

# THE FATE OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ronald J. Rychlak

*The Persecution and Genocide of Christians in the Middle East: Prevention, Prohibition, & Prosecution* (Angelica Press, 2017)

"I knew they were persecuting Westerners," she said. "I just didn't know they were persecuting Christians."

The "she" is a very well educated and informed woman who had just read the first chapter of a new book, which I had the privilege of editing along with Ave Maria Law Professor Jane Adolphe. To say the book was eye-opening would be an understatement.

We have all seen news stories of beheadings; we know about the terror and warfare of ISIS (aka ISIL, Islamic State, IS, and Daesh); and we are certainly aware of the refugees who are fleeing Syria and elsewhere. In this book, a very impressive group of scholars shows how these matters all fit together. It should be of interest to all concerned Christians.

Spread throughout the book are 28 photos, some of them hopeful but more of them gut-wrenching, of desecrated churches, children playing in rubble, kneeling men about to be executed, and girls who were kidnapped by extremists. One particularly poignant photo shows a distressed priest with his head bowed, standing in his demolished church, shortly after his town was liberated from ISIS. In front of him is a statue of the Virgin Mary with her hands and head cut off. ISIS defaces all Christian images; it does not care about their antiquity, historical importance, or cultural value.

This book grew out of a conference held in 2016, the point of which was to urge the U.S. government to label the on-going

persecution of Middle Eastern Christians as a genocide. That designation is important because it brings special rights to the victims under international and U.S. law, and it subjects the perpetrators to prosecution and punishment.

At the time of the conference, Pope Francis had called the persecution a “genocide,” but other officials had not yet gone that far. Shortly after the conference, Secretary of State John Kerry used the term genocide to refer to the Islamic State’s persecution of Christians and other minorities. It was a significant advance in terms of the conference’s aim, but the waters have once again become murky. In the summer of 2017, the legal advisor to the U.S. State Department said that Kerry had expressed a personal opinion, and going forward the term genocide would not be used by the department. So the book is even more timely than it seemed as it was being assembled.

The term genocide was coined in 1944 and gained notoriety when it was used to explain what the Nazis tried to do to the Jews in the Holocaust. In 1948, the *U.N. Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* defined “genocide” as killing and certain acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” The convention opened the avenue for prosecution of perpetrators and protection of victims under international law. Many nations adopted similar domestic laws. That’s why the “genocide” label is so important.

Anyone who reads this book will have a hard time denying that the term genocide is fully applicable to the persecution of Christians in the Middle East today. The first chapter was written by Nina Shea of the Hudson Institute. In it, she reviews account after account of persecuted Christian men, women, and children in areas under ISIS control. The horrors are so dreadful and so common that a reader could almost become numb to the violence, but the issue is too important to lay aside.

Among the better known atrocities reviewed in the book are: the beheading of 21 Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya, an elderly French priest beheaded at morning Mass, and the kidnapping and sexual enslavement of 276 Nigerian schoolgirls by Boko Haram (a terrorist organization that collaborates with ISIS). The little-known details of these events are horrific, but so are the stories that are not as well known.

The book is filled with dozens of accounts like those of the Iraqi Christian woman who watched jihadists crucify her husband to the front door of their home; a Syrian evangelical preacher and his twelve year old son who were tortured and crucified after they refused to renounce their Christianity; and the harrowing story of a Christian mother who escaped ISIS enslavement where she had been brutally tortured and taken to a sex slave detention center. The center was run by an ISIS sheikh who performed "marriages" between captive girls and women and ISIS fighters. She explained: "That night I was married to eight different men and divorced eight times. Each man raped me three or four times. When all this was over, we were taken back to the room where all the girls were being held. They made us walk naked through the big room where all the men were sitting. We were barely able to walk. This scenario was repeated every week—it was like a nightmare."

Jane Adolphe's chapter in the book, *Sexual Violence as a Tactic of Terror: The Plight of Christian Women and Girls*, presents many similar accounts.

In addition to numerous firsthand accounts from the victims, in many public statements, ISIS has "taken credit" for the murder of Christians precisely because they were Christians. Representatives have expressed the intent to wholly eradicate Christian and other minority communities from the "Islamic State." Why then is there a question as to the genocide designation of this persecution? It is largely because of a tax.

