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Preventing a 'spiritual Disneyland' in the Holy Land

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

By now, the threat facing Christianity in its birthplace has become depressingly clear. Christians represented 30 percent of British Mandate Palestine in 1948, while today their share in Israel and the Palestinian Territories is estimated at 1.25 percent. The risk, as the Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, has put it, is that the Holy Land is becoming a "spiritual Disneyland" -- full of glittering rides and attractions, but empty of its indigenous Christian population.

French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue and formerly Pope John Paul II's top diplomat, offers another evocative image: The Christian centers of the Holy Land as "archeological and historical sites, to be visited like the Colosseum in Rome" -- museums with entrance tickets, and guides who explain the beautiful legends.

This decline in the Holy Land is part of a broad Christian exodus all across the Middle East. The reasons are also well known, and fairly obvious:

- The Israeli/Palestinian conflict, which affects Arab Christians just as much as Arab Muslims;
- Economic instability and lack of opportunity;
- Rising Islamic fundamentalism, today compounded by fear that the promise of the Arab Spring could give way a winter of insecurity and theocratic regimes;
- The fact that Christians in the area are disproportionately better educated and more affluent, and thus stand a better chance of getting out. As one observer has said, in the Middle East frustrated Christians emigrate physically, while frustrated Muslims emigrate ideologically.

Yet even when the big picture is familiar, its details still pack emotional punch.

Raphaella Fischer Mourra is the daughter of a German father and a Palestinian mother, born and raised in Bethlehem. In 2000, at the age of 15, she lost her father to an Israeli missile attack as he raced to rescue their neighbors; she tearfully describes him as "the first Christian martyr of the Second Intifada." Samer Makhoul, a 35-year-old raised in a Christian village on the West Bank, was arrested by Israeli troops at the age of 15 for tossing a stone in frustration. He was detained for four months, he said, interrogated and tortured, and still bears the marks of the experience, both physical and emotional. Another young Palestinian Christian, Jacob Sleibi, says his family is forced to haul water to their home in Bethlehem, while fresh water flows abundantly through nearby Israeli settlements.

To make the point that no one has a monopoly on pain, there's Rabbi Daniel Sperber of Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, who over the years has found himself scraping bits of bone and skin out of burned Israeli tanks in order to make DNA identifications, calling it the sort of tragedy "that has touched every Israeli family." His own children have been afraid to get on the school bus, he said, worrying that it might blow up "illustrating, as Sperber puts it, that "we also have our agony."

These were among the voices at a two-day conference on the fate of Christians in the Holy Land in London this week, cosponsored by the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols. Held at Lambeth Palace, the spiritual headquarters of the Anglican Communion, the event brought together some 90 church leaders, politicians, activists and media types to raise what Williams described as "literate, compassionate awareness" of the Christian plight, and to galvanize action.

The summit seemed to offer three main contributions:

- A crystallized form of the rationale as to why the Christian world should care;
- A survey of open questions;
- A set of concrete ideas about how to support the Christian presence in the Holy Land.

Retired Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C., and Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, were the American prelates at the gathering, while Tauran was on hand for the Vatican. (As a footnote, McCarrick is "retired" only in the technical sense. At 81, he logs more miles as a trouble-shooter and promoter of dialogue than anyone else I know; while he checked into our hotel he let me flip through the pages of his passport, which has to be one of the most used travel documents I've ever seen.)

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The argument as to why we ought to care about Christians in the Holy Land boiled down to two points: First, their survival is critical to Christianity's identity; second, it's a key to peace in the region, and therefore to peace in the world.

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Williams made the first case.

"Christianity is an historical religion," he said. "At its center is a set of events that occurred in a particular place and at a particular time. It is not open to Christians to say that Christianity is whatever they choose it to be. We are responsible to what happened in the Holy Land two millennia ago."

A Christian witness in the place where these events occurred, Williams said, is therefore "no small thing."

"It would be a form of Gnosticism if we were to say that the Christian presence in the land of Our Lord does not matter to us," Williams argued, calling such disregard a way of "cutting ourselves loose from history."

(The depth of that history, by the way, was memorably captured by Zoughbi Zoughbi, a Palestinian Christian from Bethlehem: "My great-great grandmother," he quipped, "was the babysitter of Jesus.")

