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Acton conference draws ties between Christian persecution, economic liberalism

by Joshua J. McElwee

Rome — Christian minorities across the Middle East face an uncertain climate of change with unknown consequences following the revolutions stemming from 2010's Arab Spring, the archbishop who ministers to Catholics in Jordan said.

Mentioning particularly that the numbers of Christians in places like Iraq, Israel and Palestine have dropped to historic lows -- to 4 percent, 2.5 percent and 1.2 percent of the population, respectively -- Archbishop Maroun Lahham said that in the last three years, "Arab societies have been impacted by jolts no one was expecting."

"We're going to have to see the new face that will be presented by the Middle East after all these uprisings," said Lahham, who spoke Tuesday in Rome at an event organized by the U.S.-based Acton Institute.

"Arab Christians are up to the challenge of reviving their presence," said Lahham, the auxiliary bishop of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. "They should not rely solely on political circumstances, whether they are favorable or not."

"They should always work towards religious dialogue, be open to diversity and conviviality, and have an unflinching commitment to the Arab land," Lahham said.

The Acton Institute organized Tuesday's event, "Faith, State and the Economy: Perspectives from East and West," to tie issues of religious freedom around the world to classic liberal economic theory on limiting state intervention in the economy.

The event, held at an independent conference center on the ground floor of the Pontifical Gregorian University, was the first of a five-part series of conferences the institute is hosting in places around the world through 2016 focusing on the relationship between religious and economic freedom.

Fr. Robert Sirico, the institute's founder, opened the event Tuesday by claiming that Christians are under the "most intense persecution against the church since the fall of communism."

"Economic liberty, however, is rarely mentioned in such discussions," he said. "Some degree of economic freedom ... is also essential for limiting state power."

Lahham, who previously served as archbishop of Tunis, Tunisia, where the first demonstrations kicking off the Arab Spring began in 2010, focused his talk on a general overview of the situation facing Christians around the Middle East.

"The first thing to be said is that the Christians in the Middle East countries are Arab and Christian and have been so for centuries now," Lahham said, emphasizing that most Christians there are not converts and sometimes refer to themselves as the "Churches of Calvary."

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"They willingly accept this name because they know that after Calvary comes resurrection," Lahham said.

Lahham also mentioned many positive aspects of Christian life in the region, saying Christians are for the most part "fully integrated into society" and "for many decades had a rather calm and favorable situation."

Yet, the archbishop said, there is a "daily unease," as "being a minority creates a fragile psychology because there is always a search for protection from the unknown."

Other key problems for Christians in the region that Lahham pointed to are struggles of Muslim families to accept mixed Muslim-Christian marriages, educational curricula that do not refer to the long Christian history in the area, and lack of availability of Christian religious instruction.

Fr. Martin Rhonheimer, a Swiss Opus Dei priest, spoke before Lahham on Tuesday, focusing his talk on the relationship between church and state throughout European history and criticizing some interpretations of what is traditionally called Catholic social teaching.

Rhonheimer, who is also a professor of ethics and political philosophy at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome, particularly criticized the 19th-century German Bishop Wilhelm von Ketteler. A theologian, von Ketteler warned against a capitalist system of free trade that would result in a "permanent slavery" for laborers, influencing Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

"As we know today, Ketteler proved to be absolutely wrong," Rhonheimer said.

Catholics "should not be advocates of a social justice, which makes citizens more and more dependent on state welfare," Rhonheimer said.

"Precisely as Christians," he said, "they first of all should be defenders of freedom, personal responsibility and free entrepreneurial initiative, in order to meet the real needs of their fellow citizens, especially the poorest and most needy among them."

Other speakers at Tuesday's event included Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium, the retired archbishop of Hong Kong who has criticized China's treatment of Catholics.

The next event in the Acton series will be in November in Washington on the topic of "Dignitatis Humanae: Preserving Religious Liberty in an Age of Expanding Government." The series will then have conferences in the Philippines, Israel, and again in Rome.

Tuesday's event had more than 20 co-sponsors, including the Dignitatis Humanae Institute, Religions for Peace, and the Italian Tea Party.

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