

Alarm Bells in the East

How to save Christianity in the Middle East

BY DREW CHRISTIANSEN

I HAVE BEEN ANGUISHING over the fate of Christians in the Middle East. Only three months ago **America** published a survey by Michael Hirst of the dire problems facing Christians across the Middle East and South Asia (6/19). Last week's news included two items that deepened my fears. The first, in these pages, reported that since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, half of that country's 1.2 million Christians have emigrated—600,000 people. "What we are hearing now," lamented Bishop Andreos Abouna of Baghdad, "is the alarm bell for Christianity in Iraq" (8/28).

DREW CHRISTIANSEN, S.J., is editor in chief of **America**. His earlier thoughts on the impact of the war on terror on Christians in the Middle East appeared in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, the bimonthly Italian Jesuit journal, on March 5, 2005.

The second story concerned a mission to Lebanon and Israel just completed by the World Council of Churches. According to *The Jerusalem Post* of Aug. 7, Jean-Arnold de Clermont, a Reformed pastor and president of the Conference of European Churches, returning from the W.C.C. solidarity mission, declared, "We came back from Lebanon sharing the impression that this destruction was planned." The Reverend Clermont went on to explain, "Israel would not want the existence of a democratic Lebanon where Jews, Christians and Muslims were peacefully living side by side, because it does not want to see its neighbor state succeeding."

Diplomatic Deafness

I do not agree with Clermont's reading of Israeli motives, but it is true that the effect of Israel's assault on Lebanon has



Cardinal Nasrallah P. Sfeir of Lebanon, patriarch of the Maronite Catholic Church, talks with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at the State Department on July 18. The Associated Press reported that Rice told Cardinal Sfeir that the United States was "very concerned" about Lebanese civilians.

CNS PHOTO/JOSHUA ROBERTS, REUTERS

been to strain that country's unique experiment in interreligious "conviviality," the coexistence of Christians, Muslims and Druze. Israeli policymakers are exceptionally unsentimental and little moved by religious appeals. While Labor and its allies were sensitive to more cosmopolitan values, the heirs of Vladimir Jabotinsky in the Likud and Kadima-led governments weigh only short-term political and strategic gains. Religion does not interest them.

Insensitivity to the place of religion in world affairs, however, is not restricted to Israeli public officials. It is shared by American diplomats, especially when it comes to Lebanon. Until the Cedar Revolution last year, U.S. foreign service personnel and intelligence officers could be positively allergic to any mention of Lebanon. They acquiesced for decades in a situation in which Syria and Israel each could have its way with the country, with Syria occupying Lebanon and Israel bombing its neighbor at will.

Behind U.S. diplomatic indifference lay bitter memories: the bombings of the Marine barracks and the U.S. embassy in Beirut (1983), and the kidnapping and killing of the C.I.A. bureau chief William Buckley (1984). Moreover, with Lebanon religiously divided and all parties seeking their own advantage, distrust became the natural response for outsiders. Finally, as in the Balkans, the growing power of Islamic militants and the belligerency of some of their

Christian antagonists fed the attitude that religion be damned, all that really matters is strategic interests. Add to this the bellicose ideology of neocon political appointees, and it is no surprise that the United States was blind to the effects of its policies in Iraq on the Christian population or of Israel's war on Lebanon on that country's unique experiment in religiously pluralistic democracy. (A message on Aug. 25 to the Holy See from the U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, Frank Rooney, on U.S. support for humanitarian assistance and rebuilding in Lebanon is a welcome new turn in this relationship.)

A Sanctuary of Interreligious Harmony

The tragedy is that since the end of its civil war (1974-89), Lebanon had been making progress. Last year an alliance of Christians, Sunni and Druze, helped by the international community, had forced Syria to withdraw its troops from the country and had arranged for all the militias but Hezbollah to disarm. The redevelopment of the country begun by the assassinated ex-premier Rafik Hariri had continued apace. The government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora had created real hope that Lebanon might still be a sanctuary of interreligious harmony in an ever more radicalized Middle East. Then came the Hezbollah-Israeli war.

Hezbollah, which once aimed at making Lebanon an

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Islamic state, is riding high, and Lebanon's model of interreligious cooperation is once more in question. As a result of Hezbollah's growing standing in the Arab street, militant Islam possesses a strength it has not known since the end of the Lebanese civil war 15 years ago. If one outcome of Hezbollah's "victory" turns out to be a Shiite-Sunni rapprochement, then Lebanon's Christians will find themselves marginalized once again. At the very least, the cost of rebuilding and uncertainty about what the future holds may bring on new waves of emigration, accelerating the depletion of the Christian population.

According to Msgr. Guy Paul Noujaim, patriarchal vicar of Sarba, "These days a great number of Christians are joining the exodus." He observed, "They feel abandoned." Archbishop Paul Matar of Beirut told AsiaNews that his people "want to leave the country not out of fear, but out of uncertainty for [Lebanon's] future."

It is the eleventh hour for the ancient churches of the Middle East. They are doubly threatened by militant Islam and by the great powers' games in the region. Can anything be done to save them?

A Six-Point Plan

First, we must remember that Middle Eastern Christians (Catholics, Orthodox, Copts, other oriental Christians, Protestants and evangelicals) are a resilient people, who

have endured the coming and going of empires for two millennia. Given a chance, they will rebound. That is especially true of Lebanon's Maronites, who have survived 1,200 years of threats and oppression.

