

MODERN MARTYRDOM

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Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

“The blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity,” wrote the author Tertullian in the third century A.D. Tertullian was writing as the early Church was being persecuted by the Roman emperors. Today when we in the West think of Christian persecutions, we often envision an arena with hungry lions and a blood-thirsty crowd. In short, we tend to think of it as something that happened long ago.

It isn't. It's happening right now as we speak. Yet we don't hear much about it. The fact is, as authors Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea note in their new book *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians*, “Christians are the single most persecuted religious group in the world today.” That's not a matter of opinion: they aptly cite sources as divergent as the Pew Research Center and the Vatican. The European Bishops' Conference, for example, notes seventy-five percent of “acts of religious intolerance” are directed against Christians worldwide.

The authors know their subject well. Marshall is connected with the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom and has lectured widely on the subject. Gilbert is an award-winning journalist and author whose focus is religion. Shea is a lawyer specializing in international human rights. They dedicate their book to religious freedom, the “first freedom,” without which other freedoms fall apart; it is a necessity to “the preservation of human dignity and the flourishing of the person.” We in the West take this for granted.

The authors look at the following groups:

- The world's last communist states: China, Cuba, Vietnam, North Korea and Laos.
- Former communist states, such as Belarus, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- Countries with a large Hindu/Buddhist population.
- Countries with a predominantly Muslim population.

While persecution occurs elsewhere, it's in the above that they're most frequent and intense. All Christian groups are oppressed in one way or another: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox. The late Pope John Paul II called this an "Ecumenism of the Martyrs." It's not missionaries who are being persecuted, but the indigenous Christian population. (Most missionaries actually head to America for their immigrant co-religionists who emigrated there.)

In his foreword to the book, Eric Metaxas, author of a bestselling biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor martyred by the Nazis, writes:

"Those of us who live in the West don't experience anything along these lines, and most of us are deeply ignorant of the sufferings of our brethren around the world. Indeed, as we read these words now, millions suffer. And we have been blessed with such a bounty of religious freedom that we can hardly imagine what such suffering must be like."

It's not a pretty picture. The authors describe North Korea as "today's most intense persecutor of Christians," where people are executed or sent to prison camps merely for possessing a Bible. In China, the government has brought about a schism within the Catholic Church, arbitrarily appointing bishops without Vatican approval. It also forces women to act against their consciences by having forced abortions. Protest is met with imprisonment. However, China's "stock answer is that people are not punished for their religious faith but for breaking the law." China may have the largest growing Christian population in the world (some estimate 100 million).

Vietnam maintains an equally tight control over churches, including a state-sponsored church. The Christian population is also expanding here. Laos has been called a "mini-Vietnam," with government crackdowns in the mainly Buddhist nation not uncommon. From 1959 to 1992, Cuba, a traditionally Catholic nation, was officially atheist (now Cuba calls itself secular). Tight control is still the rule, with a state-sponsored Protestant Cuban Council of Churches (CCC).

In former Communist nations, registration and surveillance are keywords. In Uzbekistan, a largely Muslim nation, religious literature cannot be distributed without a license, which is practically impossible to get. Belarus has been called "Europe's last dictatorship." While religious freedom is ostensibly guaranteed, it's practically impossible to register for normal religious activity. Although particular restrictions may vary from region to region, in general, the authors note, "the laws of the former Soviet republics are both harsh and ambiguous, and those in authority often act arbitrarily."

In south Asia, Hinduism and Buddhism are the main religions (Christianity also has a long history there). While both faiths have a history of peaceful coexistence with neighbors, there's also a history of militant exclusivism (the authors note this isn't the predominant pattern). Examples include the Hindu nationalist movement Sangh Parivar ("family of organizations") and the radical Buddhist Jathika Hela Urumaya party in Sri Lanka. In some areas of India, there are anticonversion laws, as well as communal acts of violence directed against Christian minorities. Discrimination also exists. In 2003, an order of Catholic nuns in Sri Lanka was prohibited from legal incorporation. The judge argued that there was no fundamental right to propagate a religion, and that Christian expansion would "impair the very existence of Buddhism."

