

Reconciliation in the Shadow of ISIS

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In the contemporary world we can observe a great return of religion to public life. Contrary to widespread opinions it had not commenced on 9/11 2001 but already in the 1970s. The Six Day War in 1967 caused an annihilating defeat of pan Arabism. While Naser's army marched chanting "Land! Sea! Air!", six years later this battle cry was replaced with "Allah Akbar!". In 1977 America elected its first born-again Christian President (Jimmy Carter). In 1979 Iran was shaken with the revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini with his mullahs who took the power from the secular Shah Pahlavi. Simultaneously, Zia al-Haq Islamised Pakistan and Buddhism reigned in Sri Lanka. Finally, an anti-Communist Pole became the Catholic pope, and, as John Gaddis observed, secular '-isms' started to fall one after the other. In this context Philip Jenkins argues that historians looking at our century will most probably see religion as the most basic, inspiring and destructive force of humanity, steering our approaches to politics, freedom, responsibility, conceptualisations of nationality and, of course, conflicts and wars¹.

Since the year 2000, 43% of domestic wars had religion in the background². One may say that religion rarely is a *casus belli*. However, many argue that when it enters the scene of conflict, it usually both intensifies and renders it nearly impossible to solve since the dispute is changed into a disagreement about non-negotiable absolutes³. It ought to be noted that many conflicts around the world acquired an openly religious character. For example, the

¹ P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, New York 2011.

² United States Institute of Peace, *Religion in World Affairs Report. Special Report 201*, 2008, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/sr201.pdf>.

³ For a detailed account regarding religious violence please see: M. Al-Rasheed, & M. Shterin, (eds.), *Dying for Faith. Religiously Motivated Violence in the Contemporary World*, London 2009; A.R. Murphy (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Religion and Violence*, Oxford 2011; R.S. Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, New York 2011; C.P.E. Burns, *More Moral Than God. Taking Responsibility for Religious Violence*, New York 2008; C. Selengut, *Sacred Fury. Understanding Religious Violence*, Lanham 2004; J. Stern, *Terror in the Name of God. Why Religious Militants Kill*, London 2003; M. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God. The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Berkeley 2003 among others.

conflict in Palestine, which started as a clearly secular affair (with many Palestine Liberation Organization activists being Christian), with time transformed into a polarised, doctrine-driven battle, in which both sides are convinced that God is on their side. The first Chechen war was a war of independence. The subsequent ones changed the irredentist uprising into a religious conflict and, as in the case of Bosnia earlier on, Chechnya attracted foreign fighters from all over the world. This happens because religious conflicts do not respect national borders.

In the 1960s scholars were convinced⁴ that if religion would survive at all, then it would be only in its most benign and ecumenical form. Current developments, prove this thesis to be false. Furthermore, various fundamentalisms drive each other and are very adept in employing the tools offered by modernity, symptoms of the 'revenge of God' discussed by Gilles Kepel⁵. Indeed, in 1975 it appeared as if Islam was no longer a political force in the Middle East. In our century, it became a thriving political platform for struggle against the forces of evil (often equated with the USA and the West in general). Such trends have also been augmented by the Arab Spring. It is claimed that in the 1970s, international terrorism was a domain of radical left, while today we witness a wave of religious international terrorism⁶. Additionally, the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) replaced the non-state Al Qaeda with a quasi-state threat that further complicated matters.

However, if we agree to the fact that religion is part of the problem, then it should also constitute part of the solution. Thus, the religious renaissance brought forward a renewed interest in religious dialogue and reconciliation understood as a "restoration of the right relationship" between two communities of different denominations. While we observed many faith based initiatives in the 20th century, the new millennium faces humanity with even more daunting challenges in the context of the much desired reconciliation of Christian and Muslim communities, particularly those in the area under the control and influence of ISIS.

Looking at the case of ISIS in general and the persecution of Catholics in particular, this chapter aims to examine the issue of faith-based reconciliation by exposing the inadequacies of secular responses to religiously motivated conflicts and subsequently investigating the effectiveness of top-down approaches by the Holy See and hierarchs in order to juxtapose them with bottom-up reactions of ordinary clergy and the faithful both within and beyond

⁴ J. Casanova, *Public Religion in the Modern World*, Chicago 1994.

⁵ G. Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*, Cambridge 1994.

⁶ D.C. Rapoport, *The Four Waves of Terrorism*, [in:] *Attacking Terrorism. Elements of a Grand Strategy*, A. Cronin, J. Ludes (eds.), Washington DC 2004, p. 46-73.

the areas under the direct influence of ISIS. This analysis reveals paradoxes and deficiencies of religious and non-religious approaches to ISIS and sheds light on their ramifications, thus offering new perspectives that further our understanding of reconciliation in the context of religious conflicts.

ISIS and religious minorities

What is known about the Islamic State resembles a precarious mixture of wartime propaganda, social media newsfeeds, and secret service operational files. Our ignorance of ISIS is partially explicable as academic research in this area is impossible and the majority of analyses rely on speculation or extrapolation. We know ISIS existed as one among many Islamist groups operating in the Middle East long before it captured the attention of global media and world politicians. It is confirmed that the self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, has been its leader since May 2010. In the summer of 2014 ISIS seized vast swaths of territory, including cities like Mosul and Ramadi, and, as Graeme Wood noted,⁷ “even though nobody expected them to last longer than three months, ISIS already rules an area similar to that of the United Kingdom”. Wood’s thorough analysis of the group suggests that ISIS “rejects peace as a matter of principle; that it hungers for genocide; that its religious views make it constitutionally incapable of certain types of change, even if that change might ensure its survival; and that it considers itself a harbinger of apocalypse—and headline player in—the imminent end of the world”. In other words, religion is an essence, an axis of the *modus vivendi* as well as *modus operandi*, and the strategically formulated goal of the group to the extent that one could claim ISIS to be a unique case of using politics for furthering religious agenda rather than the other way round (much more typical for international relations⁸).

