**The wave of anti-Christian violence**

Christians in the Muslim world are becoming scapegoats as anger about the 'crusader west' takes hold

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A recent wave of violent attacks on Christian worshippers and churches in countries across the Muslim world is intensifying concern that continuing military conflict, cultural friction and economic imbalances embroiling Islam and the west are fuelling a parallel rise in religious intolerance at grassroots level.

The increase in tensions is seen as particularly disturbing in countries such as Egypt where Islam and Christianity have a centuries-old history of largely peaceful co-existence. In one recent incident, gunmen attacked a Coptic Christian congregation near Luxor, on the Coptic Christmas eve, killing six churchgoers and provoking inter-communal rioting and arson.

The Egyptian government said the violence was an isolated event and not sectarian. But many disagreed. About 2,000 Copts took to the streets of Cairo on Wednesday, saying the official response had been inadequate and complaining of systemic ill-treatment. One sign read: "Egypt burns while its leaders sleep."

Egypt's constitution guarantees equal rights for all religions. Yet according to Human Rights Watch's 2009 world report, discrimination against Christians, Bahá'ís and minority Muslim sects is entrenched. Egypt's 78 million population is predominantly Sunni Muslim. Copts make up 10% of the total.

Anger in local Muslim communities about Christian proselytising, alleged desecrations of the Qur'an, or "liberal" attitudes towards women often sparks confrontation. An attack on a Protestant church in Tizi Ouzou in Algeria on Saturday night, when Bibles and hymnals were burned, was reportedly touched off by rumoured Christian attempts to convert Muslims.

Reactions to the incident were typically defensive. "We have always been persecuted in this country. It is not acceptable and the authorities must do something to stop the attacks against us," said Mustafa Krim, head of the Algerian Protestant Church Association. Government spokesman Fellahi Ada was unsympathetic, suggesting such complaints were a western plot.

"The general trend is that Christianity is no longer attractive in Algeria," he said. "This is why some circles outside Algeria are doing whatever possible to portray my country as a country where religious minorities are suffering and that an international intervention is needed to protect them."

The US state department's latest country report on Algeria, whose population is 99% Sunni Muslim, says that "in practice" the Algerian government restricts religious freedom. Restrictions increased in 2009 following implementation of an ordinance limiting public assembly for the purpose of worship, the US said. Twenty-seven churches were closed for non-compliance with the ordinance. It also reported routine antisemitism in Algerian Arab media.

In Tizi Ouzou, other influences may be at work: the town 60 miles east of Algiers, a centre of resistance to French colonial rule, is now sometimes described as a hotbed of al-Qaida in the Maghreb. It was the scene of a suicide bombing in 2008. Islamists there are said to take exception, for example, to women mixing with men in Christian congregations.

Attacks on Christian minorities over the Christmas period were also reported in Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, and in mostly Sunni Muslim Pakistan. In one case last year in Gojra, Pakistan, several Christians were burned to death and Christian homes and churches destroyed by a mob after reports circulated that a Qu'ran had been desecrated. "The attacks on Christians seem to be symptomatic of a well-organised campaign launched by extremist elements all over central Punjab," Pakistan's human right commission chairwoman Asma Jehangir said.

Disturbances have also shaken majority Muslim Malaysia in recent weeks, where attacks on churches and a Catholic school followed a row over whether Christians should be allowed to use the word "Allah" to refer to God. In separate incidents, extremist thugs have also picked on Malaysia's Hindu minority.

In Iraq, the problems facing Christians and other minorities are more deadly. An estimated 1,960 Christians have died there in targeted attacks since the 2003 invasion. The Christmas period saw a spate of church attacks in Mosul in defiance of a long, pre-war tradition of co-existence. Other minorities, such as Jews, have also suffered – although by far the biggest toll has been exacted by clashes between Iraq's Sunnis and the larger Shia Muslim community.

Local factors such as disputes over land, objections to the presence of alcohol, large numbers of unemployed young men with not enough to do, or sheer mutual ignorance and suspicion of "rival" religions help explain some of these tensions. And few would argue that somehow all such incidents are linked.

But analysts and academics suggest common threads do exist, notably the impact of globalisation on conservative communities across the Muslim world and a resulting threatened loss of cultural identity. Violence against Christians as representatives of the "crusader west" is also an aspect of what French author Gilles Kepel has described as the far bigger civil war, or fitna, raging within the Islamic world itself.

Yet hostility also arises, in a fundamental sense, from Muslim perceptions of western aggression against Islam, be it the war in Afghanistan, domineering western economic and cultural behaviour, attempts to ban veils, offensive cartoon caricatures of the prophet Muhammad, airline and immigration profiling, or systemic, unchecked and arguably worsening discrimination and harassment of Muslim minorities living in western nations.

To have a chance of overcoming this widening gulf, the west may have to put its own house in order first. One proposed path is wider adoption of Karen Armstrong's new Charter for Compassion, a "spiritual document for the world", whose guiding idea is that while almost every religion has a history of intolerance, all have traditions of compassion that rise above hatred.

For faithful believers of all descriptions, the charter offers a golden rule: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."