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Five myths about anti-Christian persecution

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

In his annual address to diplomats Monday, Pope Benedict XVI highlighted religious freedom with emphasis on persecuted Christians around the world.

"In many countries, Christians are deprived of fundamental rights and sidelined from public life," he said. "In other countries, they endure violent attacks against their churches and their homes."

This week, a delegation of Catholic bishops from Europe and the States tried to shine a spotlight on one small chapter of this global story: the Gaza Strip, where 2,500 Christians live amid an overwhelmingly Muslim population of 1.5 million. They're caught in a vise formed by Islamic militancy on one side and an Israeli- and Egyptian-imposed blockade on the other.

English Bishop William Kenney told the Christians of Gaza, "You are not forgotten."

It's a lovely sentiment, and the bishops of the Holy Land Coordination, which includes Tucson Bishop Gerald Kicanas as the American representative, deserve credit for their efforts. One wonders, however, how much reality there is behind Kenney's claim.

French intellectual Régis Debray, a veteran leftist who fought alongside Che Guevara in Bolivia, has observed that anti-Christian persecution unfolds squarely in the political blind spot of the West -- the victims are usually "too Christian" to excite the left, "too foreign" to interest the right.

As a contribution towards erasing that blind spot, let's debunk five common myths about anti-Christian persecution.

Myth No. 1: Christians are vulnerable only where they're a minority

First of all, even if this were true, it would hardly diminish the seriousness of the issue. According to a recent Pew Forum analysis, 10 percent of Christians live in societies in which they're a minority. Given that there are 2.18 billion Christians on the planet, this translates into more than 200 million people, many facing threats such as those in the Gaza Strip.

Any scourge that imperils 200 million people, whatever the cause, would merit concern.

Yet it's palpably false that persecution occurs only where Christians are a minority. According to October 2010 data from the Pew Forum, Christians face harassment in a staggering total of 133 countries, representing more than two-thirds of all nations on earth, including many where Christians are a strong majority.

A glance at a recent list put together by Fides, the Vatican's missionary news agency, of Catholic pastoral workers killed during the past year illustrates the point.

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Of the 26 who lost their lives in 2011, only one died in a country where Christians are a minority: Polish Salesian Fr. Marek Rybinski, killed in Tunisia in February. All the rest died in countries where Christians are a majority, including several overwhelmingly Catholic nations such as Colombia, Mexico, Burundi, South Sudan and the Philippines.

Colombia, the sixth-largest Catholic country on the planet, was also the world's most dangerous place to be a Catholic pastoral worker in 2011. Six priests and one layman died, adding to a bloody count of 70 priests, two bishops, eight religious and three seminarians killed in Colombia since 1984.

One of the most harrowing new martyrologies of 2011 came out of Mexico, where 92 percent of the population is Catholic. Mary Elizabeth Mac'as Castro, a leader in the Scalabrinian Lay Movement and a blogger, was beheaded for exposing the activities of a drug cartel; according to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, she was the first journalist in the world killed for use of social media.

Anywhere Christians openly profess their faith, take stands against injustice or put themselves in harm's way on account of the Gospel, they are at risk -- whatever the religious demographics of the place happen to be.

Myth No. 2: It's all about Islam

A disproportionate share of anti-Christian persecution is, indeed, fueled by radical Islam. Open Doors, an Evangelical group, put nine Muslim states on its "Top 10" list for 2011 of the most dangerous places for Christians, including Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Somalia and Iran.

Yet simply identifying anti-Christian persecution with Islam is misleading. There are compelling examples of collaboration between Christians and Muslims in many parts of the world, which is the basis for Pope Benedict XVI's vision of an "Alliance of Civilizations." (One of the major political parties in the Philippines, for instance, is the "Christian Muslim Democrats.") It also should not be forgotten that the most numerous victims of Muslim extremism are, in fact, other Muslims.

Moreover, radical Islam is hardly the only source of anti-Christian animus. Christians suffer from a slew of other forces, including:

- Ultra-nationalism (as in Turkey, where extreme nationalists tend to be a greater threat than Islamists)
- Totalitarian states, especially of the Communist variety (China, North Korea)
- Hindu radicalism (Anti-Christian aggression has become routine in some regions of India. This week, Hindu radicals armed with sticks and iron bars attacked 20 Pentecostal Christians in a private home near Bangalore, an assault that left the pastor missing a finger on his left hand. When Christians reported similar assaults two weeks ago, a member of the state's official Commission for Minorities, which is under the control of a nationalist Hindu party, shrugged it off: "If you really knew the teachings of Jesus, Christians should not be complaining," he reportedly said.)
- Buddhist radicalism (as in Sri Lanka, where, contrary to stereotypes of Buddhist tolerance, mobs led by Buddhist monks attacked Christian churches and other targets across the country in 2009)
- Corporate interests (as in Brazil's Amazon region, where Christian activists have been killed for protesting injustices by agri-business conglomerates)
- Organized crime, narco-traffickers, and petty thugs (For instance, the 1993 murder of Mexican Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo, shot 14 times at the Guadalajara airport by gunmen linked to a drug cartel, or the assassination in the same year of Italian Fr. Giuseppe Puglisi, a bitter critic of the Sicilian mafia.)
- State-imposed security policies (as in Israel, where checkpoints, visa requirements and other restrictions divide Christian families between East Jerusalem and the West Bank and make it virtually impossible for Christians in one location to worship in the other)
- Even, believe it or not, Christian radicalism

