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Pope Francis, and the west, should be wary of the UAE's tolerance agenda

The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world, but severe problems there persist.

By Nina Shea

National Review (05.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2RIp2m0> - On Sunday, February 3, history was made when Pope Francis landed in the United Arab Emirates, marking the first time any pope has been permitted to set foot anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula in over a thousand years. The papal visit is a breakthrough for religious tolerance in the heart of the Muslim world. But all the hype and hoopla attending it and the risible boasts of openness by the UAE government should not blind us to severe problems that persist.

By the end of his three-day visit, the pope will have been welcomed by the crown prince at the presidential palace, joined by the grand mufti of Al Azhar to sign a document on "human fraternity for world peace and living together," and invited to dialogue with the local Muslim Council of Elders. It will have culminated in an open-air Mass at which he presided before 120,000 Christians in Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City Stadium. While small by the standards of other papal trips — the Mass in Panama last month had 400,000 in attendance — this will be the largest public Christian worship service held on the peninsula since Islam took hold there in the seventh century.

The UAE is using the occasion to declare 2019 "the Year of Tolerance," announce a Festival of Tolerance, establish a new cabinet post for a minister of tolerance, and open a state Internet portal on tolerance. In an attempt to rebrand itself as religiously tolerant, it has brought in planes filled with Western opinion-makers, think-tank scholars, and envoys to observe these efforts. It is the UAE's spiritual equivalent to its flashy displays of modern wealth — the over-the-top shopping malls replete with ski resorts, the palm-tree-shaped man-made luxury islands, etc.

On one hand, this is real progress. It further erodes an ancient taboo against religious freedom on the Arabian Peninsula. Attributed to Islam's Prophet Mohammed, tradition holds that no religion other than Islam is permissible there. For many centuries none was. Christianity had once been well established in the region, and the ruins of a sixth-century Christian monastery can still be seen on the UAE's Sir Bani Yas Island. But by the eighth century, all churches and Christian communities had disappeared. Even now few nationals of the UAE or in any other of the Arabian Peninsula countries dare openly profess a faith other than Islam.

Without taking into account Saudi Arabia, the UAE's neighbor and closest ally, it is impossible to assess the UAE's new cultural campaign. When I visited Riyadh in 2011 as a commissioner on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), the director of the official Saudi National Human Rights Commission explained that churches are forbidden in his country because all of it is "a sacred mosque" for Islam's holiest shrines in Mecca and Medina—two cities completely closed to non-Muslims. That has not changed. As recently as 2015, Grand Mufti Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al ash-Sheikh, Saudi Arabia's chief religious and legal authority, openly declared that all churches in the entire peninsula region should be destroyed. The Saudi cabinet shakeup after the Khashoggi murder scandal did not touch the grand mufti — he remains in that office to this day. Saudi Arabia's intolerant policies are reinforced by the government's educational system, in which there is "a troubling rise in intolerant content in Saudi textbooks promoting hatred and violence" against non-Muslims, women, and gays, according to a recent USCIRF report.

In this context, that the UAE celebrates the arrival of the Catholic pope and allows some churches and a public worship service for its non-Muslim foreign workers is a significant development. But, by wrapping itself in the mantle of religious tolerance, the UAE invites closer scrutiny, on its own terms. It bears noting, for example, that in a recent Pew Research Center index the UAE is ranked "high" for government restrictions on religion. And in 2018 it ranked 45th among the world's top 50 religious persecutors, according to the respected Christian advocacy group Open Doors. The UAE looks good compared with Saudi Arabia, but it is hardly a paragon of religious tolerance and freedom.

The UAE, like the rest of the Gulf, employs millions of foreign workers, including nearly a million Christians, who account for 12 percent of the population, rivaling the number of its Muslim nationals; almost 90 percent of the country's population consists of expatriates. The Christians among them are afforded few rights. Since the 1960s, they have been permitted churches and schools, but in severely limited numbers.

