

commentary

from other pens...

Christmas not pleasant for Christians in Arabia

At Christmas, the cultural divide between the United States and Saudi Arabia reaches a high point, at least for American Christians living in a kingdom where puritanical Islam is the norm.

There are no churches in Saudi Arabia. Public displays of Christian worship are unlawful and draw the attention of the Muttawa, government-paid agents who monitor religious deviationism. Customs officials confiscate materials considered offensive, such as Bibles.

U.S. officials said Christians in the American diplomatic community were holding Christmas services in private homes on Wednesday, as they do every year. Other Christians in the kingdom do the same.

Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, recalls the restrictions on Christmas services imposed on the American troops deployed in Saudi Arabia in preparation for Desert Storm in December 1990.

In an article in the current issue of *The National Interest*, Pipes says the Saudis decreed Christmas services could be held, but only in places "where they would be invisible to the outside world, such as tents and mess halls."

All citizens of Saudi Arabia must be Muslim. Conversion by a Muslim to another religion is considered apostasy and can be punishable by death. Christian missionaries are unwelcome.

Christians who go to Saudi Arabia for other kinds of work are welcome, so long as they abide by religious rules. At least 500,000 Roman Catholics are believed to be in Saudi Arabia, including many women from the Philippines who work as domestics.

A State Department report on religious freedom around the world, released in October, says, "Non-Muslim worshippers (in Saudi Arabia) risk arrest, imprisonment, lashing, deportation and sometimes torture for engaging in overt religious activity that attracts official attention."

Christians lack religious freedom in Saudi Arabia, but Jews for the most part are denied entry. Timothy Hunter, a former U.S. diplomatic official assigned to Saudi Arabia in the 1990s, says State Department policy was to avoid sending Jewish employees to the kingdom under an agreement with the Saudis.

In a letter this past June, Hunter told Pipes that it was "the duty of the foreign service director of personnel to screen all Foreign Service officers applying for service in the KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) and to 'tick' Jewish officers' names using the letter 'J' next to their names, so that selection panels would not select Jewish diplomats for service in Saudi Arabia."

The U.S. has maintained close official ties with the kingdom for more than 60 years, although not without strain since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. There is a debate about whether Saudi Arabia contributes to terrorism by giving money to extremist Islamic groups in South Asia and elsewhere, or whether they have joined hands with the United States in the fight against terrorism.

The United States calls the kingdom a partner in the fight against terror but says the Saudis could do more. The Saudis say they have arrested more than 200 terrorist suspects, including those involved with al-Qaida, the network headed by Saudi-born expatriate Osama bin Laden. They say intelligence sharing has resulted in the freezing of more than \$70 million linked to terrorist organization financial accounts.

Washington seems determined to preserve good relations with the country, which has 25 percent of the world's oil reserves. The Saudis won points with the United States a year ago by issuing a formal proposal for a comprehensive settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

But Pipes sees an obsequious U.S. policy toward the kingdom. "For decades," he writes, "U.S. government agencies have engaged in a persistent pattern of deference to Saudi wishes, making so many unwanted and unnecessary concessions that one gets the impression that a switch has taken place, with both sides forgetting which of them is the great power and which the minor one."

EDITOR'S NOTE — *George Gedda has covered foreign affairs for The Associated Press since 1968.*



Bullies mirror our own fears

Talk to any middle-school kid anywhere in the country. He or she can diagram the hierarchy of their social group and sub-groups with the precision of Margaret Mead describing the tribes of Borneo. There will be footnotes about losing status for dancing or eating lunch with particular classmates. There will be references to nerds, fags, blimps, morons and sluts.

If there is a hell, it will resemble the social life of an eighth-grader.

"We worry so much about what parents are doing to kids and what teachers are doing to kids and don't pay enough attention to what kids are doing to kids," says Rick Lavoie, an educator and author of the upcoming book, "It's So Much Work To Be Your Friend."

But since Columbine and other school shootings, we have come to acknowledge that bullying, teasing and ostracism aren't trites of passage. They have horrific consequences, in violent escalations, retaliations and suicides. They account for thousands of absences every day among kids afraid to walk the school halls. Even the current Miss America has taken on bullying as her primary cause.

Now a survey finds that the most frequent targets of bullying are kids who are gay or thought to be gay.

Almost 80 percent of teens say they have witnessed classmates being teased with gay slurs, according to a national survey of 760 kids ages 12



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to 17, which was released last week by the National Mental Health Association.

Interestingly, according to another survey, three out of four kids who are targets of anti-gay bullying are actually straight.

This suggests that among many teens, labeling someone as gay is, on its face, a deep insult, perhaps the deepest. Some teachers and parents, motivated by good intentions, respond by telling the bully that he should never "accuse" someone of being gay, that it's mean and hurtful.

"When you make such a big deal about it, you're sending a very mixed message," Lavoie says. The teacher or parent can unwittingly (one presumes) reinforce the perception that calling someone gay is, in fact, a pejorative like stupid or ugly.

