

The Pope and the Archbishop in the Middle East: Religion, Politics, and Faith

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Christians can take heart from the recent visits of Pope Francis to Egypt and the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to the Holy Land and Jordan. The encounters with Jews and Muslims felt momentarily important for everyone involved, not least the beleaguered Christian communities in the region. Such moments produce hope in the midst of all the clouds hovering across the region, and the intricacies of the political situation in Israel/Palestine. We should be rightly thankful for leaders like them as they try to show a different way of doing business together with a great deal of seriousness, intelligence and faith. More importantly, the visits should make us ask afresh whether religion in general, and the Church in particular,¹ can still play a role for the good of the region.

Since the latest invasion of Iraq in 2003, we are used to speaking of the region as a religious and geopolitical minefield. The current wars in Iraq, Syria, Lybia and Yemen, and the unstable condition in Egypt have confirmed the collapse of the modern national Arab States that emerged after World War I. In the absence of meaningful national identities in the region, an intolerant Islamic supremacy, for whom sovereignty and territorial integrity do not matter much, have taken root, threatening not only the traditional autocratic regimes, or the Christian minorities alone, but the very soul of Islam. In addition, as previously during the Cold War, the Middle East has become a theatre in which the rising tensions between Russia and America are played out. With the current religious zealotry in the Middle East, and the half-secularised, culturally diverse West, no one seems to have a clue where true sanity and justice are to be found. The question is whether we can still speak of religion, exemplified by the Pope's and the Archbishop's visits, as offering a direction for the future.

Within the contemporary discipline of Religious Studies in the West, there is some confusion as to what 'religion' might mean. Sometimes, lecturers talk about Durkheim's definition as 'a system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself'.² At other times, they refer to the curious seventeenth-century efforts to make religion private. There are those who still think that if we keep 'religion' out of 'politics' in the Middle East all shall be well. A visit to Jerusalem, Cairo, or Mecca, easily dispels the notion that religion can ever be a private matter. The daily calls to prayer, the constant listening to Koranic recitations in shops, the bands of pilgrims walking the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, the public celebrations of Easter in the streets of Jerusalem's old city, the thousands gathered at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the social gatherings that surround the celebrations of religious feasts, the millions walking around the Ka'ba in Mecca; they all make a curious expression of the supposedly 'private' character of religion. Religion in the Middle East is not an archaeological site; it is something that is continually affecting the life of Jews, Muslims and Christians.

This is apart from the fact that the history of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and their relationships make a substantial part of the history of the Middle East as well as Europe, not to mention other parts

¹ The reference here is to the Church universal rather than to any particular denomination.

² Durkheim, Emile (1952). *Suicide: A Study of Sociology*. Trans. John. A Spaulding and George Simpson (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul), p. 312.

of the world. Does religion still provide a hope for common life? The Pope tried to argue that it does. He spoke of Egypt as 'an ancient and noble civilization'. If there is a civilization to be saved here, what are the dimensions of this religious culture that point us towards the essentials that need to be preserved and developed? Or, to use the title of John Milbank and Adrian Pabst's recent publication, *The Politics of Virtue*, what are the *political virtues* that 'religion' can generate? Are we able to translate them into the context of contemporary geopolitics in the region?

The Pope spoke of what faith communities should propose for the common life of their various adherents as a structure that is relevant to the needs, stability and justice of the wider societies in the region. He said:

All of us have the duty to teach coming generations that God, the Creator of heaven and earth, does not need to be protected by men; indeed, it is he who protects them. He never desires the death of his children, but rather their life and happiness. He can neither demand nor justify; indeed, he detests and rejects violence ("God....hates the lover of violence": Ps 11:5). The true God calls to unconditional love, gratuitous pardon, mercy, absolute respect for every life, and fraternity among his children, believers and nonbelievers alike.

Religion here is understood as a *response* to an invitation that is not of our own invention. It is not a theory that competes with political, social, or scientific, theories, but a summons. This understanding of religion is common to the Abrahamic traditions. In other words, if for the Muslim, Islam means submission, in the sense of giving back everything to the Creator from whom one has received everything, then presumably it is a blasphemy to try to suggest you can serve God and establish justice by slaughter and suicide. Those who act in such fashion are trying to show strength, when in fact they are showing a condition of spiritual weakness that is pitiable to say the least. They are suggesting that God cannot defend himself; we are the strong ones who can. The unfortunate recent sentencing of the Christian governor of Jakarta for claims of blasphemy is another example of this pitiable show of strength and is bad news for all of us (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/05/09/jakartas-christian-governor-sentenced-to-prison-in-blasphemy-case/?utm_term=.d26b6d154a18). God does not need us to stick up to him.