By far the largest Christian community in the UAE is the Catholic, which counts 870,000 members. Their 150 nationalities are reflected in the Mass schedules — English, Tagalog, Arabic, Malayalam, Konkani, Tamil, Urdu, Spanish, Korean, etc. Their worship services have been described as exuberant, and the churches function as social-support centers for these sojourners on temporary work visas, who exist on the margins of UAE national life. Some observers say this is freedom of worship. But it is more like token tolerance. In reality, only a small fraction of Catholics in the UAE can go to church. Half a century ago the government adopted a policy to allow churches but since then has permitted only nine Catholic churches to be built, or one church for every 100,000 Catholics.

Catholic services outside these churches are illegal. Church exteriors must be stripped of their crosses, bells, and all Christian imagery. Religious literature is restricted. Evangelization is banned and blasphemy against Islam is a crime. Anti-Semitism is promoted. Islam itself is tightly restricted: The imams are employed by the state, and the content of Friday mosque sermons is prescribed by the government. Nationals are not free to choose a religion other than Islam.

The seven federated emirates of the UAE remain under authoritarian governance that curbs religious freedom along with free speech, due process, and other basic rights. Its growing tolerance of Christian churches and Sikh and Hindu temples within its territory is delivered as a top-down "privilege" rather than respected as a guaranteed democratic right. This means that the evolution of religious freedom in this region is not inevitable.

In the events this week, the UAE is acting as Saudi Arabia's more liberal alter ego. At a time when American support for Saudi Arabia is wearing thin, these Gulf countries are

anxious to shore it up by having the UAE show a modicum of the religious tolerance that Saudi Arabia has promised but failed to deliver. The West should commend the UAE at this time but keep it in perspective.

Pope Francis comes to Abu Dhabi hoping for more churches on the Arabian Peninsula and desperate for dignity and respect for all humanity throughout the larger Muslim world. The Catholic Church and other Christian communities in Iraq and Syria are struggling to recover from genocide that was supported by nations in the Gulf. Sunni intolerance continues to threaten Catholic and other Christian communities in Asia and Africa. During a Mass only last Sunday, ISIS blew up a Catholic cathedral in the Philippines.

For this papal visit, Bishop Paul Hinder, apostolic vicar for Southern Arabia, has adopted a theme from the opening line of the Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi: "Make me a channel of your peace!" Saint Francis braved shipwreck, beatings, and a perilous journey through the battlefield of the Fifth Crusade to meet with the sultan of Egypt, to build greater human understanding and peace with the Muslim world. Eight hundred years later, the great saint's papal namesake seeks, in his own way, the same from the Muslim leaders of our own day. The rest of the West should too.

Christians in the Emirates, freedom in the shadow of Islam

This freedom, unique in the region, goes with a strict imperative of discretion

By Gauthier Vaillant

La Croix International (02.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Gmy2LE> - Ahead of Pope Francis' visit to Abu Dhabi on Feb. 3-5, La Croix spoke with Catholics living in the United Arab Emirates.

First of all, forget all our Western representations. There are no old stones, no belfry, no courtyard opening out onto the outside in a church in the United Arab Emirates, but modern building complexes enclosed by high walls behind which Catholic communities bubble with life.

This Friday afternoon, for example, it is a festival day at the Saint Mary of Dubai Church. The Filipinos, one of the largest Christian communities in the Emirates, are celebrating the day of the Holy Child, the Child Jesus, an event they inherited from Spanish settlers.

In the sun-drenched courtyard, the crowd applaud the dancers in traditional costumes, the children's choirs and the musicians who succeed each other in a joyful din. A few minutes ago, they had been listening to a mass celebrated in Tagalog.

The church, which seats close to 3,000 persons, is full.

So is the adjoining room, used to accommodate the extra worshippers and there are still hundreds more outside, following the celebration on a big screen. Altogether more than 5,000 persons have come to attend the mass, and it is only one of many scheduled for today.

