

The dark side of Christian history

Body counts

by Miroslav Volf

WITH ITS LONG coastline, rugged mountains and haunting sand dunes, Oman is truly a paradise for desert lovers, hikers and boaters alike. Muscat, the capital city, is a gem—its arched white buildings and flat roofs squeezed between blue waters of the ocean and black rocks of the mountains.

I was traveling with my sons, and at one point Nathaniel remarked, “Dad, this was the best vacation we ever had!” I thought of the sea turtle laying eggs and covering them with its flippers, of my sons frolicking in the Wadi Tiwi’s clear waters and sliding down the long slopes of sand dunes, of hundreds of dolphins surrounding our boat, of the red snapper my younger son, Aaron, caught. I agreed with Nathaniel.

Call me an egghead, but what I remember most from the Oman experience is a booklet with an ominous title: *Body Count* (2009). Its subtitle tells a fuller story: *A Quantitative Review of Political Violence Across World Civilizations*. For Christians, the surprise comes when author Naveed Sheikh concludes that “the Christian civilization emerges as the most violent and genocidal in the world history.” Compared to Islam, Christianity is a clear winner: 31.94 million deaths (by Muslims) to 177.94 million deaths (by Christians).

I’m not convinced that the numbers are correct. For instance, Sheikh describes Nazi genocides (16.31 million dead) as Christian. One might as well call communists Christians. Similarly, the author is silent about the long, brutal and bloody march of Ottoman Turks through the Christian lands in the 14th to 17th centuries, from Asia Minor all the way to the Alps. It will be important for those competent in world history to carefully

examine this body count. But even if we slash the numbers on the Christian side and add some to the Muslim side, the scale of violence committed by Christians throughout history is mind-numbing.

I read the booklet about the body count on a beach near Muscat. A short distance to the north, across the Gulf of Oman, is Iran. Tensions with Iran have been escalating over the past few years, and a peaceful resolution doesn’t seem to be in sight. On Oman’s western border

“Christian civilization,” according to Sheikh, is “the most violent in world history.”

is Yemen, a base of operation for al-Qaeda and now a potential target of a Western attack. To the northeast is Pakistan, and on Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan as well as in Afghanistan itself a full-blown war is going on. To the north, of course, is Iraq.

Consider this: If we apply the criteria for just war that great Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas have developed (conceding for a moment that the more stringent demands of Jesus to “turn the other cheek” don’t apply to world affairs), we must conclude that the war in Iraq is unjust (as I argued in this magazine before the Iraq war started); the war in Afghanistan is unjust (and serious injustice is being committed in the course of waging it—for example, by the use of drones); a war against Iran would be unjust; a war against Yemen would be unjust.

That would be four unjust wars, all of them waged by a country whose population is predominantly Christian. Flanked by people from other religions as well as some atheists, Christians are widening the body count gap.

Travel with me back in time some six centuries. On May 29, 1453, Ottoman armies led by the young and ambitious sultan Mehmed II entered the imperial city, which bore the name of the first Christian emperor and had stood as the center of Eastern Christendom for over

a thousand years. The sack was brutal, but for those who survived it, the prospect of what was to come seemed even worse. Now that the walls of this “New Rome” had given way to enemy cannons and its streets had been overrun by enemy soldiers, Rome—center of Western Christendom since the time of the apostles—was in danger as well. Many feared that the whole of Europe might face the fate of Constantinople.

At that time, two options presented themselves to the Europeans in response to the fall of Constantinople and the rise of the Ottoman power. One option had been tried before throughout the centuries, with varying degrees of success: organize a crusade. A second option was to engage in a dialogue, a response that was new and untested.

Miroslav Volf teaches at Yale Divinity School.

Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405–1464), who became Pope Pius II, was the most vigorous and persistent advocate of a crusade. The writings of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who earned a cardinal's hat, most ably represent the call for dialogue. Both prominent churchmen were Renaissance humanists, and they were friends.

Why did Nicholas choose conversation over crusade? He had a friend, John of Segovia, a professor at the

University of Salamanca, whom he met at the council in Basel in 1433. Unlike Piccolomini, John knew Islam and Muslims, and he believed that “war could never solve the issue between Christendom and Islam.” Nicholas came to share that view.

It's fair to say that Nicholas prevailed. It is not just that the pope died during a failed attempt to organize a crusade (the last one in history) and that Cardinal Nicholas's writings, especially his little

book on the peaceful harmony of religions, continued to inspire and guide. Nicholas won in a more significant sense: for one thing, his was the option that was in sync with Christian principles; for another, he was proven historically right in his convictions about how to deal with the threat of expanding Islam. What explains Western ascendancy over the past six centuries is not the power of guns, but the power of ideas forged in vigorous dialogue. **CC**

Family time with St. Francis

Sister Moon

by *Elizabeth Myer Boulton*

IT'S OFFICIAL: our entire household is obsessed with outer space. Our children have a solar system hanging over their beds, our upstairs hallway is graced by images of the Milky Way, and when nighttime falls, glow-in-the-dark planets sing an eventide song of praise to the God who made them all and yet is mindful of one little family staring up in wonder.

In recent weeks our bedtime ritual has been going like this: after everyone has been bathed and brushed, we descend the stairs and get comfortable on the couch. Then one of us removes the shade from our living room floor lamp. With great ceremony, we turn off all the lights—that is, all the lights but that one floor lamp, whose bare bulb magically becomes the shining sun. Then one of our two children (we're careful to have them take turns) stands facing that light, holding up at arm's length a yellow pencil stuck into the bottom of a large, white styrofoam ball.

The styrofoam ball is the moon, you understand, and the appointed child of the night proudly plays the role of the

earth. At first, since the moon is directly in front of the sun, we only see the moon's silhouette—the “new moon,” we've all learned to call it.

Then the child holding the moon slowly begins to pivot counterclockwise, and lo and behold a slim crescent of light appears on one side of the big white ball. The turning continues, and the moon's phases come and go: a half-moon, then a full moon, then another half-moon, and at last another new moon. After the waxing and waning we all climb down out of the heavens and head up the stairs for a story.

Like many families we cycle through periods when one bedtime book or another becomes the favorite. Lately it's been a picture book about St. Francis. In the soft shadow of hand-painted planets, stories of the poor man of Assisi whirl through the air—stories about midwives beside themselves with worry because Pica, the wife of a rich cloth merchant, has been in labor for hours, but the baby will not come. Then comes a knock at the door, and a stranger who declares, “Tell the woman in labor to go out to the sta-

ble—that child will not be born in a decadent house!”

We read stories about how, as a young man, Francis lives a wild life, the life of a lover and a fighter. Intoxicated by romantic tales of the knightly round table, he goes off to war against the neighboring town—and is roundly defeated, captured and held for ransom in a stone dungeon for more than a year.

We read stories about how, after returning home, his broken heart wants nothing but prayer; and about an old crucifix in a ruined country chapel that speaks to him, saying, “Francis, rebuild my church”; and about how he steals and sells cloth from his family's shop to pay for his rebuilding projects, only to be dragged by his furious father before the town bishop in a public demand that he return the stolen property.

Francis returns not just the cloth he has stolen but the very clothes on his back. As the elegant silk and satin robes fall down around his feet, he becomes a new creation all together. He rips open his tunic as if it were his heart.

From that day forward, he is God's