This total approach to religion results in direct violence against religious minorities, both as a by-product of its military operations and one of the key policies of the caliphate. While this violence is aimed at Shia Muslims, Alawites, Assyrian, Chaldean, Syriac and Armenian Christians, Yazidis, Druze, Shabaks and Mandeans, my analysis focuses on Christians and particularly on the communities adhering to the Roman Catholic Church.

It needs to be underlined that ISIS is not the only group which employs destructive policies by using religious identity markers. Nevertheless, the sheer scale and variety of employed means render them the epitome of religious

⁷ G. Wood, *What ISIS really wants*, “The Atlantic”, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

⁸ An excellent analysis of an instrumental approach to religious violence can be found in W. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, New York 2009.

persecutor. Whereas it is impossible to provide an exact headcount, rough estimates indicate that while in 2000 Iraq was home to a Christian community ranging from 850.000 to 1,4 million faithful, in 2013 this number plummeted to 330.000 and in 2015 further melted down to below 100.000. Mosul exemplifies the fate of Christians under ISIS. Initially about 100.000 Christians inhabited the city, in 2013 only 5.000 remained, and only dozens survived after ISIS had captured the city⁹. ISIS has begun marking Christian homes with the Arabic letter 'n' signifying "Nasrani" which means "Christian" in Arabic¹⁰. Christians in Mosul were given four choices: convert to Islam, abandon the city taking nothing with them and having their houses and properties confiscated by ISIS upon their departure, stay and pay *jizya* (the religious levy all non-Muslims must pay while living in the land of Islam), or die. The majority fled and of the 40 churches, several were destroyed, while the remainder has been turned to mosques. Christians in Syria suffer a similar fate; more than 7.6 million Christians have been displaced since the beginning of the war in Syria. Their predicament is even more dire than that of Iraqi Christians due to the fact that of the main features of Syria's Christian population is its combined ethnic and religious identity¹¹.

In the ISIS-controlled areas Christians are killed, frequently after having been publicly tortured and mutilated. Executions often take the form of beheadings or crucifixions like in Aleppo where on August 28, 2015, 12 Christians were punished for saying "they would never renounce Christ" for Muhammad¹². Among ISIS victims are both adults and children, the latter repeatedly used as leverage against their parents; an Anglican priest known as the "Vicar of Baghdad," recounted Christians seeing their children chopped in half for refusing to embrace Islam¹³. A 12-year-old boy had his fingers cut off for refusing to convert while his father watched, being told that the torture would stop only "if he, the father, returned to Islam." Additionally, in ISIS-controlled areas Christians suffer various forms of violence (beatings¹⁴,

⁹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/iraq/>

¹⁰ *ISIS in Mosul Marks Christian Homes, Patriarch Issues Urgent Appeal*, Assyrian International News Agency, 19 July 2014, <http://aina.org/news/20140719115241.htm>.

¹¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/syria/>.

¹² *Christian Workers in Syria Crucified, Beheaded*, Christian Aid Mission, October 1, 2015, http://www.christianaid.org/News/2015/mir20151001.aspx?utm_source=MorningStar+News&utm_campaign=34e2b79b1b-Syria_terrors10_2_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_6e3978492c-34e2b79b1b-78080769.

¹³ *Canon Andrew White on ISIS in Iraq - Jerusalem Dateline*, The Christian Broadcasting Network, Video available at: <http://www.cbn.com/tv/3879370412001?mobile=false>.

¹⁴ S. Zaimov, *Christian Beaten, Tortured and Killed by ISIS for Refusing to Convert to Islam*, "Christian Post", September 3, 2014, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/christian-beaten-tortured-and-killed-by-isis-for-refusing-to-convert-to-islam-125779/>.

rapes¹⁵, arrests and forced marriages¹⁶). Aside from targeted assassinations, abduction¹⁷ is another imminent danger facing Christians under ISIS; both lay and religious people, including priests,¹⁸ nuns,¹⁹ and bishops²⁰ are kidnapped and then either killed²¹ or kept for ransom,²² labour or pleasure²³. Those Christians who escape physical violence are subjugated as *dhimmi*²⁴ and suffer deprivation, oppression, and marginalization under the sharia law. For instance, ISIS called for all books written by Christians, whether researchers, writers, or academics, that are found in the Central Library at the University of Mosul to be burned²⁵.

Finally, churches, shrines, and other religious buildings (libraries, chapels, monasteries) are desecrated, destroyed and razed to the ground²⁶. In the ancient Mar Elian monastery, the remains of Saint Elian were removed from his stone sarcophagus, and then profaned by the jihadis.

¹⁵ A. Shubert, B. Naik, *ISIS soldiers told to rape women 'to make them Muslim*, CNN.com, October 8, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/08/middleeast/isis-rape-theology-soldiers-rape-women-to-make-them-muslim>.

¹⁶ R. Perring, *Kidnapped Christians forced into marriage and Islam or infected with diseases and beheaded*, "Daily Express", October 17, 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/612536/Boko-Haram-kidnapped-Christian-marriage-Islam-terror-group-Nigeria>.

¹⁷ J. Akbar, *ISIS post pictures of 'Christian women kidnapped in Syria'*, "Daily Mail Online", August 15, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3199105/ISIS-post-pictures-Christian-women-kidnapped-Syria-threatening-sex-slaves-ransom-not-paid.html>.

¹⁸ *Syrian priest kidnapped by ISIS is free*, "The Catholic Herald", October 12, 2015, <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/10/12/syria-priest-kidnapped-by-isis-is-free>.

