



Ayaan Hirsi Ali's Tale of "Christophobia"

by David L. Johnston

Last week I happened to see Newsweek's cover article, *The Global War on Christians in the Muslim World*, and read it immediately. My reaction: like Ayaan Hirsi's other writings, it is less than truthful. Most cited facts are indeed "facts." But truth, surely, lies in a balanced telling of such life-and-death stories within their wider context. She does not.

Truth is, weaving a tale of Muslim rage with Christian victims piling up from Nigeria to Indonesia conveniently adds to the political strife of a US election year. When Democrats decry the plight of beleaguered Muslims, Republican hopefuls vie for the harshest invectives against Islamic radicalism. As it turns out, Hirsi Ali works for that great bastion of conservatism, the American Enterprise Institute.

When her bestseller, *Infidel*, came out in 2007, the Economist (clearly right of center) opined that for a woman who certainly "fascinates," "the Dutch-Somali politician who has lived under armed guard ever since a fatwa was issued against her in 2004, is a chameleon of a woman. Even the title of her new autobiography reflects her talent for reinvention (http://www.economist.com/node/8663231?story_id=8663231). That is because it had first been published in the Netherlands as *My Freedom?* and that version was more focused on defending women's rights. The new version is mostly about leaving behind the

faith of her fathers.

OK, so just because her truth-telling record isn't spotless and she has motives for painting Islam and Muslims in the darkest possible terms, don't the facts speak for themselves in this case? Yes, and no. My short answer is in three parts:

- she is pointing to a real problem that Muslim leaders need to address more than they have up to now
- the growing attacks on Christian minorities by Muslims is a much more complicated issue than she makes it out to be
- the tone and word choice, and Newsweek's publishing it (on the cover, no less!), are all sensational and likely to fan even more the flames of fear and rancor.

Now for the long answer.

Hirsi Ali is right about one important fact. Christians in many Muslim-majority countries today live in fear. That is a deplorable situation that indeed needs to be discussed at the highest levels – but not in these terms. I'll come back to her “war” discourse, but let me say here that the causes are multiple and that they vary from setting to setting. Let me add too, for the record, that this is not the case everywhere.

Nigeria's poisonous brew of postcolonial woes

Hirsi Ali starts with Nigeria and all the dastardly attacks by Boko Haram she mentions did take place. This is a home-grown jihadi organization that recently has linked up with al-Qaeda, according to their spokesman, Abu Qaqa, in a recent interview (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/jan/27/boko-haram-nigeria-sharia-law>). Indeed, their goal is nothing short of bringing the government to its knees and replacing it with one that follows “the dictates of Allah.” But Nigeria’s tensions between its Muslim north, Christian south, and minorities in either place, have roots in the distant past.

Part of the problem comes from the vast oil reserves that are all located in the southern delta of the Niger River. Compare this to Iraq, where the oil wells are either

in the north with the Kurds, or south among the Shia, but none in the Sunni middle. In both countries, oil creates bitter strife and contention.

Another factor is that the dominant tribe to the north, the nomadic Fulanis, who are still spread over several nations, used to be the dominant force in the region, mounting numerous raids to the south to grow their slave population. This was not about religion, but mostly about power and economic interests. Since the south is more developed economically, many families and clans from the Muslim tribes in the north have moved south over time.

In the central city of Jos, for instance, where up to last year most of the sectarian violence was located, the violence is reminiscent of the tensions between farmers and cowboys in the classic musical *Oklahoma*. The Christian farmers have resented the northern intruders and have often barred them from voting. Feeling disenfranchised, the Muslims resort to violence and the cycle feeds itself. So far, the number of victims has been fairly even on both sides.

This June I go back to Nigeria for a third two-week intensive course in a large seminary in Lagos. Some of the pastors I teach about Islam, apologetics and peacebuilding are in the north. And I'm sure the stories I'll hear this year will be worse than ever. If anything, the rapid rise of Boko Haram could not have been possible without tacit support from at least some parts of the population. Clearly, Christians in the north and Muslims in the south tremble at the thought of an all-out civil war. Not surprising, after the recent spate of church bombings since Christmas, the highest profile Christian leader announced that this was a declaration of war and that Christians had the right to defend themselves wherever and whenever they could (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-16350635>).

