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Beyond a 'Darth Vader' view of secularism

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 8, 2010 All Things Catholic

The 67 million Catholics in the United States represent just six percent of the global Catholic population of 1.2 billion, but we sometimes have a hard time understanding how the other 94 percent lives. Beginning next week, there?s a golden opportunity to think more globally about the challenges of the early 21st century -- that is, if we?re paying attention.

The Synod of Bishops for the Middle East begins on Sunday morning in Rome with a papal Mass in St. Peter?s Basilica, and runs through Oct. 24.

Read NCR's full coverage of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East: Index of stories from the Synod [1].

This will be the 23rd synod since the institution was launched under Paul VI in 1967. They bring together roughly 250 bishops, priests, religious women and men, and lay experts to advise the pope on some topic, and whatever else a synod may be -- an expensive talk shop to some, an experiment in collegiality for others -- they typically offer a graduate seminar in issues facing the global church.

Going in, one measure of success for this synod will be its ability to look beyond the usual bleak script about Christianity in the Middle East -- crisis, conflict, and the threat of extinction -- and also ponder the creative contributions the region can make to global Catholic reflection.

Nowhere is that potential more clear than in Christian thinking about secularism, where the churches of the Middle East could lead us beyond a one-sided ?Darth Vader? perspective into a more balanced appraisal.

A Christian exodus

When Catholics in the West think about the church in the Middle East, it?s usually with a mix of pity and alarm. The ?exodus? of Christians is well known: In 1948, Christians represented 20 percent of the population in what is now Israel and the Palestinian Territories; today they?re less than two percent, roughly 150,000 believers amid 7.4 million Israelis and almost 4 million Palestinians. The same pattern holds across the Middle East, where the total number of Arab Christians is thought to have dropped from 25 million in 1975 to 14 million today (out of a total population of 330 million).

Daniel Pipes, writing in the *Middle East Quarterly* a decade ago, predicted that within a relatively brief arc of time Christians ?will effectively disappear from the region as a cultural and political force.?

The nightmare scenario is that Christianity could be extinguished in the land of its birth. When Pope Benedict XVI visited the region last year he called upon Christians to ?persevere in faith, hope and love,? and to ?maintain the church?s presence in the changing social fabric of these ancient lands.?

The out-migration of Christians has become an emblematic cause for currents in the West on both the right and

left. For hawks, it illustrates the threat of Islamic radicalism; for doves, the urgency of ending the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and especially putting more pressure on Israel to change its ways.

The exodus is certainly real, but talk of crisis and extinction needs to come with an industrial-sized caveat: Generalizations are the death of good analysis.

For sure, life is tougher by the day for Christians in some parts of the region, including Egypt (where the Coptic church is being targeted by Muslim radicals) and Iraq (where the once-sizeable Chaldean Christian community has been decimated). Yet there are also places where things are relatively stable, such as Syria, Jordan, and some of the smaller Gulf States. In 2008, the first new Catholic church on the Arabian peninsula since the Islamic conquest opened in Qatar, built on land donated by the Emir. Last year, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem announced plans to build a new Catholic University in Jordan, and right now two new parishes, one Latin and one Melkite, are being constructed at Bethany-beyond-the-Jordan.

All that suggests Christianity in the Middle East can get off life support when the conditions are right. As it happens, the synod might just have something fascinating to say about what those conditions look like.

Praising secularism, not burying it

Secularism is often the bogeyman of the Catholic imagination in the West. Say ?secularism? to the typical European Catholic and they flash on the EU trying to cram liberal social policies down the throats of member nations, or the ?Equality Laws? in the U.K. under Blair that made it illegal for Catholic adoption agencies not to serve same-sex couples, or the latest book attacking religion by Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens.

Given those associations, secularism usually looms as the primary ideological and pastoral problem facing the church in the West.

Yet whatever one might think about it, secularism isn?t going away. Thus a towering challenge is to promote what Benedict XVI has repeatedly called a ?positive secularism? -- a form of church/state separation that recognizes the positive culture-shaping role religion can play, without trying to drive it underground.

Arguably the most interesting laboratory on earth these days for Christian reflection on ?positive secularism? lies in the Middle East.

Squeezed between two religiously defined behemoths -- Israel and the Muslim states which 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.

The working document reflects the input of Catholic bishops and other leaders across the region, and 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 *laïcité*? -- meaning a positive form of secularism. It cites a September 2008 speech in France by Pope Benedict, who borrowed the term ?positive *laïcité*? 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 *laïcité*? 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 secularism. If Muslims had more experience of separation of church and state, it says, they might be less inclined to blame all Christians for the perceived offenses of Western governments.

In addition to 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.?

Admittedly, for the tiny Christian minority of the Middle East to try to engineer a social revolution in the direction of democracy and church/state separation is a tall order -- especially given its understandable historical reluctance to stick its head up.

?I don?t think people in the West appreciate to what extent the thematics of the synod are totally new to so much of the Church in the Middle East,? said Franciscan Fr. David Jaeger, an expert on the region.

?The whole discussion of the civic duty of the Christian ... is totally new. For thirteen centuries, Christians in the Middle East have been made to live in a kind of socio-economic ghetto,? he told Reuters Television in Rome.

Whatever its impact on Middle Eastern societies, the Christian experience in the Middle East can also help shape the culture of the global church.

Something like balance

The struggle against radical secularism -- what Benedict XVI has memorably described as a ?dictatorship of relativism? -- has become an idée fixe both for the policy-making class in the church, as well as a broad swath of Catholic intellectuals and activists. Listening to some prophets of doom talk about secularism these days, all that?s missing is the ?Imperial Death March? from ?Star Wars? as a soundtrack.

One can certainly understand the reaction. Yet the danger is a sort of siege mentality, in which secularism is perceived primarily as a threat rather than as an opportunity for Christianity to flourish.

Properly organized, a healthy secular society means freedom *for*, not freedom *from*, religion. It offers space for a more ?evangelical? form of Catholicism to develop, one not dependent on state sponsorship or legal privilege, relying instead on the attraction of the Gospel message and the boldness of those who proclaim it.

The positive Christian view of secularism boils down to this: Give us a fair and open marketplace of ideas and Christianity will be just fine.

Christians in the West sometimes think of secularism as a threat to that open marketplace of ideas, but in the Middle East secularism tends to loom instead as its last, best hope. Perhaps by combining those experiences and outlooks, Catholicism can find something approaching balance.

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John Allen will be in Rome next week covering the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East. Watch the NCR Today [2] blog for his regular reports. His first report is already up: Middle East synod is unique, and here's why [3]

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