¹⁹ B. Marie, *Two nuns, kidnapped by ISIS, released safely and without ransom*, "Christian Today", July 15, 2014, <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/two.nuns.kidnapped.by.isis.released.safely.and.without.ransom/38868.htm>.

²⁰ S. Schwartz, *Two Years Ago, Two Christian Bishops Were Kidnapped. Has a 'Silent' World Forgotten Them?*, TheBlaze.com, April 26, 2015, <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2015/04/26/two-years-ago-two-christian-bishops-were-kidnapped-their-fate-is-still-a-mystery>.

²¹ H. Macura, *Kidnapped Priest Killed, Chopped Up by ISIS as 'Christians Become a Form of Currency' in Mid-East War, Says Aid to the Church in Need*, "Christian Post", August 12, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/kidnapped-priest-killed-chopped-up-by-isis-as-christians-become-a-form-of-currency-in-mid-east-war-says-aid-to-the-church-in-need-142658>.

²² *In Baghdad, Christians Kidnapped and Killed Despite the Payment of Ransom*, Agenzia Fides, July 10, 2015, http://www.fides.org/en/news/38168-ASIA_IRAQ_In_Baghdad_Christians_kidnapped_and_killed_despite_the_payment_of_ransom#.VaBW_PIViko.

²³ J. Shammas, *ISIS monsters abduct 400 civilians including women and children to sell as sex slaves*, "Mirror Online", January 20, 2016, <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/isis-monsters-abduct-400-civilians-7210317>.

²⁴ *Dhimmi* was the name applied by the Arab-Muslim conquerors to indigenous non-Muslim populations who surrendered by a treaty (*dhimma*) to Muslim domination.

²⁵ *IS Burns Books by Christian Authors in Mosul University in Iraq*, "Middle East Christian News", July 12, 2015, http://www.mcndirect.com/showsubject.aspx?id=63642#.Vd4kW_IVikp.

²⁶ N. Gutteridge, *ISIS dig up and desecrate saint's bones after bulldozing 1,600-year-old Christian church*, Express.co.uk, August 21, 2015, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/599816/ISIS-Islamic-State-Mar-Elian-monastery-Homs-Syria-bulldoze-saint>.

All of the occurrences described above are photographed or filmed and disseminated on social media for propaganda purposes. One of the most known videos released by ISIS is the one depicting 21 Egyptian Christians being decapitated in Libya²⁷. Interestingly, however, when ISIS released another video of more Christians in Libya being massacred, a masked spokesman addressed not the local followers of Christ but addressed “Christians everywhere”:

We say to Christians everywhere, the Islamic State will expand, with Allah’s permission. And it will reach you even if you are in fortified strongholds. So whoever enters Islam will have security.... But whoever refuses will see nothing from us but the edge of a spear. The men will be killed and the children will be enslaved, and their wealth will be taken as booty. This is the judgment of Allah and His Messenger²⁸.

This global agenda is further reiterated by threats to take Rome and kill the pope²⁹. In several messages ISIS announced that while they want “Paris before Rome”, ultimately the black flag of the Islamic State will fly over the St. Peter’s Square³⁰ and pope Francis “will be the last pope”. Indeed, four people were arrested in Italy for plotting the attack on the pontiff³¹.

Secular responses to ISIS

Religious conflicts are not government-driven and rarely does the authority condone or support them. Nonetheless, the ability of secular governments to control the religious element diminishes rapidly. This forces us to look again at the role and significance of religion in politics and especially with regard to political albeit religiously motivated violence as well as the processes and factors that could facilitate reconciliation between the communities. In the context of ISIS, these truisms are particularly potent: They call themselves the Islamic State. They claim to be the restorers of the caliphate, the ones who have finally fulfilled the most cherished aspiration of Islamist movements all over the world. They declare their intention to govern their domains solely and wholly

²⁷ R. Ibrahim, *Christian Slaughter in Libya*, “FrontPage Magazine”, February 16, 2015, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/251483/christian-slaughter-libya-raymond-ibrahim>.

²⁸ *Islamic State Warns Those Who Refuse Islam Will Die like Ethiopians in Libya Video*, “Morning Star News”, April 24, 2015, <http://morningstarnews.org/2015/04/islamic-state-warns-those-who-refuse-islam-will-die-like-ethiopians-in-libya-video>.

²⁹ *Suspected jihadists ‘threatened Pope Francis*, “The Local”, December 1, 2015, <http://www.thelocal.it/20151201/four-arrested-in-italy-kosovo-anti-terror-sweep>.

³⁰ R. Iyengar, *There Is a Real Threat to the Pope From ISIS, Says Vatican Security Chief*, “The Time”, March 2, 2015, <http://time.com/3729537/pope-isis-threat-real-vatican-police>.

³¹ *Threats on the Web: This will be the Last Pope*, “La Stampa”, December 1, 2015, <http://www.lastampa.it/2015/12/01/vaticaninsider/eng/news/threats-on-the-web-this-will-be-the-last-pope-LWSCFRX9teXYyEQdqV7vLP/pagina.html>.

by Islamic law, acting swiftly and ruthlessly to end any practice that does not conform to that law. They repeatedly proclaim their piety, ascribing all their victories to Allah and submitting themselves in all things to his will while their official statements are peppered with Koranic quotes and references to prophet Muhammad. In fact, to use Wood's wording again, "Every major decision and law promulgated by the Islamic State adheres to what it calls, in its press and pronouncements, and on its billboards, license plates, stationery, and coins, 'the Prophetic methodology', which means following the prophecy and example of Muhammad, in punctilious detail"³².

Yet despite all this, the responses from Western leaders, scholars and public figures, the mainstream media, and much of the public are confined within the secular paradigm hence the plethora of analyses, diagnoses and strategies ignores the political theology of ISIS. This is done in two ways: the religious nature of ISIS is either denied or dismissed with claims that it hijacked *vel* abused *vel* misinterpreted the peaceful message of Islam.

