

John Martin investigates global persecution of Christians today



A CHILLING STORY SELDOM TOLD

Pakistan Christians protest against Peshawar church bombing.
Photo: © Musa Farman/epa/Corbis

key points

- At least 20 Christians die for their faith every day ... that amounts to 7,300 a year.
- Christians are soft targets and face some form of harassment in 139 nations.
- Churches teaching that faith is about promoting inner peace and tranquillity tend to shy away from the facts about persecution.

In Pakistan, two suicide bombers secreted themselves into a Peshawar church courtyard; their deadly cargo leaves 85 dead and many more injured. In Egypt dozens of Coptic churches and homes are put to the torch in wave on wave of violence waged against Christians. In Syria war is wiping out entire Christian communities; this is a country where Christianity dates from the time of the apostle Paul and was the safest living space for Middle Eastern Christians.

We are witnessing what historian Tom Holland has termed 'the effective extinction of Christianity from its birthplace' with the collapse of the region's nation states as militant Islam wages terror. 'In terms of the sheer scale of the hatreds and sectarian rivalries, we are witnessing something on the scale of horror of the European Thirty Years' War,' said Holland.¹ The ripples from this terror are reaching every point of the globe.

What is perplexing is the lack of serious media coverage and analysis. The BBC reported the Peshawar attack but quickly downgraded it in pursuit of other headlines. During August in Egypt, violence against Christians was the worst in seven

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centuries. But the focus of an anaemic Western media was the much lower-scale army assaults against the Muslim Brotherhood. As for Syria, little information ever reaches the West about how Christians are faring. Few of the politicians who advocate regime change have realistic ideas on how to guarantee the position of Christians, something the much hated Assad regime has always done.

Why the West is silent

We need to understand the imperialist backdrop to geo-politics of the Middle East. It is well known that many of the Middle Eastern states were created by the World Powers more for their own strategic reasons than for the benefit of local people and Muslim memories are long. This is one reason why

Western politicians and the media – and for that matter the church too – is frightened to raise the spectre of Muslim-on-Christian violence.

Bishop Angaelos, leader of the Coptic Orthodox Church in the UK, has spoken of his disappointment at the response from other UK religious leaders to the situation: ‘if Christians burned down ten synagogues or mosques, let alone 50, they’d be going over to show their sympathy and shame.’²

The persecution of Christians is rife. And it is global. Thomas Schirrmacher of the World Evangelical Alliance, believes that a tally of 20 Christian die each day as martyrs for their faith. That comes to 7,300 per year.³

Christians under pressure

There are other observers who put the figure much higher. The missionary organisation Gospel for Asia estimates the number as 14,000 Christians killed for the faith every year around the world. It claims this is based solely on reported cases. The US-based Pew Forum, a much-respected research institute said in its September 2012 report that between 2006 and 2010, Christians had faced some form of harassment in 139 nations. That amounts to three-quarters of all the societies on earth.

Muslim violence against Christians grows apace. The Somali-instigated Al-Shabaab is believed to be behind the recent atrocity in the Westgate Shopping Centre in the centre of the Kenyan capital Nairobi. Chillingly they singled out non-Muslims for execution while allowing their own people to go free. On the west side of Africa the Boko Haram insurgency has resulted in an estimated 10,000 deaths between 2001 and 2013. It has attacked churches, police stations and schools and casualties include Muslim politicians. That is by no means the end of the list.⁴

Likewise Christians increasingly face harassment. In Malaysia they have used ‘Allah’ in Bibles and worship ever since the first Malay dictionary was published. It follows a precedent in the Arabic language that pre-dates Mohammed. Now a local court has decreed that Muslims alone may use ‘Allah’.

A turning point?

We may, however, at last have turned the corner over the issue of media silence on persecution. In October, John Allen, a high-profile Catholic journalist from the USA published *The Global War on Christians*.⁵ ‘On the whole,’ he writes, ‘the war on Christians remains the world’s best-kept secret.’ The book’s title has raised lots of eyebrows. Does violence amounting to 20 deaths a day denote a ‘global war’? Perhaps not, but the book has certainly got the media people caressing their keyboards and recognition that in so many places Christians are soft targets.

Allen sets out to debunk a number of ‘pernicious myths’. One such myth, he claims, is that Christians are at risk ‘only where they’re a minority’. Not so. There are countries and cultures where Christian

minorities live persecution-free. Another myth he enumerates is ‘the myth that no one saw it coming’. It is possible to observe current events and identify potential flashpoints. Yet another is ‘the myth that it’s all about Islam’ – an idea that is patently untrue as evidenced by events in India, China, Burma, Colombia to name a few examples.

So how is it that the West and its media maintain silence about persecution? One issue is that much of the persecution occurring happens a long way from the West and outside the scope of its news gathering. Another key reason is that Christians in the US and Western Europe have no personal experience of persecution. Alongside this is a worrying ‘broad tendency’ in the West to see the primary function of faith ‘as promoting inner peace and tranquillity.’ Dwelling on the spectre of the cruel treatment of other people doesn’t sit well with this. Allen writes that persecuted Christians fall through the cracks of the left-right divide – they are ‘too Christian for liberals and too foreign for conservatives’.

Another factor Allen identifies is the heavy investment by many mainstream churches in interfaith initiatives which he says creates a ‘risk of “interfaith correctness” that wants to avoid confrontation with the world of Islam or Hinduism. To this he adds ‘a distressing share of Christian time and treasure today [being] eaten up by internal battles, making it difficult to galvanise a unified response on anything.’

Illiteracy about faith

There is deeper underlying reason for the political and media silence: lack of literacy – maybe even downright ignorance – about faith issues. Or as Allen puts it, ‘reflexive hostility to institutional religion ... [and people] conditioned by such views are inclined to see Christianity as the agent of repression, not its victim.’ It is this lack of religious literacy which causes journalists, politicians and bureaucrats alike not to take faith seriously in enumerating policy options. It fails to take account of deeply held religious motives and beliefs that are a key part of world affairs.

Jesus taught that persecution was something to be expected as a normal part of living as a disciple. ‘They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, the time is coming when anyone who kills you will think they are offering a service to God.’⁶ The point is reinforced by Peter. ‘Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.’⁷

John Martin is CMF Head of Communications.

What we can do

Four things Christian doctors (and Christians in general) could consider:

1. Apply the power of prayer. We are apt to underestimate the power of intercession to break down the strongholds of persecution and oppression. Use new technologies to research prayer information. Cultivate the skill of ‘praying the news’ so headlines become prayer bulletins.
2. Subscribe to the newsletters of at least one Christian doctor working in a place Christians are a minority.
3. Engage with your local MP to seek better protection for Christians in tough places: the West invaded Iraq: what is being done to support Christians there? or in Syria? or Pakistan?
4. Use your influence to encourage your church to be more informed about persecuted Christians.

references

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