

THE COMING CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

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Christian persecution is the sleeper story of the decade. It is perhaps the most newsworthy and least reported of any phenomenon in the world today.

Let me begin with an example. On March 15, 2019, 28-year-old Brenton Harrison Tarrant carried out two horrific consecutive mass shootings of Muslims in mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Tarrant entered both mosques during Friday prayer, starting with the Al Noor Mosque and continuing to the Linwood Islamic Centre. In his rampage, Tarrant killed 51 people and wounded another 40.

Tarrant's religiously motivated killing spree was atrocious and rightly captured front-page billing in *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. All the major television networks and 24-hour cable news stations likewise accorded the story pride of place.

The problem with this scenario is not what was covered but what was not. In the very same moment when a lone shooter with a documented mental problem was shooting up mosques in New Zealand, 120 Christians lost their lives in brutal, targeted attacks over a three-week period in Nigeria. The difference was that no one in the West heard about it because no one bothered to report it. Not only was it not frontpage news; it wasn't mentioned at all. That includes NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, Fox News, and all the print media worth mentioning.

Many of our contemporaries, Christians included, mistakenly think of Christian persecution as a historical curiosity, a one-time occurrence happening during the first three centuries of the modern era, which forever disappeared with the Edict of Milan and the fall of the Roman Empire. This is unfortunately far from reality.

The troubling fact is that a full 75 percent of religiously motivated violence today occurs against Christians and some 360 million Christians around the world live in situations of serious persecution, meaning they fear for their lives and wellbeing on a daily basis. As grim as these statistics are, you would never know it because Western mainstream media—for a number of reasons—refrain from reporting on this, leaving ordinary people in the dark.

Widespread ignorance and downplaying of the magnitude of the problem is an important factor explaining why Christian persecution is getting more serious by the year. The other is the intensification of the *drivers* of such persecution, which are not getting weaker but stronger.

According to the director of Open Doors Italy, which monitors Christian persecution, there are nine primary drivers of persecution in today's world: radical Islam, communist and post-communist oppression, religious nationalism, ethnic antagonism, tribal oppression, denominational protectionism, secular intolerance, dictatorial paranoia, and organized crime.

In a country like North Korea, run by an explicitly atheistic Marxist regime, Christians have no rights whatsoever, and a crime as simple as being found with a Bible can mean winding up in prison or even death. China, another communist state, offers a veneer of religious freedom but only on the communist party's terms, and the state employs advanced surveillance methods to be sure that the content of Christian worship coheres with the ideology of Maoist socialism. Children under

the age of 18 are not allowed in church for any reason.

Radical Islam is the number one driver of violent Christian persecution today and nine out of the ten countries where it is most dangerous to be a Christian are Muslim majority nations, including Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan, Iran, and Sudan. Unsurprisingly, the nation in which a Christian is most likely to be killed for the faith is among these: Nigeria.

Some of this persecution has come from governments, some from individuals and mobs, and some from organized Islamic terror groups like Boko Haram, Al-Shabaab, or the Islamic State. Who can forget the scene of 21 Coptic Christians martyred by the Islamic State on a beach in Libya in February 2015? Wearing bright orange jump suits, the Egyptian Christians were forced by their captors to kneel down before having their throats slit. Given the chance to save themselves by denying their Christian faith, not one did.

While these and the other drivers seem in no way to be abating, the post-Christian West seems to be losing its will to defend Christians, which ties in with the shameful lack of reporting on Christian persecution. Worse still, in the West, Christians are looked upon increasingly as part of the problem, especially those who espouse biblical morality and are unwilling to conform to society's expectations.

This is where "secular intolerance" comes into play. Whereas Christian ideas about the human person, the family, and society itself historically formed the undergirding of Western civilization, Christianity is now often equated with bigotry by radical secularists and Christians are viewed with suspicion or even outright hostility. This is particularly true when it comes to the LGBT lobby and so-called "abortion rights," which orthodox Christians naturally oppose. As part of this trend, religious freedom is often downgraded to just one right among many with no special status, and Christians

are often expected to act against their conscience when it comes to the rights of others.