In his nationally televised speech on the eve of the anniversary of 9/11, President Obama described ISIS as a form of political myopia and rendered it "not Islamic;"³³ a sentiment shared also by Vice President Joe Biden.³⁴ British Prime Minister David Cameron, explained: "What we are witnessing is actually a battle between Islam on the one hand and extremists who want to abuse Islam on the other. These extremists, often funded by fanatics living far away from the battlefields, pervert the Islamic faith as a way of justifying their warped and barbaric ideology – and they do so not just in Iraq and Syria but right across the world, from Boko Haram and al-Shabaab to the Taliban and al-Qaeda"³⁵. In a similar vein British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond declared that the "so-called caliphate has no moral legitimacy; it is a regime of torture, arbitrary punishment and murder that goes against the most basic beliefs of Islam"³⁶. Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, assessed that ISIS is "beheading people and parading their heads on spikes, subjugating women and girls, killing Muslims, Christians and anyone who gets in their way. This is no liberation movement – only a perverted, oppressive ideology that bears no

³² G. Wood, *What ISIS really wants*, op. cit.

³³ J. Auerbach, *When is an Islamic State Not Islamic?*, "Algemeiner", September 12, 2014, <http://www.algemeiner.com/2014/09/12/when-is-an-islamic-state-not-islamic/>.

³⁴ R. Spencer, *Imam Joe Biden Schools an Infidel*, "FrontPage Magazine", December 12, 2014, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2014/robert-spencer/imam-joe-biden-schools-an-infidel/>.

³⁵ D. Cameron, *ISIL poses a direct and deadly threat to Britain*, "The Telegraph", August 16, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/11038121/David-Cameron-Isil-poses-a-direct-and-deadly-threat-to-Britain.html>.

³⁶ *Hammond: James Foley murder an 'utter betrayal' of Britain*, Channel 4 News, August 24, 2014, <http://www.channel4.com/news/iraq-philip-hammond-james-foley-beheading-isis-is-isis/>.

relation to Islam"³⁷. Unfortunately, every atrocity enumerated by Yvette Cooper, ISIS presents as a Koranic sanction (Koran 47:4, 4:34, 4:89, 9:29). UN Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon renamed ISIS "The Un-Islamic Non-State,"³⁸ while the European Union's head of foreign affairs and security policy, Federica Mogherini asserted that "Da'esh³⁹ is Islam's worst enemy in today's world"⁴⁰.

I do not intend to question the normative grounds of the above approaches, merely to point out that we are faced with the paradox of subjective and therefore utterly irrefutable and simultaneously mutually exclusive perceptions of ISIS's religious dimension. In the West this perception constitutes the very fulcrum upon which military, economic, and diplomatic responses are based. In reality, the question whether or not ISIS practices 'true' Islam is secondary to the fact that they themselves believe they do so, hence suppression of the issues related to political theology firstly, renders the secular responses to ISIS unable to excoriate the 'caliphate' concept (which is the key foundation of a purposeful and systematic persecution of religious minorities), and secondly, culminates into an apologism that only facilitates radical Islam and, in turn, eliminates the possibility of genuine reconciliation between communities. Furthermore, secular responses to ISIS are characterised by a lack of concern for the possibility that the 'ISIS effect' will spread beyond the territory it controls influencing both a) relations between Muslim and Christian refugees from the regions and b) Christian-Muslims relations in other regions of the world, as well as c) compelling other Muslim groups to follow the ISIS example (e.g. Boko Haram in Nigeria).

Surprisingly, Middle Eastern politicians are more willing to acknowledge the religious aspects of ISIS. For instance, Jordanian-Palestinian politician, Muhammad Bayouth Al-Tamimi, stated that "there is no such thing as 'ISIS ideology' – it's Islam" and called for "a public discussion about this dichotomy and how it came about, and whose position is better represented among Muslim populations worldwide, as well as in light of Islamic tradition, theology and law"⁴¹.

³⁷ N. Culzac, *James Foley beheading was an 'utter betrayal of Britain', says Philip Hammond*, "The Independent", August 24, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/killing-of-james-foley-an-utter-betrayal-of-britain-foreign-secretary-philip-hammond-9687959.html>.

³⁸ P. deHahn, *UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon renames ISIS 'The Un-Islamic Non-State'*, "Kicker", September 24, 2014, <http://gokicker.com/2014/09/24/un-secretary-general-ban-ki-moon-renames-isis-un-islamic-non-state/>.

³⁹ *Daesh (Da'esh)* is an acronym of the Arabic *ad-Dawlah al-Islāmiyah fi 'l-Irāq wa-sh-Shām*, i.e. the same words that make up ISIS in English: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

⁴⁰ P.J. Watson, *EU Security Head: "Political Islam" is the Future of Europe*, "Infowars", July 6, 2015, <http://www.infowars.com/eu-security-head-political-islam-is-the-future-of-europe/>.

⁴¹ *Jordanian-Palestinian Politician: There Is No ISIS Ideology – It's Islam; Syrian Soldiers Deserved to Be Slaughtered*, The Middle East Media Research Institute, August 31, 2014, <http://www.memri.org/clip/en/0/0/0/0/0/4471.htm>.

Non-Secular Responses to ISIS

The religious responses to ISIS can be understood in two ways: those responses that acknowledge and react to the religious character of ISIS and its activities and the responses from the religious community targeted by the self-proclaimed caliph and his armies; these two are not identical, although they are not mutually exclusive. This chapter focuses on the responses coming from the Roman Catholic Church and it distinguishes between top-down reactions by the pope and hierarchs and the bottom-up reactions of rank and file Catholics. Furthermore a distinction is made between the approaches to ISIS proposed by those who were immediate targets of its genocidal policies and those who belong to the same community of believers but were spared the fate of a persecuted minority and speak of reconciliation from a purely theoretical perspective.

