

Christianity and Genocide?

In the lead-up to Easter, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron committed his government to fighting the persecution of Christians abroad, saying no group is under more pressure for its faith.

Cameron is not alone in making the claim. In February, U.S. Congressman Chris Smith said, "The global persecution of Christians has gone from bad to worse." In November 2012, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, "Christianity is the most persecuted religion worldwide." In January 2011, former Lebanese President Amine Gemayal said, "What is happening to Christians is a genocide."

In May, Christian Solidarity International an international human rights organization issued a Genocide Alert for Christians and other religious minorities in Syria and Egypt. (See the United Nations definition of genocide [here](#).)

On March 12, the day before Cameron's announcement, Lord David Alton, of the U.K.'s House of Lords, spoke at a Lenten Vigil dedicated to the suffering church in Syria and the Middle East. During the service, Alton highlighted the systematic killing and outright persecution of Christians, which he said "takes place without hardly a murmur of protest."

"There is a mistaken belief that somehow this has little or nothing to do with us," he said.

Speaking in a town near London, Alton discussed in detail what he said is the "complete denial about the existence of religiously motivated persecution" in hopes of encouraging policymakers, intelligence services and the media to have a more considered understanding of religious radicalization and intolerance.

“Religious illiteracy amongst policy makers in Western nations means that the way we view these conflicts has led to serious mistakes,” he said.

Alton’s talk, titled “Paying a Price for Belief,” addressed maltreatment of Christians globally but focused on specifically on North Korea, Pakistan and Syria—places where he said being a Christian requires one to pay the ultimate price for their faith.

“The two greatest fault lines of our times are the fault lines between Christianity and secularism, and Christianity and Islam,” he said. “Unless we lay bare the ideology which lies behind radical Islamist thinking—and which too often reduces God to the status of a faction leader or tribal chief –and challenge the conspiracy of silence which surrounds the question of religious persecution, at the hands of radical Islamists and atheists alike, we will sleep-walk into a massive tragedy.”

Since 1948 the U.N.’s Declaration of Human Rights has enshrined the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, but the document “is not worth the paper on which it is written,” Alton said. “In country after country, all of this has been ignored. And little wonder that Pope Benedict on his visit to the Holy Land remarked: ‘Churches in the Middle East are threatened in their very existence.’ “

Persecution is not limited to Christians. An Indonesian atheist was fined and jailed for 2 1/2 years after posting the words “God does not exist” and controversial cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad on his Facebook page. Rohingya Muslims live under pressure in Burma, Bahias in Iran, and Tibetan Buddhists in China. However, Alton said, in every country where religious persecution occurs, Christians are in the front line.

This, he said, demands a response from Muslims in the West:

“If, in the face of evil deeds, secularists and Christians need to weigh up their silence and priorities, so do our Muslim brothers. Muslims, who have often settled in our democracies, need to be much braver in breaking the conspiracy of silence and in identifying with those who suffer – among whom are many Muslim victims of visceral hatred motivated by persecution for being the wrong kind of Muslims. Never forget that many of these families came to Europe to escape the intolerance of countries like Pakistan, where a young Muslim girl was shot for wanting an education, and its Catholic minister for minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, was assassinated for preaching co-existence.

“Many of our European Muslims are good, law-abiding people, who want the same things for themselves and for their families as the rest of us. They are not, as some foolishly and wrongly caricature them, an enemy within. But if they remain silent it will increasingly be seen as acquiescence. It will, however, require real courage to speak out against forces which have no respect for difference or diversity, or for life itself.”