in some way stem from, Islam the religion.) The deeper and more comprehensive explanation is that within Sunni Islam itself there continues to thrive a living and centuries-old and quite consistent tradition of extremism and intolerance to the point of violently cancelling out the different other, a tradition known as Hanbalism, which represents the most radical of the four main Sunni jurisprudential *fiqh* schools of Quranic interpretation. And no one from the other three milder schools—the Hanafi, the Shafi’i, and the Maliki—appears willing to confront Hanbalism head-on with a view to discrediting it. Out of this toxic Hanbali brew have come Wahhabism from Arabia since the 18th century, and the more militant versions of the Muslim Brotherhood from 20th century Egypt all the way to Mohammad Morsi. It is Hanbalism ultimately that has spawned all the current permutations of Takfiri sub-bestiality such as Taliban, al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, Filipino Abu-Sayyaf, Somali al-Shabab, and of course ISIS. This is the ideology that haunts and stalks not only Christians in the Middle East but other non-Muslim communities, Shiites, moderate Sunnis, and really any person or group which departs in the slightest from its narrow and dehumanizing dictates. And this is also the ideology that has the West squarely in its sites as the ultimate target.¹⁶

It has been suggested by knowledgeable observers that the Islamic tradition itself does contain within it the elements—albeit eclipsed ones—required for its own internal reform. One bold idea advanced in this regard has been the need to revive an abandoned early Islamic conciliatory response to the dispute raging in the 7th century (Islam’s first century) over who was a true Muslim, and the merits of faith versus good works as they relate to this crucial question. Invoking the position of a group from that early period who came to be known as the *Murji’ah* (Murjites, or Postponers), modern seekers after reform from within highlight the solution these Murjites have advanced: since it is not possible in this life to resolve disputes over righteousness and what resides in the heart, such disputes should be deferred (hence the name “Postponers”)

¹⁶ On Hanbalism and its Qur’anic literalism, its opposition to rationalism, its public enforcement of strict morality in conformity with *shari’a* (Islamic law), its destruction of shrines, its rejection of rituals, and its inspiration of extremist scholars like Ibn Hazm, Ibn Taymiyah, Ibn Khaldun, Muhammad Bin ‘Abdul-Wahhab (founder of Saudi Wahhabism), and Sayed Qutub (a leader of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood), see Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 135-136, 157, 166, 190, 210, and 572; see also *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman, Vol. I, Part I (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 357 and 360; and see the section entitled “Literalism and Neo-Hanbalism: Ibn Hazm, Ibn Taymiyah, and Muhammad B. ‘Abdul-Wahhab” in Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, third edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 323-329; on Hanbalism’s hostility to Shiism and early clashes with the Shiites see Nimrod Hurvitz, “Early Hanbalism and the Shi’a” in *The Sunna and Shi’a in History*, edited by Ofra Bengio and Meir Litvak (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 37-50.

until the final judgment when God, who has perfect knowledge, will decide once and for all. This meant ceasing to pass judgments on, or issue condemnations of, those with whom there were disagreements; acceptance of such a view would open the door for tolerance and pluralism, both within Islam and conceivably beyond. The Murjites also stressed faith over works or ritual worship—some have detected here affinities with a Pauline position—and urged the application of reason over the passions. The Postponer position in essence constitutes a powerful refutation of the Takfiri stance that pronounces automatic damnation on any and all who differ from the views of the radical Jihadis. Historically, the founder of Hanbalism, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, attacked the Postponers and advocated their execution, whereas Abu-Hanifa, founder of the moderate Hanafi School, was sympathetic to their position. “Unfortunately,” wrote one scholar, “a separate school of the tolerant Postponers did not last long. Their pluralist theology faded amid the heated conflicts between self-righteous factions.”¹⁷

Searching for viable avenues towards Islamic reform from within is not a new endeavor, with this attempt to resuscitate the Postponer view, undeniably a worthy approach, being the latest in a long line of similar quests.¹⁸ Surely the implied tolerance and consequent peaceful pluralist coexistence inherent in the Postponer interpretation would happily subvert Takfirism and serve as the desired antidote to ISIS’s latest barbaric version of this Takfir. Punishments that prescribe flogging for drinking alcohol, amputation of limbs for theft, stoning for adultery, and execution for apostasy—not to mention odious statutes like Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws—would receive quite a blow under a Postponer version of Islam. Postponer theology, if it undergoes a renaissance that manages to endure, could also provide protection for both Christians and non-Christians, which include moderate Muslims. A quick reality check, however, underscores the glacial time-scale needed for ambitious reforms of this sort proposed from within Islam to emerge and take root and begin to exercise a tangible positive difference in people’s lives. Until that materializes Muslim moderates, and by extension exposed communities like the Christians living in Muslim-majority countries, will need other more pressing measures of support and

¹⁷ See Mustafa Akyol, *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, second edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. 85. On the Murjites/Murji’ites (Postponers) spelled “Murdji’a” see *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (new edition), edited by B. Lewis, Ch. Pellat, and J. Schacht, Vol. II (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), pp. 606-607. See also Duncan B. MacDonald, *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1903), pp. 122-127 and pp. 129-132.

