MYTHS ABOUT CHRISTIAN NON-PERSECUTION

Robert Royal

At the present moment, Christians are the most widely persecuted religious group in the world. They are forbidden normal freedom to practice or attacked for explicitly religious reasons in Muslim countries from Algeria across North Africa, throughout the Middle East, into Pakistan and Indonesia. In other countries, such as China, Christians of various kinds exist and even continue to grow in numbers, but are subject to political control intended to keep them from becoming a potential force for reform as they did in Poland, the Philippines, and Latin America in the twentieth century. The Chinese Communists are quite aware of the role Solidarity and John Paul II played in the fall of the Soviet Union, and that is one among several reasons they are determined to keep a lid on Christianity, even going so far as to establishing a Patriotic Catholic Church to compete with the historic Catholicism in communion with Rome.

The motives for these persecutions—and sometimes outright martyrdom—vary, as you well might expect, depending on multiple factors. And there are several nations in the developed world that practice subtler forms of discriminations and government control: witness our own American government's misguided efforts to impose healthcare guidelines on religious institutions, which violate their settled moral principles. But the fact and scope of anti-Christian persecution is beyond all doubt. Non-partisan human rights organizations report on it, in detail, annually. And former French President Nicholas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel—neither exactly the kind of right-wing Christian extremist that the media love to mock—have both pronounced Christianity "the most persecuted religion in the world."

Which makes it quite odd that Candida Moss, a professor at Notre Dame, has just published *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom*. In the main, her book deals with misconceptions about early persecution and martyrdom, but her real goal—beyond what is essentially a series of technical debates among scholars of the early Church—is to dispel a dangerous "myth," as she would have it, which she claims is not merely "academic":

The view that the history of Christianity is a history of unrelenting persecution persists in modern religious and political debate about what it means to be Christian. It creates a world in which Christians are under attack; it endorses political warfare rather than encouraging political discourse; and it legitimizes seeing those who disagree with us as our enemies. It is precisely because the myth of persecution continues to be so influential that it is imperative that we get the history right.

All those persecuted Christians around the world noted above might think this a merely "academic" reading of their plight indeed. And to be fair to Professor Moss, her aim seems less to deny them than to block Christians in America from vigorous action to defend what they see as threats to their beliefs and institutions. She couches her point in a way that it would be difficult to disagree with. Christians should not believe that they have "always and everywhere," "relentlessly," and "constantly," been suffering under persecution. That is simply not true, as she rightly argues. But outside of a rather slender sect of scholars – the kind that generally gathers impressions of what traditional Christians believe from the most extreme statements of a very few that are deliberately highlighted in the liberal media—who ever believed such a thing? The most rabid Christian culture warrior knows that the anti-Christians lay low or take a break now and then.

If Professor Moss were to extend her efforts at a generous understanding—which she so clearly wishes to do to

contemporary Muslims and even ancient pagan figures—to the large numbers of Christians she's actually living among, she might be surprised to find that they are not bent on "sacred violence," don't even have a jaundiced view of, say, Muslims as a whole. But they can read and think. And they know pretty well where the HHS mandates are headed or where something like the Boston bombings came from.

The latter wasn't from Christian discrimination against Muslims—the Tsarnaev brothers had many American friends and did rather well here in academics and sports. It wasn't from economic stress—the family pulled in hundreds of thousands of dollars for rent and food from Massachusetts's welfare agencies. It was from an Islamist ideology of the sort that academic discourse or "dialogue" can do little to affect. The reason we even have police, FBI, military services, and intelligence agencies is precisely because some malefactors can only be stopped with the appropriate and justified use of force.

And even in domestic terms, are the Christians really the ones most to blame and most offending in today's culture clashes? Do we practice "sacred violence," which Dr. Moss sees in many places? And does a long "myth" of persecution play a significant role in whatever problem Professor Moss thinks she detects?

In fact, she has really tried to write two books that don't have much to do with one another.

