Body counts: The dark side of Christian history

by Miroslav Volf in the April 20, 2010 issue

With its long coastline, rugged mountains and haunting sand dunes, Oman is truly a paradise for desert lovers, hikers and boaters alike. Muscat, the capital city, is a gem—its arched white buildings and flat roofs squeezed between blue waters of the ocean and black rocks of the mountains.

I was traveling with my sons, and at one point Nathaniel remarked, “Dad, this was the best vacation we ever had!” I thought of the sea turtle laying eggs and covering them with its flippers, of my sons frolicking in the Wadi Tiwi’s clear waters and sliding down the long slopes of sand dunes, of hundreds of dolphins surrounding our boat, of the red snapper my younger son, Aaron, caught. I agreed with Nathaniel.

Call me an egghead, but what I remember most from the Oman experience is a booklet with an ominous title: *Body Count* (2009). Its subtitle tells a fuller story: *A Quantitative Review of Political Violence Across World Civili zations*. For Christians, the surprise comes when author Naveed Sheikh concludes that “the Christian civilization emerges as the most violent and genocidal in the world history.” Compared to Islam, Christianity is a clear winner: 31.94 million deaths (by Muslims) to 177.94 million deaths (by Christians).

I’m not convinced that the numbers are correct. For instance, Sheikh describes Nazi genocides (16.31 million dead) as Christian. One might as well call communists Christians. Similarly, the author is silent about the long, brutal and bloody march of Ottoman Turks through the Christian lands in the 14th to 17th centuries, from Asia Minor all the way to the Alps. It will be important for those competent in world history to carefully examine this body count. But even if we slash the numbers on the Christian side and add some to the Muslim side, the scale of violence committed by Chris tians throughout history is mind-numbing.

I read the booklet about the body count on a beach near Muscat. A short distance to the north, across the Gulf of Oman, is Iran. Tensions with Iran have been escalating

over the past few years, and a peaceful resolution doesn't seem to be in sight. On Oman's western border is Yemen, a base of operation for al-Qaeda and now a potential target of a Western attack. To the northeast is Pakistan, and on Pakistan's border with Afghanistan as well as in Afghanistan itself a full-blown war is going on. To the north, of course, is Iraq.

Consider this: If we apply the criteria for just war that great Christian thinkers such as Augustine and Aquinas have developed (conceding for a moment that the more stringent demands of Jesus to "turn the other cheek" don't apply to world affairs), we must conclude that the war in Iraq is unjust (as I argued in this magazine before the Iraq war started); the war in Afghanistan is unjust (and serious injustice is being committed in the course of waging it—for example, by the use of drones); a war against Iran would be unjust; a war against Yemen would be unjust.

That would be four unjust wars, all of them waged by a country whose population is predominantly Christian. Flanked by people from other religions as well as some atheists, Christians are widening the body count gap.

Travel with me back in time some six centuries. On May 29, 1453, Ottoman armies led by the young and ambitious sultan Mehmed II entered the imperial city, which bore the name of the first Christian emperor and had stood as the center of Eastern Christendom for over a thousand years. The sack was brutal, but for those who survived it, the prospect of what was to come seemed even worse. Now that the walls of this "New Rome" had given way to enemy cannons and its streets had been overrun by enemy soldiers, Rome—center of Western Christendom since the time of the apostles—was in danger as well. Many feared that the whole of Europe might face the fate of Constantinople.

At that time, two options presented themselves to the Europeans in response to the fall of Constantinople and the rise of the Ottoman power. One option had been tried before throughout the centuries, with varying degrees of success: organize a crusade. A second option was to engage in a dialogue, a response that was new and untested. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405–1464), who became Pope Pius II, was the most vigorous and persistent advocate of a crusade. The writings of Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464), who earned a cardinal's hat, most ably represent the call for dialogue. Both prominent churchmen were Renaissance humanists, and they were friends.

Why did Nicholas choose conversation over crusade? He had a friend, John of Segovia, a professor at the University of Salamanca, whom he met at the council in Basel in 1433. Unlike Piccolomini, John knew Islam and Muslims, and he believed that “war could never solve the issue between Christendom and Islam.” Nicholas came to share that view.

It’s fair to say that Nicholas prevailed. It is not just that the pope died during a failed attempt to organize a crusade (the last one in history) and that Cardinal Nicholas’s writings, especially his little book on the peaceful harmony of religions, continued to inspire and guide. Nicholas won in a more significant sense: for one thing, his was the option that was in sync with Christian principles; for another, he was proven historically right in his convictions about how to deal with the threat of expanding Islam. What explains Western ascendency over the past six centuries is not the power of guns, but the power of ideas forged in vigorous dialogue.