Beyond an antidote to Gnosticism, Williams said, the Arab Christians of the Holy Land make another contribution to Christian identity: They remind us that at its origins, Christianity is an "exotic Eastern religion" not bound up with Western culture.

In typically wry fashion, Williams observed that Christianity was not born "in Europe, or even on the shores of North America" which is quite good for us all. It is, therefore, as alien "to the Capitalist West as it is to the Far East."

That point, Williams said, is vital to the "specificity of Christian faith" and its "authenticity."



In terms of the importance of Christianity in the Holy Land to hopes for peace, speakers repeatedly stressed that although Christianity have a small sociological footprint, it is, in the words of Tauran, "a minority that matters." Churches operate a vast network of schools and universities, hospitals, and social service centers, and individual Christians make key contributions to business, politics, and arts and culture.

Several observers also insisted the presence of Christianity keeps alive the notion of the Holy Land as a pluralistic space in which tolerance, democracy, and respect for human rights are essential "and, conversely, the disappearance of Christianity would send the wrong signal about the future direction of the region.

In that sense, the presence or absence of a flourishing Christian minority is a bellwether for the political and cultural health of the society.

Perhaps the most compelling form of that argument came from Lubna Alzaroo, a young Palestinian Muslim who currently attends Bethlehem University, an institution sponsored by the De La Salle Christian Brothers. Raised in Hebron, Alzaroo said her family can trace its roots in the area back 1,500 years.

In the mid-1960s, Alzaroo said, Hebron had a small Christian community, but today it's entirely disappeared. (There's a Christian elementary school, she said, but its student population is entirely Muslim.) As a result, she didn't actually meet a Christian until she was 18 years old, and that encounter

came during a study program in the United States.

It's not a coincidence, Alzaroo said, that Hebron is considered the most religiously conservative city in the Palestinian Territories, and thus an incubator for more radical and militant currents.

'Part of the reason is the lack of pluralism,' she said. 'The more isolated they become, the more they think their way is the only way.'

Given the link between the presence of Christianity and the plausibility of a democratic and tolerant Palestine, Alzaroo offered this dramatic warning: If Christianity were to disappear, she said, 'It would have ramifications as catastrophic for the Palestinians as the Nakba in 1948.'

('Nakba' is an Arabic term, roughly meaning 'disaster,' which Palestinians use to refer to their displacement following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.)

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Making the case for concern, of course, is the easy part. Knowing what to do is far harder, in part because the situation is maddeningly complex. One consensus was that any intervention in defense of Christians in the Holy Land, and, more broadly, in favor of peace in the region, cannot come off as partisan — i.e., biased in favor of one party to the conflict or the other.

Twal, who is himself a Jordanian, put it this way: 'The only authentic pro-Israeli position is one that's also pro-Palestinian and pro-peace.'

Beyond that call for balance, at least three recurrent tensions ran through the discussions at Lambeth Palace — open questions which drew differing answers, depending upon who was speaking.

1. What's the impact of Israeli policy on Christians?

Samer Makhoulf, a Latin Catholic and executive director of 'One Voice' in Palestine, a grassroots movement that brings together young Palestinians and Israelis to promote peace, said that of the four problems facing Christians in the Holy Land, the first three are 'occupation, occupation, occupation.'

Makhoulf described Israeli military and security policy, which Palestinians capture with the term 'occupation,' as 'the father of all the problems in the region.'

Over and over, Palestinian Christians insisted that the main factors fueling their exodus — political discrimination and a sense of second-class citizenship, lack of economic development and employment, restrictions on their freedom of movement, and so on — are fundamentally the result of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, rather than explicit discrimination against Christians.

One frequently cited difficulty involves access to Christian holy sites. Palestinians living in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem hold different residency cards, and they cannot move from one place to the other without special permits. It can be virtually impossible for a Christian in Bethlehem, for instance, to travel to Jerusalem to worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. (That's true even if a permit is granted, many speakers said, since Easter coincides with the Jewish festival of Pesach, when a security lockdown is imposed.)

As Mourra put it, 'It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a Palestinian to go to Jerusalem.'

Residency policies can have a devastating impact on families. Reportedly, there are some 200 Christian

families living apart today, split between members in the West Bank and members in Jerusalem.