Here Sunday Mass begins on Thursday evening and continues until Sunday, to adapt to the rhythm of Muslim society, where the weekend goes from Friday – the day of the great prayer in Islam – to Saturday. During that interval, about 30 Masses are said.

Generally, the parish's statistics appear staggering: 400 lay persons just to distribute communion, 80,000 communicants a weekend, and up to 300,000 for the big festivals. Saint Mary is the only Catholic church in the city, and the number of worshippers is estimated at half a million.

On this day, the effervescence reigning in the Church grounds is impressive. As they leave the mass, people rush to take selfies before a cardboard effigy of Pope Francis, as a reminder to churchgoers of his imminent arrival.

On the other side of the courtyard, a queue can be seen in front of the kiosk where T-shirts and official caps for the Pope's visit are selling like hot cakes.

Yet, "what you see here is a Church of the poor," said Father Tanios Geagea, a Lebanese priest who has been officiating in the parish for nine years now.

"Most people earn less than 800 dollars a month," he said. On many occasions, NGOs such as Human Rights Watch have denounced the abuses perpetrated on migrant workers, especially construction and domestic workers.

All Christians in the Emirates, estimated at 10 percent to 12 percent of the population, are foreign; so are the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants of the country, where there is no birthplace right.

In Abu Dhabi, nationals are estimated to make up about 15 percent, and in Dubai, barely 5 percent.

The biggest contingents of Christians are Filipinos, Indians and Pakistanis, way more than Western expatriates. They are the waiters in restaurants, the receptionists or cleaners in hotels, cashiers in supermarkets, domestics in the wealthier houses.

In all of the Emirates, Catholics have eight churches, even if new ones are built quite regularly. The most recent one, in Mussafah, not far from Abu Dhabi, was consecrated in 2015.

"Of course, obtaining a building permit takes time, but not more than in France to build a mosque," quips Father Michael O'Sullivan, coordinator of the Pope's visit.

In a country where more than 200 nationalities live side by side, the small number of churches leads to regular discussions between the different communities. "What we experience here is quite unique," says Father Tanios. "People often speak of the universality of the Church as a theoretical concept. Here we are really living it."

This close contact between Catholics also exists between Christians and Muslims. In Dubai as in Abu Dhabi, the church has been built next to a mosque.

In fact, in the capital, it is called the Mary Mother of Jesus Mosque. And during mass, you can often hear the call of the muezzin answer the hymns of the faithful. On Friday, you can even hear the priest's homily and the Imam's sermon at the same time.

In many respects, the United Arab Emirates are an exception among the Persian Gulf countries. Tradition and Islam mix inextricably with an openness to economic globalization in this young country where, in under 50 years, thanks to oil, the desert has made way for ultramodern high-rise jungles, with luxury hotels and multinationals, surrounded by green parks and spacious highways.

But the religious tolerance that the country holds aloft is not the least of its qualities. Here there is even a "ministry of tolerance." Although Sunni Islam is the State religion, the Government shows many signs of openness.

Other than the Catholics, many denominations and religions also have their places of worship: Protestants, Copts, Mormons, even a synagogue was recently built in Dubai. The Hindus have had the right to cremate their dead in the Emirates for many years now, even though the practise is strictly prohibited in Islam.

However, this freedom, unique in the region, goes with a strict imperative of discretion, like the churches without belfries or crosses on their outer walls. Seeking converts is prohibited, as are associative activities. For Catholics, this means neither evangelisation nor charity work.

While these limits may seem considerable to the outside world, the Christians who live here seem to live with them.

"We have freedom of belief and we're free to meet," said one female expatriate. "That's already huge."

"As monotheistic believers, we are very respected here," said another.

Above all, many see this situation as a sine qua non condition for preserving the calm that reigns in the Emirates.

"This country's greatest wealth is not oil," said Father Tanios. "It's peace."