¹⁸ On the rise of reformist movements in Islam see Lapidus, *op. cit.*, pp. 210-216, 461-468, and 817-823.

protection. One thing is clear; what shouldn't be "postponed" is dealing decisively, meaning militarily, with ISIS and their Takfiri savagery.

Can anything tangible be expected from the West that would help alleviate some of the dangers threatening both Muslim moderates and Christians living in the Middle East? Stated bluntly: If secular Europeans are incapable of fathoming what they are up against in their urban neighborhoods and on their own streets, how can they be expected to identify with, let alone offer support for, those like the Middle East's longsuffering Christians who for a considerably extended period have been facing these very same threats? It becomes more pressing than ever these days to search for and do everything possible to safeguard those few remaining spaces in the region where some degree of freedom and peaceful coexistence survive. Lebanon is one such place. Despite its chronically dysfunctional state system, its venal and corrupt political class, the lingering tensions among several of its sectarian communities, and its vulnerability to the current regional tug of war between Sunnis and Shiites, Lebanon persists in harboring the freest and most open society in the Arab Middle East precisely because it is in Lebanon that there continues to exist the only remaining free and entrenched regional Christian community. Over many decades stretching back to Ottoman times Lebanon has constituted a living laboratory for a creative two-way osmotic influence yielding largely positive fruits between its Christians and its Muslims. Lebanon's journey has certainly not been a smooth or easy ride, punctuated by regular recurring intervals of upheavals and armed clashes and external interference all of which culminated in the 1975-90 war along with a 29-year harsh occupation by the Assad regime from neighboring Syria that finally came to an end in 2005. In spite of all these severe trials, however, Lebanon's Christians have managed to cling to their deeply rooted free way of life that has set not only them apart from their regional and predominantly *dhimmi* coreligionists, but also distinguished the country's Muslim community, which has absorbed and internalized impressive features of the precious commodity of freedom thanks to having lived and interacted intimately for so long with free Christians.¹⁹

Freedom makes all the difference. And since personal as well as communal freedom is in such short supply throughout the Arab and broader Middle East it needs to be defended wherever

¹⁹ On Lebanon's free Christians see Habib C. Malik, *Islamism and the Future of the Christians of the Middle East*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2010), pp. 20-27.

it has germinated and endured. The sobering fact that a native Christian community with rare hard-won freedoms is found *only* in Lebanon should invite such a commitment. Hence the line of relentless erosion afflicting the Christian presence in the Middle East must be held firmly at Lebanon. This does not require the dispatching of foreign fleets or soldiers or crusades. Instead, it requires strengthening the Lebanese army, one of the few intact and religiously mixed and successful national institutions in the country; investing generous sums of money in Lebanon's educational sector, both private and public, to restore it to how it once served as a beacon of free critical thought for the entire Arab world; helping to create jobs and economic opportunities to halt the rising emigration of Christian and other youth; and using all means available to promote internal political reconciliation among contending groups with a view to revitalizing the state institutions—presidency, parliament, government. There is no cradling environment among Lebanon's Muslims for Takfiri terror, so the army and security forces bolstered with good equipment and intelligence capabilities can effectively concentrate on confronting infiltration of Jihadis and ISIS operatives from Syria.

However, the huge numbers of Syrian refugees currently languishing in Lebanon pose a particularly grave threat to the country. It is therefore most urgent and vital as regards the future of Lebanon and its well-being that the West in particular, and the international community as a whole, make a joint, official, and solemn pledge—and stick to their word—to help repatriate the over one million Syrian refugees at present inside Lebanon (a country with a population of 4.5 million) back to Syria as soon as hostilities there end and a comprehensive political settlement is in sight, or even sooner if and when protected safe havens inside Syria are created and offered the required security. Unlike Turkey, which has a homogeneous population of about 80 million people 98 percent of whom are Sunni Muslim, has a large land mass with abundant resources, and can easily absorb three million extra displaced Sunnis from Syria, Lebanon is much smaller and poorer, composed of a delicately balanced and religiously heterogeneous mix of sects, and now on top of the half-a-million Palestinian (mostly Sunni) refugees already living in its camps for decades must cope with an extra influx of nearly a million Sunnis from Syria, adding a total of more than 50 percent of Sunnis to its volatile demographic cauldron.²⁰ This is nothing short

