

## A CALL TO ACTION

David Alton – New York - October 29<sup>th</sup> 2019

In congratulating Amanda Bowman for organising another important conference – this time on the rise of global intolerance - I am going to talk about our indifference, our silence and our blindness.

Step back first to 1942 when Stefan Zweig first published his magnificent *“The World of Yesterday – Memoirs of a European*

The masterful autobiography of this Jewish writer charts the rise of visceral hatred; how absurd theories of blood, race and difference, scapegoating and xenophobia, cultivated by populist leaders, rapidly morphed into the terrifying horrors and the shame of the concentration camps.

In 1942, in a presentiment of what lay ahead, Zweig warned of the dangers of indifference:

*“We are none of us very proud of our political blindness at that time and we are horrified to see where it has brought us.”*

He described indifference as university professors were forced to scrub streets with their bare hands; devout Jews humiliated in their synagogues; apartments broken into and jewels torn out of the ears of trembling women – calling it *“Hitler’s most diabolical triumph.”*

Zweig said:

*“it was our fate to be aware of everything catastrophic happening anywhere in the world at the hour and the second when it happened.”*

And that was the 1940s, before the digital age of Twitter and social media.

Now it is live streamed and in every living room and on every mobile device within seconds – including pre- arranged broadcasts of mass shootings, courtesy of Facebook and Google.

ISIS has used social media to express its genocidal intent in its recruitment and propaganda newsletters and videos.

The crucifixion and death of one young man – crucified for wearing a cross – was boastfully posted on the internet.

From the same town, local girls were taken as sex slaves. ISIS returned their body parts to the front door of their parents’ homes with a videotape of them being raped.

Two men who saw where hateful theories could lead, and who died at the hands of the Nazis. both spoke about the danger of indifference and the luxury of silence.

St. Maximilian Kolbe, murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz, said that *"The deadliest poison of our times is indifference"* and he was right.

When the Nazis invaded Poland, they offered him the chance to continue publishing religious journals, just so long as he made no social or political comment.

He responded with an editorial excoriating the Nazis and said that *"beyond the hecatombs of the extermination camps two irreconcilable enemies lie in the depths of every soul"* and he asked *"of what use are the victories on the battlefield if we are defeated in our innermost personal selves?"*

For Kolbe, the deadly poison of indifference and silence was simply not an option.

In a similar vein, the great Protestant theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of his countrymen:

*"We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. What we shall need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain, honest, straightforward men."*

He insisted that *"Not to speak is to speak; not to act is to act"*

But in these troubled times do we speak?  
Do we act?

To what have we been indifferent --casually leading *our* lives while *others* have been losing *theirs*?

Let's begin in the Middle East – the birthplace of all three monotheistic religions.

In 1914, Christians made up a quarter of the Middle East's population. Now they are less than 5%.

Syria's Christian population has declined from 1.7 million in 2011 to below 450,000 ; in Iraq ethnic cleansing and genocide has reduced the ancient Christian population from 1.5 million (2003) to below 120,000 .

Archbishop Bashar Warda of Erbil recently remarked:

*"The world should understand that on our path to extinction we will not go quietly any longer... so that, if some day we are gone, no one will be able to ask: how did this happen?"*

Our former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks calls it *"one of the crimes against humanity of our times."*

A slow burn genocide began in 1915 and it hasn't ended yet.

In 1915 1.5 million Armenians were murdered in a genocide still unrecognized as such by the UK, let alone by Turkey.

In 1933, the Jewish writer, Franz Werfel published, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a novel about the Armenian genocide.

Werfel's books were burnt by the Nazis, no doubt to give substance to Hitler's famous remark: *"Who now remembers the Armenians?"*

A fatal chain of events stretches from the Armenian genocide to Hitler's concentration camps and the depredations of Stalin's gulags and Mao's Cultural Revolution; from the pestilential nature of persecution, demonization, scapegoating, and hateful prejudice, to the recent genocides against Christians and other minorities in Iraq and Syria.

Consider the events of the past month which are another chapter in this same bloody story.

Turkey's illegal invasion of North East Syria; its use of chemical weapons against its population; its absorption of Jihadists supporters of ISIS to fight alongside its army, has led in the last month to the further displacement of 160,000 people – many from the religious minorities; and now the ethnic cleansing and repopulation of the areas from which the minorities have been driven.

