



RELIGION UNDER FIRE

Timothy Compston examines the surge in attacks on places of worship

Today safety and security are high on the agenda for many religious communities across the globe as churches, synagogues and mosques find themselves caught up in deadly bomb and gun attacks as well as other violent incidents. Recent events in Sri Lanka and New Zealand have served to illustrate – all too clearly – the devastating repercussions when fanatics with ill intent are able to gain entry to places of worship and then turn their weapons on those inside.

Away from the extreme end of the spectrum – terrorism and mass shootings – places of worship are increasingly having to contend with repeated lower level incidents that are driven by intolerance, such as defacing gravestones; criminality – like the theft of lead from roofs – and ignorance in the shape of anti-social behaviour.

Returning to the ever-present spectre of terrorism, one of the most deadly and coordinated assaults to hit places of worship in recent years transpired back in April when, during Easter Sunday services, three Sri

The shrine of St Anthony in Colombo, Sri Lanka, was devastated by suicide bombers in April

Lankan churches in Negombo (St. Sebastian's church), Batticaloa (Zion) and Colombo's Kochchikade district (the Shrine of St. Anthony) – as well as major hotels – were devastated by suicide bombers leading to the deaths of 290 and 500 more injured. In the case of the Zion church, where at least 30 were killed, the bomber was pretending to film proceedings. Although he was stopped from entering the church proper due to the service taking place, the bomber still managed to detonate his explosives outside where children leaving Sunday school had congregated.

The planning and scale of the Sri Lankan atrocities had all the hallmarks of international terrorism – with the finger being pointed at IS (Islamic State) or its affiliates – and sent shockwaves around the island nation, which had been trying to turn a corner after decades of ethnic conflict. Not surprisingly, questions were raised in the aftermath about any prior warnings that such attacks might take place – albeit not on such a scale – and whether action could have been taken earlier against those involved. On these talking points, a spokesman for the cabinet office was quoted in the media as saying that Sri Lankan authorities were warned about a bomb threat from National Thowheed Jama'ath, a local militant Islamist group – with which all seven suicide bombers were associated – two weeks before. The Defence Secretary, Hemasiri Fernando, emphasised that the warning was only about one or two isolated incidents not at the level of what happened. The State Intelligence Service did say that subsequent raids and arrests had, thankfully, prevented a second wave of attacks.

ALT RIGHT ATTACKS

Just a month earlier, another series of tragic events unfolded on the other side of the world which, some analysts suggest, may have been part of the motivation for the perpetrators of Sri Lanka. It was during Friday prayers when two mosques in Christchurch, the biggest city on New Zealand's South Island, were hit in quick succession by a lone gunman with semi-automatic weapons, shotguns and a lever-action firearm, claiming the lives of 51 people. The first attack was at Al Noor Mosque, where the gunman managed to get inside, with the second taking place just 15 minutes later at Linwood Islamic Centre. The speed of these events led to initial reports that the attacks had taken place simultaneously and that multiple shooters might have been involved. In the end, the person charged was a 28-year-old Australian man who was said to be a white supremacist with links to the alt-right and who live-streamed the first attack on social media. An incident like this was unprecedented for New Zealand in the 21st Century with the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, commenting that it was one of the country's darkest days. In fact, you need to go back 22 years to find the last mass shooting, the Raurimu massacre, in what is recognised as one of the world's safest countries.

Shifting focus to the Middle East, where religious strife is much more prevalent than New Zealand, here the minority Christian community has been particularly hard hit by extremist elements. An interim report by the Bishop of Truro to the UK's then-Foreign Secretary – Jeremy Hunt – on the persecution of Christians makes for stark reading with the Bishop saying that in the Middle East and North Africa: "Forms

of persecution ranging from routine discrimination in education, employment and social life up to genocidal attacks against Christian communities have led to a significant exodus of Christian believers from this region since the turn of the century." In fact, as the report points out, a century ago the proportion of Christians was 20 percent whereas today it is less than four.