UAE's tolerance embraces faiths, runs up against politics

By Aya Batrawy

AP News (02.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2Da6g1X> - DUBAI - The United Arab Emirates has branded a bridge, a new ministry, a family day at the park and even the entire year of 2019 under the banner theme of "tolerance," an elaborate effort that's in overdrive as the country prepares to host Pope Francis starting Sunday in the first-ever papal visit to the Arabian Peninsula.

The state's tolerance-themed project, however, has hard limits. While allowing churches and other places of worship to exist, and marking holidays like Christmas, the Hindu Diwali and Chinese New Year with festivals and celebrations, the government has simultaneously stomped out critical political expression in the name of national security.

Human rights activists and Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers have been imprisoned, academic research deemed sensitive has been curtailed and human rights groups have been barred entry. Political parties are banned and local media are censored.

And while the law prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees the freedom to exercise religious worship, the state's official religion of Islam is tightly monitored and controlled.

A permit is required to hold a Quran memorization circle or lecture, collect donations or distribute books or audio in mosques. The law also prohibits mosque employees from preaching and teaching religious lessons outside of mosques.

Moreover, all imams receive their salaries from the government and — with the exception of the most senior imams — must follow an official weekly guidance on the content of Friday sermons.

The UAE's Minister of Tolerance, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak Al Nahyan, said the government is simply doing what "we think is right for our people and for the world."

"We are trying to protect our religion," he told The Associated Press in an interview last week. "We want to restore our real religion, which stems from our holy book the Quran, which believes in living together. It believes in the dignity of a human being."

The UAE, a federation of seven constituent monarchies led by President Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, is known for its gleaming cities of Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Modern skylines draw tourists from around the world, bars exist next to mosques, men and women dressed in traditional garb brush past foreigners, and tight security and surveillance ensures high levels of safety.

Government bodies, public relations firms and even banks have been busy promoting the state's version of tolerance in preparation for the pope's visit, which includes a meeting on Monday with Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Sunni Islam's foremost religious institution, and a mass on Tuesday before 135,000 people in Abu Dhabi.

In a video message translated into English and Arabic ahead of his arrival, Pope Francis described the UAE as "a country which strives to be a model for coexistence and human fraternity, a meeting point of different civilizations and cultures. A place where people find a safe place to work, live freely and where differences are respected."

The UAE has a Hindu temple in Dubai and a large one being built in Abu Dhabi on land donated by the country's rulers to help accommodate the roughly 3.3 million Indians who live in the country. It is also home to around 1 million Catholics, including a sizeable Filipino community. In addition to several Catholic churches, there are numerous churches in the UAE of other Christian denominations, a Sikh temple and a space for Jewish worship.

Still, the U.S.-based Freedom House notes that more than 85 percent of the UAE's population consists of foreign residents who lack political rights and electoral opportunities, including tens of thousands of stateless residents— known as Bidoon.

Freedom House says that since 2011, when Arab Spring protests rocked countries throughout the Middle East, the UAE has aggressively cracked down on opposition activists, particularly if they are suspected of belonging to Al-Islah, an Islamist group perceived as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The UAE has branded the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, viewing it as a threat to the country's system of hereditary rule.

"They're certainly not tolerant of any form of political dissent," Devin Kenney, researcher on the UAE for Amnesty International, said.

"I mean OK, sure, like bars exist and people of multiple faiths are allowed to practice their faiths so it's not culturally totalitarian but it's clearly not a really tolerant place," he added. Kenney said the pope's visit "seems like a fairly straightforward PR gesture."

In recent years, the UAE named dozens of individuals and some 80 groups as "terrorist"— many for their alleged ties with the Brotherhood, which is not deemed a terrorist group in Europe or the U.S.

The list includes political dissenters and opposition voices, but also groups like the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim advocacy and civil rights group in the U.S., as well as Islamic Relief Worldwide, a UK-based humanitarian aid organization with operations around the world.