Meanwhile, in one detention camp alone, where there are 68,000 ISIS families whom the Kurds have been holding prisoner, the ISIS flag has been flying again.

And among those being hunted down, enslaved or killed once again are the Assyrian Christians and the Yazidis.

I vividly recall a Yazidi woman, a former Iraqi Member of Parliament, telling us in the UK Parliament:

*"The Yazidi people are going through mass murder... This is a genocide and the international community should say so".*

But did we? Do we? Will we?

Isn't this what the Jewish lawyer, Raphael Lemkin – whose family had been murdered in the Holocaust - intended to prevent when he conceived the 1948 Genocide Convention – with its triple duties to prevent, protect and punish? But never again keeps happening all over again – and on our watch.

Think of Pakistan, which I visited last year.

Its Christian population of 2.6 million are trapped in a caste system, in dire poverty – illiterate women like Asia Bibi sentenced to death on trumped up blasphemy charges. Released after 9 years her cell is now occupied by Shagufta Kauser, another illiterate Christian woman also sentenced to death. But where are our protests? We just go on pouring in foreign aid – in the UK’s case over £2.6 billion in a decade, £340,000 every day.

And it hasn’t finished yet. Turkey’s illegal invasion of North East Syria; its use of chemical weapons against its population; its absorption of Jihadists supporters of ISIS to fight alongside its army, has led in the last month to the further displacement of 160,000 people – many from the religious minorities.

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Impunity in Pakistan means that no-one is brought to justice for murdering the Christian Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti.

Shabaz Bhatti was assassinated for challenging persecution of minorities and challenging the Blasphemy Laws.

If a country cannot bring to justice the killer of a Government Minister what chance does anyone else have?

I heard testimonies of abduction, rape, the forced marriage of a nine-year-old, forced conversion; the exclusion of a 13-year-old boy from a classroom because he had touched the water supply in that classroom. He was beaten, and his mother was told he had no place in that school because he was only fit for menial and degrading jobs.

Children from Pakistan's Christian minorities are forced to work in brick kilns, workshops, and factories or as domestic servants; told that the only public jobs available to them are as latrine cleaners or road sweepers - children like Iqbal Masih, an incredibly brave 12-year-old Christian boy, shot dead for rebelling against enslavement; or the girls from minorities now being sold in faith-led trafficking to Chinese gangs; or the two Christian children forced to watch as a lynch mob of 1,200 burnt alive their parents.

Such prejudice is reinforced by school text books funded by Saudi Arabia, and compulsory Quranic teachings in Punjab which demean and stigmatise minorities.

In Pakistan's "colonies" – ghettos- on the periphery of cities like Islamabad, I saw Christians live in festering and foul conditions without running water or basic amenities. And where are the protests on their behalf in the free world?

Fleeing, persecuted Pakistani Christians end up in South East Asia, kept like caged animals in detention centres which I have visited.

But where are the protests?

Just deafening silence as countries like mine pour in over £340,000 every single day - £2.6 billion in ten years – none of it directed specifically at these beleaguered minorities.

And where were our voices during the burning or bombing of more than 50 of Egypt's churches in Egypt's Kristallnacht; *and what of the dignity – and very lives – of the 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians decapitated in 2015 by ISIS for refusing to renounce their faith and who "in the moment of their barbaric execution", were repeating the words "Lord, Jesus Christ," ?*

Or, think of Iran – where there were almost 1000 executions last year, including the execution of Bahai's.

Last week in Parliament I led a debate about why Hong Kong is so fearful for its future.

It watches mainland China where churches have been demolished; pastors and bishops from the underground churches are in jail, along with lawyers who spoke up for them.

It remembers fearfully that thirty years ago, in Tiananmen Square, we saw the Red Army massacre 10,000 pro-democracy demonstrators, many of them young.

In June, on the 30th anniversary of Tiananmen, the regime said that the brutal suppression of those pro-democracy demonstrations had been good for society, describing it as a “vaccination” against political instability.

We have also seen how Xi Jinping is repressing political dissent and religious belief.

The assault on religion in China is the most systematic since the lethal cultural revolution, when churches were desecrated, looted, and turned into storerooms and factories.

The religious were incarcerated, tortured, some burnt alive, some sent to labour camps, with Christians publicly paraded through cities and towns and forced to wear cylindrical hats detailing their crime of belief.

And now it is happening again. And where are our voices? Where are our protests?

