

Why Christianity lacks a Holocaust literature

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 4, 2011 | All Things Catholic

Here's a question that astute observers of the religious landscape find themselves asking these days, and which deserves a serious response: Why doesn't Christianity have its own Holocaust literature?

By that, of course, no one means to minimize the absolute singularity of the Holocaust against the Jews during the Second World War, and the moral imperative of keeping that memory alive. Yet the question persists: Given the harrowing realities of Christian martyrdom during the 20th century, and the rising global tide of anti-Christian violence in the early 21st century, why isn't there a budding genre of Christian analogs to *Night* by Elie Wiesel, or Spielberg's *Schindler's List*?

(A rare example is the compelling 2010 French film *Of Gods and Men*, based on the assassination of a group of Trappist monks in Algeria in 2006. It's too bad the movie wasn't nominated for *Best Foreign Language Film* at the Oscars, which would have given it broader exposure to American audiences. The U.S. debut is Feb. 25.)

More broadly, why don't attacks against Christians in places such as Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, India and Pakistan, to cite just a few recent examples, generate the same outrage among Christians in the West that similar oppression directed against followers of other faiths elicits among their coreligionists?

According to the German-based relief agency *Aid to the Church in Need*, fully 75 percent of all acts of religious intolerance in the world are directed against Christians. Yet in the court of popular opinion, the mythology persists that Christians are more likely to be the oppressors than the oppressed.

The most recent example of reticence came Tuesday, when the Foreign Ministers of Europe, meeting in Brussels, couldn't agree on a specific reference to Christians in a declaration condemning religious persecution. The fact that Europe is the cradle of Christendom makes the omission not only ironic, but also an index of Europe's ambivalence about its Christian heritage.

Without any pretense of being definitive, here are four factors I suspect are in play.

First, especially when it comes to Americans, the myopia of the broader culture is faithfully reflected in church circles. The roughly 67 million Catholics in the United States may represent just six percent of a global Catholic population of 1.2 billion, but you'd never know it by surveying most American Catholic books, blogs and newspapers, or even what's bubbling in the pews. If something isn't happening in the States, it's often not perceived as a matter of Catholic concern.

Second, although Islamic radicalism has no monopoly on anti-Christian prejudice, it's a primary incubator these days. As a result, concern for Christian persecution is often swept up into the broader politics of relations between Islam and the West, especially legitimate concern not to foment Islamophobia.

A recent controversy in the diocese of Springfield, Ill., illustrates the point.

In his Christmas Eve homily, Bishop Thomas Paprocki called the recent attacks on Iraqi Christians the latest chapter in a "centuries-long onslaught of Muslims against Christians." Among other things, Paprocki appeared to support racial profiling in airport security, saying that if 83-year-old grandmothers get the same pat-downs and body scans as "Muslim Arabs from the Middle East," then "we're wasting a lot of time and money for nothing."

"You can't fight a war if you can't identify the enemy," Paprocki said.

The homily brought a Jan. 22 response from Viatorian Fr. Corey Brost in a local newspaper, arguing that "the vast majority of Muslims around the world live and preach" the values of peace and religious tolerance. Brost also warned that Paprocki's argument could unintentionally stoke what he described as a spreading "hatred of Islam" in America.

Brost clearly endorsed Paprocki's concern for Christians suffering persecution. Nonetheless, the dispute seemed to underline internal Catholic divisions, rather than to project a united front in defense of Christians in Iraq or anywhere else.

Third, some Christians in the West are hesitant about campaigns against anti-Christian persecution abroad because they're often bundled with protests against purported anti-Christian bias at home, such as the so-called "War on Christmas," or art exhibits, TV shows, and journalistic commentary which some pious souls find offensive. Other Christians find such complaints exaggerated, if not hysterical, and don't feel represented by the people who voice them most loudly.

To put that point into Catholic terms, some people just don't want to get behind the likes of Bill Donohue, whose Catholic League and its protests against the Smithsonian, "The Simpsons," and other makers of culture both high and low, inspire applause in some quarters and a reflexive rolling of the eyes in others. In any event, the group is not in a position to speak on behalf of all Catholics about anti-Christian persecution or anything else.

A similar point could even be made about the U.S. bishops. Some Catholics these days read official statements from the bishops largely to find out what they're supposed to be against.

Fourth, some social justice activists in the church find a specific focus on anti-Christian persecution overly sectarian. We should be in favor of religious freedom for everyone, they argue, not just Christians; and violence against anyone ought to engage our concern, no matter what their religious affiliation. They worry that a focus on Christians weakens the case for religious liberty by making it seem like special pleading or institutional self-interest, rather than a principled stand in favor of human rights.

These four points may add up to an explanation, but they are no excuse.

No matter what the causes, it's appalling that the suffering of Christians around the world has not stirred the Christian conscience in the West to a greater degree. It's especially shocking that American Christians have not reacted more strongly to anti-Christian violence in Iraq, given the responsibility the United States bears for creating the conditions in which that insecurity could metastasize.

Disappointment ought to be particularly acute among Catholics, since Catholicism prides itself on forming a communion of saints linked by bonds of solidarity that transcend both time and space.

Perhaps what the Christian world needs is precisely the call to conscience that a thoughtful, evocative Holocaust literature would elicit. May its moment come, and that right soon.

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