The Holy See acts as a moral authority being the steward of an international community and a point of reference for Catholics all over the world. Its teachings, both in written and spoken form, including those issued by the pope, have various pastoral weight, but together comprise a reliable map indicating the way the faithful should follow. The current approach of the Catholic Church to inter-faith relations is based upon the documents of Vatican II, and in particular on *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian religions⁴². As David B. Burrell observed, it was widely hoped that “the opening provided by *Nostra Aetate*, together with cultural changes in attitudes catalysed by increased commingling of cultures, will bring people of faith into alliances that can foster mutual illumination and unveil other dimensions of these faith traditions”⁴³. Indeed, the spirit of Vatican II directed Catholics to a fresh appreciation of Islam⁴⁴ until the steady rise of Islamic fundamentalism challenged the asymmetry of inter-faith outreach; this phenomenon manifested particularly in the aftermath of pope Benedict’s Regensburg lecture⁴⁵. Since then, the Vatican’s stance towards Islam-related issues has been very cautious and toned. The new pope, Francis, distanced himself from his predecessor to the extent that in his first apostolic exhortation he wrote that “authentic Islam and the proper reading of the Koran are opposed to every form of violence”⁴⁶. Later, when Christian persecution under ISIS intensified,

⁴² *Nostra Aetate*, October 28, 1965. Full document available at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁴³ D.B. Burrell, *Interfaith Perspectives on Reconciliation*, [in:] *The Politics of Past Evil. Religion, Reconciliation, and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, D. Phillpott (ed.), Notre Dame 2006, p. 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

⁴⁵ J.V. Schall, *The Regensburg Lecture*, South Bend 2007.

⁴⁶ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (253), November 24, 2013. Full text available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

the pope called for 'appropriate' responses to ISIS⁴⁷ and appealed to the international community to prevent the persecution of Christians who have lived in the Middle East for thousands of years. Far from requesting military action, Francis expected rather "an effective political solution on both the international and the local levels"⁴⁸. At the same time the pope named Cardinal Fernando Filoni as his personal envoy to the conflict area in order to organise support for the refugees and continued outreach to Muslim communities through inter-faith prayers and meetings. During his visit to the Central African Republic, in a mosque burned by Christians the pope delivered a message of reconciliation saying that "together, we must say no to hatred, to revenge and to violence, particularly that violence which is perpetrated in the name of a religion or of God himself. God is peace. *Salaam*"⁴⁹. It should be noted that the pope is very careful not to single out Islam in the context of religious fundamentalism. In his address to the US Congress in September 2015, Francis assured that "no religion is immune from forms of individual delusion or ideological extremism"⁵⁰ thereby equating ISIS with Christian fundamentalist groups even though the latter do not endorse religious genocide.

Western hierarchs follow the papal example with regard to inter-religious dialogue, interfaith meetings and prayers, condemnation of Islamophobia, and outreach to local Muslim communities. Bishop Robert McManus (USA) declared that "talk about extreme, militant Islamists and the atrocities that they have perpetrated globally might undercut the positive achievements that we Catholics have attained in our inter-religious dialogue with devout Muslims"⁵¹. Other responses point towards the problem of relative victimisation: Cardinal Theodore McCarrick (USA) insisted that "the truth of the matter is in these terrible massacres of the Islamic state, most of the victims have been Muslims"⁵². This relativism is usually combined with openness towards local

⁴⁷ Pope Francis Calls for 'Appropriate' Responses to ISIS, "The Week", November 30, 2014, <http://theweek.com/speedreads/441024/pope-francis-calls-appropriate-response-isis>.

⁴⁸ J. Hooper, *Pope Francis: ISIS violence against minorities in Iraq must be stopped*, "The Guardian", August 10, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/10/pope-francis-iraq-isis-islamic-state-religious-minorities-violence>.

⁴⁹ H. Sherwood, *Pope Francis Visits Besieged Mosque in Central African Republic*, "The Guardian", November 30, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/30/pope-francis-mosque-central-african-republic>.

⁵⁰ The full text of pope Francis' address to US Congress is available at: <http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/francis/papal-visit-2015/media-resources/upload/11-EN-congressional-address.pdf>.

⁵¹ *A false ecumenical fantasy is stopping the Vatican from seeing the evil that is the religion of Islam*, "Toronto Catholic Witness", November 19, 2015, <http://torontocatholicwitness.blogspot.com/2015/11/a-false-ecumenical-fantasy-is-stopping.html>.

⁵² *US Cardinal Praises Islam, Slams ISIL*, "Arab America", September 12, 2014, <http://www.arabamerica.com/us-cardinal-praises-islam-slams-isis>.

Muslim communities and extraordinary endeavours to accommodate their needs, e.g. one of the Swedish bishops wanted to remove crosses from churches and mark the direction of Mecca to make it more inviting for Muslims⁵³, while an Italian hierarch called for the construction of a mosque and the accommodation of Muslim festivities in Italian schools⁵⁴. Exceptions to this general trend are rare⁵⁵ and tend to happen rather among ordinary priests than bishops. Additionally, dissenting priests and communities are penalized for speaking⁵⁶ and acting against the official line, for instance by partaking in the marches organized by PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West)⁵⁷. While it is very difficult to assess the general attitude among Catholic laity in the West, taking into consideration the increasing societal animosity towards Islam and Muslims, one can assume that opting out for retaliation rather than reconciliation is also true for them as evidence to the contrary does not exist.

