

## **Persecution of Christians in History and Today**

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When considering the persecutions that Christians have endured over the centuries, a naïve person may ask, “Why would anyone persecute the followers of Jesus, all of whom are dedicated to his Gospel?” At first glance, we Christians do not appear to be obvious candidates for persecution. We try to imitate Jesus’ acts of kindness and self-sacrifice, and try to express God’s own mercy and compassion in human form. Why would anyone want to persecute the followers of Jesus?

And yet such persecution has been well-documented throughout history and continues unto today. Pope Benedict XVI made a strong claim in his 2011 message entitled “Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace.” He said:

At present, Christians are the religious group which suffers most from persecution on account of its faith.<sup>1</sup>

Pope Benedict did not explain the basis for his claim. He did refer to Iraq, however, and specifically to the attack, seven years ago, on the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baghdad. There two priests and fifty members of the faithful were killed as they gathered for the celebration of Mass on October 31, 2010. Violence, the pope said, has provoked many to emigrate from Iraq by spreading fear within the Christian community. The pope’s statement that Christians suffer more than any other religious group was echoed in headlines around the world.

The Baghdad attack, as I said, was in 2010. Archbishop Silvano M. Tomasi, the Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, gave further testimony about Christians as victims of persecution in 2013. In his address to the UN Human Rights Council, Archbishop Tomasi made a claim as strong as that of Pope Benedict. He said:

Credible research has reached the shocking conclusion that an estimate of more than 100,000 Christians are violently killed because of some relation to their faith every year.<sup>2</sup>

Archbishop Tomasi’s address did *not* cite the “credible research” from which came the estimate of 100,000 Christians violently killed. He did *not* explain how some Christians are killed because of “some relation” to their faith. But when Pope Benedict judged that Christians suffer more for their faith than others, and when Archbishop Tomasi concluded that more than 100,000 are violent killed annually, the world paid attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, “Religious Freedom, the Path to Peace,” a message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace, January 1, 2011 (retrieved from the *Vatican* website on August 5, 2016), no. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Silvano M. Tomasi, “Address to the UN Human Rights Council Interactive Dialogue,” May 27, 2013, retrieved from the *Zenit News Agency* website on August 2, 2016.

## Part One: Christian Persecution Today

Let us consider, for a moment, the persecution of Christians in today's news. Recently we have read about North Korea and Nigeria as places where Christians face persecution. But every day we read about the persecution of Christians in Islamic lands.

- Consider, for example, the situation in Mosul. As we speak, Iraqi government forces, with the help of Kurds and international forces, are fighting to retake the city of Mosul from the Islamic State in Iraq. Before the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country was home to an estimated one million Christians. But in the last fourteen years, Islamic terrorists have made life so miserable that hundreds of thousands of Christians have left. The European Union has called the ISIS strategy a “genocide.”
- Another example is Boko Haram. This Islamic extremist group in Northeastern Nigeria wants to establish an Islamic state. It opposes the Westernization of Nigerian society and the concentration of wealth among a political elite in the Christian south of the country. On the night of April 14-15, 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 276 female students at a secondary school in Chibok, a town in Borno State. Chibok is primarily a Christian village and most of the victims were Christians. On October 21, Boko Haram freed 21 of the Chibok girls. But since 2009 the Boko Haram insurgency has killed 20,000 and displaced more than a million people.
- We do not hear often about the North Korean persecution of Christians, but it is noteworthy. The UN has documented the existence of political concentration camps in North Korea and a policy (according to the *Washington Post*) of “extermination, murder, enslavement, torture, imprisonment rape, forced abortions” on “political, religious, racial, and gender grounds.”<sup>3</sup> Some estimate that 50,000-70,000 Christians are held in such camps. Vatican Radio quoted Andrew Boyd of Release International, who said that North Korea is the “worst persecutor” of Christians.

These stories illustrate the point of Pope Benedict and of Archbishop Tomasi. Christians are undoubtedly the victims of terrorist violence today. North Korea may be the worst persecutor, even worse than Islamic terrorists, but all of them are reprehensible.

## Part Two: Christianity's Entanglements

At the same time, however, we cannot be naïve in our study of the persecution of Christians. First of all, we know that Muslims suffer more than Christians from Islamic terrorists. And second, we know that Christianity has long been entangled with many movements that are inimical to the gospel, or at least have a problematic relationship to it. In a moment I will ask you to reflect with your neighbor about this entanglement. But for now, let me make some general observations.

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<sup>3</sup> Editorial: “This is no time to lose sight of North Korea’s human rights catastrophe,” *Washington Post* (Feb. 22, 2015), accessed on August 10, 2016.

Alliances. First, from our study of history, we can see that Christianity has at times allied itself with political, economic, and cultural currents that no Christian today would affirm. We think of the Crusades, for example, and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Undoubtedly Christianity has been persecuted in the past, and is persecuted in the present. But we Christians have also been persecutors of Muslims, Jews, and other so-called enemies of our faith.

