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Archbishop's column

RETURN TO HOME

In Christian-Muslim relations, peace not served by ignoring history

Healing of conflict requires honesty, repentance from both parties

Over the past few decades, studies have shown again and again that Americans tend to have a poor grasp of history. In fact, the scholar Christopher Lasch once wrote that Americans love nostalgia, because we see it as a form of entertainment. But we dislike real history, because *real* historical facts are inconvenient. Yesterday helps shape today. Real history places annoying obligations of truth on our present and future, and gets in the way of re-inventing ourselves.

As a result, quipped a teacher friend, "history is whatever we say it is, as long as we can get away with it."
I remembered her words recently as I read a news story. The story reported an Islamic leader as suggesting that it was European Christians, never Muslims, who tried to root out those who didn't agree with them.
Perhaps the reporter misunderstood the speaker. Perhaps the speaker made an honest mistake. Both Muslims and Christians have committed many sins against each other over the centuries. In the United States, we have an opportunity to overcome that difficult history and learn to live with each other in mutual acceptance. But respect can't emerge from falsehood.

Catholics who *do* know history may remember the following:
Islam has embraced armed military expansion for religious purposes since its earliest decades. In contrast, Christianity struggled in its divided attitudes toward military force and state power for its first 300 years. No "theology of Crusade" existed in Western Christian thought until the 11th century. In fact, the Christian Byzantine Empire had already been resisting Muslim expansion in the East for 400 years before Pope Urban II called the First Crusade — as a *defensive* response to generations of armed jihad.

Much of the modern Middle East was once heavily Christian. Muslim armies

changed that by imposing Islamic rule. Surviving Christian communities have endured centuries of marginalization, discrimination, violence, slavery and outright persecution — not always and not everywhere; but as a constant, recurring and central theme of Muslim domination.

That same Christian suffering continues down to the present. In the early years of the 20th century, the Muslim Ottoman Empire murdered more than 1 million Armenian Christians for ethnic, economic, but also religious reasons. Many Turks and other Muslims continue to deny that massive crime even today. Coptic Christians in Egypt — who, even after 13 centuries of Muslim prejudice and harassment, cling to the faith — continue to experience systematic discrimination and violence at the hands of Islamic militants.

Harassment and violence against Christians continue in many places throughout the Islamic world, from Bangladesh, Iran, Sudan, Pakistan and Iraq, to Nigeria, Indonesia and even Muslim-dominated areas of the heavily Catholic Philippines. In Saudi Arabia, all public expressions of Christian faith are forbidden. The on-going Christian flight from Lebanon has helped to transform it, in just half a century, from a majority Christian Arab nation to a majority Muslim population.

These are facts. The Muslim-Christian conflict is a very long one, rooted in deep religious differences, and Muslims have their own long list of real and perceived grievances. But especially in an era of religiously inspired terrorism and war in the Middle East, peace is not served by ignoring, subverting or rewriting history, but rather by facing it humbly *as it really happened* and healing its wounds.

That requires honesty and repentance from both Christians and Muslims. Comments like those reported in the recent news story I read — claiming that historically, it was European Christians, never Muslims, who tried to root out those who disagreed with them — are both false and do nothing to help.

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