Kids pick up this perception from a culture that is at once increasingly open and judgmental about sexuality.

Adults who wouldn't dare use a racial epithet around children let loose with gay slurs on the grounds that homosexuality is immoral and aberrant.

"There's been a polarization of sexuality over the past 20 years, so the anti-gay bullying has gotten progressively worse," says Dr. Lynn Ponton, a UC San Francisco psychiatry professor and author of "The Sex Lives of Teenagers."

"There are more explicit images in the media," she says, "and at the same time more rigid views (about sexuality) from the right wing and churches."

About 40 percent of teens have had same-sex attractions at some point. Thus, their own fears of being gay can fuel their bullying of others — if they make clear their hatred of homosexuals, they can't be suspected of being one themselves.

The survey results have prompted the National Mental Health Association to launch a campaign called "What Does Gay Mean?" Ponton wrote the accompanying brochure, "How to Talk With Kids about Sexual Orientation and Prejudice."

The National Mental Health Association felt obligated, however reluctantly, to note in the brochure and its press releases that Ponton is straight. Some might assume because she lives in San Francisco she might be gay. The clarification, the institute decided, would give Ponton's information and advice wider acceptance.

They are probably right, an irony that argues a need for change more powerfully than the brochure itself.

Joan Ryan is a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Send comments to her e-mail at joanryan@sfchronicle.com.

A true police state

If there were a contest naming which nation's government is the most vicious at crushing human rights and the human spirit, many countries would be leading contenders. I would vote for Zimbabwe, ruled by Robert Mugabe — once its liberator, now its tyrant.

The United Nations' World Food program reported on Nov. 30 that food shortages in Zimbabwe are so severe that half the population — more than 6 million people — will be in acute need of food by March. But Andrew Natsios, the administrator for the United States Agency for International Development, testified before Congress in August:

"We now have confirmed reports in a number of areas in the most severely affected region of the country, which is the south, that food is being distributed to people who are members of Mugabe's political party and is not being distributed based on need. The children of opposition party members have been driven away from school supplementary feeding programs in rural areas."

In September, Adotei Akwei, Africa Advocacy director of Amnesty International U.S.A., told *The New York Times* that "people have been detained and tortured. In (Zimbabwe) now, literally, no one's safety and security is guaranteed if there is even the slightest doubt of support for President Mugabe."



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The Amani Trust in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, monitors and treats black citizens of that country who have been tortured or otherwise punished as enemies of the state. Tony Reeler, clinical director of the Amani Trust — which is supported by the U.N. Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture and the Swedish Red Cross — told Christina Lamb in the Aug. 25 Sunday Telegraph in London:

"We're seeing an enormous prevalence of rape and enough cases to say it's being used by the state as a political tool, with women and girls being raped because they are the wives, girlfriends or daughters of political activists. There are also horrific cases of girls as young as 12 or 13 being taken off to militia camps, used and abused and kept in forced concubinage. But I suspect, as with Bosnia, the real extent of what is happening is going to take a hell of a long time to come out."

Passed by Mugabe's controlled parliament, the Public Order and Security Act was enacted this past

January. Described by Lawyers Committee for Human Rights in New York and Washington, the act makes it "an offense to make a public statement with the intention to, or knowing there is a risk of 'undermining the authority of or insulting' the president. This prohibition includes statements likely to engender 'feelings of hostility toward the president.'"

In October, Sandra Nyaira, former political editor of *The Daily News* in Zimbabwe, received this year's International Women's Media Foundation Courage in Journalism Award in New York. Accepting it, she said that "day in and day out, journalists in Zimbabwe work without knowing what the future holds for them — could it be a bomb? Could you be thrown behind bars for being too critical?" Many have been arrested.

Yet, in November, *The New York Times* reported that "the South African foreign minister, Dr. Nkosazana Zuma, said it was time for Western nations to consider ending penalties they imposed on Zimbabwe. South Africa hailed Zimbabwe's presidential election in

March as legitimate, even though officials eliminated polling stations in opposition strongholds, and the police fired tear gas to disperse hundreds of people who were waiting to vote."

Where is Nelson Mandela, who fought so long and courageously for democracy in South Africa? Where, in this country, are women's groups; the black and white clergy that organized against slavery and gang rapes by government militia in Sudan; editorial writers; and the clamorous commentators on cable television? Where is Jesse Jackson?

Zimbabwe, mind you, is a member of the United Nations Human Rights Commission, seated comfortably with such other proudly undemocratic regimes as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Libya and Sudan. But then, remember that the United Nations ignored genocide in Rwanda, as did President Bill Clinton. Well, at least Mugabe has yet to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

I have yet to hear of any demonstrations on American college campuses to help children in Zimbabwe who are going hungry because their parents are in the wrong political party — or to protest against the girls and women being raped for political reasons.

Nat Hentoff is a nationally renowned authority on the First Amendment and the Bill of Rights.

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