

“The Unthinkable in the Twenty-First Century”

Rick Hinshaw

George J. Marlin, *Christian Persecutions in the Middle East: A 21st Century Tragedy* (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2015)

Bombarded as we are by daily news reports, we probably feel we know all we need to know about the unspeakable crimes being perpetrated virtually every day against innocent people – primarily Christians – in the Middle East. But how much do we really know, about the history, the causes, and, perhaps most importantly, possible responses to this persecution?

As chairman of Aid to the Church in Need-USA, which works to support the suffering and persecuted Church around the world, George Marlin is uniquely situated to give us a much clearer picture of this tragic situation. And he does so in this book, which helps us better understand the long and often painful history of Christian-Islamic relations in the Middle East; the current day situation of Christians in the different nations of that region; the proximate causes of their suffering and persecution; and, through the eyes of various Church leaders who bear the burden of ministering to the suffering faithful throughout the Middle East, some of the challenges that must be addressed, needs that must be met, and solutions that must be explored if the world – and the universal Church – are to help bring about a just and lasting end to the persecution.

And that, as Marlin makes clear, is his intent.

“Far more than supplying readers with information and perspective, or even alerting Christians and others in the West to the threat posed by today's ultra-violent expression of Islam,” he writes in the Introduction, “the purpose of

Christian Persecutions in the Middle East is to enable us to walk the Via Crucis, the 'Way of the Cross,' with these fellow Christians in the Middle East, to truly stand with them, and to inspire us to provide them with the means to help them continue to bear witness to Christ in the land that gave Him birth."

In "The Unthinkable in the Twenty-First Century," the book's second main section, Marlin gives us a heart-wrenching overview of what that "Way of the Cross" looks like for Christians in today's Middle East. He starts by recounting the carnage that the Ottoman Turks committed against Armenian Christians before, during and after the first World War, beginning in the 1890s when the Ottoman Sultan, "[t]o dissuade Christians from seeking more rights and freedoms ... turned to loyal Muslim tribesmen, particularly the Kurds, to attack and massacre" Christian Armenians.

"As many as 200,000 Christians perished" in what became, Marlin quotes historian Philip Jenkins, "a dress rehearsal for the later genocide" that would occur in Armenia during and after World War I – when, as Marlin quotes British statesman and historian Lord James Bryce, "the Turks hatched 'a plan for exterminating Christianity root and branch.'

"It is estimated that between 1914 and 1923, when a new state in Turkey was established, 1.5 million Armenian Christians, out of a total population of 2.5 million, were murdered by Turkish Muslims."

From here, Marlin, citing scholars and Church leaders of the region, details – nation by nation – the persecution of Christians today throughout the Middle East, in:

- Turkey, "Now a prosperous democracy under the rule of an Islamist party," where Christian communities "find themselves at risk of being extinguished altogether."
- Egypt, where "discrimination" against Christians is

“continuous,” and “violent persecution,” which “tends to surface sporadically” has “increased significantly over the last five years, in parallel with the Islamization of the police.”

- Lebanon, where a 15-year-long civil war between 1975-1990 left 125,000 dead, 80 percent of them Catholic; another 213,000 Christians fled the country; and “approximately 440 Christian churches and facilities were destroyed.”
- Syria, the “cradle of Christianity,” where Christians today are caught in the middle of the civil war between the brutal Assad regime and rebels, and now the ISIS terrorists. Open Doors International reports that “Syria headed ‘the list of the countries in which the most Christians were killed for their faith’”; and, according to a study released in January 2014, “as many as 600,000 Syrian Christians, a third of the nation’s total, have fled their homes and are displaced within Syrian borders or have been living as refugees in neighboring countries.”
- Iraq, where a mass exodus of Christians began during the Gulf War in the early 1990s, and has accelerated in the years since, as a series of events – culminating now in the onslaught of ISIS – has so terrorized Christians and put them to flight that the Archbishop of Mosul declared, “My diocese no longer exists. ISIS has taken it away from me.”
- Iran, where there is systematic discrimination and repression against Christians and other religious minorities, who are prohibited – under penalties including even death – from propagating their faith.
- Sudan, where “In the final decades of the twentieth century,” it is estimated that 2 million people may have been killed by fighting and famine, and 5 million displaced, as “Sudan’s single party authoritarian sharia-based government waged war on the country’s 6.6 million Christians and 18 million racial minorities.”

- Saudi Arabia, where “public practice of non-Muslim religions” has for most of its history “been strictly forbidden”; and where, in recent decades – even as the government actively sought to attract foreign workers for its rapidly expanding oil industry – it has repressively enforced these anti-religion restrictions against some six million foreign workers, including about 600,000 Christians. They face floggings, jailings and deportation for daring to practice their Christian faith.