Yet, like the protracted war in Ireland pitting Catholics against Protestants, the Muslim-Christian struggles in Nigeria are less about religion than they are a mix of postcolonial woes and real-life issues of power disparities and injustice in a context where governance has long been characterized by corruption and incompetence. Enter Boko Haram ("Western Education is forbidden")... This jihadi-salafi ideology (see my blog on this at <http://www.humantrustees.org/blogs/religion-and-global-society/item/42-the-global-salafi-phenomenon>), without a doubt, is pouring oil onto the fire. Still, none of

this bears out Hirsi Ali's allegation of "a global Muslim war on Christians."

In fact, the maverick mufti from Qatar and the religious rock star of al-Jazeera with a devoted global following of several hundred million, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, has issued a fatwa condemning the violence on both sides and calling on the Nigerian government "to provide security and safety for all people in order to prevent strife among religious groups." In the same statement he and the International Union of Muslim Scholars, which he heads, denounce the heinous acts of Boko Haram which are responsible for killing 150 people since Christmas 2011, "Muslims, Christians and policemen" (<http://islamopediaonline.org/fatwa/international-union-muslim-scholars-condemns-violence-against-muslims-and-christians-nigeria>). Some Muslim leaders are speaking out; and they rightly point out that the victims are both Muslim and Christian.

Sudan's troubled history

Hirsi Ali then moves on to Sudan. Admittedly, after the 1989 coup by which General Omar al-Bashir took over, the war with the mostly Christian south only intensified. What is more, under the strict Islamist ideology of Hasan al-Turabi, life became nearly intolerable for the Christians in the north. Easily two million people died in this 22-year war; yet skirmishes continue in border regions, despite the 2005 peace treaty and the January 2011 referendum that sealed the south's independence. Meanwhile, another million or so people died in the brutal attacks in Darfur – once again, nomads against farmers, but all Muslims this time.

So let's be fair: these are all common symptoms of postcolonial chaos and growing pains, especially in Africa. The mayhem is indicative of a civil war with both parties fighting. Still, responsibility lies mostly with the north – it's for good reason that al-Bashir stands indicted for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court.

Egypt's revolution and bumpy road ahead

Are Christians in Egypt and Iraq afraid these days? Yes, they are. But again, reasons differ. Having lived three years in Egypt in the 1990s, I can tell you that Christians

have complained of discrimination and harassment from time immemorial. Sadly typical, a recent rampage against Christians in a mostly Muslim village resulted in eight Christian families expelled from the village, by decision of the local authorities (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0216/After-surviving-sectarian-mob-Egyptian-Christians-expelled-from-village>). The victims were punished. In a positive development, members of parliament in Cairo stepped in to bring back five of those families (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2012/0217/Egyptian-lawmakers-intervene-to-allow-expelled-Christians-to-return-home>). Still, a long history of prejudice and discrimination won't go away over night.

Add to this the euphoria and chaos unleashed by the January 25 Revolution. For many Egyptian Christians, annoyance gave rise to fear. In the uncertain transition from a dictatorial government to one firmly in the grip of a military junta, which is only reluctantly ceding power to an elected parliament – whose overwhelming majority is one brand of islamism or another – any minority is going to feel vulnerable. Add to that attacks on churches with dozens killed, and even the tragic incident of the army deliberately killing peaceful Christian protesters in early October (for a larger context, see my blog on this at <http://www.humantrustees.org/blogs/muslim-christian-dialog/item/32-seek-the-peace-of-the-city>). I never read Hirsi Ali's figure of 200,000 Copts fleeing their homes, but I'm sure more Egyptian Christians than before are trying to emigrate.

Nevertheless, many Egyptian Christian leaders remain optimistic, figuring that while the road to democracy is bound to be treacherous, it will open up better opportunities in the long run. They have ruled out the idea of a "Christian" political party (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/10/egyptian-christian-political-party_n_1266666.html), banking on more fruitful alliances with the dominant Justice and Freedom party and its coalition partners – that do not include the ultraconservative Salafi Nour party (<http://www.humantrustees.org/blogs/religion-and-global-society/item/42-the-global-salafi-phenomenon>).