Enlightenment. Second, many have revolted against Christianity in the name of the Enlightenment. This is the philosophic movement of the eighteenth century that first proclaimed the separation of church and state. It gave rise to revolutions in France, Russia, and Spain. Today we Christians live in democratic regimes with freedom of religion. We often take these freedoms for granted. We should recall that they were achieved in revolutions in which Christians were sometimes the counter-revolutionaries.

Power. Third, Christianity today is far from the counter-cultural movement it was in first-century Palestine. The historically Christian lands of Western Europe and the Americas are among the most powerful in the world. Almost one-fifth of U.S. senators are Catholics. Five out of eight Supreme Court justices are Catholics. Our nation's political enemies identify the USA with Christianity. Countries who persecute Christians today see their enemy not as the humble Christ, but as a powerful Christian elite that controls military might, global politics, finance and the media.

When we consider the persecution of Christians today, therefore, we have to remember that Christianity has persecuted minorities in the past. Today we Christians are politically and economically powerful. Christianity deserves our allegiance. But Christianity is entangled in history. We are not being disloyal to our faith when we admit that injustices have been committed by Christians in the name of Christ. In a moment we are going to consider three of Christianity's "entanglements" in history that shed light on the topic of persecution. But before we get to them, let us pause and reflect.

I have come to the first question that I would like to raise with you this evening. My argument has been that, while Christians suffer persecution, its enemies and persecutors claim that Christianity itself harms them or threatens them. *How should we view our Christian faith? Is it a heavenly revelation, a divine gift that invites us to live in the holiness of God? Or is it a cultural, economic, and political movement that inevitably draws us into matters remote from the Gospel and sometimes incompatible with it?*

### Part Three: Movements Unworthy of the Gospel

Our discussion of Christian faith is complicated by fact that Christians have often been unfaithful to it. Many throughout the world identify Christianity with imperial power, clerical privilege, and colonial ambitions. Christianity, we can say, is entangled with political, economic, and cultural movements that are remote from the Gospel. Some illustrations will remind you of what I mean.

Imperial Power. When Christianity was made legal in the Roman Empire, for example, Church and state became enmeshed in a way that has proven difficult for Christians. St. Augustine, we remember, weighed in against Donatus, the leader of an ecclesial faction in North Africa that insisted on a virtuous clergy. It was intolerant of

clergy who had cooperated with its Roman oppressors. After North Africans rejected a bishop appointed by Rome, the Donatists elected their own bishop. In the fifth century, Augustine had to invite imperial troops to put down the opponents of Rome. Christians, we could say, were persecuted by fellow Christians.

Crusade. In the Middle East, to give another example, the Islamic world has never forgotten the invasions of Turkey, Syria, Palestine and Egypt by Europeans in the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries to take possession of the Holy Land. To this day, the word “crusade” – an echo of the Latin word referring to the cross of Christ – is used by Muslims to disparage the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. Undoubtedly Christians were and are attacked for their faith. But they also have brought war and suffering to their opponents.

Conquest. The peoples of the Americas speak of the Spanish and the Portuguese who invaded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century as “conquistadores,” soldiers with the cross in one hand and a sword in the other. They brought not only a European and Christian worldview, but also war, slavery, and foreign diseases which decimated the aboriginal population.

In short, when we speak of the persecution of Christians, we must not be naïve. We must not assume that non-Christians attack Christians simply out of a pure malevolence and a desire to do evil. We have to inquire about the motives for persecution. Often these motives reveal a disquieting truth. It is true to say that Christianity has been entangled with political, economic, and cultural movements that are unworthy of the gospel we profess.

#### Part Four: Christianity and the Enlightenment

Another point has to do with Christianity shifting and developing its position as it came into the modern world. For example, Christians were certainly persecuted during the Reign of Terror at the time of the French Revolution. But the French economy was in tatters, and the clergy and monarchy enjoyed enormous privileges while the common people lived from day to day. The revolutionaries in France took to the barricades because they believed that the Church was acting unjustly and not living up to the principles of the gospel. Tens of thousands of Christians were killed by Jacobin revolutionaries. The violence of the revolution was undoubtedly a “persecution of the Church,” and the bloodshed was appalling. But the *ancien régime* that linked Church and the aristocracy would not, without a revolution, have surrendered its privileges.

In this respect, we Christians must admit that we have changed in our view of religious freedom. The case of modern revolutions, starting with the American Revolution and including the French, is important for us to reflect upon, especially in the USA. Here we are raised to see no contradiction between our Christian faith and the democratic values of our country. We see a genuine benefit to free and democratic elections. We embrace religious liberty. We reject the idea of a state religion. But each of these – free elections, religious liberty, and the wall of separation between Church and state – were virtually unknown before the Age of Enlightenment. They are products of revolutions, often revolutions in which Christian elites were counter-revolutionaries.