Drilling down to specific incidents which underline the clear and present dangers faced by Christians and their religious sites, back in October

LARGE CROWDS STANDING OUTSIDE PLACES OF WORSHIP ARE AN OBVIOUS TARGET FOR ATTACK

2010 Al-Qaeda in Iraq militants attacked Our Lady of Salvation Catholic Church in Baghdad during a Sunday night mass killing 58. When it comes to Egypt, Coptic Christians, who are the largest Christian community in the region – with an estimated 15 to 18 million adherents in the country out of a total population of 98 million – have found themselves targeted in multiple incidents. A case in point was the Palm Sunday 2017 suicide bombings in Alexandria and Tanta where 45 died. In addition, in March this year 30 men were sentenced in court for planning another suicide bombing in Alexandria. Further to the East in South Asia there is Pakistan – a predominantly Muslim country – where we have witnessed a succession of attacks on places of worship. These include the Peshawar church bombing of 2013, two bomb blasts at churches in Lahore in 2015 and the 2017 Quetta church attack.

Of course, it is not just Christians who are under pressure. 311 Sufi worshippers were killed in Sinai, Egypt, back in 2017 when the Al-Rawda mosque was attacked by an estimated 40 gunmen. Across the border in Israel, November 2014 saw two Palestinians enter the Kehilat Bnei Torah synagogue in Jerusalem and attack the congregation with knives, axes and a gun resulting in the murder of four Jewish worshippers and an Israeli police officer. Returning to Pakistan, the Shiite community has also suffered at the hands of extremist elements with a case in point being a January 2015 suicide bombing in town of Shikarpur that led to 71 fatalities.

Closer to home there is also a need for renewed vigilance. On mainland Europe there was the shocking 2016 murder of a Catholic priest in Normandy, France, during mass as part of a wider wave of incidents by IS-inspired individuals. Ultimately, the two assailants were shot dead by the BRD of the French National Police as they tried to leave the church. The previous year the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen, Denmark, was the second of three locations where shots were fired as part of a terrorist attack, leading to the death of a person on security duty during a bat mitzvah and injuries to two police officers. Also, in Scandinavia, December 2017 saw a synagogue in Gothenburg, Sweden, targeted by a masked gang throwing petrol bombs. Here in the UK, mosques have been on the receiving

end, for instance close to the Muslim Welfare House and Finsbury Park Mosque a vehicle-ramming attack resulted in one death and around 10 injured.

Across the Atlantic in the US, sadly, there has been a succession of mass shootings at religious sites of various denominations often with a far right or white supremacist connection. These have ranged from the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek – where six individuals were murdered by a lone gunman – to the Pittsburgh Synagogue shooting

TWO MOSQUES IN CHRISTCHURCH WERE HIT IN QUICK SUCCESSION BY A LONE GUNMAN

with 11 deaths, and churches finding themselves in the firing line in both Charleston and Texas.

So, with such a litany of incidents what can be done to shore up the defences of religious sites? After the events in New Zealand, Home Secretary Sajid Javid announced the doubling of security fund for places of worship in England and Wales to £1.6-million for 2019/20. In New Zealand itself

a Royal Commission has been set up to look at what lessons security agencies can learn from Christchurch.

Much of the UK Government’s advice on crowded places is relevant here. Beyond this, the CST (Community Security Trust), which gives security advice to Jewish communities in the UK, is also a good source of guidance. Back in 2014, the CST produced a document – *Security Procedures for Places of Worship* – at the request of the Department of Local Government, Communities and Police – to assist mosques in Bradford affected by far-right extremists. The guidance was further updated in 2017.

Some of the key points covered by the CST guide include: being aware of your surroundings at all times; if you spot someone acting suspiciously, approach and question them but only if it is safe to do so (ideally to be done in pairs); disperse large crowds standing outside unnecessarily as they are an obvious target for attack and familiarise yourself with evacuation and invacuation procedures. The CST document also notes that it may be safer to keep the community inside the building, locking the doors and ‘barricading’ them inside, until the police arrive. Where it is not safe to remain inside the building the CST advises that the community should be evacuated to a safe place away from the building or immediately dispersed ●

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A police officer lays flowers outside a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, after the attack in March



Picture credit: David McCarthy