²⁰ In 2013 the numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon were around 600,000; see Marwan M. Refaat and Kamel Mohanna, "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Facts and Solutions", in *The Lancet*, Vol. 382, No. 9894, 31 August 2013, pp. 763-764, [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(13\)61461-0/fulltext?rss=yes](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(13)61461-0/fulltext?rss=yes). By

of a recipe for disaster guaranteed to obliterate not only Lebanon's free Christians but its moderate Muslims, its religious pluralism, its communal diversity, and everything uplifting and hope-inspiring that the little country's checkered yet unique experiment in liberal coexistence has contributed to the Arab region. For these Syrian refugees to remain in Lebanon in such enormous numbers will spell the end of Lebanon and mark an irreversible calamity for the region and the world. As soon as the security situation in Syria improves the return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon should shift from being voluntary to becoming mandatory. Thankfully, and unlike the hapless Palestinians, these Syrian refugees have a country to return to when safety there is assured, and they carry official papers showing clearly their national affiliation to that country. So far the insensitivity of the European Union and the international community as embodied in the United Nations on this critical issue has not been kind to Lebanon. All they seem interested in is to solve the problem of the Syrian refugee deluge into Europe at Lebanon's expense. Meager amounts of money for housing and education are promised or issued as loans to Lebanon coupled with vague statements on eventual repatriation, while much whispering goes on behind the scenes that Lebanon ought to absorb the bulk of this ticking human time bomb.²¹ How utterly shortsighted this is when it comes to the welfare of free Middle Eastern Christianity, or the future of Muslim moderation, and by implication, once these are irreversibly compromised, to adverse implications for the West itself down the road!

February 2016 the numbers had risen to 1,069,111 according to Mercy Corps, and approximately 1.1 million according to Amnesty International; see "Quick Facts: What You Need to Know about the Syria Crisis", 5 February 2016, <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>; and "Syria's Refugee Crisis in Numbers", 3 February 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/02/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/>; the UNHCR gave the figure of 1,048,275 for 31 March 2016, see <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>.

²¹ Since this writing, United Nations special coordinator in Lebanon, Sigrid Kaag, has dispelled Lebanese fears that UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon had implied Syrian refugees in Lebanon should be naturalized and that their return to Syria was voluntary. See "Kaag Assures Ban Made no Mention of Lebanon in Refugees Report", in *Naharnet Newsdesk*, 20 May 2015, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/209686>; the Lebanese government had unanimously rejected such proposals, but Kaag denied that Ban had meant Lebanon. Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Federica Mogherini, after meeting Lebanese foreign minister Gibran Bassil, stated that while the international community worked to repatriate the Syrian refugees safely back to Syria from Lebanon these refugees needed basic protection, housing, education, and jobs where they are currently residing. These remarks heightened Lebanese anxieties about the future of Syrian refugees in Lebanon; see Mogherini's remarks in Beirut 21 March 2016 at http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2016/160321_05_en.htm.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the centrality of preserving tiny Lebanon to the whole question of protecting the Middle East's Christians and, by extension, ensuring the very survival of freedom, pluralism, and moderation in the heart of the Muslim Arab world. Lebanon's Christians may be the freest, but Egypt's Coptic Christians are by far the largest Christian community native to the Middle East. They trace their beginnings to Saint Anthony the Great founder of Christian monasticism as well as to the early Desert Fathers, and before these to Mark the Evangelist.²² As with Iraq's and Syria's Christians, whose fortunes took a turn for the worse when various shades of Islamist Jihadis including ISIS replaced the repressive yet secular Baath, so too did Egypt's between 8 and 10 million Copts (roughly 10 percent of the Egyptian population) fall prey to continuous harassment and bloody assaults by fanatics under the brief rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.²³ However, with the replacement of the Muslim Brothers by President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's authoritarian rule matters on the whole have improved for the Copts. In an unprecedented gesture on January 6, 2016, the Coptic Christmas Eve according to the Julian calendar, President Sisi made it a point to attend Christmas Mass in St. Mark's Coptic cathedral in downtown Cairo where thousands of Coptic faithful cheered him jubilantly. After the service he openly apologized to the Copts on behalf of the Egyptian state for delays in renovating their damaged churches, rebuilding their destroyed ones, and compensating Coptic families for losses incurred due to violent attacks perpetrated by the Muslim Brothers the previous year and during Morsi's rule.²⁴ This open apology and pledge are truly novel for an Egyptian president. Both President Sisi and Azhar Grand Mufti Sheikh Tayyeb made significant public speeches and declarations at the start of 2015 in which they condemned religious extremism, specifically *Daesh*, and advocated inclusiveness and moderation. Although hundreds of families left following the coming to power of the Muslim Brothers, Egypt's Copts are too numerous to be easily uprooted en masse. For the most part, however, the Coptic community in Egypt tends to suffer from chronic poverty and deprivation while leading a centuries-old *dhimmi*

²² On Egypt's Copts see Theodore Hall Patrick, *Traditional Egyptian Christianity: A History of the Coptic Orthodox Church*, (Greensboro, NC: Fisher Park Press, 1996).