Hana Bendcowsky, a Jewish Israeli affiliated with the Jerusalem Centre for Christian Jewish Relations, warned of hardening Israeli attitudes towards Christianity. A 2009 survey, she said, found that 18-29 year old Israelis hold more negative views of Christians than older generations.

At root, she said, Jews in Israel have a hard time thinking of themselves as a majority. They see tend to see the Christians in their midst not as an embattled minority, but a "doubly threatening majority" part of both the Arab world and the Christian West.

There was also an undercurrent of frustration at the London meeting about negotiations which have lingered since 1993 over the "Fundamental Agreement" between Israel and the Vatican, which among other things was supposed to regulate the tax and legal status of church properties in Israel. The terms of the agreement have never been implemented by the Israeli Knesset, and in the meantime, Israeli has declared certain important Christian sites, such as Mount Tabor and Capernaum, to be national parks, overriding Christian control.

As one speaker put it, those acts seem part of an Israeli policy of creating "facts on the ground" that unilaterally reshape negotiations.

During a plenary session at the end of the gathering, a recommendation surfaced that church leaders should urge Israel to act and should also urge the Vatican to keep up the pressure. The fear is that if Israel ignores its deal with the Vatican, it erodes public confidence in the possibility of a negotiated settlement to anything.

On the other hand, several speakers noted that as the lone genuine democracy in the region, Israel has a track record of giving minorities, including Christians, a better break than they find elsewhere. Some argued that Christianity is actually doing comparatively well inside Israel itself.

Sperber said that more than 50,000 Christians have recently settled in Israel from the former territories of the Soviet Union, and adding to those numbers are other émigrés from the Balkans and from Asia, especially the Philippines. As a result, he said, "the churches are full in Tel Aviv and Haifa," and he sees the same thing in Jerusalem.

Sperber said there is also a "tremendous upsurge" in Christian pilgrimage in Israel so much so, he said, that his neighbors often find it difficult to get out of their houses because their narrow alleyways are stuffed with Christian tourists.

In fact, Sperber said, there is "a renaissance of Christian activity in the state of Israel." He added that Israel is one of the few countries in the Middle East where the Christian population is growing, and where Christian institutions enjoy state support.

Bernard Sabellah, a Palestinian Christian academic and a member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, offered a different take.

There were roughly 35,000 Christians in the territory of Israel in 1948, he said, while today the number is 110,000. Given the natural rate of demographic increase over a half-century, he said, the Christian population today should be 150,000, which means that there are a "missing" 40,000 Christians in Israel. Moreover, he asserted, a recent survey of young Christians in Israel found that 26 percent want to leave the same percentage as in the Palestinian Territories.

As a result, Sabellah said, for Christians, "the state system is not a blessing from the Israeli government."

2. What to make of the Arab Spring?

Nowhere in the Christian world does one find a more positive treatment of secularism than in the Middle East. In the West, secularism is often the bogeyman of the Christian imagination, because it's identified with declines in religious faith and practice and in the impact of traditional moral values. In the Middle East, Christians generally see secularism as a survival strategy – the only viable alternative to corrupt authoritarian regimes on the one hand, and Islamic theocracy on the other.

Reflecting that psychology, considerable enthusiasm coursed through the Lambeth gathering about the Arab Spring, and the vision of pluralistic, democratic, and participatory societies which seem to animate its young protagonists.



"The recent Arab Spring of youth in the region is spreading," Twal said. "Sooner or later, with violence or peacefully, it is coming. No regime is immune to these events."

The Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Suheil Dawani, said the Arab Spring demonstrates that "the people are demanding to be heard," and that as Arab Christians, "we join our Arab brothers and sisters."

Sabellah said the Arab Spring reflects the reality that the majority of Arabs want to live "in an open, preferably secular, democratic society." That's especially true, he said, for Christians.

"I have no problem with Islam, but I want to be a citizen, not a tolerated minority by a gracious act of Israel, or Assad, or Abu Mazen, or the King of Jordan," he said.

"Citizenship" was a key theme throughout the meeting, seeming to capture a distinctly Arab Christian vision of secular society. Zoughbi once again put the point in pithy fashion: In the Middle East, he said, "We don't need liberation theology. We need liberation from theology."

Yet some Christians cannot help but feel ambivalent about the Arab Spring, wondering if it will really deliver on those heady promises.