Nowhere is Christian persecution more intense or widespread

than the Muslim world. In Turkey, Christian communities (which form .015% of the population) face “a dense web of legal regulations that thwart the ability of churches to survive and, in some cases, even to meet together for worship.” Saudi Arabia allows no churches of any kind; the “Christian community consists almost entirely of foreign workers and diplomats.”

Iran, the authors write, is “one of the world’s worst religious persecutors.” In its government, Islamic clergy have a prominent place. Religious discrimination is not banned. The penalty for killing women and non-Muslims is less than that for killing a Muslim male. Jews and Orthodox Christians may not hold military commissions or government positions. In recent years the arrest of Christians has increased for alleged conspiracy. Converts are routinely arrested. The authors contend the United States has focused more on Iran’s potentiality for developing nuclear weapons than its religious persecution. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a strategic ally and supplier of a fourth of the world’s oil, America has been reluctant to protest on religious matters.

In other countries, the threat of persecution is increasing. In Iraq, the main threat comes not from the government, but from terrorists and extremists. The Arab Spring of 2011, a series of revolutionary uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, has not boded well for the Christian population of those countries. Islamist regimes have brought greater danger than ever before. This is a major problem for peace, especially in the Middle East, and in more ways than one. For example, Charles Malik, who played a major role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, notes that these Christian communities have helped encourage “Islamic openness and moderation, creating an environment of pluralism that fosters open acknowledgement of the different other.” Once gone, widespread intolerance can’t be far.

There is also the question of anti-Christian abuses far

different from those in Communist, post-Communist, Islamic and other regimes. In Burma and Eritrea, we see militant regimes determined to wipe out any type of opposition. In Ethiopia, long a Christian country, Muslims are making significant inroads and directing violence against local Christians. The message is quite clear throughout this book; as one witness put it, there are many parts of the world where Christians are becoming an "endangered species." Then there are other areas, like China, where Christianity is growing in unprecedented numbers. But this expansion is taking place there under the aegis of state-sponsored oppression.

The sources used in this book are extremely reliable. There are no polemical anecdotes here; there's just hard fact. The U.S. International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA), which they describe as "[o]ne of the great successes of past political mobilization against religious persecution," mandated that the State Department publish annual reports of religious persecution throughout the world. These are the sources for many of the incidents described in this book. The authors write: "They have official stature and are relied upon throughout the world." Add to this the writing and work of the three authors, and it makes for powerful reading.

The authors conclude this impressive work with a "call to action." They call for use of the presidential "bully pulpit," whereby the President of the United States calls attention to human rights abuses involving religious intolerance. It's a tool that's gone largely silent under the present administration. There are other suggestions:

"We, as citizens living in freedom, are not powerless. Sometimes within our given circumstances we are able to take steps on our own to help: as diplomats or members of the international business community, or as ordinary people by starting social media or Internet campaigns, by organizing mass letter writing and petitions to oppressive governments abroad, or by using music and art to raise awareness."

The authors are quick to point out that this isn't just an issue that concerns Christians alone, nor even religious people alone. It's an issue that involves all: "We believe that all citizens of any or no religion should be equally concerned with the persecution of people of any or no religion."

This is an important book, and a well written one. It reads quickly, even if the contents are sometimes hard to process. Once again, it's hard for us in the West, where we often take our freedom (particularly our religious freedom) for granted, to process everything contained herein. But it's important that we do, because it's an issue that concerns all of us, believers and non-believers. And we need to remember that we have a moral obligation to lessen the plight of our brothers and sisters worldwide, in any way we can. Persecution isn't just something that happened long ago in ancient Rome: it's happening right now. And we need to do something about it.

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