The top-down embracing and bottom-up rejection of reconciliation by Catholics living beyond the ISIS controlled area can be juxtaposed with the opposite trend among the faithful in the region. Middle Eastern bishops and patriarchs underline the plight of Christians⁵⁸, using very strong words (genocide⁵⁹, religious cleansing⁶⁰, war crime⁶¹), expose the passive stance of the West and lament the “death of the world’s conscience”⁶² calling for an armed

⁵³ D. Langert, *Biskopen vill ta bort kristna symboler*, SVT.se, September 29, 2015, <http://www.svt.se/nyheter/regionalt/stockholm/biskopen-vill-ta-bort-kristna-symboler-i-sjomanskyrkan>.

⁵⁴ J. Freitag, *Italian Archbishop Calling for construction of a Mosque*, “Church Militant”, March 11, 2016, <http://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/bologna-archbishop-wants-mosque>.

⁵⁵ T.D. Williams, *‘Eleven Christians Killed Every Hour,’ Says Irish Bishop*, “Breitbart News”, May 19, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/05/17/eleven-christians-killed-every-hour-says-irish-bishop>.

⁵⁶ *German priest muzzled for speaking at anti-Islam protest*, “Associated Press”, January 21, 2015, <http://www.cruxnow.com/church/2015/01/21/german-priest-muzzled-for-speaking-at-anti-islam-protest>.

⁵⁷ W. Kilpatrick, *Prelates and Politicians favour cultural suicide in Germany*, “The Crisis Magazine”, January 9, 2015, <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2015/new-jews-new-nazis-new-communists-old-hatreds>.

⁵⁸ *Synod: the West must ‘not forget the Christians in the Middle East,’ says Patriarch Younan*, “Asia News”, October 8, 2015, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Synod:-the-West-must-%E2%80%9Cnot-forget-the-Christians-in-the-Middle-East,%E2%80%9D-says-Patriarch-Younan-35532.html>.

⁵⁹ Demetrios of Mokissos, *ISIS Is Guilty of Anti-Christian Genocide*, “The Wall Street Journal”, February 11, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/isis-is-guilty-of-anti-christian-genocide-1455236036>.

⁶⁰ D. Abi-Raad, *ISIS: Religious Cleansing ‘Plain And Simple’*, “America Magazine”, August 27, 2015, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/isis-religious-cleansing-plain-and-simple>.

⁶¹ F. Noun, *For Gregorios III, the destruction of Ma’aloula churches is a ‘war crime’*, “Asia News”, April 22, 2014, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/For-Gregorios-III,-the-destruction-of-Ma%27aloula-churches-is-a-war-crime-30883.html>.

response⁶³. According to Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Warda “all the statements [by US government and media] have not condemned strongly what damage it [persecution of Christians] is doing. What they are saying is just ‘This is not the true Islam. This is violating the picture of Islam.’ The issue for them is the image of Islam, but none of these statements speak about the victims, about what has been done to the victims, they are not even mentioned”⁶⁴. Furthermore, the hierarchs frequently indicate that ISIS is not a threat only to the Middle East but also to Europe, and that Westerners will soon suffer the same hardships experienced by Christian communities in Iraq and Syria⁶⁵.

It is evident that the local clergy is as far removed as possible from the rosy picture of Islam promulgated by the Western bishops. Father Douglas al-Bazi, an Iraqi Catholic parish priest from Erbil, tortured by the jihadis, denounced the Western refusal to accept reality about Islam:

I’m proud to be an Iraqi, I love my country. But my [Muslim] country is not proud that I’m part of it. What is happening to my people [Christians] is nothing other than genocide. I beg you: do not call it a conflict. It’s genocide... When Islam lives amidst you, the situation might appear acceptable. But when one lives amidst Muslims [as a minority], everything becomes impossible.... Wake up! The cancer is at your door. They will destroy you. We, the Christians of the Middle East are the only group that has seen the face of evil: Islam⁶⁶.

Religious sisters Diana Momeka⁶⁷ and Hatune Dogan were on the ground and witnessed the devastation of Christian communities under ISIS: “The mission of [Abu Bakr] Baghdadi, of ISIS, is to convert the world completely to the Islamic religion and bring them to Dar Al Salaam⁶⁸, as they call it. And Islam is not peace, please. Whoever says ISIS has no connection to Islam or

⁶² *In Syria, Maronite patriarch denounces ‘death of the world’s conscience*, “Catholic News Service”, June 8, 2015, <http://catholicphilly.com/2015/06/news/world-news/in-syria-maronite-patriarch-denounces-death-of-the-worlds-conscience>.

⁶³ *Chaldean Patriarch calls for ARMED RESPONSE to defend Christians from Genocide*, “Catholic Online”, August 11, 2014, http://www.catholic.org/news/international/middle_east/story.php?id=56510.

⁶⁴ M. Rezac, *If you won’t help our people stay, help them leave - Catholic bishops from the Middle East*, “EWTN News”, August 5, 2015, <http://www.ewtnnews.com/catholic-news/US.php?id=12457>.

⁶⁵ T.D. Williams, *Patriarch of Antioch: Muslims want to conquer Europe with ‘faith and the birthrate’*, “Breitbart News”, November 6, 2015, <http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2015/11/06/patriarch-antioch-muslims-want-conquer-europe-faith-birthrate>.

⁶⁶ M. Matuzzi, *‘There’s No Such Thing as Moderate Islam’: An Iraqi Priest Describes the Christian Genocide*, “Il Foglio”, August 26, 2015, <http://rorate-caeli.blogspot.com/2015/08/theres-no-such-thing-as-moderate-islam.html>.

⁶⁷ T.C. Morgan, *Sister Momeka: Liberate Christian Lands From ISIS*, “Gleanings”, May 15, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/april/iraqi-christian-leader-denied-us-visa.html>.