In a statement to the AP, Islamic Relief said it is not connected in any way to the Muslim Brotherhood and that the allegation has been "hugely damaging." The group said it was never provided with any evidence by Emirati authorities to substantiate the assertion and has tried to contest it in UAE courts.

"All our attempts to get an open hearing in front of a judge have been rejected on procedural technicalities," the group said.

The UAE is also one of four Arab countries that cut ties with Qatar in 2017, in part over its support of the Brotherhood throughout the region. The UAE banned the news operations of Al Jazeera inside the country, expelled Qatari residents, blocked websites affiliated with Qatar and warned residents that anyone who expressed sympathy for Qatar could face up to 15 years in prison.

"Nobody's perfect in this world ... ," Al Nahyan, the tolerance minister, said. "We're proud of our acceptance, tolerance, respect for human dignity, having laws which protect everybody's right."

Papal visit to UAE is a 'breakthrough,' says EU envoy



Jan Figel, EU special envoy for religious freedom. Courtesy photo.

By Andrea Gagliarducci

CNA (01.02.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2TvhANO> - Vatican City: The first ever papal visit to the Arab Gulf marks a “historical breakthrough” according to the European Union’s religious freedom envoy. Pope Francis will travel to the United Arab Emirates to attend the Global Conference of Human Fraternity, which begins February 3.

Jan Figel, the EU special envoy for the promotion of religious freedom, spoke to CNA and said that Pope Francis’ upcoming trip will “deepen the ongoing dialogue and sense of responsibility to the representatives and people of the second major religion.”

The two day conference in Abu Dhabi is being convened by Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. It will consist of three themes: principles of human fraternity, common responsibility in achieving human fraternity, and human fraternity - challenges and opportunities.

According to the Emirates News Agency, the conference “will also highlight efforts to reinforce the overarching concept of citizenship and ethnic extremism.”

Figel said that the conference, which brings together different religious and societal leaders, had great potential.

“When trusted leaders show their example and commitment for human brotherhood, this is the great contribution to peaceful coexistence in diversity,” he said.

Figel has held the post of EU envoy for religious freedom since it was created in May, 2016, shortly after the conferral of the Charlemagne Prize on Pope Francis.

He told CNA that “acting in the spirit of brotherhood, as requested from all of us by the 70 year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights, should be visible especially among those who claim one God - Creator and Father of all.”

Figel highlighted developments in the wider Muslim world to advance peace and religious tolerance, recounting a similar conference in the UAE in December 2016, the World Conference on Peace in Muslim Societies.

“That conference was oriented on understanding of civil state based on equal citizenship, pluralism and fair treatment of religious minorities in the spirit of the Marrakesh Declaration adopted by Islamic leaders and scholars”.

The Marrakech declaration was a Jan. 2015 statement signed by more than 250 Muslim religious leaders, heads of state, and scholars aimed at “defending the rights of religious minorities in predominantly Muslim countries.”

Figel said that “this process continues. There are countries showing efforts to stop frequent misuse of Islam by terrorist groups for their interests.”

In January of this year, the Islamabad declaration was signed by 500 Muslim scholars during a gathering of the Pakistani Ulema Council. That declaration proclaimed 2019 as “a year to annihilate terrorism, extremism and sectarianism from Pakistan,” and condemns murder “under the pretext of religious belief.”

“Victims of the violent extremism are not only vulnerable minorities, but opposing peaceful Muslim communities as well,” Figel noted.

“After terrorist attacks on 9/11 of 2001, after Beslan massacre in Chechnya in 2004 and especially after rise of brutal movement of ISIS/Daesh since 2014 and other militant groups of Islamists there is an ongoing quest by numerous Muslim scholars, religious and political leaders for the elimination of frequent abuse of Islam by various groups in pursuit of their power and interests,” Figel said.

According to the EU envoy, Pope Francis’ attendance at next week’s summit will deepen the ongoing dialogue and sense of responsibility and bring a “message of care and support to Christian communities living in the region.”