Over the summer I met Hong Kong’s Cardinal Zen and Martin Lee, the founder of Hong Kong’s Democratic Party—a meeting that the Chinese authorities tried to stop.

I heard their fears that religious persecution will be visited again on Hong Kong and then on Taiwan.

President Xi may not yet have a Little Red Book, but he has replaced the 10 commandments with his sayings.

In addition to the lack of religious freedom, churches, mosques and temples have been shut or demolished, leaders imprisoned and surveillance cameras installed.

The European Parliament described the situation as “a new low”.

Writing about surveillance, George Orwell famously said in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: “Big brother is watching you”.

But not just watching—Orwell said:

*“If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face—for ever” and that: “The most effective way to destroy people is to deny and obliterate their own understanding of their history”.*

For Buddhists in Tibet and Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, Xi's Sinicisation programme seeks to do just that.

To ensure that their history is obliterated, over 40 Uighur cemeteries have been destroyed, with bones and ancestors' remains scattered.

We have heard disturbing evidence about the vile incarceration of 1 million Uighur Muslims, where there are to be re-educated, brainwashed, intimidated, and reprogrammed.

We have also seen disturbing evidence suggestive of why Uighur DNA is tested. Falun Gong practitioners told a parliamentary hearing how bodies have been turned into sources of forced human organ harvesting.

An independent tribunal, chaired by Sir Geoffrey Nice QC, concluded that there is *"incontrovertible evidence"* that this has happened.

I have visited North Korea on four occasions and published a book in which I detail some of the affronts to human dignity experienced by North Korea's believers. 200,000- 3,000 people are incarcerated in North Korea's Concentration Camps.

One who escaped, Jean Young-Ok, told the parliamentary committee which I chair, that *"They tortured the Christians the most. They were denied food and sleep. They were forced to stick out their tongues and iron was pushed into them"*

Another escapee, a woman called Hae Woo, told us *"The guards told us that we are not human beings, we are just prisoners...the dignity of human life counted for nothing."*

A United Nations Commission of Inquiry concluded: *"There is almost a complete denial of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; Severe punishments are inflicted on people caught practising Christianity; "the State considers the spread of Christianity a particularly serious threat."*

The Commission concluded that North Korea's human rights violations make it a *"state without parallel."* Its presiding Judge, Mr. Justice Michael Kirby said evidence adduced by the inquiry *"was very similar to the testimony one sees on visiting a Holocaust Museum by those who were the victims of Nazi oppression in the last century"* and that the *"witnesses told their stories in a low-key way, without exaggeration"*.

Whether it is Syria or Iraq, Egypt or Pakistan, North Korea or China, Nigeria, Eritrea or Sudan – or many other parts of the world, people of religious belief are suffering on an unimaginable scale.

A recent report says that 250 million Christians are persecuted worldwide – with 11 being killed each and every single day.

And this persecution inevitably plays into the unprecedented 70.8 million people forcibly displaced worldwide; to the 37,000 people forced to flee their homes every day due to conflict or persecution; and the 40 million people – including 8 million children – in modern day slavery.

And it isn't only about Christians.

Who among us expected, 120 years after the Dreyfus case and 70 years after the Holocaust, to hear again the cry of *"Death to the Jews"* ?

Recall the violence last year in the US that led to the deaths of 11 worshippers in a synagogue in Pittsburgh.

In Burma, where Buddhists have turned on Muslims, I visited a mosque burnt down the night before, with Muslim villagers driven out of a place where, for generations, they had lived alongside their Buddhist neighbours.

And non-believers suffer too – people like Raif Badawi, the Saudi Arabian atheist and blogger sentenced to 1,000 public lashes for publicly expressing his atheism, described by the UN as *"a form of cruel and inhuman punishment"*; or Alexander Aan, imprisoned in Indonesia for two years after saying he did not believe in God.

This is about their human dignity, freedom to believe, or not to believe, and it's about our common humanity.

Jonathan (Lord) Sacks says that in the face of *"one of the crimes against humanity of our time"* he is *"appalled at the lack of protest it has evoked."*

That, then, is my message today.

In the face of all of this evidence are we to remain silent spectators, blind and indifferent to this immense, harrowing, suffering – to persecution, to crimes against humanity, and to outright genocide.

Or are we going to make this the greatest human rights cause of our day?

Indifference is the greatest poison of our age.

Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.

**David Alton**

**Professor the Lord Alton of Liverpool,  
Independent Crossbench Member of the House of Lords.**