²³ See Daria Solovieva, "Egypt's Coptic Christians Face Unprecedented Reprisals from the Muslims Brotherhood", in *The Washington Times*, 20 August 2013.

²⁴ See "Egyptian President Sisi Attends Christmas Mass, Wishes Copts Merry Christmas" and "Egypt's President Sisi Vows to Rebuild All Destroyed Churches in 2016", in *Egyptian Streets*, 6 January 2016; at <http://egyptianstreets.com/2016/01/06/egyptian-president-sisi-attends-christmas-mass-wishes-copts-merry-christmas/>, and <http://egyptianstreets.com/2016/01/06/egypts-president-sisi-vows-to-rebuild-all-destroyed-churches-in-2016/> respectively.

existence of subjugation. The demonstrated openness and new embrace of Copts by both the state and the mosque, as embodied respectively in Sisi and Tayyeb, offers hope for gradual amendments regarding their freedoms and economic status.²⁵ This is certainly a trend that deserves to be nurtured and offered vigorous support.

Based on a PEW Foundation study and empirical confirmation gathered by credible international religious-liberty NGOs including Open Doors there is much alarming evidence pointing to pervasive persecution of Christians worldwide for no reason other than that they are Christian.²⁶ The bulk of this oppression occurs in Islamic-majority regions from Nigeria to Mindanao in the southern Philippines, but it is also documented in parts of India, China, and North Korea. Middle Eastern Christians, who happen to reside in the epicenter of the world of Islam, receive the lion's share of this unsolicited abusive attention. This unsettling global reality marking the early 21st century has merited the designation Christophobia (or Christianophobia).²⁷ What then about the much advertised Islamophobia, or bigoted fear and hatred of Muslims? The two designations could not be further apart in their meanings and their claims to authenticity. Although there are some documented instances of prejudice and gratuitous hatred directed at Muslims, Islamophobia so-called is in essence a bogus and politically driven accusation. It rests on the unsubstantiated blanket assertion that Muslims everywhere but especially in the West are being deliberately singled out for reasons of bigotry and targeted for abuse. The fact is, however, that objectively there happens to exist a specific, independently given and unfabricated profile that presents itself every time a terrorist outrage is perpetrated: young male and female Sunni Muslims between the ages of 16 and 45. In this deadly game the category of "usual suspects" is not a concocted fantasy, nor is it the product of a malicious connivance. These young Sunnis are the ISIS recruits, the cannon fodder that extremists indoctrinate, train, and unleash to wage their war on all of us. It matters little from a security standpoint whether or

²⁵ On the Tayyeb speech see Footnote 10 above. View excerpts from the speech by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi delivered on 1 January 2015 on the occasion of Christmas and the Prophet's Birthday before an audience of Muslim clerics at Al-Azhar in Cairo; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n4WMVFz07Sc>.

²⁶ See the 14 January 2014 study by PEW entitled "Religious Hostilities Reach Six-Year High"; <http://www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/>. For the Open Doors evidence see Footnote 8 above.

²⁷ See Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith under Attack*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013).

not they represent the “true” Islam (whatever that may be); the overwhelming majority of non-Muslim people being victimized by terror attacks in the name of Islam are unfamiliar with Islam, let alone Islam’s legitimate versus perverted manifestations.

Those saddled with the responsibility of maintaining the safety and security of the public would be criminally remiss in their duties if they overlooked this given and largely uniform profile. Bottom line: if it waddles like a duck and quacks like a duck, it is not a rabbit. Political correctness has offered the misleading charge of Islamophobia as a convenient smoke-screen behind which real ruthless killers can choose to conceal themselves. Sadly, many innocent and law-abiding Muslims get inadvertently included as objects of the fear possessing people who feel justifiably vulnerable when instead the focus ought to be squarely on the Hanbali-Takfiri tradition and its sub-bestial byproducts. Here moderate Sunni Muslims have the urgent duty not only to disassociate themselves after the fact from terror outrages and lament that such carnage is not reflective of “true” Islam; moderates need to be proactive by fingering boldly the Hanbali-Takfiri culprits that may be hiding in their midst, teaching their children vigorously to embrace other milder and more open Qur’anic interpretations that abhor violent Jihadi militancy, and doing their utmost to integrate constructively within the wider society where they have chosen to live if it happens to be the West or, if they reside in predominantly Muslim countries, to champion courageously the moderation agenda that includes defending exposed non-Muslim minorities. This is quite a tall order for the otherwise fickle moderates of Sunni Islam—can they live up to it?

