

Is Christianity Nearing Extinction in the Middle East?

Middle Eastern Christians are experiencing one of the most significant periods in their history, according to religious and political leaders meeting in London last week.

Regime changes in Egypt and Iran, and sectarian violence in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, have presented an opportunity for the Christian minority to speak out, or for international bodies to advocate on their behalf.

The Rev. Andrew White, pastor of an Anglican church in Baghdad, spoke of the “terrible suffering” of Iraq’s Christian community. He said that in the last 10 years since Saddam Hussein was toppled, 1,026 members of his congregation had been killed—58 within one day.

White said that in the last decade, Iraq’s Christian population had shrunk from 1.5 million to around 200,000.

As Egypt adapts to its second regime change in two years, Bishop Angaelos, leader of the Coptic Church in the U.K., said Egyptians are beginning to embrace their identity as Egyptians, rather than only as part of a group of distinct communities.

“It was unheard of before two years ago that Egyptian flags would be flying on the streets because people felt that they were not really part of a single nation state, so they reverted to their own religion, whether Christian or Muslim,” he said.

The bishop said that one **Muslim Brotherhood** leader said he felt closer to an Indonesian Muslim than a Coptic Christian

because of the concept of the nation of Islam, the Ummah.

In this way, he said former President Mohammed Morsi's religious-led government had highlighted the distinctions between the different faith communities, rather than brought people together.

"We looked at what happened two years ago as the turning point, but ... there was a mentality of divide and conquer, which means that you keep communities apart; you make them think that they can't trust each other.

"You don't bring people together at all, because if you bring people together, you get what's happening on the streets of Cairo today, which was impossible back then. It's a great opportunity to be able to break down some of the barriers and bring people together for a common cause."

Freedom of Religion

In the wake of the overthrow of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and with reference also to the situation for Christians in Iran, the retired Rev. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali said he had yet to be persuaded that a truly Islamic state could grant its citizens religious freedom.

"Very prominent church leaders have said in my presence that a truly Islamic state will guarantee the freedoms of non-Muslims. Well I beg to differ! I don't think there is a single historical instance of this happening anywhere," he said.

The bishop said countries in the Middle East must learn from the case of Egypt and look beyond the ideal of democracy.

"Democracy is not enough," he said. "It can simply mean the feeling of the majority. In the Egyptian context, the question is not achieving power through the ballot box, but whether there is a willingness to give up power through the ballot box. That's the other test of democracy."

Religious freedom must be considered more than just a Western ideal, according to Canada's Andrew Bennett, the country's first ambassador to the Office of Religious Freedom.

"We must speak up and defend freedom of religion for all, especially for **Middle Eastern Christians**, who are experiencing such grave persecution," he said. "This core principle is not culturally specific; it is not the sole preserve of Western democracies. It is a universal principle that speaks to human dignity."

Ziya Meral, a Turkish researcher and writer living in London, said the concept of religious freedom is "flawed" and in need of redefining.

Meral said he was encouraged that freedom of religion has risen exponentially in prominence in the media over the past five years.

However, he said the word "freedom" is often viewed as freedom from social responsibility.

Instead, Meral said we need a "new language" and should redefine religious freedom to mean: "responsibility to all enjoy our different faiths together."