Iraq, a wounded nation “pacified” by force

Iraqi Christians, by contrast, are not so upbeat. Hirsi Ali correctly notes that half of

the mostly Assyrian Christians of Iraq have fled the country since the US invasion of 2003. What she leaves out of her “story telling” is that this is mostly due to the American military occupation and the violence it has spawned in Iraq. Though Sunni-Shii tensions are longstanding, Muslim-Christian ones, unlike Egypt, are not. Christians since 2003 have been perceived as somehow collaborators and thus scapegoats for the violence perpetrated by a “Christian” nation on them. Apparently, you can’t impose democracy on a nation by force – and especially one where ethnic and sectarian tensions run deep, ever embittered by the uneven distribution of oil wealth.

Pakistan and Afghanistan: a cauldron of acrimony and violence

Hirsi Ali mentions a growing number of attacks against Christians in Indonesia, and again, a lot more could be said about ethnic tensions, political grievances, and the like. She rightly calls Saudi Arabia’s handling of religious minorities “totalitarian restrictions.” But I would like to comment on Pakistan, which I see as perhaps her strongest case. Indeed, since at least the 1980s, there has been a hardening of Islamic traditional norms, and the military, in its bid to control the political elites, has only made the political opposition harden its Islamist rhetoric.

Yet by far the biggest factor for Islamic radicalization in Pakistan has been the war in Afghanistan. Its government turned to Islamic symbols to counter foreign imperialism, first in supporting the CIA-backed mujahiddeen against the Soviets in the 1980s, then in their alliance with the Pashtun-led Taliban state in the 1990s. Hence, the genie was let out of the bottle, so that with the Nato-led coalition invasion of 2001, years of bitter fighting, scores of civilian casualties, and now following regular drone attacks on Pakistani soil, anti-American resentment has reached a boiling point in Pakistan. This kind of resentment only produces more venom against the already beleaguered Christian minority (about 1%).

Having said that, some clear-cut human rights violations are practically written in the law of the land. When religious positions harden in Muslim contexts, minorities suffer. The medieval law of apostasy, still on the books in a religious sense, comes into force and its corollary, the law of apostasy is, as Hirsi Ali writes, “routinely used by criminals and intolerant Pakistani Muslims to bully religious minorities.” And yes, two high profile

politicians, including Punjab's former governor Salman Taseer and the most influential Christian lawmaker, the Minister of Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti, were both gunned down in January and March of 2011. Both had campaigned for the repeal of the blasphemy laws (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2011/0302/Murder-of-Christian-lawmaker-Can-Pakistan-check-Islamic-extremism>). For more on apostasy, see this blog: <http://www.humantrustees.org/blogs/religion-and-human-rights/item/12-islam-hudud-and-human-rights>).

Hirsi Ali mentions the attack on the World Vision compound in 2010, in which six people were killed and four wounded, and connects this to the blasphemy laws that make confessing one's belief in the Trinity a crime. Indeed, this was a brazen act, and considering World Vision is extremely careful to avoid any action that even looks like proselytism, one can only conclude that even the presence of foreign Christians is intolerable to some Muslims.

What about Afghanistan? Carl Moeller, president of Open Doors USA, one of several evangelical organizations that specialize in helping persecuted Christians around the world recently wrote a piece entitled, *Will There Be a Place for Christians in Muslim-Majority 'Arab Spring' Countries?* (<http://m.crosswalk.com/news/a-place-for-christians-muslim-majority-arab-spring.html>) Though I don't necessarily agree with all that he writes (I would be more upbeat about Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, for instance), I stand by his analysis of the situation in Afghanistan – though I have to wonder why it's included since it's obviously not an Arab country. In 2010, the last standing church structure was bulldozed, and the traditional apostasy law is routinely enforced. Afghans, by law, must be Muslim. Moeller mentions a recent State Department report informing us that "Afghanistan's media law prohibits publicizing and promoting religions other than Islam."

Every year the Open Doors World Watch List (<http://www.worldwatchlist.us/about/>) ranks the fifty countries where Christians are most persecuted. In the 2012 version, 39 were Muslim-majority countries. North Korea has been at the top of the list for decades, but Afghanistan moved up to second place, just ahead of Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Iran and the Maldives. Pakistan was listed at number ten.

Hirsi Ali's "War on Christians" Discourse

By now you are probably saying, “isn’t this exactly what Ayaan Hirsi Ali wrote in ‘The War on Christians’”? As I wrote in the beginning, yes and no. Many of the facts are correct, but the context is missing. With a wider angle camera focused on each of the countries mentioned here, I hope that it’s clear that there is no “war” declared by Muslims against Christians on a global scale. Hirsi Ali herself tries to downplay the title of her piece at one point. She writes,

“No, the violence isn’t centrally planned or coordinated by some international Islamist agency. In that sense the global war on Christians isn’t a traditional war at all. It is, rather, a spontaneous expression of anti-Christian animus by Muslims that transcends cultures, regions, and ethnicities.”