Therefore, how does one restore a spiritually credible *civilization* as the Pope referred to Egypt? The Pope referred to the principals of freedom of worship, access to work and good education as a foundation for healthy societies. He noted that these principals are part of the Declaration of Human Rights in his address. But, if religion is a response to a summons, then at the most basic level whatever we do in life, (work, study and prayer), is done in gratefulness and for service of others. Within the framework, the rhythm set by religion, society is allowed to grow, not just be productive. Society is called to examine its work and its failings. Does it engage with the most vulnerable around us? the Pope asked. Even when we study, we do so in order to be able to serve the society better. In other words, religion's relevance to the realms of politics appears in the call for a common self-assessment, otherwise known as 'repentance'.

Can one say then that the violence we witnessed in Egypt in April, claimed by ISIS (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/09/egypt-coptic-church-bombing-death-toll-rises-tanta-cairo>) is not religiously motivated? (The same question sadly has to apply to this week's attack in Manchester) Or that it has nothing to do with Islam? The Pope suggested before that religious

(Islamic) extremism does not exist (<http://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=70197>). This claim, unfortunately, cannot withstand the scrutiny of religious history and current events. One does not have to be an atheist to notice that there is an 'ambivalence' about religion and the sacred, which could lead at time to violence.³ What one could perhaps say is that the problem is not simply about *Muslims*; there is a problem with a certain history of religion, be it Muslim, Christian or Jewish. Muslims find the language of Christians and Jews about God to be too full of paradox and irony in comparison with the direct sobriety of Koranic depictions; there is no lack of polemical texts and attacks against Christians and Jews throughout Islamic history reflecting this difficulty. The type of language used against Christians in Egypt today, and the inability to engage with the history of Christian thought and Christian contribution to Egyptian culture and civilisation, grows out of these earlier sources. However, we have to add here that Christians, too, used the paradox of their doctrinal language against the expectations of justice and compassion with non-Christians. Therefore, one needs at least to acknowledge that there is a danger with religions in general. Religion has been a tool that fuelled hatred and created unreal assumptions, whether it was Muslim or not. This is different from saying there is no religious or Islamic violence. Religion needs the same level of 'repentance' that politics requires as well.

So, where is social and political coherence to be found in Egypt and the Middle East? The Pope added: 'Egypt, in building peace and at the same time combatting terrorism, is called to give proof that *'al-din lillah wal watan liljami'* – religion belongs to God and the nation to all', as the motto of the Revolution of 23 July 1952 sates'. In the political scene of Egypt, and by implication the wider Middle East, this implies a serious valuation of cultural and religious diversity and a rejection of those that associate authority with either one religious confession, or one professional group. This should not mean that religion becomes merely a private matter. The Arab world has in fact always been a pluralist world, never a monochrome culture. The urge to homogenise coming from certain Islamic trends today is one which Christians in the region have had every reason to resist. Inflexible concepts of authority cannot do full justice to cultural diversity and local freedoms. Historically, Christian communities in the Middle East under the Umayyads, the Abbasids, and later the Ottomans, were a force that challenged and enlarged the cultural and philosophical horizons of Muslim-controlled lands. The Nineteenth century renewal of Arab literary culture owed an enormous amount to Christians. Christians were never just an interesting historical cultural mystique or museum in the region, but a force for intellectual political and social good.

How this good is achievable today in the Middle East requires thinking about how civic identity is defined in majority Muslim lands; the Pope's quote from the moto of the Egyptian revolution reminds us that the communities of the Middle East need to shape a common civic purpose out of their diverse allegiances if there is to be stability. Here, one has to acknowledge that there is a spectrum of understanding. The Arab world includes ideologically secular thinkers as well as the type of Muslims who are inflexible about difference and diversity. The latter are hardline thinkers who claim that they adhere to the bare minimum of the first data of revelation. The latter are commonly referred to in the media as 'fundamentalists' – primitivists might be a better description.⁴ If this is the spectrum, does

³ Appleby, R. Scott. (2000), *The Ambivalence of the sacred: religion, violence, and reconciliation*. (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield).

⁴ In reference to the claim of adhering to the primitive data of revelation, the Koran and the early example of the Prophet alone without taking seriously what history has made later generations of Muslims to learn.

this mean that we need to succumb to a standoff between a liberal secular society and a religiously based political establishment? No. Egypt and the rest of the Middle East can find a way forward if we have a political leadership in the region that provides the space to debate over civic identity across these different perspectives. The standoff between the two extremes is not a necessity.