“On one side we see rise of religious diversity, on the other spread of religious illiteracy. We observe promotion of secular ideologies by some regimes, on the other a number of religious states with growing social intolerance and discrimination against minorities.”

In his capacity as religious freedom envoy, Figel has undertaken official missions to 13 countries in the Middle East, Africa and South-East Asia. His office has contributed to the release of groups of prisoners in Sudan and Pakistan, worked on special programmes for reconciliation and reconstruction in Iraq, and on interfaith cooperation in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, Malaysia and other countries.

He said he was encouraged to see the creation of diplomatic roles for advancing religious freedom by several sovereign states in recent years. Since 2016, religious freedom envoys have been created by countries including Hungary, Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom.

The United States has had an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom since 1999.

“Religious freedom represents actually freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief. It is important for believers and non-believers,” Figel said. “It is a litmus test of all human rights.”

Jesuit scholar of Islam assesses upcoming Papal visit to UAE

By Edward Pentin

Excerpt of the interview with Egyptian native Father Henri Boulad, National Catholic Register (31.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2SjhhQ6>

(...)

Do you think such visits to Muslim-majority nations can be more damaging than helpful to the Church and the faith?

Such visits cannot be damaging. Rather, they offer a golden opportunity to frankly address some of the thorny issues raised above, which require concrete answers. This visit could encourage the UAE to open up to a more liberal Islam. The Pope should emphasize that the Emirates are already on the right track, by their openness to Christians, to modernity and to human rights. I would highlight several recent initiatives in the Emirates, which augur the best for a new era in Christian-Muslim relations:

- Qatar [finances](#) the construction of a Maronite church in Keserwan (January 2019);
- A cathedral will [be built](#) in [Bahrain](#);
- Abu Dhabi will see the inauguration of [St. Elias Cathedral](#); [and]
- The only Kuwaiti priest, Father [Emmanuel] Gharib, is able to [celebrate the Bible in Bedouin attire](#).

Aid to the Church in Need: Religious freedom report 2018

ACN International (2018) - <https://bit.ly/2D66qHI> - On the occasion of the Pope's visit to the United Arab Emirates on 3-5 February, HRWF presents you below the excellent chapter of the 2018 ACN report on religious freedom in that region.

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a federation of seven emirates situated in the Persian Gulf. Dubai is politically and economically the most important of them.

According to the constitution of 1971,[1] Islam is the official religion in the federation. Article 7 reads: “Islam is the official religion of the UAE. The Islamic Shari'a is a main source of legislation in the UAE.” Article 25 excludes discrimination based on religion. It reads: “All persons are equal in law. There shall be no distinction among the citizens of the UAE on the basis of race, nationality, faith or social status.” Article 32 reads: “Freedom to exercise religious worship is guaranteed in accordance with the generally

accepted traditions provided that such freedom is consistent with the public policy or does not violate the public morals.”

Muslim citizens do not have the right to change religion. Apostasy in Islam is punishable by death. Apostasy is criminalised in accordance with hudud offences, which are based on Islamic law and incorporated in the country’s Penal Code. These include “adultery, apostasy, murder, theft, highway robbery that involves killing, and a false accusation of committing adultery”. [2] Article 1 of the penal code provides that Islamic law applies in hudud cases, including the payment of blood money and murder. Article 66 states that the “original punishments” under the law include punishments of hudud crimes, including the death penalty. No one, however, has been prosecuted or punished by a court for such an offence.

The law criminalises blasphemy and imposes fines and imprisonment as punishment. Insulting other religions is also banned. Non-citizens face deportation in case of blasphemy.

While Muslims may proselytise, penalties are in place for non-Muslims proselytising among Muslims. If caught, non-citizens may have their residency revoked and face deportation.

Shari’a law is applied in matters of personal status for Muslim citizens and residents. Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women ‘of the book’, i.e. Christians or Jews. Muslim women can only marry Muslim men. In the case of a mixed marriage between a Muslim man and a non-Muslim woman, child custody is granted to the father. Non-Muslim wives are not eligible for naturalisation.

