

Last Christmas, my wife Carmen and I hopped on an airplane and flew to the Holy Land. We were extremely excited. It was not our first pilgrimage, but it was our first pilgrimage to the Holy Land in Israel. Several years earlier we had gone on a pilgrimage through Greece and Turkey with Steve Ray (In The Footprints of St. Paul).

Pilgrimages have been an important part of the Catholic faith for a long time, and while you can go on a pilgrimage without ever leaving the country, sometimes without leaving your hometown, there is obviously something very special about walking on the same path as Jesus and His Apostles.

While our pilgrimages in Israel, Greece, and Turkey, were extremely powerful and moving experiences, one less than pleasant fact has also stuck with me: Islam truly is hostile to Christianity. It isn't just Isis, the Taliban, and other radical Muslims. Islam is not content with its current status in the world. Unfortunately, we Christians are more than content. In fact, we are derelict.

A quote from the Qur'an.

47:4: "When you meet the unbelievers, smite their necks, then, when you have made wide slaughter among them, tie fast the bonds; then set them free, either by grace or ransom, till the war lays down its loads."

Several years ago, as our ship cruised into the Port of Istanbul, Carmen and I stood on the upper deck with some friends. It was an eerie feeling to be entering what was once the seat of the great Byzantine Empire, the great city of Constantinople. From our ship we could see the Hagia Sophia (the Church of Holy Wisdom), which was the largest Catholic, then Christian Church in the world for nearly 1,000 years. Byzantine emperor Justinian I commissioned its construction, which was finished in 537 A.D., or about 33 years before Muhammad was born.

Muhammad invented Islam in about 610 A.D. In the centuries to follow, Muslim invaders tried to capture Constantinople numerous times. They finally succeeded on May 29, 1453. Muslim warriors quickly took over the Hagia Sophia and turned it into a mosque, demolishing or taking all of the accoutrements and valuables. The Hagia Sophia remained a mosque until 1931, when work began to turn it into a museum.

We could also see the Blue Mosque, the main mosque in Istanbul, which was built near the Hagia Sophia in order to claim, even more aggressively, Islam's conquest over Christianity.

In an effort to modernize Turkey, its first President, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, initiated a number of new laws, including the prohibition against wearing of clerical garb in public. This applied to Muslims, Christians and other faiths. As we silently stood on the top deck of our cruise ship, scanning the enormous city around us, I recall that one of our fellow pilgrims, a bishop, asking one of our guides if he could still wear his clerics when we entered the city. He was assured he could. The law only applied to Turkish citizens, not visitors.

After we disembarked and made our way to the Hagia Sophia, we were greeted with the Zuhr prayer, the prayer Muslims pray at noon each day as part of their five-part Salat prayers. We were standing just outside the Hagia Sophia when the prayer began to blast all around the city. We had to pause our tour until the prayer was over because it was so loud, it drowned out the voice of the tour guide. The eeriness we had felt on the upper deck of the cruise ship returned as we waited for the prayer to end.

After a bit, we entered the Hagia Sophia. Although it is still a museum, it is really just an enormous empty building. The only evidence of Christianity which remain are a number of ancient mosaics which were uncovered after it was converted into a museum. Only some of the mosaics are exposed. You can see Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and angels because Muslims also believe in them, just not the same way we do. There are also many beautiful geometric designs which are not contrary to Islam. However, much of the walls and ceilings are still either behind plaster, or they have been vandalized or fallen victim to the many earthquakes which have plagued Istanbul over the centuries.

Also remaining is the mihrab, a niche in the wall at the point nearest to Mecca, toward which the Muslim congregation faces to pray in a mosque. The church's alter had been torn out by the first Muslim invaders in 1453. The church had been built facing East, but since Mecca is not true East, the mihrab sits to the right of the former sanctuary, making it look strange and off-center with the architecture of the church.

Our guides warned us against praying out loud, displaying our rosaries, and from other activity which would be considered a violation of the rules against Christian prayer in the museum. We were told that engaging in obvious Christian prayer could get us thrown out, or worse. I inconspicuously prayed the rosary the entire time we were in the Hagia Sophia.

After touring the Hagia Sophia, we toured the enormous Blue Mosque, which was just a short walk away. Unlike the Hagia Sophia, the Blue Mosque is still used for Islamic prayer. It was my first time in a mosque, and the main thing I remember is just how militaristic it felt. The carpet pattern is specifically designed so that all the men line up in perfect lines in order to perform their prayers. Granted, church pews are also lined up, but the feel of the mosque, combined with certain passages of the Quran, left me with the sense that Islam is not a religion like Christianity is. It feels, sounds, and appears quite different than Christianity.