⁶⁸ *Dar al Salaam* means House or Abode of Peace in Arabic and may refer to countries where Islam dominates.

something like this is, he's a liar. ISIS is Islam; Islam is ISIS"⁶⁹. Simultaneously, the disillusioned picture of Islam and scepticism towards a futile Muslim-Christian dialogue that has not saved a single Christian from Muslim persecution, or turned one jihadi into a peaceful man, but has abandoned thousands of Christians to their fate at the hands of those jihadis, does not inhibit a bottom-up willingness to pursue reconciliation. To the contrary, examples of forgiveness and a conciliatory stance allow for the hope that bridging the divides between the two communities is possible. Father Jacques Mourad, a Syrian-Catholic priest kidnapped by ISIS and kept in captivity for 84 days, confessed that the prayer of Charles de Foucauld, who was a victim of violence but decided to devote his life in a monastery to dialogue with Islam, enabled him to believe that all people are children of God and never feel hatred for his captors, but instead pity them and pray for them⁷⁰.

A lay Iraqi Christian, currently living in exile, explains that she loves her enemies – even the ones that hurt her “because they don't know what they are doing” – and insists that “The bombs will never liberate, but only the people that kneel and pray. If you, me, and everyone here would kneel and pray, this could change the face of the earth”⁷¹. Another refugee, an 11-year-old Iraqi girl, whose video message of forgiveness for ISIS posted on Facebook by SAT-7 ARABIC went viral worldwide, has given startling advice on how world leaders should respond to a Middle East in crisis: “Walk with love and mercy in your hearts”⁷². In the video Myriam, who fled from Qaraqosh when ISIS militants overtook the city, explains that “I wouldn't do anything to them, I only ask God to forgive them.” “You forgive them?” asks the reporter and the girl replies without hesitation, “Yes”⁷³. A similar viral video, “Who Would Dare to Love ISIS?”⁷⁴ more commonly known as “The Letter of the People of the

⁶⁹ E. Stakelbeck, *Nun: 'Islam Is ISIS. Whoever Says Otherwise Is a Liar'*, “CBN News”, May 11, 2015, <http://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/world/2015/May/Nun-Islam-is-ISIS-Whoever-Says-Otherwise-Is-a-Liar>.

⁷⁰ *Syrian priest kidnapped by ISIS: The rosary kept me going for my 84 days as prisoner*, “Rome Reports”, December 19, 2015, <http://www.romereports.com/2015/12/19/syrian-priest-kidnapped-by-isis-the-rosary-kept-me-going-for-my-84-days-as-prisoner>.

⁷¹ K. J. Lopez, *Notice the Genocide*, “National Review”, February 8, 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/430924/genocide-iraq>.

⁷² *Revisiting Myriam – the Girl Who Forgave ISIS*, Sat-7 Trust, December 23, 2015, <http://www.sat7uk.org/announcements/revisiting-myriam-the-girl-who-forgave-isis>.

⁷³ Video is available here: *Iraqi Christian girl teaches ISIS the power of forgiveness*, Maroun Maa'louf's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U3pAxAHT0jg>.

⁷⁴ The video can be seen at: Z. Romanowsky, *Video: This Powerful Message to ISIS From “The People of the Cross” Shows What Christian Love Is All About, “Aleteia”*, April 21, 2015, <http://aleteia.org/2015/04/21/video-this-powerful-message-to-isis-from-the-people-of-the-cross-shows-what-christian-love-is-all-about/#sthash.r2hzQqN3.dpuf>.

Cross to ISIS” is a powerful message of forgiveness, reconciliation, and brotherhood.

* * *

Reconciliation requires time, an appropriate setting engaging all the parties, but above all it requires the violence to stop. Especially systematic and wide-scale violence, like is the case of ISIS, needs to be eliminated, otherwise it will be impossible to have the two conflicted communities ready and willing to embark upon the long and painful journey of reconciliation. While approaches employed heretofore by both religious and secular authorities, especially in the West, have been aimed at stopping the violence and preparing the ground for reconciliation between the communities, they proved ineffective for a variety of reasons. Secular responses ignore the political theology of ISIS and thus are unable to counter the threat it poses. Non-secular responses outside the Middle East are bent on top-down initiatives of religious dialogue meant to foster understanding between communities, but result in a bottom-up rejection of reconciliation in favour of retaliation preferred by the ordinary clergy and Catholics. Simultaneously, while the responses of hierarchs from the area affected by the genocidal policies of ISIS are hard-line rather than conciliatory, regular members of the Catholic community remain open towards the idea of reconciliation in spite of their rather dark view of Islam. Most importantly, there is no coordination between the secular and non-secular, both on the Christian and Muslim side; a fact with profound ramifications.

Firstly, secular responses ignoring the religious dimension of ISIS fail to identify the source of the threat properly in order to enable adequate steps against it. An obvious failure involves the stance that Western and Middle Eastern authorities have taken regarding Muslim organizations in their countries. Only by accepting the religious motivations of ISIS policies, will they be able to call on Muslim scholars and opinion leaders to take decisive action and teach against the understanding of Islam that the Islamic State represents. This is necessary, because Muslims (not only in the West) seem to be at a loss when it comes to knowledge on how exactly ISIS is wrong on Islamic grounds. If the Islamic State violates the Koran and warps Muhammad’s example, why is it so appealing to the most devout young Muslims that over 20,000 Muslims from all over the world have now joined it in Iraq and Syria⁷⁵, with 5,000 joining its Libyan wing⁷⁶? If 25,000 young Christians had flocked from all over the world

⁷⁵ Syria, more than 20 thousand foreign fighters have joined the jihad, “Asia News”, November 2, 2015, <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Syria,-more-than-20-thousand-foreign-fighters-have-joined-the-jihad-33431.html>.

