

EDITOR AT LARGE

Persecuted Christians and Their Quiescent Leaders

After the Easter slaughter in Sri Lanka, why did bishops fail to stand up for their flock?



Mourners at the funeral of a victim of the Sri Lanka bombings on April 25. PHOTO: CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES



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Last week, I wrote about the West's unerring capacity for self-immolation. Forgive me for returning to the subject, but last weekend's massacre in Sri Lanka has underscored how self-destructive our elites can be.

When 250 people were killed by suicide bombers, many of them as they attended Easter Sunday services, it was a harrowing reminder of the intensifying persecution of Christians around the world. The slaughter followed similar assaults in Nigeria, Egypt, Syria, Indonesia and a dozen other countries in the past year alone. According to a recent Pew Research study, Christians are the most widely harassed faithful on Earth. They were attacked for their religion in 144 countries in 2016, more than Muslims, Jews or any other group.

So you would think that the latest horror might induce the official Christian leadership to speak out in defense of their people. John Sentamu, the archbishop of York—the second-highest-ranking cleric in the Anglican communion—had an opportunity. Interviewed on the BBC on Monday, he was asked if this was now a moment to plant a flag for Christians who find themselves under siege.

The archbishop whiffed. “Violence of any sort, to any community, any group, is totally unacceptable. The flag I want to fly is a flag of peace,” he said. Along with the Catholic cardinal of Colombo, he wanted to “ask Christians to refrain from taking any retributory steps against their Muslim brothers.”

One of the most prominent pastors in the world, faced with the scattering of his flock by a pack of murderous wolves, manages to avoid blaming the perpetrators for the carnage and actually worries aloud that the problem might actually be the Christians. Quite a feat after 300 or so of your coreligionists have been blown to bits by supporters of a fanatical religious ideology. Jesus wept, as the Bible tells us.

Why does this keep happening? To be fair, part of the explanation is that this is the very essence of the Christian message: Turn the other cheek. Find the beam in our own eye before pointing to the mote in others. As a creed for individual living, it is imperfectible. But for an entire community under attack, it’s a recipe for self-extinction.

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According to another Anglican bishop, Philip Mountstephen of Truro, who is leading a church inquiry into the rising persecution of Christians, the reason for the widespread reluctance among leaders—religious and secular—to take the continuing war against Christians seriously is a lingering sense of historical responsibility. “There is a lot of postcolonial guilt around a residual sense that the Christian faith is an expression of white Western privilege,” he told the Times of London.

This would be absurd even if the people who were being murdered in their hundreds each year were indeed wealthy white Christians in stately homes and colonial mansions. Yet, as the bishop went on to point out, the vast majority of Christians suffering today aren’t white wealthy Westerners. Most are from the relatively poor global South: Asia, Africa, the Middle

East, Latin America. To their already unupportable lot of grinding poverty, they must add the risk of being assaulted by governments, religious vigilantes, gangs and others.

To compound their plight, it seems many Christian leaders in the West are so afraid to upset the politically correct crowd who control the media and cultural establishment that they won't even speak out. These clerics often find it more congenial to weigh in forcefully on other issues of pressing concern, where they know they're in no danger of losing invitations for TV interviews and fancy premieres.

I would respectfully suggest to the bishops of the Anglican persuasion—and quite a few of their Catholic brethren too—that however serious and acute you might think the threat of climate change or workplace discrimination, the larger and more immediate threat to Christians in many parts of the world is that they might not get through their next church service without someone dispatching them to eternity to shouts of “Allahu akbar.”

Addressing the rising threat of persecution will require concerted and complex action, policies enacted by governments to isolate and pursue the murderers and those who abet them, and direct support of threatened communities. None of that will be easy. But surely it must start with a willingness by church leaders to call the threat what it is.

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