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Playing politics with the global war on Christians

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Most people, most of the time, are fundamentally decent. Hence if they knew that there's a minority facing an epidemic of persecution -- a staggering total of 150,000 martyrs every year, meaning 17 deaths every hour -- there would almost certainly be a groundswell of moral and political outrage.

There is such a minority in the world today, and it's Christianity. The fact that there isn't yet a broad-based movement to fight anti-Christian persecution suggests something is missing in public understanding.

In part, of course, the problem is that unquestionable acts of persecution, such as murder and imprisonment, are sometimes confused with a perceived cultural and legal "war on religion" in the West, a less clear-cut proposition. In part, too, it's because of the antique prejudice that holds that Christianity is always the oppressor, never the oppressed.

Yet as with most things, politics also has a distorting effect, and a story out of Israel this week makes the point.

On Tuesday, the doors of a Trappist monastery in Latrun, near Jerusalem, were set ablaze, with provocative phrases in Hebrew spray-painted on the exterior walls, such as "Jesus is a monkey." The assault was attributed to extremist Jews unhappy with the recent dismantling of two settlements on nearby Palestinian land.

Founded in 1890 by French Trappists, the Latrun monastery is famed for its strict religious observance. Israelis call it *minzar ha'shatkanim*, meaning "the monastery of those who don't speak." Ironically, it's known for fostering dialogue with Judaism, and welcomes hundreds of Jewish visitors every week.

Tuesday's attack was not an isolated incident. In 2009, a Franciscan church near the Cenacle on Mount

Zion, regarded by tradition as the site of Christ's Last Supper, was defaced with a spray-painted Star of David and slogans such as "Christians Out!" and "We Killed Jesus!" According to reports, the vandals also urinated on the door and left a trail of urine leading to the church.

Last February, the Franciscan Custodian of the Holy Land wrote to Israeli authorities to appeal for better protection after another wave of vandalism struck a Baptist church, a Christian cemetery and a Greek Orthodox monastery. That time, slogans included "Death to Christianity," "We will crucify you!" and "Mary is a whore."

At the time, the custodian, Franciscan Fr. Pierbattista Pizzaballa, complained that no arrests had been made in any of these cases.

Israeli observers say these assaults are part of what's called the "price tag" campaign, meaning the vow by extremists that a price will be paid every time a settlement is dismantled -- not just by those actually responsible for the demolition, but also by groups in Israeli society, such as the Christian minority, perceived to support the Palestinians and the ending of settlements. Frequent targets also include mosques, places of gathering for Arabs, and Israeli pacifists.

The assaults on Christian holy sites also reflect a nasty, if little-discussed, streak of broader anti-Christian animus in some Israeli circles. Local priests have reported that sometimes Yeshiva students chant insulting slogans at them, or even throw stones and spit in their direction.

The Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land released a statement in reaction to the latest attack.

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"What is happening in Israeli society to the point that Christians are the sacrificial lambs of such violence?" they asked. "Those who left their hate-filled graffiti expressed outrage at the eviction of illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank. But why are they taking it out on Christians and their places of worship?"

"What kind of 'teaching of contempt' for Christians is being communicated in their schools and in their homes?" the bishops asked. "And why are the culprits not found and brought to justice? ... It is time for the authorities to put an end to this senseless violence and ensure a teaching of respect in schools for all those who call this land home."

(The phrase "teaching of contempt" was deliberately chosen, since critics have long charged that Christianity fostered a teaching of contempt about Judaism over the centuries. Today, the bishops appear to be suggesting the shoe is in the other foot.)

To be clear, so far these outrages haven't resulted in any deaths -- as opposed to, say, the thousands of Christians killed in Nigeria by the radical Islamist "Boko Haram" movement, or the hundreds who died in the Indian state of Orissa during anti-Christian pogroms in 2008. Israel remains a fundamentally safe environment for Christians, certainly as compared to most places in its immediate neighborhood.

Nonetheless, the question remains: Why haven't these blatant acts of prejudice become a cause célèbre? I can think of at least three reasons.

First, some Christians may be hesitant to speak out because, in this instance, the prejudice is coming from Jews. Given the long and depressing history of anti-Judaism in Christianity, some Christians may, in their

gut, be tempted to feel: "Yeah, this is disgusting, but in a way we've got it coming."

Second, most Christians in the Holy Land are passionately pro-Palestinian, for the obvious reason that many are Palestinians themselves. Some Christians in the West sympathetic to Israel are therefore reluctant to take up their causes, however deserving in themselves, for fear of weakening the Israeli position.

Third, the travails of a handful of Trappist monks in Israel -- or Dalit and tribal Christians in India, or Nigerian Christians menaced by the Boko Haram, or the 150,000 new Christian martyrs every year generally -- simply have a hard time breaking through the media filter in the West, perhaps especially in the United States, where it's now all 2012 elections all the time.

All of this, however, amounts to an explanation, not an excuse. If the defense of persecuted Christians is ever to become a transcendent social cause, analogous to the defense of Soviet Jews in the 1970s, or the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, it can't be selective in its energy.

If the perception is that the West will push back when Muslims harass Christians, but not when Jews do it -- or, to take another perceived inconsistency, that the United States will react when Christians are menaced in Iran, but not in China -- then the oppressors will rightly conclude that the real concern isn't defending a vulnerable minority, but scoring political points.

Perhaps Christians could take a page on this score from the Anti-Defamation League, which, needless to say, is not an outfit known for being soft on the defense of Israel. Yet on Tuesday, shortly after the assault on the monastery, they issued a statement strongly condemning it.

"We stand in solidarity with the monks of the monastery against this heinous act of religious intolerance and hate," the ADL said, calling for the perpetrators to be severely punished.

One wonders what difference it might make if Christians across the West, both in officialdom and at the grassroots, were to react that swiftly and unequivocally -- protesting not just anti-Christian outbreaks in Israel, but wherever they occur.

There are at least 150,000 at-risk Christians on the planet right now who would probably love to find out.

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