⁷⁶ J. Moore, 5,000 Foreign Fighters Flock to Libya as ISIS Call for Jihadists, “Newsweek”, March 3, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/5000-foreign-fighters-flock-libya-isis-call-jihadists-310948>.

to join a terrorist group, no one would dare to deny the religious underpinnings of such a phenomenon and Christian theology would be meticulously scrutinised.

The non-secular responses of the Holy See and Western hierarchs are conciliatory and rely on dialogue as a means to building religious bridges. This highly apologetic stance is meant to empower Muslim communities and foster understanding between the communities, but instead alienates ordinary Catholics who more and more often opt for retaliation rather than reconciliation. It shows that these misguided policies should be abandoned, not so as to hurl denunciations and imprecations against Islam, but to facilitate an indispensable prerequisite of sustainable reconciliation: a dialogue that does not shy away from difficult topics. On practical grounds it transcends also to the Muslim communities in the West. Where exactly have Muslims protested against the Islamic State? Recently we have seen hundreds of thousands of Muslims protest against cartoons of Muhammad, while the reactions against atrocities committed by Islamic jihadists were minuscule. Why is this the case? There are plenty of Muslims who condemn the Islamic State, but where are those who are actually opposing them or fighting them?

On the other hand, a hard-line stance of Eastern patriarchs renders them incapable of engaging with Muslims clerics and scholars. As opposed to Catholicism, Islam is not hierarchical and thus it is very difficult to obtain a religious ruling tantamount to a Muslim equivalent of *Roma locuta, causa finita*⁷⁷. For this reason, in the plethora of diverging and sometimes even contradictory opinions, teachings, and interpretations, it is crucial that the leading spiritual centres of Islam speak in unison and that their message is heard worldwide. Sadly, this is not yet the case. During an open discussion at Cairo University held on December 2, 2015, Dr Ahmed al-Tayeb, the Sheikh and Grand Imam of Al Azhar, and thus Egypt's foremost Islamic authority and one of the most influential Islamic centres in Sunni Islam, when again asked why Al Azhar refuses to issue a formal statement denouncing the Islamic State, stated:

Al Azhar cannot accuse any [Muslim] of being a kafir [infidel], as long as he believes in Allah and the Last Day—even if he commits every atrocity,” adding: “I cannot denounce ISIS as un-Islamic, but I can say that they cause corruption on earth. ISIS believes that those [Muslims] who commit the great sins are kafirs and can be killed. Thus if I denounce them of being un-Islamic, I fall into the same [trap] I am now condemning⁷⁸.

⁷⁷ Rome has spoken; the cause is finished; statement referring to the authority of the pope and the Apostolic See.

⁷⁸ M. Kamel, *Al-Azhar Sheikh: I cannot atone Daesh*, “Egypt Independent”, December 2, 2015, <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/852355>.

This inconsistency among various sheiks, clerics, and opinion leaders might be the reason why the condemnations of ISIS from Muslim scholars have been completely ineffective in stopping young Muslims from joining the group. Clearly, if the Islamic State is not Islamic, it represents a massive failure on the part of Muslim authorities. They have failed spectacularly to communicate the true tenets of their religion, that are so obvious to both religious and non religious non-Muslims, to tens of thousands of their young people⁷⁹. And to have this religious message clearly communicated is of paramount importance. Here David Burrell's wise words should be invoked again, that "nothing short of the quality of forgiveness at once demanded and facilitated by the Abrahamic revelations will be able to empower people to make a fresh start after the devastation endorsed by the shadow sides of those same religious faiths"⁸⁰, even the shadow of the Islamic State.

POJEDNANIE W CIENIU ISIS

Streszczenie

Jednym z największych wyzwań na drodze dialogu międzyreligijnego oraz pełnego pojednania pomiędzy chrześcijanami i muzułmanami jest istnienie i działalność Państwa Islamskiego (ISIS). Niniejszy artykuł analizuje kwestię procesów pojednania w kontekście prześladowań religijnych mniejszości chrześcijańskich na terenach Iraku i Syrii znajdujących się pod kontrolą ISIS. Po szczegółowym omówieniu sytuacji, w jakiej znajdują się chrześcijanie i przedstawieniu form przemocy, na jaką są narażeni, analizie poddano reakcje na Państwo Islamskie i jego działania. Wyróżnione zostały reakcje ignorujące i uznające teologię polityczną Państwa Islamskiego. Do tych pierwszych zaliczyć należy militarne, ekonomiczne oraz dyplomatyczne reakcje polityków, szczególnie świata zachodniego, odrzucających lub umniejszających religijny wymiar ISIS. Do drugiej grupy należą te reakcje, które ów wymiar religijny akceptują i/lub wychodzą ze strony wspólnot prześladowanych przez samozwańczy kalifat. Niniejsza praca skupia się szczególnie na reakcjach ze strony Kościoła Rzymsko-katolickiego, zestawiając ze sobą odgórne inicjatywy papieża oraz hierarchów, z oddolnymi trendami obserwowalnymi wśród zwykłych wiernych oraz podkreślając różnice w podejściu do kwestii pojednania pomiędzy katolikami żyjącymi poza obszarem kontrolowanym przez Państwo Islamskie oraz tymi, którzy bezpośrednio zostali dotknięci prześladowaniami z jego strony.

⁷⁹ R. Spencer, *Is The Islamic State Islamic? Of Course It Is*, "The Daily Caller", March 16, 2015, <http://dailycaller.com/2015/03/16/is-the-islamic-state-islamic-of-course-it-is/>.

⁸⁰ D.B. Burrell, *Interfaith Perspectives on Reconciliation*, [in:] *The Politics of Past Evil. Religion, Reconciliation, and the Dilemmas of Transitional Justice*, D. Phillipott (ed.), Notre Dame 2006, p. 124.