Muslims and non-Muslims are required by law to respect fasting hours during Ramadan.

The government controls content in almost every Sunni mosques. Textbooks and curricula in both private and public schools are censored by the Ministry of Education. [3]

Christian churches may not be adorned by bell towers or have crosses on them.

In July 2015, the UAE announced new legislation for crimes related to religious hatred and extremism. These included the death penalty. A presidential decree bans any act that stirs up religious hatred as well as discrimination “on the basis of religion, caste, creed, doctrine, race, colour or ethnic origin”. [4] According to the decree carried by an official news agency, offenders risk up to 10 years in prison or the death penalty if convicted of “takfirism” (declaring other Muslims infidels) or Sunni Muslim extremism.

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, said the law “guarantees the freedom of individuals from religious intolerance ... and underpins the UAE’s policy of inclusiveness”. [5] Jesuit priest Father Samir Khalil commented: “By doing this, the UAE has taken a step forward with regard to religious freedom, still the exception to the rule in Muslim countries.” [6]

Non-citizen residents come mainly as guest workers from South and South East Asia, but also from the Middle East, Europe and North America. Although recent numbers are not available, the majority of residents are Muslims. According to the last census (2005), more than three-quarters of the population are Muslims, with Christians the next largest group. [7]

The Catholic Church is present through the Apostolic Vicariate of Southern Arabia (AVOSA) with its seat in Abu Dhabi, currently occupied by Bishop Paul Hinder. Eight

Catholic parishes and nine schools operate in the UAE. The number of Catholics is estimated to be around 800,000.[8]

There are also Protestant and Orthodox communities. In total, more than 35 churches operate as well as two Hindu temples. Given the large numbers of worshippers, they are often overcrowded.

Incidents

According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2016[9], the UAE government continues to provide land for Christian churches (as well as Sikh and Hindu temples). It also provides land for non-Islamic cemeteries and cremation facilities for the country's large Hindu community.

In November 2016, UAE authorities held a conference[10] to discuss ways to promote tolerance and understanding. Religious representatives were among the invited guests, among them Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury, the most senior cleric in the Church of England, and Dr Ahmed El Tayeb, Grand Imam of Al Azhar and president of the UAE's Muslim Council of Elders. It was decided that a union would be formed for youth from various cultures and nationalities and aimed at improving and encouraging tolerance.

In June 2017, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE armed forces, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, ordered that the Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed Mosque be renamed "Mary, Mother of Jesus". This decision was taken in order to "consolidate bonds of humanity between followers of different religions".[11] The move to rename the mosque reflects UAE initiatives to promote religious tolerance in the region.

In December 2017, UAE Prime Minister and Dubai Emir Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum declared that the pedestrian bridge over the recently built Dubai Canal be named "Tolerance Bridge".[12] He had previously tweeted that "Love and tolerance are bridges of communication and a universal language, binding humanity across different languages, religions and cultures". He added that "these are the foundations of the Emirates".

From 11th – 13th December 2017 the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies was organised in Abu Dhabi. Hosted by the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the theme of this fourth round of the Forum was "Global Peace and the Fear of Islam: Countering the Spread of Extremism".[13] A joint cooperation agreement between the United Nations and the Forum was announced by Undersecretary-General and United Nations Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Adama Dieng. This cooperation consists in organising 10 research workshops to promote religious education in the Islamic world.[14]

Prospects for freedom of religion

One can expect freedom of religion to improve in the coming years in the UAE. Local Church leaders describe the atmosphere as friendly and praise the open atmosphere in the country.[15] George,[16] a Maronite Christian born to Lebanese parents, told ACN: "The UAE is a good place for Christians to live in. There are limits, of course, but respecting them [means] one has a good life there." The new law against religious hatred is a hopeful sign.

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