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Secularism means survival for Christians in Middle East

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Catholics celebrate as they wait for the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI at the Eleftheria Sports Palace in Nicosia, Cyprus, June 6. (CNS/Reuters/Ronen Zvulun)

Analysis

Where people stand often determines what they see, so perspective is critical in framing any question. Take secularism, for instance: It may be the bogeyman of the Catholic imagination across Europe and the United States, but for Christians in the Middle East, it's more like a survival strategy.

Squeezed between two religiously defined behemoths -- Israel and the Muslim states that surround it -- the tiny Christian minority has no future if fundamentalism wins the day. As a result, nowhere on earth are Catholic leaders more zealous apostles of the separation of religion and state, and the construction of a legal order that protects both pluralism and freedom of conscience.

In part, their advocacy reflects a basic law of religious life -- secularism always looks better to minorities who would be the big losers in a theocracy. If it doesn't disappear first, therefore, Christianity in the Middle East may be ideally positioned to inject balance into global Catholic reflection about the

relationship between faith and secular society.

That point shines through the instrumentum laboris, or working document, for the upcoming Oct. 10-24 Synod of Bishops for the Middle East in Rome. Pope Benedict XVI presented the document during his June 4-6 trip to Cyprus.

The pope's outing began under the shadow of a dramatic reminder of the struggles facing Christians in the region -- the June 3 murder of Bishop Luigi Padovese in Turkey by his longtime driver, for motives that remain murky.

In Turkey, police sources say the investigation into the killing of the 63-year-old Capuchin prelate by his driver and bodyguard, Murat Altun, is ongoing. The act stirred memories of the killing of Italian Fr. Andrea Santoro in 2006, another murder of a Christian cleric by a young Turkish male for obscure reasons.

Benedict's three-day visit to Cyprus, the first ever by a pope to the tiny island nation, played to multiple audiences. At one level, Benedict spoke to the Cypriots themselves, gently prodding them toward reconciliation. The island was ethnically split between Greeks and Turks in 1974 following an invasion by Turkey. Turkish Cypriots declared an independent republic in the north in 1983, but only Turkey recognizes it, and it maintains 35,000 troops there.

Benedict urged his hosts to become "a bridge that unites different worlds."



Because of the symbolic significance of Cyprus as a focal point of tensions

between Catholics and Orthodox Christians, as well as Christians and Muslims, the pope also used the trip to signal his interest in both relationships. He briefly met a Turkish Cypriot Muslim leader, Sheik Mehmet Nazim Adil, as a sign of outreach to the Islamic world. (It was also a moment of octogenarian solidarity, as the 83-year-old pontiff and the 88-year-old sheik joked about their ages.)

Benedict held a longer and more formal session with Orthodox leaders on Cyprus, including Archbishop Chrysostomos II, who has carved out a profile as an ecumenical pioneer in the Orthodox world. Yet that meeting also offered a reminder of lingering tensions in Catholic/Orthodox relations, as two Orthodox bishops boycotted in protest. Outside the stadium where Benedict celebrated Mass on June 6, a small knot of Orthodox protestors displayed signs reading, "The pope is not a brother, but a heretic," and "Papal infallibility is not only a heresy but an ultra-heresy."

The centerpiece of the trip, however, was the presentation of the working document for the October synod, and more broadly, the effort to raise global consciousness about the plight of Christianity across the Middle East. Christians have been emigrating since the late 19th century, a trend accelerated in recent years by war, economic stagnation, and a rising fundamentalist tide across the region.

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Many observers call the out-migration an "exodus," warning that if current demographic trends hold up, Christianity could effectively disappear from the land of its birth.

The working document reflects the input of Catholic bishops and other leaders across the region, and in many ways it reads like a manifesto for secular politics. It calls upon Christians to work for "an all-inclusive, shared civic order" that protects "human rights, human dignity and religious freedom."

Twice, the document dwells on the concept of "positive laicity" -- meaning, in effect, a positive form of secularism. It cites a September 2008 speech in France by Benedict, who in turn borrowed the term "positive laicity" from French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

"Catholics, together with other Christian citizens and Muslim thinkers and reformers, ought to be able to support initiatives at examining thoroughly the concept of the "positive laicity" of the state," the synod document says.

"This could help eliminate the theocratic character of government and allow for greater equality among citizens of different religions," the document asserts, "thereby fostering the promotion of a sound democracy, positively secular in nature, which fully acknowledges the role of religion ... while completely respecting the distinction between the religious and civic orders."

In forceful language, the document urges Christians not to retreat into a "ghetto," but rather to work for the construction of a new social order across the Middle East. Perhaps to disarm Muslim criticism that secularism erodes the religious and moral fabric of a society, the document asserts that "the rights of a person are not in opposition to those of God."

The document offers an additional argument in favor of "positive laicity": If Muslims had more experience of separation of church and state, they might be less inclined to blame all Christians for the perceived offenses of Western governments.

In addition to the rise of political Islam, the document also warns of another potentially toxic form of fundamentalism spreading across the region: evangelical Christians who "use sacred scripture to justify Israel's occupation of Palestine, making the position of Christian Arabs an even more sensitive issue."

On other matters, the document supports efforts toward both Christian unity and "trilateral dialogue" among Christians, Jews and Muslims; liturgical renewal based on "an updated outlook on the contemporary world," including translation into the vernacular languages (principally Arabic); and greater financial transparency from church leaders, including a clear distinction between their personal property and that of the church. On the ecumenical front, the document floats the idea of a joint Catholic/Orthodox commission to consider the issue of intercommunion between the two churches.

The top note, however, remains the document's call for Christians in the Middle East to become the architects of a secular society. At a time when church leaders in the West are increasingly inclined to see secularism as the enemy, that raises the intriguing prospect that the October synod could unleash a powerful current in the church pulling in precisely the opposite direction.

The bishops of the Middle East, in other words, seem to be coming to Rome to praise secularism, not to bury it.

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