Let us pose our original central question slightly differently: What can Middle Eastern Christianity, living as it is these days under mounting duress, expect from the West, in particular from secular Europe? Most unhelpful would be to have these struggling Christian communities relegated in the Western mind to the ossified status of living relics in suspended animation with all the condescension implied in such an attitude, a condescension that parallels the museum-like preservative posture secular Europeans grudgingly display with regard to their great (and now largely empty) cathedrals and other visible reminders of the splendors of a once vibrant Christian past. These supposed Middle Eastern Christian relics, contemplated from a safe distance if at all, are in fact living repositories of the deepest spiritual values that inform European civilization, values whose source secular Europe has turned its back upon refusing to acknowledge any

Christian patrimony whatsoever. The unwillingness to include in the European Union's unwieldy constitution a single reference to Europe's 1500-year Judeo-Christian heritage, all in the name of a largely fictitious multiculturalism, is both obscene and scandalous. Glaring examples of the stubborn lack of assimilation dot the European landscape and stand as living monuments to the failed multicultural ideal—need one go beyond pointing to the southern French coastal city of Marseille that resembles in many of its features more a North African city than a homogeneous French one spawned out of the Gallican Mediterranean traditions of Provence, or the now notorious Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek, or similar unassimilated spaces in and around many of Europe's large metropolises? Instead of buying into the European secular project these resistant islands have been generating opposite pressures on their surroundings in the form of what has best been designated a “creeping *shari'a*”.²⁸ While benefiting from the liberal laws and protections in the West, these communities continue to cultivate a resolute apartness as they slide unnoticeably down the slope of Islamization towards radicalization.

Europe's secular project of integration is not working, undermined increasingly by sullen shadowy networks embedded deep within mostly unassimilated Muslim emigrant communities that conceal Jihadis and disseminate hate literature. What are the candidate replacements for Europe's faltering secularism? Sadly, at present, it is the platform of the far-right that is gaining steady prominence as it benefits from the failures of political correctness and multiculturalism. This is translating into heightened xenophobia, racism, chauvinism, supremacism, ultra-nationalism, and fascism—all sonorously expressed and accompanied by an ascending dose of violence. For her part, the Roman Catholic Church, in the declarations of at least two of her recent popes, has called for a re-evangelization of Europe.²⁹ This means as a start the reacquainting of Europe with its Christian roots and with its eclipsed heritage of Christian spirituality. The Church is convinced a healthy pluralism leading to the acceptance of the

²⁸ A term pointing to the steady and barely noticed spread of Islamization in the West taking advantage of its free, open, pluralist, tolerant, and permissive societies.

²⁹ For the “re-evangelization” or the “new evangelization” theme see Pope Saint John-Paul II's address to the Latin American Bishops: “Address of John-Paul II to the Assembly of CELAM” in Port-au-Prince, Haiti (March 9, 1983), last section; see also his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990), no. 33; see <http://www.jp2shrine.org/en/ev/jpii.html>. See Pope Benedict XVI's Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), no. 122. See Pope Francis's Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013). For all papal writings see <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/it.htm>.

different other can only come about through a revival of European Christianity. Clearly the far-right and the Church are working at cross purposes here, but the former has the advantage of capitalizing on the unbridled passions and elemental fears and targeted hatreds that are on the rise across Europe as a consequence of Islamist terror.

If over time the re-evangelizing project stalls or peters out, and if the far-right's manipulation of anger and atavism collapses into violence and chaos, a third outcome could rear its head: the Islamizing of Europe. In the final analysis no ideology, especially one as vacuous as liberal secularism has become, can replace a religion; only another religion can take the place of a dying religion. This is an unavoidable bedrock truth because only *religious* answers to the recurring yearnings of the human soul are sufficiently all-encompassing and offer the sought-after finality that alone can satisfy. Perhaps then what the late Mouammar Gaddafi of Libya once said about sending millions of Muslim people north into Europe to Islamize the continent will have been prophetic.³⁰

From the forgoing it emerges that the Christians of the Middle East have little to expect from the West by way of sympathy let alone support. Europe's radical secularism prevents her from grasping the true import of what is ultimately at stake if Christianity disappears in the Middle East. States usually prioritize their interests by placing national security at the top followed by economic prosperity and lastly come issues pertaining to values and rights, especially the rights of others. In the United States, where unlike most of Europe faith continues to be vibrant in many quarters and churches are full during Sunday services, people are better predisposed to comprehend the significance of the survival of Christians, particularly free Christians, in an unsettled place like the Middle East. Yet Americans on the whole tend to lack sufficient knowledge and are generally less sensitized to foreign developments let alone to the challenges faced by persecuted communities in distant lands overseas.