"I look at it with great hope, but also great worry and fear," Makhoul said. "If it means greater democracy and more free societies, that's very promising. But the future is not clear – What's next? Is it the Muslim Brotherhood? More Islamic regimes in the region?"

Others echoed those sentiments.

McCarrick said he recently returned from a trip to Gaza, where he met both with young people and with some of the elders. While the youth expressed frustration about the lack of movement and the difficulty of obtaining visas, he said, the elderly voiced deeper worries.

‘They’re afraid of Hamas, and they’re afraid of the Arab Spring, what it might mean for the government there,’ he said.

Likewise, conservative British MP Tony Baldry said he recently visited Egypt, where he met with both Coptic and Catholic leaders who ‘are not optimistic’ about the Arab Spring. Christian leaders in Egypt, he said, worry that ‘by next year, the Muslim Brotherhood will be in control of the military’ with potentially threatening consequences for the country’s Christian minority.

Harry Hagopian, a Jerusalem-based representative of the Armenian Orthodox Patriarchate and also an advisor to the Catholic bishops of England and Wales on the Middle East, put it this way: ‘The Arab Spring is bringing down walls, and sometimes kicking up dust.’

To the extent there was a consensus, it might be expressed this way: There’s much to applaud in the Arab Spring, but it’s also naïve, as Baldry put it, ‘to think that every change is necessarily for the better.’

3. Is political advocacy or grassroots effort the way to go?

Repeatedly, speakers at the Lambeth event said that politicians, both inside and outside the Holy Land, appear incapable of resolving the region’s problems. There seemed little confidence in a new outburst of sensibility.

Indeed, there was a palpable sense that politics is driving the region towards a new cycle of disaster with the potential for a new Intifada, or a new war in Lebanon, or new conflict between Al-Fatah and Hamas. Several speakers even raised the prospect that in Gaza, Hamas is coming to seem a ‘moderate’ force up against even more radical currents of Islam.

Though it wasn’t much discussed, participants were obviously conscious of the likelihood of a September vote on Palestinian statehood in the General Assembly of the United Nations, and the prospect that it too could unleash new conflict.

As a result, some suggested that the right approach to aiding Christians is to focus on bottom-up, grassroots initiatives, ignoring the bleak political landscape.

‘We are not sitting by the wayside waiting for politicians or anyone else to create a path to peace,’ Dawani said.

He pointed to a number of concrete efforts launched by Christian leaders, including a new joint project in Jerusalem between the Anglican and Catholic churches intended to give young Christian families access to decent housing. A wide range of similar initiatives, either already under way or in the planning stages, were floated over the two days.

On the other hand, several speakers insisted that one cannot simply throw in the towel on the political process – especially given the obvious linkage between the specific plight of Christians and the broader Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

‘The greatest single thing Christians worldwide can do [to help believers in the Holy Land] is to encourage a two-state solution,’ said Stephen Colecchi, director of the U.S. bishops’ Office of International Justice and Peace. He argued that the drive to work locally, and on a small scale, must be ‘held together’ with broader political advocacy.

Robert Edmunds, chaplain to the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, said that many grassroots initiatives amount to ‘band-aids,’ and that ‘if we don’t encourage the government of Israel to cut a deal, we’re going to be putting on band-aids for a very long time.’

Edmunds insisted he’s not opposed to such projects: ‘Band-aids are important,’ he said. ‘They keep you from bleeding to death.’ Yet until there’s a broad political solution, he said, the grassroots approach risks ending in ‘words and good will’ that don’t fundamentally change the realities on the ground.

In the end, the approach that seemed to prevail was ‘both/and?’ small-scale initiatives as a form of confidence-building measures, while continuing the pursuit of a political game-changer.

In terms of how to do effective advocacy, Sabellah stressed the importance of a limited and pragmatic agenda.

‘Lofty dialogue will get you nowhere,’ he said. ‘Let’s not waste effort.’ He suggested a narrow focus on practical matters such as residency, housing, and freedom of movement, which could be resolved even in the absence of a comprehensive peace deal.

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Towards the end of the meeting, an effort was made to identify concrete ideas that would be of help to Christians in the Holy Land, and which could be achieved not in a far-off speculative future, but in the here and now.

A sampling of those proposals follows.