This secular intolerance also manifests itself in hostility to those who take their Christian faith seriously, as if this would disqualify them from participating fully in society, especially in a formal capacity. In 2017, President Donald Trump nominated Amy Coney Barrett to serve as a U.S. Circuit Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit. Barrett, who held a named chair of law at the University of Notre Dame at the time and is also the mother of seven children, was fiercely hazed during her confirmation hearing by members of the Senate Judiciary Committee and multiple senators challenged her fitness to serve due to her Catholic faith.

“When you read your speeches, the conclusion one draws is that the dogma lives loudly within you,” Sen. Dianne Feinstein famously said. “And that’s of concern when you come to big issues that large numbers of people have fought for for years in this country.”

One simple fact that has strengthened oppressed Christians down through the ages has been the entirely *expected* nature of the abuse. From the Apostolic Age to the present, no follower of Christ can reasonably say that he never knew persecution was coming. Even before His disciples knew what the “cross” was, Jesus made it quite apparent that it would accompany all those who chose to associate themselves with Him.

People sometimes speak of the “prosperity gospel” or the “gospel of success,” but except in the most metaphorical of senses, such terminology stands diametrically opposed to the message of Jesus. While no Christian can be certain of reaping material benefits from his faith, all Christians can be sure that the more closely they follow Christ, the more they will experience the persecution that was the hallmark of His own life on earth.

Jesus not only foretold His own Passion and death, preparing His disciples for the agony of seeing Him brutally tortured and killed; He also foretold their own sharing in His fate, insisting that whoever follows Him will partake of His Passion as well. It is because of their union with Jesus that this will happen, He asserts, and thus persecution is a mark of the true disciple's intimate sharing in the life and mission of Jesus, just as the world's love and acceptance is a sure sign that a would-be disciple has not attained to this union.

This persecution began in earnest in the Roman Empire, especially under the reign of the emperor Nero when Peter, Paul, and many others were martyred, but it has continued down through the centuries to our own time. There are, in fact, more martyrs today than at any other time in history.

Various theories have been advanced as to why Christians have been a particular magnet for persecution ever since the foundation of the Church. While Christians themselves have generally accepted the fact of persecution as a mark of authenticity and faithfulness to Jesus, others have proposed that there is something essentially *intolerable* about Christianity that provoked even the famously tolerant Roman Empire to treat Christians with cruelty.

Monotheism alone, for instance, cannot explain the unique hostility toward the followers of Jesus. The Jews, in obedience to the first commandment, declined to take part in many of the religious rituals prescribed by the Roman emperors and yet were generally given a pass when it came time to enforce their civic duty. Being Jewish was not illegal in the Roman Empire, whereas being a Christian was.

Some, like Voltaire and Edward Gibbon, have tried to downplay Christian persecution and even to blame persecution on the Christians themselves, but these efforts reveal more about those who make them than about the Christians.

A better explanation for the motives behind antipathy toward Christians was offered by the author of an ancient Christian text known as the *Letter to Diognetus*. Written by an unknown author sometime between AD 130 and 200, the letter attempts to describe the relationship between Christians and the world, thereby elucidating what it is about them that the “world” finds so irritating and intolerable.

Outwardly, Christians are not all that different from others, the text explains, and Christians “are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe.” They do not live apart in self-made ghettos or communes, but inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, they follow “the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct.”

But by their lives, Christians stand as a silent reproach to the worldly and their pursuits, and this fact alone is sufficient to explain the hostility they elicit.

Regardless of the motivations behind it, however, Christian persecution is a fact that is not going away but only intensifying.

No one seeks persecution for its own sake; it is unpleasant, painful, and repulsive to our human nature. No one wants to be mistreated, misunderstood, or ridiculed—much less punished, tortured, or put to death. And yet a willingness to endure such things out of fidelity to Jesus points to the truth of the faith and the sustaining power of God’s grace even in the most trying ordeals.

In today’s world, the greatest temptation for many Christians is not apostasy per se but rather assimilation. It is so much easier to shade the truth of the gospel in order to be well liked, to advance in our careers, and to be accepted by “the world” than to stand firm and expose ourselves to ridicule and ostracization for our fidelity to Christ.

This is the challenge that faces today's Christians: to stand firm in the faith, emboldened by the grace of the Holy Spirit and sure of the victory that Christ has already won for his Church. Jesus' words must be a light for our path: "In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

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