If that last entry seems counter-intuitive, consider what happened in the village of San Rafael Tlanalapan, in the Mexican state of Puebla, this past September. Seventy local Protestants were forced to flee after a band of traditionalist Catholics issued a chilling ultimatum: Leave immediately or be "crucified or lynched."

The point is that extremism and intolerance of whatever stripe, not Islam, is the threat.

Myth No. 3: No one saw it coming

When Christians are targeted, politicians and police often play the role of Capt. Louis Renault in *Casablanca*, professing shock at what happened but suggesting the violence was an unforeseeable calamity rather than a failure of vigilance. Yet in a disturbing number of instances, the warning signs were all too clear.

Turkey offers an example. On June 3, 2010, Bishop Luigi Padovese, an Italian Capuchin and the Apostolic Vicar of Anatolia, was murdered by his driver, who claimed he had a private revelation identifying Padovese as the anti-Christ. Since the driver had been receiving psychiatric treatment, Turkish authorities announced there was no "political motive" and declared the case closed.

What that failed to acknowledge was the general climate in which a madman might get the idea that a Catholic bishop was evil.

Shortly after Padovese arrived in 2004, negotiations began toward Turkey's membership in the EU, inflaming nationalist resentments. Between that point and Padovese's death in 2010, a clear pattern of menace emerged to the tiny Christian minority (150,000 out of 72 million):

- In 2005, polemical mini-dramas about the Crusades aired on Turkish television, which led to rocks being tossed through the windows of Christian churches, garbage being left on the doorsteps of churches and verbal abuse of Christian clergy in the streets.
- Also in 2005, a sensational book was published by a Turk named Ilker Cinar, who claimed to be a former Protestant who had returned to Islam, titled *I Was a Missionary -- the Code is Decoded*. He claimed that Christians were working with Kurdish separatists and wanted to destroy the nation.
- On Jan. 8, 2006, a Protestant church leader in Adana was beaten by five young men.
- On Feb. 5, 2006, an Italian Catholic missionary named Fr. Andrea Santoro was shot to death in the city of Trabzon by a 16-year-old shouting "Allahu Akhbar." (Padovese celebrated the funeral Mass.)
- In the weeks after Santoro's murder, Slovenian Fr. Martin Kmetec was thrown into a garden and threatened with death in the port city of Izmir, while French Fr. Pierre Brunissen was stabbed with a knife in the Black Sea port of Samsun.
- On Jan. 19, 2007, a prominent Turkish Christian of Armenian descent, Hrant Dink, was assassinated in Istanbul.
- On April 18, 2007, three Christian missionaries who ran a small publishing operation were murdered in Malatya.
- In 2009, Turkish media published reports about the "Cage Plan," a scheme hatched by ultra-nationalists in tandem with elements of the military to destabilize the state through attacks on Christians, Armenians, Kurds, Jews and Alevis.

In that context, does it really make sense to style Padovese's murder as an isolated act? Or is it more accurate to say that even if no one could have predicted the precise time and target of the next attack, Turkey had allowed a perilous climate to fester?

In fairness, Turkish authorities took steps after 2007 to tone down anti-Christian polemics in the media, and, according to the Association of Protestant Churches in Turkey, violence has waned. Its annual report listed 19 anti-Christian attacks in 2007 and 14 in 2008, but only two in 2009. The Padovese murder, however, suggests that changing the climate remains a work in progress.

(As a footnote, Turkey's largest English-language newspaper, *Today's Zaman*, carried a fascinating column in mid-December comparing the Vatican's tepid response to the Santoro and Padovese murders to the aggressive Protestant approach in the Dink and Malatya cases. The Protestants have assembled a high-powered team of lawyers to push for a serious investigation, and have worked hard to sustain media interest. According to columnist Orhan Kemal Cengiz, there has been, by way of contrast, "an absolute lack of pressure by the Vatican." He attributes that to a mistaken diagnosis in Rome that too much pressure might inflame Christian/Muslim tensions; in fact, Cengiz says, the guilty parties are extreme Turkish nationalists.)