OK, it’s not really a “war” against Christians. So don’t say it. And don’t put it in the title. Maybe it was *Newsweek* that, anxious like any media outlet to boost its sales, insisted on the title. Certainly the bloodied icon on the cover was meant to add to the sensationalism and elicit emotion – should I say shock and outrage?

There is another motive in Hirsi Ali’s piece. See for yourself:

“Over the past decade, these [the OIC and CAIR] and similar groups have been remarkably successful in persuading leading public figures and journalists in the West to think of each and every example of perceived anti-Muslim discrimination as an expression of a systematic and sinister derangement called ‘Islamophobia’—a term that is meant to elicit the same moral disapproval as xenophobia or homophobia.”

So this is it: she’s setting out to counter what she perceives as a smear campaign on the part of some Muslim organizations – a campaign that has been remarkably successful. Hence, she fights back. Her objective in this article is to pit the annoying but rather “minor” discrimination that Muslims face in the West against the outright persecution and killing of hundreds of Christians every year in Muslim countries.

To make this contrast really work, she coins an equivalent word, even though she has deridingly characterized Islamophobia “as an expression of a systematic and sinister derangement … meant to elicit the same moral disapproval as xenophobia or homophobia.” Nevermind, “Christophobia” will do just fine.

This is political wrangling, and it is much more than just sparring about words. In the academic disciplines of the human sciences (from literary criticism to philosophy, history, sociology and anthropology) we call this mounting an oppositional “discourse.” More than simply language, creating a discourse is to construct a series of arguments from a particular perspective (we all have one – total objectivity is impossible). But it’s more than just words and arguments. Tone is crucial too.

On the one hand, Hirsi Ali’s piece is considerably toned down, compared to writings by Robert Spencer, Brigitte Gabrielle, or Daniel Pipes. On the other hand, she deftly builds her case by piling the most egregious acts against Christians one on top of the other and then saying, “[i]t should be clear from this catalog of atrocities that anti-Christian violence is a major and underreported problem.” This, combined with a contemptuous dismissal of Muslims’ complaints about “Islamophobia,” allows her to build up to her conclusion:

“Instead of falling for overblown tales of Western Islamophobia, let’s take a real stand against the Christophobia infecting the Muslim world. Tolerance is for everyone—except the intolerant.”

Here “Christophobia” is a virulent infectious disease that must be denounced. And then the eminently reasonable word – a darling of liberals, but which conservatives cannot dismiss either – “tolerance.” Contrast her tone to that of a recent Economist article on the same topic (<http://www.economist.com/node/21542195>), or, better yet, the masterful work of scholar, clergyman and longtime resident in Lebanon and Egypt, Colin Chapman (Christians in the Middle East: Past, Present and Future” www.emeu.net/pdf/Christians_in_the_ME.pdf).

Notice too the use of “tale”: for her, “tales of Islamophobia” are all about exaggerated storytelling to make people sorry for Muslims. But the shoe fits on her foot too: her article is about telling a tale of woes suffered by Christians in Muslim lands. Is the

litany of suffering on the Christophobia side of the ledger so many times worse than that on the Islamophobia side? Yes, in the sense that many basic human rights are denied to non-Muslims in Muslim-majority contexts and that there is much loss of life. No, in the sense that the suffering is caused by many more factors than intentional persecution. Other minorities are oppressed too. Besides, Muslims suffer as well from the lack of freedom of expression and conscience. In fact, if you count numbers of casualties, Muslims are by far the greatest victims of extremist violence.

To sum up, Christians do suffer in some Muslim countries. Some of it is outright persecution. Yet most of this hardship is due to a brutal convergence of factors that affect many Muslim societies as a whole: authoritarian regimes (thanks to the “Arab Spring,” that is beginning to change); economic woes made worse by corrupt governance; a groundswell of puritanical and intolerant religiosity; and an angry reaction to western military and political interference.

Hirsi Ali’s tale of Christophobia told in this way is inflammatory. While raising an issue that deserves careful consideration on a global scale, the tone and tenor of her article will likely short-circuit needed negotiations.