In a very real sense, the survival of Christianity in the Middle East, particularly of the Eastern Catholic churches, depends on what happens in Lebanon, home to a number of Eastern patriarchates and to the Council of Catholic Patriarchs of the East. The Lebanese, especially the Maronites, exhibited the vitality of their church in 1999 when they hosted the First Congress of Catholic Patriarchs and Bishops of the East, which drew together hundreds of bishops from seven rites (Maronites, Melkites, Chaldeans, Latins, Copts, Armenians and Syrians) around the region and from the diaspora. The meeting, hosted by the Maronite patriarch, Cardinal Nasrallah Pierre Sfeir, would not have succeeded without the energy, organization, material resources and intellectual drive of the Lebanese church.

Cardinal Sfeir was also the leading critic of the Syrian domination of Lebanon and the country's most outspoken advocate for full Lebanese independence. Even before the Cedar Revolution, his prophetic witness made possible the Christian-Sunni-Druze alliance. Recovery may demand patient effort over many years, but Lebanon's Christians should not be counted out.

Second, the most important thing outsiders can help

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provide for both Lebanon and Palestine is peace. No partial settlement will do. It is time to return to the kind of comprehensive settlement between Israel and the Arabs that was attempted at Madrid in 1991 and endorsed by the foreign ministers' meeting in London last month. When I consulted experts on reconciliation and religion and diplomacy, the one thing on which they all could agree is that peace in Lebanon, in Israel and Palestine is the sine qua non of any program to save Christianity in the Middle East. A consensus is growing among international affairs specialists in the region, and even in Israel, that it is time for a comprehensive, regional settlement between Israel and all its Arab neighbors.

Third, as to the other major conflict—in Iraq—I fear that finding a path to peace will prove even more difficult. There other ways must be found. Efforts at sectarian reconciliation among Muslim (Sunni and Shiite) leaders should be tried. Arab and Muslim foundations should encourage reconciliation processes with the help of experienced civil society groups, like Religions for Peace, the International Center for Religion and Diplomacy, the U.S. Institute for Peace and the Center for Strategic Studies. Catholic peacemaking groups like Focolare, the Community of Sant'Egidio, Notre Dame's Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies and the Catholic Peacebuilding Network could also support this effort. At first leaders may have to assemble outside the country, but later meetings might be convened in more secure areas of Iraq and, in time, at the grass roots. Military and police work alone will not pacify Iraq. Deeper groundwork must be laid for peacemaking.

Fourth, together the churches must enter into dialogue with both Muslim and Jewish leaders and with the region's political establishment about common concerns as well as the impact of particular policies and trends on Middle East Christians. Pope John Paul II had significant success in persuading Muslims that the invasion of Iraq was not a Western crusade against Islam. Events have overtaken the good feelings he created. The time has come for a new initiative.

During the fighting in Lebanon, Pope Benedict showed leadership in combining religious and diplomatic initiatives. He has demonstrated the clarity of mind and firmness of purpose required to undertake a new venture in dialogue, but it ought to be done in collaboration with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople and the heads of the autocephalous oriental churches. (In tandem, the Vatican also needs to overcome the anti-Islamic spin being given modest corrections in its Islamic policy by George Weigel, Michele Pera, Sandro Magister and other commentators.)

Fifth, U.S. church groups, like the U.S.C.C.B., the National Council of Churches and Churches for Middle

East Peace, in a campaign of public education, should push for Congressional hearings and provide briefings for public officials on the impact of the war on terror and U.S. Middle East policy on the ancient churches of the East. In addition, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ought to examine the multiple factors leading to the decline of Christians in the region. It recently attended to the condition of Christians in the Islamic world. Public scrutiny ought to be multifaceted and include Israel, the war on terror, religious policies in the Arab states and broad U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Sixth, the Holy See, the U.S.C.C.B. and others already involved in the education of U.S. diplomats under the U.S. International Religious Freedom Act ought to engage the State Department in as many forums as possible, apprising them of the unanticipated negative consequences of U.S. policy and diplomatic antipathy to religion on the Christians of the Middle East. These sessions should explore steps that could be taken to correct the current adverse state of affairs.

How Shrewd the Children of Light?

"The children of this world," says Jesus in Luke's Gospel, "are more astute in dealing with their own kind than the children of light" (16:8). So it has been in the Middle East these last years, where the violent once more have their way. Warning against passivity and complacency on the part of Christians in the waning days of the Second World War, Reinhold Niebuhr urged believers to take up the tools of politics, though without the malice of the children of darkness. The hour is late to preserve Christianity in the lands that were its cradle. We will need to deploy every tool of engagement, dialogue and persuasion in its defense.

These recommendations may seem unrealistic, but look where conventional thinking has taken the world. Nothing short of an all-out campaign by the Christian world to protect the Christians of the East stands a chance of saving them. And with such an effort, perhaps a smoother path may be paved for Muslims and Jews as well on the way of all toward a lasting peace. **A**

Note to Readers

The impetus for these proposals came from the widespread insensitivity to the Christian stake in today's Middle East and the utter lack of ideas I found among experts on peacemaking for addressing the problem. If you agree with these points, please pass them along to your political leaders, experts in international affairs and N.G.O. representatives. If you have proposals of your own, please share them with us at letters@americamagazine.org. We will publish a selection in a future issue.

—D.C.