In one, a trained scholar of early Christianity applies the historical/critical method developed over the past several centuries by Scripture scholars to raise doubts about the truth of all but a handful of early Christian martyrdom accounts. Like the use of this method in search of the "historical Jesus," the results largely reflect the presuppositions the writer brings to the task. Close reading of any text, even a formal legal filing, can be used to

increase doubts about how it all fits together—if at all. Scholarly conclusions, therefore, are more often than not reserved and skeptical, not only as to the words and acts of early Christians, including Jesus, but about how the Church received the history, interpreted it, and passed it on.

In Professor Moss's other book, however, which is to say the one she has written in her opening and closing chapters along with a sprinkling of editorializing comments throughout, a trained scholar of early Christianity steps into current debates about the legal penalizing, sometimes bordering on persecution, that traditional Christians routinely suffer in modern societies. She isn't particularly well informed about this side of things—whether in this country or abroad—and has very little sympathy for those very fellow Christians who, rightly or wrongly, do very much feel—not without considerable evidence—that ominous developments are under way.

Professor Moss writes, she believes, from the highest motives: the wish to find common ground together, to work towards the good of all across partisan and religious lines. But she, like many another liberal thinker, has all the proportions—outside the academy—simply wrong. You won't need to break a sweat looking for extreme statements by talk-radio hosts, politicians, the occasional bishop. But whereas Moss would extend the hand of liberal understanding to the most destructive of Muslim terrorists—we should understand why they want to do what they do to us—there's no similar sympathy to Americans, Christians, Westerners more generally who believe they are being wronged.

And it's hard not to believe that this bias warps more than one interpretation of the ancient material. For example, the "heretical" early Gnostics, Professor Moss assures us, never really existed as a "coherent movement." This is a very carefully formulated, almost lawyer-like scholarly assessment. But when it comes to the opponents' views—i.e., the reactions of traditional Christians who lived a lot closer to these

Gnostic movements than any modern scholar—the judgment is much broader and "judgmental." The idea that the Gnostics presented serious threats were "the product of paranoid orthodox invective." How we know this after all this time is less clear than the doubts about embroidered stories of martyrdom. At the same time, despite their non-existence, we learn a few lines later that the Gnostics might be taken in some of their unorthodox texts such as the Gospel of Judas as examples of "a more moderate and reasonable form of ancient Christianity for post 9/11 Christians."

Say what? The early Christians no doubt editorialized in the martyr stories to make Christian points. But in many respects, whatever their editorial interventions, they were recounting something that their fellow Christians could have no trouble recognizing was plausible. Compared to their narratives, Professor Moss's transmuting of ancient literary material into fodder that can be put to use for contemporary political maneuvers borders on sheer invention. To ask an embarrassing question, why exactly do we need to debunk stories of the early martyrs if all we're really after is trying to talk contemporary Christians out of the notion that they should engage in "dialogue" with anti-Christian culture and with the perpetrators of the recent wave of Islamist terrorism? Professor Moss presents no convincing case for linking the two, because there isn't one—not a good one, anyway.

Professor Moss is using some doubtful material about Christian persecution and martyrdom to do exactly what? Is the U. S. involved in drone-strikes, even under the liberal Obama Administration, because Christians are being persecuted and martyred in Pakistan (as they most certainly are)? No. Did we invade Afghanistan and drive out the Taliban because they persecuted Christians along with Hindus, Buddhists, and others? No. Do we bomb southern Somalia solely because it's persecuting and slaughtering Christians, which it is? No.

Some Christians might think these would all be justified use

of force in humanitarian relief of a persecuted religious minority. But we haven't acted for those reasons and are unlikely to. So what are the reasons for these warnings about Christian self-righteousness and "sacred violence"?

She and her endorsers seem most to lament a lack of "compassion and dialogue today" because Christians are so self-righteous and so wedded to the notion that they are always and everywhere victims, that they are unwilling to talk with those with a differing faith and different view of the world. Everyone has to judge these complex questions with such lights as God grants, but is it really the case – outside some academic framing of our current situation – that our actively violent enemies want to talk and all we want to do is bomb, and that because we're martyrdom–obsessed Christians? There are myths of persecution and myths of a lack of persecution. Professor Moss has chosen to write a new chapter in the latter mold.

Dr. Robert Royal is author of *The Catholic Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* and is president of the Faith & Reason Institute in Washington, D.C. He is finishing a book on the Catholic intellectual tradition in modern times.