American insularity and European unconcern stand in sharp contrast to Russian historical identifications with the sufferings of Middle Eastern Christians. The Russian Orthodox Church

³⁰ Colonel Mouammar Gadaffi: "We have 50 million Muslims in Europe. There are signs that Allah will grant Islam victory in Europe—without swords, without guns, without conquest—will turn it into a Muslim continent within a few decades." Speech (10 April 2006); see a clip translated by MEMRI (Middle East Media Research Institute) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=79AAkAWYYGk>.

has always been a frontier embattled church that has faced successively the Mongols from the east, the Muslims from the south, and more recently militant atheistic communism from within. If any church knows existentially what the Middle East's Christians are up against it is the Orthodox Church in Russia.³¹ Moreover, Russia never needed to humor an energy-rich country like Saudi Arabia to the same degree that the US and Europe have been doing for decades. Only now, as the US has become energy self-sufficient, is this excessive American indulgence of Saudi whims beginning to wind down.³² The undeniable links between Saudi Wahhabi ideology and the violent Islamism on the rampage throughout the Middle East as seen with *Daesh* is an added reason for policy-makers in Washington to exercise extra caution in their dealings with the desert kingdom. The Washington-based independent organization Freedom House in 2005 published a revealing report analyzing some fifty documents of overt hate written in Arabic and retrieved from American mosques spread throughout the country. All of them had the official Saudi embassy seal stamped on the front, and they contained incredibly incendiary content inciting hatred against Christians and Jews, hatred against America and her President, and hatred against feasts like Christmas and other occasions holy to Christians. They were also backed by official religious rulings (*fatwas*) put out by leading Saudi clerics at the time.³³ This find should have been an eye-opener for American authorities to confront their Arabian "ally" with the ugly truth, and to exercise added vigilance at home regarding the possible violent implications of such hate literature.

Like Russia the Vatican, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church in Istanbul, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and many mainline Protestant churches in North America are all deeply worried about the future of the Christians of the Middle East. Several

³¹ John Eibner, CEO of Christian Solidarity International (USA) for 25 years, examines Russia's historic and current interest in the Middle East's Christians; see "The Moscow Patriarchate and the Persecuted Christians in the Middle East", *Keston Newsletter* No. 21 (2015), pp. 5-16, http://www.csiint.org/fileadmin/Files/pdf/2015/15_05_je_Moscow_Patriarchate_persecuted_Christians_in_ME_-_Keston-Newsletter.pdf. See also Bernard El Ghoul, "Protecting Eastern Christianity in the Middle East: Russia's New Diplomatic Tool?" in *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 95-102. See the piece in Arabic entitled "The Immense Respect Russia has for the Maronite Patriarchate" in the online news service *Lebanonfiles* (12 February 2016), <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/997642>.

³² President Barack Obama might be the first sitting US President to have publicly voiced criticisms of, and policy differences with, Saudi Arabia. See his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg entitled "The Obama Doctrine" in *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

³³ See *Saudi Publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques*, published by Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, directed by Nina Shea (2005), 90 pages.

leading Christian figures around the globe, chief among them Pope Francis, have voiced their concerns on repeated occasions for these exposed Christians.³⁴ Uppermost on their minds after the immediate physical dangers facing these Christian communities that involve indiscriminate murder, forced dispossession, and enslavement by Jihadis, is the accelerating phenomenon of Christian emigration out of the region. Although emigration has constituted the scourge of the Middle East's Christians for the better part of the past 1400 years since the rise of Islam, the speed with which it has been occurring in recent years is something new and alarming. In Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, to name three stressed states with Christian populations, the Christian numbers just over the past seven years alone have gone down by 40 percent.³⁵ Without tangible material support and security guarantees this hemorrhaging of Christians out of the Middle East will continue. Some of the material support for the Middle East's Christians can be arranged by the leading churches of the world through tapping into benevolent private sources, charitable foundations, non-governmental organizations, and at times perhaps soliciting direct government aid. Publicizing large-scale abuses also contributes to heightening awareness and may even serve to urge local governments in the region to clamp down harder on perpetrators within their jurisdictions. But real security can begin to be ensured for these targeted Christians and the other native minority communities, and indeed for the civilized world as a whole, only if and when the Islamic State (*Daesh*) terror entity is decisively destroyed. This is an urgent task for the big powers of the world to undertake, and concerned Christian leaders must lend their blessings to such an effort even if those spearheading it in Syria are the forces of Bashar Assad on the ground supported by Russian airpower, and in Iraq the Iraqi government forces plus the Kurds supported by coalition airstrikes. While destroying ISIS will certainly help in the short run, it will not end violent Islamist extremism, so this is in truth a chronic problem of momentous proportions requiring that the civilized world display the needed endurance and determination for the long haul.

³⁴ Pope Francis spoke forcefully of a genocide against the Middle East's Christians and of a third world war being waged piecemeal against Christians: "Today, we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus,... In this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end." See Address of Pope Francis to the World Meeting of Popular Movements, Santa Cruz, Bolivia, 9 July 2015, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2015/july/documents/papa-francesco_20150709_bolivia-movimenti-popolari.html.