Our own United States of America were founded on principles that spurned the *ancien régime* of hereditary monarchy and clerical privilege. So the topic of persecution

of Christians is a delicate one. The French revolutionaries persecuted Christians in the name of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité*. We are right to lament the persecution of Christians. But we are no less right to affirm that the Gospel has unfolded in history, and now includes a demand for equality and liberty. We Christians have changed. At one time, we would not have tolerated democracy, religious liberty, and the wall of separation between church and state. They were not compatible with a Christian monarchy, with religious conformity, or with Christian government. But now we feel that we are entitled to them. Those who persecuted us helped us to acknowledge new truths.

### Part Five: Christianity and Power

A final point has to do with the geo-political alignments of Christianity today. It is a cultural irony that we Catholics often view our secular society as anti-Christian. We Christians may feel that our ancient faith is under siege from cultural, economic, and political forces here in the West. But we have to remember that our own countries, the most powerful countries in the world, are associated, in the eyes of our enemies, with Christianity. The Orient views the West as the heartland of Christianity.

Catholic Christians are among the most powerful leaders in the USA, including (as we noted) Senators and Supreme Court Justices. When terrorists persecute Christians, they persecute us because they associate Christianity with “The West,” that is, with powerful cultural, economic, and political forces. These forces have occasionally led to oppression and imperialism. What seems to us to be an attack on Christianity may be, in the eyes of our enemies, an attack on the vanguard of colonialism and capitalist greed. Consider, for example, the Church’s mission to the Far East.

17<sup>th</sup> Century Japan. Japan was evangelized in the sixteenth century by Portuguese missionaries. This is the theme of the Martin Scorsese’s recent film “Silence.” The Portuguese were so successful, mainly among the poor, that Japanese Christians became numerically large. They grew to one-fourth of the population by the mid-1600s. The Japanese imperial government initially supported the Christian mission, believing that it would procure for them Spanish and Portuguese trading partners and help them reduce the power of the Buddhist monks regarded as loyal to China. But when in 1637, an uprising of Catholic peasants challenged the Shogun and his policies of heavy taxation, the Shogun beheaded their leader and sent a force of 125,000 to suppress the rebellion. The Catholic peasant-rebels were put down. 37,000 were executed. The Shogun wanted to prevent the colonization of Japan by those who earlier had colonized the Philippines.

18<sup>th</sup> Century India. A second example comes from India. Christianity is India’s third-largest religion, after Hinduism and Islam, and tradition says there have been Christians in India since the time of the Apostle Thomas. But in 1784, the Islamic Sultan of Mysoru in South-West India, Tipu Sultan, turned against the Christians among his people. Tipu Sultan deported the priests and ordered lay Christians to be seized. He confiscated their property and deported them to the capital of his empire, where they were enslaved to Islamic owners. Scottish reports say that Tipu Sultan oversaw the death of 20,000 Mangalorean Christians in a forced march. This is certainly deplorable. But until his death in 1799, the Sultan was motivated by opposition to the British East India Trading Company. In his day the company accounted for half of the world’s trade in

cotton, silk, dye, salt, and tea. Today in India, Tipu Sultan is regarded as an Indian nationalist who opposed European economic expansion.

19<sup>th</sup>-Century China. Another example comes from the China of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There Christian missionaries had established schools which proved successful in introducing Western ideas and ideals. The success of the schools was undercut by Chinese nationalism, however, which viewed Christians with suspicion as tools of Western imperialism. We see this particularly in the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901). The “Boxers” (our English name for the Chinese “Militia United in Righteousness”) were motivated by opposition to European imperialism, which they identified with Christianity. At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Governor of Shanxi implemented a brutal anti-foreign and anti-Christian policy. During the Boxer Rebellion as a whole, a total of 136 Protestant missionaries and 53 children were killed, as well as 47 Catholic priests and nuns. An estimated thirty thousand Chinese Catholics, 2,000 Chinese Protestants, and many of the 700 Russian Orthodox Christians in Beijing were killed.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese governor feared European colonialism.

To sum up, Japan, India and China persecuted Christians. But we must acknowledge the link between Christianity and the economic and political forces to which it was then aligned. With these economic and political forces, so threatening to rulers in the Far East, Christianity was entangled. We might well ask whether the rulers of Asia feared Jesus Christ or feared the cultural and economic imperialism identified with Christianity. It can be misleading to speak as if the persecutors of Christians were solely motivated by antipathy to Jesus Christ. Our enemies considered us a political and economic threat.

Today we have to acknowledge our own strength. In the Western world, Christians form an elite majority. We may not like to admit it, but we wield enormous political, economic, and cultural power. