

Christianity in Danger of Extinction in Its Birthplace

Respected United Kingdom historian Tom Holland said during a briefing in London this week that the world is watching the effective extinction of Christianity in its birthplace.

In an apocalyptic appraisal of the worsening political situation in the Middle East, a panel of experts provided a mass of evidence and statistics for the end of the region's nation-states under the onslaught of militant Islam.

"In terms of the sheer scale of the hatreds and sectarian rivalries, we are witnessing something on the scale of horror of the European Thirty Years' War," Holland said. "It is the climax of a process grinding its way through the 20th century—the effective extinction of Christianity from its birthplace."

The event, titled "Reporting the Middle East: Why the Truth Is Getting Lost," sought answers to the "anemic" coverage of attacks on Egypt's Christians on Aug. 14.

Pre-planned destruction of scores of ancient churches, monasteries, schools, orphanages and businesses went unreported for days across the West, said Nina Shea, director of the Hudson Institute's Religious Freedom Center in Washington, D.C.

After the Islamists swept multiple elections during the first revolution in 2011, U.S. newspapers asking how it would change Egypt suggested merely that women would be prohibited from wearing skimpy clothes and that Sharm el-Sheikh would close as a tourist destination.

This was "utterly trivial," Shea said. Persecution of Copts, who dated their church to Gospel writer St. Mark in

Alexandria, was at its worst since the 14th century, with “horrific levels of violence.”

“It has been the worst persecution in 700 years against the oldest, largest remaining Christian minority in the Middle East,” Shea said.

The media failed to ask the most basic questions, she said, such as “Why were the Copts singled out?” and “What was the significance and purpose of the attacks?”

A fourth-century church dedicated to St. Mary—whom Muslims are supposed to revere—that was on the shortlist to become a UNESCO World Heritage site was destroyed and designated as a Muslim prayer space. The building was 200 years older than the Bamyān Statues in Afghanistan, yet the mainstream media ignored its demise.

Even so, there was enough evidence to show the violence was part of a plan to “drive out the Copts, to terrorize them into leaving,” Shea said.

Holland said Egypt was not a developing nation and needed help to emerge as a Western democracy—but was also the world’s first state, with a civilization on a level with China and Iran. In Roman times, it had been the world’s bread basket.

Now it is the single largest importer of wheat anywhere on the planet.

The audience heard a litany of atrocities and devastation covered by Arabic-speaking foreign correspondent Betsy Hiel of a U.S. newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, who has been on the ground in Cairo throughout both revolutions.

The Coptic Church in the U.K.’s General Bishop Angaelos, former secretary to the late Coptic Pope Shenouda, spoke in detail of distortions in media coverage that were mere presuppositions aggravating the situation on the ground.

Angaelos said some reports had suggested Egypt was undergoing a civil war, even referring to a "field hospital" in a mosque in the "leafiest," most affluent part of Cairo.

"Egypt will never have a civil war," Angaelos said. "Its demographics just don't fit that scenario."

Muslims, he pointed out, often protected Christians. The church and civil society together were against the extremists. Many Muslims had turned against the Muslim Brotherhood when it became clear there was no economic plan.

In an answer to a question from the floor, Angaelos agreed there had been what felt like silence from Western churches, governments and indeed Western Muslims after the attacks, which he said belied Islamist propaganda that the West colluded with Christians.

Shea also spoke about Syria. Christians in Syria are now "caught in the middle," and there is a shadow war against them by rebels, with jihadis and al-Qaida factions deliberately attacking Christians.

"When they conquer a town, they set up Sharia courts and mini Sharia states," she said. "The Christians are fleeing. Given the choice to be killed or to leave, they leave. If they stay, the jizya tax is imposed and then raised. If they cannot pay, they are killed."

Shea said Christians dare not go to refugee camps run by rebels, as they would be recruited to fight.

The so-called Damascus Plan drafted by the Free Syrian Army to be put into effect after the war ends includes retribution killings against any who did not oppose Assad, Shea said.