Myth No. 4: It's only persecution if the motives are religious

Scanning the Fides list of pastoral workers killed in 2011, it's tempting to conclude that much of this violence isn't really anti-Christian. In many instances, it seems more like a case of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One Colombian priest, for example, was knifed to death by a thief trying to steal his cellphone; another was shot by thugs who were after his motorcycle. The same point could be made about Sr. Lukrecija Mamica, a Croatian member of the Sisters of Charity, and lay Italian volunteer Francesco Bazzani, both murdered in Burundi in November. Mamica was killed during a robbery at the sisters' residence; the thieves then kidnapped Bazzani and killed him when a standoff with police went bad.

Or consider what happened on Wednesday in Kirkuk, Iraq, where gunmen opened fire on the Chaldean

Archbishop's palace. Police suggested it was a mistake and that the terrorists had intended to attack the nearby home of a Turkmen member of the Iraqi parliament. Luckily, no one inside the archbishop's residence was harmed, but suppose someone had been -- would that count as anti-Christian violence?

Certainly, none of these cases fit the traditional definition of martyrdom, which require that someone be killed *in odium fidei* -- out of hatred for the faith. Even that standard, however, is being stretched these days. Pope John Paul II added martyrs killed *in odium ecclesiae*, out of hatred for the church, and many theologians believe martyrdom should include not only deaths for hatred of the faith, but also hatred of virtues essential to the faith.

In any event, today's risks are hardly limited to classic instances of martyrdom, but a wide variety of circumstances in which Christians are in harm's way. Even if they're not attacked for religious motives, their reasons for being in that spot are usually rooted in their faith.

In Burundi, for instance, Mamica and Bazzani almost certainly weren't targeted because they were Christians. In all likelihood, their killers simply thought that a nuns' residence had stuff worth stealing, and it wouldn't be heavily guarded. Still, a religious woman and lay volunteer from Europe obviously knew there were far safer places to be than northwestern Burundi, an epicenter of the 1994 genocide. They chose to be there because their religious beliefs compelled them to reach out to forgotten and vulnerable people.

Similarly, by now Archbishop Louis Sako and the other Chaldeans in Kirkuk, both clergy and laity, easily could have joined the exodus of Christians out of Iraq. They choose to stay, most probably because they believe in the importance of a Christian witness, or because they're simply unwilling to see their church extinguished after 2,000 years of history.

In identifying Christians who need help, the only thing that should matter is that they're in the firing line -- not what's in the head of whoever's pulling the trigger.

Myth No. 5: Anti-Christian persecution is a right-wing issue

Of the five myths considered here, this is undoubtedly the most pernicious. If we can agree on anything in this polarized world, it ought to be that persecution of people on the basis of their beliefs -- whatever those beliefs may be -- is intolerable.

Granted, anti-Christian persecution was first put on the American political map in the mid-1990s by a constellation of conservative activists and intellectuals, such as Michael Horowitz, Nina Shea and Paul Marshall. Writing in *The New York Times Magazine* in 1997, Jeffrey Goldberg called the newfound concern with persecuted Christians "an issue manufactured in the mile-square section of Washington that produces the most priceless of political commodities: the wedge issue."

Goldberg went on to describe how the crusade to defend persecuted Christians pits several important domestic constituencies against one another.

- Mainline church groups vs. evangelicals and conservative Catholics (The then-general secretary of the National Council of Churches, Joan Brown Campbell, groused in '97 that the movement smacked of an "overly muscular Christianity.")
- Social conservatives vs. pro-business groups and the foreign policy establishment (China tends to be the focal point. Do we impose sanctions because of China's record on religious freedom, or not?)
- Traditional human rights groups (Human Rights Watch, the ACLU) vs. faith-based movements

To some extent, those divisions still exist. One could add that in the post-9/11 era, anti-Christian violence by Muslims is a terrific rallying cry for hawks on the American right, which may help explain why some liberals remain skittish.

All this, however, says much more about American politics than the nature of anti-Christian persecution. Alas, we've developed a political culture that could turn Mom and apple pie into wedge issues too.

The truth is that persecution against Christians, ideologically speaking, is an equal-opportunity enterprise.

One thinks, for instance, of the famous martyrs of the liberation theology movement, such as Archbishop Oscar Romero, or the six Jesuits and two women murdered in El Salvador in 1989. There's also Guatemalan Bishop Juan José Gerardi, beaten to death in 1998 two days after releasing a report on his country's civil war that heavily criticized the army and right-wing paramilitary groups. More recently, there's American Sr. Dorothy Stang, murdered in Brazil in 2005 for advocacy on behalf of poor and indigenous Amazonians; or Indian Sr. Valsha John, slain this past year for defending members of the tribal underclass against expropriation of their land by coal mining companies.

Defending persecuted Christians, in other words, is hardly an effort that should concern the political and theological right alone. Styling anti-Christian persecution as a political football is not only an obscenity, but it's factually inaccurate.

[John L. Allen Jr. is *NCR*'s senior correspondent. His email address is jallen@ncronline.org.]

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