A few days later, we stood at the grave of St. John the Evangelist, near Ephesus, Turkey. His grave is open to the sky, because the basilica in which it once stood has been demolished. Like the Hagia Sophia, the Basilica of St. John was built by Emperor Justinian I. However, Muslim raiders turned it into a mosque in 1330, and it began to fall into ruin due to lack of maintenance thereafter. Eventually, it was completely destroyed by Mongul raiders in 1402.

As we stood in the ruins of the church, the Salat al-'asr began to blast out of an old loudspeaker posted above the gift shop across the parking lot. Unlike Istanbul, which is an enormous city,

there was nothing other than the gift shop outside St. John's grave. It was apparent that the only reason for the loudspeaker was to occasionally remind Christian pilgrims, that they are not in a Christian land. Somehow, locals cannot exhibit any signs of their faith, but Islam can blast their prayers at deafening volume all across the land.

When we arrived in Jerusalem on December 26, 2017, we were excited to walk in the footsteps of Jesus as well as the rest of his disciples. We arrived late in the day, had dinner in a nearby restaurant and then had our first Mass in the Ecce Homo Basilica which was in the convent where we lodged.

Jerusalem is eleven time zones ahead of my hometown, so I was wide awake by about 1:00 a.m. the next day. A few hours later, as I sat in the hospitality suite, drinking instant coffee and waiting for the rest of my group to stir, I heard what I thought was some sort of a public warning system. It turned out that it was the Salat al-fajr. The al-fajr is broadcast before sunrise, or what the Muslims call "true dawn". The prayer is to end when the first redness of the sun appears on the Eastern horizon.

I instantly recalled the loudspeakers in Turkey. But here? Islam was allowed to blast its prayers over the holiest place on earth? A place which was holy because of Jesus, not because of Muhammad. Muhammad may have come along later, but he added nothing to Christ's work. In fact, Muhammad started an ideology which is very hostile to Jesus Christ. On top of that, al-fajr is an obnoxious sound when it echoes across a sleeping city. Dozens of loudspeakers are positioned all over the Old City, and they take turns broadcasting the prayer in intervals. It was even more eerie than looking at the minarets all over Istanbul, including the minarets added to the Hagia Sophia.

Islam is strangely amplified in the Holy Land. Loudspeakers blast the Salat prayers, and outside many Christian sites are large banners challenging Christians. Outside the Holy Sepulchre one banner taunts Christians: "Jesus said: 'I am indeed a slave of Allah. Allah is my Lord and your Lord so worship Him alone.'" Outside the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth another banner provokes Christian pilgrims: "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the hereafter, he will be one of the losers."

And people criticize Christians for proselytizing?

The Persians destroyed all but one Christian church in the Holy Land when they invaded in 613 A.D. The only church they spared is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. They saw the mosaic of the three wise men in their eastern garb, and spared the church the fate of all the others they encountered which were eventually turned into mosques or demolished, or both.

From iconoclasm, to blaring Salat prayers, to provocative banners outside Christianity's holiest sites, Islam is showing a hostility which is often overlooked due to the much more violent Jihad we hear about in the news. However, while violent Jihad is not likely to prevail, it is the more subtle encroachment which requires our diligence.

There is a call to turn the Hagia Sophia back into a Mosque. By 2035, there will be more Muslim births in the U.K. than Christian births.<sup>1</sup> Americans elected two Muslim women to the House of Representatives under the impression that they were moderates. However since their election both women Ilhan Abdullahi Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Harbi Tlaib of Michigan, have made statements which have lead many people to question whether they are in fact, more radical than they had earlier let on.<sup>2</sup>

Personal experiences in the Holy Land combined with developments politically both in the U.S. and abroad, persuade me that the remnants of the Christian culture in the U.S. and Europe, is not safe and sound. While we are likely to see more encroachment from the secular culture as time goes by, we are also likely to see more encroachment by Islam. Neither of these are hospitable to Christianity.

I hope to return to the Holy Land soon. When I do, I'll be more prepared for the aggressive tactics of Islam. I'll put on the armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-17) and carry my weapon – my rosary. However, this armor is not only necessary when going into foreign countries. We must don the armor right in our own home as well. Pray for the Christians in the Holy Land and pray that more people see the aggressive approach of Islam for what it is, an ideology lacking in truth and love. A truth and love which is found in its fullness only within the Catholic faith.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/muslim-babies-outnumber-christian-births-2035-islam-religion-popular-fastest-growing-a7669576.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/13308/ilhan-omar-rashida-tlaib>