Before exploring possible solutions to this ongoing scourge of anti-Christian persecution, it is necessary to examine its causes; and this Marlin does, again through his own insights, those of academic experts, and – in the book’s Part Three section entitled, “Christian Perspectives on the Middle East” – through the observations of bishops, priests and religious who have been “on the ground” ministering to the Church and her people throughout the Middle East.

Some lay some blame at the feet of outside influences; and indeed, Marlin describes the machinations of western nations, particularly after the two World Wars, creating artificial divisions and boundaries throughout the region. Whether done to enhance their own economies or spheres of influence, or even for altruistic reasons, trying to construct a more durable peace, such manipulations have surely fueled resentments and power struggles in the region, leading to the scapegoating and persecution of Christians and other minorities seen as tied to the West.

Some place blame more specifically on the support of the West – particularly the United States – for Israel, at the expense, they contend, of the Palestinian people. Sister Marie Melham, after recounting her years growing up peacefully with Muslims and Christians together in Lebanon, points to “exterior forces that use poverty to their ends and that want to sell arms.” Others, too, cite conditions of poverty as a breeding ground

for violence and terrorism, as well as for scapegoating of minority populations.

Yet it becomes clear, reading this book, that the root causes of anti-Christian persecution in the Middle East cannot be separated from the tenets of Islamic teaching and the history of Islamic rule.

“Unlike Christ’s apostles, who preached to all nations but did not coerce or threaten non-believers,” Marlin writes, “Muhammad told his followers that they had a duty to wage holy wars and to destroy pagan non-believers, referred to as infidels. ‘Kill all pagans,’ he declared.”

Muhammad taught that Christianity and Judaism were “earlier, incomplete divine revelations given by God,” Marlin explains; and thus Muslims, during their “centuries of conquest,” held that Christians and Jews were “corrupted by error and obstinacy and no longer worthy of carrying out the commands or teaching of the almighty.”

Also unlike Christianity, Marlin explains – again, citing scholarly experts – religious control of the state is held to be integral to the religious mission of Islam. And thus, Christians and Jews living under Muslim rule in conquered lands were treated as “dhimmis,” second class citizens – with certain freedoms but also many restrictions, and at times – certainly today – harsh repression.

Surely, as most of the commentators cited in this book concur, this extreme face does not represent the whole, or probably even the majority, of Islam in today’s world. At the same time, as Father Wafik Nasry, an Egyptian born Catholic Copt and expert on Islam and inter-religious dialogue, maintains, it cannot be pretended that “members of al-Qaeda and ISIS and many other Muslim militant political groups have nothing to do with true Islam. ...Both Muslims and Christians,” he writes, “need to calmly face the reality of violence in Islam.”

And speak out against it. As this book also makes clear, far too many moderate Muslims – whether out of intimidation, apathy, or other reasons –are loath to raise their voices against this anti-Christian persecution. And they are not alone. Too many in the West have also fallen virtually silent, including Christians. While some of those cited in this book see a military role in protecting Christians, virtually all see the need for a strong, universal moral voice – Muslim and Christian, secular and religious, political, social and cultural – rallying, as Marlin writes, to “truly stand with” the persecuted Christians of the Middle East as they courageously continue “to bear witness to Christ.”

The question naturally arises: in the face of their terrible, terrible suffering, *why* should Christians in the Middle East be encouraged to stay, rather than being helped to flee to a potentially better life? Besides the logistical enormity of such a mass evacuation – the current number of refugees is already overwhelming nations and aid organizations – it is first a matter of simple justice. These nations are their homelands, and they should not be forced to uproot their families, abandon their livelihoods, and move to strange lands. Beyond that, their presence as Christians is vital, not just to preserve the heritage of our religion’s birthplace. As so many of the commentators to whom Marlin gives voice in this book – particularly those bishops, priests and religious “on the ground” in the Middle East—make clear, their Christian witness is essential *now* if peace and justice are ever to come for *all* the people of this beleaguered region. Their courage and sacrifice, their love of family and neighbor, their willingness to suffer so greatly out of love for Christ, can be the most powerful weapon of all in calling forth the universal cooperation – including in the Muslim world – that can ultimately destroy the forces of cruelty and oppression.

As George Marlin intended, we cannot help, after reading this book, but be inspired to support that courageous witness in

whatever way we can – offering our prayers, our material support, and our voices, calling on forces of influence in our part of the world – media outlets, government leaders, churches – to do all in their power to bring this terrible situation to light, to aid the suffering, and ultimately to stop the anti-Christian persecutions in the Middle East.

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