Therefore, two changes are inevitable for positive developments in the region. First, a change in the political scene. A monochrome Middle Eastern society is a society that becomes prone to extremism more easily as we have seen in the history of Arabia where Wahhabism seems to have found fertile soil. A brief comparison with Europe might also be helpful here. Europe's religious history always engaged arguments and debates whether between Church and prince or between churches. The Bible was never a straightforward text. It invited debates among Jews as much as among Christians. Jesus never gave a straightforward answer to his questioners, but made them think for themselves whilst telling people to follow him at the same time. It is no surprise that post-modernity finds fertile soil in the West. A culture of questioning and debates is no bad thing, however. Indeed, it is a healthy thing. It becomes poorer when it argues without any regard to the history of received wisdom at the same time.

Second, given that religion is not an optional extra in the Middle East, the current wars in the region are likely to change Islam itself. This is not a denigration of the tradition. Current Islamic primitivists who have been fuelling so much of the conflicts to date often in fact ignore most of Islamic history and jurisprudence, which always related to change and challenge. In many ways, Islam never stopped developing as it is based on constant interpretation and reinterpretation. But, it remains unclear as to what the future changes will look like. Islamic civilisation historically, in its vast corpus of writings, related to questions of politics, culture and aesthetics. All of these questions are in the current conflicts of the region neglected. If true religious revival is going to come, it will have to relate to these issues again. In the midst of all these changes, violent as well as peaceful versions of the tradition will still emerge as they have always done in the past. For the moment, the Arab and Islamic world is waiting for the political and religious leaders who are going to resuscitate these questions creatively again. They cannot just blame the West for the stagnation. They need to lead on this front. If the option for violence continues, it will not augur well for the future of Islam itself.

How does the Church in the Middle East engage with these uncertain and unstable homelands? There are no easy answers. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, often said that the Church's politics should be a reflection of the political nature of the Body of Christ, which is about service, mutuality, and attention to the needs of others; when one member aches, the whole body aches, as St. Paul argued (Romans 12 & 1 Corinthians 12). If this vision is applied, then the Christian mission to the society in the Middle East is simply about the meaning and purpose of the fellowship with Jesus, who in his death is the victim of religious and political plotting, but in his Resurrection is the Lord, Judge and the hope of all involved in conflict. He is the one who changes the terms of engagement. The Middle East needs the Church, simply because the Middle East needs the Body of Christ. Practically, when it comes to regional politics, as I have said elsewhere, 'the instincts that have sometimes led Christian leaders in the Middle East to support regimes that were favourable to them but not to other members of society need to be replaced with an attentiveness to the health of the whole society, an openness to all, of which many Christian institutions are an example' (<http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/terrorism-politics-and-faith-christian-response>).

Engaging with Muslims in dialogue and mission is also important. One of the descriptions in the Koran of Christian clergy is that they 'are not puffed up' (Koran 5:82). There are a couple of points to be raised from this description. First, the term for 'priest' in the Koran is '*qassis*,' which at times is interpreted in Arabic as synonymous to 'the learned' or *ulama* – the title given to Muslim religious scholars. This interpretation may not necessarily be how Christians understand the role of the clergy; however, it raises the important question of theological literacy at least among the clergy. Scholarly engagement between Muslims and Christians may seem irrelevant for the immediate needs of the region. However, part of the work of mission for the Church today requires seriousness about Christian doctrine. A number of Muslim scholars have noted the importance of scholarly engagement with their own communities to educate the vulnerable youth from the allures of violent political Islam. Such engagement remains important between Christians and Muslims as well. When followers of other faiths find Christian religious leaders unable to speak of their faith confidently, they lose interest in the discussion. Muslim and Jewish scholars are not interested in engaging Church bureaucrats but Christian scholars who are able to speak of what it means to be a member of the Body of Christ.

Second, the Koranic verse stresses humility; having the mind of Christ, as St. Paul said, means that we become authoritative when we put our authority aside. The call for a poor Church and risk-taking Church that has characterized both the Pope's and the Archbishop's various speeches since their time in office are refreshing; there is a need for this practice to be contagious among members of Churches. The Middle East and Europe do not need liberal leaders. There is no lack of liberal magazines that can satisfy that need; instead, the masses want Church leaders, especially bishops, priests or religious, to be humble and to show concern and action for the issues that matter individually and collectively as a result of their formation as people of prayer. As the Pope and the Archbishop have attempted to show in their recent visits, Christians, Muslims or Jews should not show mindless righteousness because of their religious convictions. Instead, everyone should be watching for this vision of humility, which shows that God's power is different from our power. We do not need to defend God. God's power cannot be connected with our mechanisms for control or domination of others. If we do this well, then perhaps 'religion' can support political virtues, and give hope for all those who are at war in the Middle East today.