Islam considers Christians and Jews to be “people of the book” and therefore purportedly gives them certain rights. Among those rights is that rather than suffering the full extent of ISIS persecution, Christians and Jews are supposed to be able to pay “jizya” in exchange for the right to live and worship in peace. The ISIS periodical *Dabiq* regularly boasts of ISIS’s magnanimity in offering Christians the choice of paying jizya.

Because of the jizya option, the Office of the UN’s High Commissioner for Human Rights has stated: “While Christian communities still living in Daesh-controlled territories live difficult and often precarious existences... their right to exist as Christians within any Islamic State existing at any point in time, is recognized...” As such, the High Commissioner has refused to find that a true genocide is taking place.

As made clear early in the book, jizya is simply a way for ISIS to extort money from the few remaining Christians in its territories. Consider the situation in Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State. After ISIS moved in, Christian women were routinely abducted and raped, while places of Christian worship were destroyed. Dozens of “Nazarenes,” ISIS’s favored term for Christians, were murdered. Only a few dozen Christian families remained by the time ISIS offered jizya agreements.

In early 2014, ISIS told Raqqa’s Christians that they could either pay jizya and abide by a list of restrictions regarding the practice of their faith, or they would be “put to the sword.” Under the proposed arrangement, Christian men would pay, in gold, amounts equivalent to one month of the average Raqqa salary. (Later this was raised to three months salary.) In exchange, they would not be harmed, and they would have a limited right to worship. The contract, however, contained a list of prohibitions, including: ringing bells, displaying crosses, making repairs, and holding wedding or funeral processions outside church walls.

Despite promises to the contrary, ISIS immediately set about shutting down, destroying, or re-purposing all the churches. No churches or priests remained by the time the caliphate was announced in July 2014. The last cleric in Raqqa, Italian Jesuit Fr. Paolo Dall'Oglio, had been murdered almost a year earlier. Today, perhaps a few dozen older Christians remain in Raqqa, where they are used by ISIS as human shields to protect against foreign military strikes.

These situations are repeated throughout the ISIS-controlled world. Jizya tax is used to extract money from the Christians. When the money is gone, Christians are forced to flee, convert, or face execution. Christianity is being exterminated. It is a genocide.

Even Christians who flee face great personal risk. With their cars and money having been taken by ISIS militants, they often have to walk through miles of desert-like terrain in 100+ degree temperatures. They carry small children and push the elderly in wheelchairs. What few possessions and wealth the families are able to pack are subject to being confiscated by ISIS officials at checkpoints set along the way. A Sunni imam from Mosul who protested this treatment was killed by ISIS.

Those Christians who make it to a refugee camp risk a whole new round of persecution. Many face violence and mistreatment at the hands of Muslim migrants who share the camp. Rape is rampant. Unprotected from such persecution and unsure of the likelihood of resettlement, many Christians have opted to stay away from the camps, but that makes mere survival even more difficult.

*The Persecution and Genocide of Christians in the Middle East: Prevention, Prohibition, & Prosecution* tells these stories and more. Chapters are devoted to Historical and Theological Reflections on the Persecution of Christians, International Humanitarian Law, Sharia Law and the Persecution of Christians, The Holy See's Diplomatic Response, International

Criminal Law, and more. There is also a helpful glossary in the back for those who fear the terminology. My own contribution is a chapter on the International Criminal Court, which unfortunately does not present many good options to protect the victims from genocide.

As bleak as the situation seems, some prayers are answered. The book tells of three-year-old Christina Khader Ebada, who was abducted by ISIS in August 2014, as her family was fleeing their home in northern Iraq. She was last seen crying and sobbing as a heavily bearded man carried her away. In 2017, however, just days before this book was released, Christina was reunited with her family. She seemed healthy. Her brother said: "With all that we have been through, we are overjoyed that our Christina has been returned to us safely. I thank all those who have prayed for her safe return."

How many others are praying for the return of a child, a parent, or a spouse? The accounts of persecution in this book are multiple and they are ugly, but the chapters review different avenues that might offer some ways to fight back. As editor, I wish we had identified more solutions, but becoming knowledgeable, spreading the word, and trying to solidify the finding that the persecution constitutes "genocide" are important starting points. *The Persecution and Genocide of Christians in the Middle East: Prevention, Prohibition, & Prosecution* helps us do that and challenges us to do more.

*Ronald J. Rychlak is a Professor at the University of Mississippi School of Law and one of the world's most noted scholars on the heroics of Pope Pius XII. He also serves on the advisory board of the Catholic League.*