³⁵ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, "Ongoing Exodus: Tracking the Emigration of Christians from the Middle East", *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, Vol. III (2013-14), pp. 39-49, see especially pp. 43-44.

In the final analysis the Christians of the Middle East need to continue to exercise self-reliance by depending first and foremost on their abiding faith in Jesus Christ, the Risen Lord. Nothing can shake this inner faith in Christ of the true believer. Their long historical acquaintance with suffering has taught them much about the Theology of the Cross, and their rich past features a gallery of saints and martyrs stretching from the early Christian centuries to the contemporary period, that is from the Desert Fathers who launched monasticism in Egypt in the 3rd and 4th centuries along with Saints Ephrem and Maron in the Levant from the 4th century all the way to Saint Charbel of the Maronite Church in the 20th century. The hardships of the present age dictate that these eastern Christians belonging to a variety of Sister Churches and having experienced diverse forms of persecution are called upon to set aside their divisions, their petty differences, and their even pettier squabbles; to obscure temporarily the free-versus-*dhimmi* divide that has separated some of them; and to cultivate a greater solidarity with, and empathy for, each other's tribulations and endured agonies. As a self-conscious and organic group of communities committed to Christ they need to rejoice in the fact that far from constituting scattered remnant relics of a distant past they still carry the torch of the earliest Christian sparks that have ignited faith all over the world, and thus they embody the future hope that a troubled world so desperately needs.

How does the continued thriving presence of these living Christian communities in the heart of the Middle East benefit both the caring and the unconcerned of this world? As was said earlier, these Christian communities that predate Islam represent far more than mere curious relics or fossils; their endurance in their ancestral home offers the Middle East a genuine and unique chance to harbor a vibrant pluralism that is the ticket to elevate the peoples of the region from the drab monochromatic sameness into which they have sunk and which has constituted a breeding ground for extremism. Christians have not existed in the region solely as reminders to the militant fanatics that there is an infidel enemy in their midst after whom they need to go. These Christians have had a contrary and moderating influence. They have been at the forefront of cultural, linguistic, educational, and political revivals in the history of the Arab world the most recent of which (and perhaps the most dazzling) was the age of the Arab *Nahda* (or renaissance) at the end of the 19th century and on into the early decades of the 20th century. Christians from Lebanon and Egypt led that cultural revival which, among other things, has given us the simplified and popularized Arabic language of the daily press, the Arabic novel, modern Arabic

poetry, and out of which came inspiration for political action and change.³⁶ The free Christians of Lebanon provided the hospitable soil for the 19th century foreign Protestant and Catholic educational missions to strike lasting roots and grow giving the region a number of its leading schools and universities that in turn have produced the cream of the Arab intellectual elite. The innovative entrepreneurial and commercial energy of young Lebanese, Palestinian, Armenian, Egyptian, and other Christians from the region created a professional managerial class of successful economic and financial pioneers that the Arabs of the Gulf area, despite their phenomenal wealth, continue to rely upon heavily until today. The same is true for Arab reliance on Christian excellence in the fields of medicine, engineering, and architecture. Moreover, by their very nature and outlook Middle Eastern Christians are instinctively inquisitive and open to the world at large with few inhibitions, making them the ideal conduits for new ideas and acquisitions from other cultures. When free and secure these Christians become indeed the preferred avenue for transmitting the finest in cross-cultural fertilization that the Muslim majority can ever dream of enjoying. And where such Christians have managed to hold on to their precious freedoms, as in Lebanon, the Muslims in daily intimate contact with them over decades have found themselves imperceptibly transformed for the better. Christian witness therefore can only occur in an atmosphere of freedom. Christians surviving and flourishing in the Middle East will reinforce the much-needed attitude of accepting the different other as a means to assuming a live-and-let-live posture with regard to diversity. This safeguarding of diversity constitutes a direct and devastating refutation of the Takfiri ideology that rejects any and all difference and brutally dehumanizes it. If there ever was an empirical manifestation of the salt of the earth or the yeast that ferments and leavens the bread, it would shine through the positive contributions of the native Christians of the Middle East to the region and to its peoples. Imagine then the colossal loss for everyone inside and beyond the Middle East if this irreplaceable leaven were to vanish permanently!

