

Hearing the Gentler Voices

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The execution of journalist Stephen Sotloff this week is a heinous act — one that is intolerable, and terribly sad. It, and the earlier murder of James Foley, magnifies attention that the group called the “Islamic State,” or IS, has received.

These two deaths are among the much wider campaign IS has launched to forcibly eliminate people and communities in the way of its stated goal of “reinstating the khalifate.” Earlier this summer, an Iraqi Presbyterian pastor reported that IS ordered all Christians (and Yezidis, Shi’ite Muslims, Sabeans, and Turkomens) to convert to Islam, pay a monthly tax on ‘non-believers,’ or leave carrying nothing with them but the clothes on their backs. IS also said that, as of noon on July 19, “the sword will be the language to be used” to deal with those who they define as non-believers who remain in Mosul.

As a church, the United Church of Christ is deeply concerned for the future of the Christian communities in the Middle East. Christians there express their fear and anxiety about the future of Christianity in the region where the faith originated. They also express their strong hope for a continued “Christian and moderate non-Christian” presence in the Middle East.

With this tragedy in Iraq and Syria, as well as Israel’s war on Hamas, in the news the past several weeks, an especially negative face of Islam has been very visible. Yet we know that the churches in the region, and Muslim institutions there, are actively struggling against the threats they face — be they IS and such religious extremism, or political threats including occupation. We yearn for a day when the high principles of the world’s faiths are lived out and not distorted, used as weapons. Grievously, that time is not yet here and perceptions of the religious “other,” especially of Muslims, have suffered.

The media and the public often ask, where are the Muslim voices speaking out against the violence in Iraq and Syria against Christians? The general impression is that there have not been such voices, when in fact, prominent institutions

and individuals have been quite vocal. In the U.S. and North America, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) has issued statements condemning both Sotloff and Foley’s murders, as well as denouncing IS for “its attacks on Iraq’s religious minorities....” ISNA’s president stated, “Their actions...are in no way representative of what Islam actually teaches.” The U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations roundly condemned IS and rejects its ideology and actions, claiming “[IS] does not speak or act on behalf of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims.”

A few weeks ago, a leading Lebanese Muslim intellectual, Dr. Mohammad Sammak, wrote an op-ed in the Lebanese daily, *Al-Mustaqbal*, entitled, “A Call for an Islamic Initiative against Terrorism and Extremism.” In it, he stated, “There is a consensus among Muslims—Sunni and Shi`i—that ‘Islamic State’ is a movement considered antithetical to Islam which denies Islam’s principles, and distorts its true image.” And a group of leading professional and academic Christians and Muslims in Lebanon wrote an open letter to UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon, in which they expressed their “deep alarm at what is happening to the Christians of Mosul in Iraq, and generally to the native Christian and other minority communities throughout the Middle East.”

It is frequently the case that the most extreme voices of any group dominate the public discourse, even if they do not represent the overwhelming majority views of the group they purport to represent. In this time of heightened anxiety about IS and other groups associated with Islam, only laziness — or willful ignorance — will hide the gentler voices of so many who only wish to represent their faith accurately, compassionately and genuinely. Those many must not be vilified by the vicious actions of some.

May that be a call for all people of faith to heed.

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