1. A targeted push with the Israeli authorities in favor of easier access to the holy sites, especially movement from the West Bank to Jerusalem. As Nichols put it, ‘The de facto separation of Bethlehem from Jerusalem seems to sum up the frustration and fear that people feel.’
2. Supporting projects such as ‘Friends of the Holy Land,’ a new charity established under Catholic auspices in England and Wales and now endorsed by Williams and the Church of England as an ecumenical project.
3. Encouraging Catholic charities around the world to focus on projects in the Holy Land, such as water supplies, medical care, housing and employment.
4. Encouraging pilgrimage and tourism to the Holy Land, under a ‘new template’ which would focus not merely on seeing historical sites but also encountering living Christian faith communities.
5. Launching an umbrella group for Christian NGOs which would pool their efforts, both in terms of political advocacy and on-the-ground aid projects.
6. Organizing a conference similar to the Lambeth event in the United States. That idea came from Kicanas, who suggested bringing religious, political and cultural leaders in the States together for a similar high-level discussion.
7. Inviting Palestinian Christian students from Bethlehem University to spend a few months abroad, perhaps as part of an exchange program. They could be hosted by parishes, and also have the chance to meet with political leaders in those areas.
8. Conducting a church study of Christian Messianic Zionism ? i.e., the view that the return of Jews to

Israel is a prerequisite to the Second Coming ? and what it means for the Christians living in Palestine.

9. Preparing homiletic materials to promote preaching and faith formation about the situation facing Christians in the Holy Land.
10. Supporting the Vatican's position on an international statute for Jerusalem, in which the holy sites would be accorded legal protection, and also encouraging the Israeli government to implement the Fundamental Agreement.
11. Reaching out to the Palestinian Christian diaspora in the United States and Europe, promoting relationships with their fellow Christians who remain in the Palestinian Territories.
12. Promoting micro-finance and job training programs for Christians in Israel and the Palestinian Territories.
13. Developing classes for the non-Christian majorities in Israel and the Palestinian Territories to educate them about the Christian presence.
14. Encouraging business firms in the West to ?adopt? a Christian enterprise in Palestine, meaning to enter into partnership and ensure its access to markets.
15. Developing an ecumenical day of prayer for the Christians of the Holy Land, so that one day a year they know the entire Christian world is praying on their behalf.
16. Developing a web-based communications network which would allow the Christians of the Holy Land to connect with the global church about their daily challenges.
17. Ensuring that advocacy and aid related to Christians in the Holy Land is truly ecumenical, beginning with a sustained Anglican/Catholic partnership.
18. Parishes in the West ?adopting? a Christian parish, or an entire community, in the Holy Land. Sperber suggested an analogy with the way Jews in the 19th century adopted fledgling communities in Ottoman Palestine, which helped solidify the Jewish presence in the land.

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Here's one final reflection, on the ecumenical significance of what happened in Lambeth Palace this week.

Williams and Nichols were genuine co-chairs of the event. It was not a typical ecclesiastical summit, where the VIPs issue a few words of greeting at the beginning and then scuttle off to other appointments. Williams and Nichols sat together on the dais throughout, introducing speakers and listening carefully, then offering reflections of their own. They also held a joint press conference at the end, presenting everything as a common reflection and plan of action.

For anyone conscious of the strained past (and, for that matter, present) of Anglican/Catholic relations, it was an impressive display of partnership. In particular, the event seemed to rebut fears that recent turbulence caused by creation of a Catholic ordinariate to welcome ex-Anglicans would somehow shut down the relationship.

Williams and Nichols did everything possible to strike an image of common cause. During a brief press conference at the conclusion of the event, a British reporter asked for comment on a pending visit to the U.K. by American pastor John Hagee, known for his staunchly pro-Israeli views which, in the eyes of some, buttress extremist positions inside Israel.

Nichols fielded the question, conceding that he's never heard of Hagee, but saying that ?I would trust the intelligence of people in this country to judge his remarks appropriately,? and then added: ?He seems to have a very different approach than we do.?

The ?we? in that sentence, of course, was himself and Williams.

No doubt, the growing divide between Anglicanism and Catholicism on a well-known canon of issues ? including women priests and women bishops, homosexuality and same-sex marriage, and the whole question of ecclesial authority ? has made structural reunion more difficult. But if this week in London proved anything, it's that those differences do not have to prevent the two churches from working together on other matters, and in a spirit of real friendship.

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