The contingent of the caring in this world already knows much of this and derives strength from it. As for the unconcerned (whether among Westerners or Muslims), they stand to reap the benefits of free, open, and secure Middle Eastern Christianity without knowing how or

³⁶ On the Arab *Nahda* and Christian contributions to it see Hisham B. Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West: The Formative Years, 1875-1914*, (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970). For translated samples from *Nahda* writers see Suheil Bushrui and James M. Malarkey, editors, *The Literary Heritage of the Arabs: An Anthology*, (London: Saqi Books, 2012), Part VII, pp. 277-350.

why, and often without deserving the fruits of such gifts. What the caring can do to help anchor these benefits is work to refashion the currently broken Middle East along new political lines that would preserve and protect the distinctive, the special, the fragile, and the diverse. Creative federal options, for instance, merit being explored seriously towards achieving this goal. Federalism is no automatic panacea, but in so many countries it has proven to be the best response to an equitable reconfiguring of heterogeneous or mixed or composite or divided societies. Why not give it a chance to work in the Middle East where states can remain unified but structured internally along federal lines that offer considerable autonomy along with protection of rights to their various constituents? The underlying primordial ethno-religious and tribal map of the Middle East needs a different social contract than the artificially imposed one early last century by the two custodian colonial powers at the time, Britain and France, both unitary top-down states. That order began to unravel terribly when it was hijacked by the military dictatorships during the middle decades of last century spawning in the process their dialectical antithesis in the form of radical Islamism. The Middle East's elemental aggregates, the Christians included, urgently need creative federalism. They also need reciprocity. Those in the West who truly care, and who possess clout with the wealthy Arab Gulf states including Saudi Arabia, must impress upon these Islamic governments with considerable financial means at their disposal that they should extend much more assistance to refugees fleeing war zones than they have thus far. If they can erect thousands of air-conditioned tents for pilgrims coming to Mecca on the annual Hajj, they can surely provide adequate housing and healthcare for hundreds of thousands of destitute Syrian and other refugees displaced but still in the region pending their eventual safe repatriation when hostilities end. However, reciprocity also means these governments treating their native non-Muslim communities who call the Middle East home with at least the same dignity and respect that Muslims experience when they come to live in the West. Minority rights are still a weak concept in the Middle East, and those who care can help instill them more firmly there.

Suffering is redemptive, and suffering for the right cause unleashes tremendous good in the world. A historically momentous meeting occurred on 12 February 2016 in Havana Airport in Cuba that brought Pope Francis together with Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox

Church.³⁷ A Catholic pope and a Russian Orthodox patriarch had never met before. The occasion that led to the meeting of these two Christian spiritual leaders for the first time was their shared concern for the plight of the Middle East's Christians. The Joint Declaration they issued after their historic meeting was composed of 30 articles; numbers 8 to 12 (one-sixth of the document) focused exclusively on the sufferings of the Christians of the Middle East:

Our gaze must firstly turn to those regions of the world where Christians are victims of persecution. In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated. Their churches are being barbarously ravaged and looted, their sacred objects profaned, their monuments destroyed. It is with pain that we call to mind the situation in Syria, Iraq and other countries of the Middle East, and the massive exodus of Christians from the land in which our faith was first disseminated and in which they have lived since the time of the Apostles, together with other religious communities. [Article 8]

In Article 10 they mention specifically the names of the two Orthodox Metropolitans of Aleppo, Paul Yazigi and John Ibrahim, kidnapped in April 2013 by Islamist terrorists (*Nusra* or *Daesh* it is not clear) and still missing. Article 12 begins thus:

We bow before the martyrdom of those who, at the cost of their own lives, have given witness to the truth of the Gospel, preferring death to the denial of Christ. We believe that these martyrs of our times, who belong to various Churches but who are united by their shared suffering, are a pledge of the unity of Christians. [Article 12]³⁸

Today, as the thousandth anniversary approaches of the shameful Great Schism of 1054 that split the Church into its Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox or Byzantine branches (the latter of which eventually spawning the Russian Orthodox patriarchate of Moscow), it was providentially the prolonged sufferings of the Christians of the Middle East that have hastened a major step in the direction of the healing of that scandalous ecclesiastical rift: the Havana Airport meeting. Important broader steps towards the same end had already commenced following the Second Vatican Council with the start in the 1960s of the ecumenical rapprochement between the

³⁷The historic meeting was reported all over the international media. See as an example the Reuters account by Philip Pullella and Daniel Trotta, "After 1000-Year Split, Pope and Russian Patriarch Embrace in Cuba", 13 February 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-orthodox-cuba-arrival-idUSKCN0VL26>.

³⁸ For the full text of the Joint Declaration by Pope Francis and Patriarch Kirill see the Catholic News Agency reporting from Havana, Cuba, on 12 February 2016, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-joint-declaration-signed-by-pope-francis-and-patriarch-kirill-61341/>.

Vatican and the Istanbul Orthodox Patriarchate. One can only say that if the persistent sufferings being endured by the Christians of the Middle East have served as the occasion to bring these two Sister Churches—the Catholic and the Russian Orthodox—closer, then from the eternal vantage point of Divine Providence such sufferings have been worth every drop of blood and every anguished pang.
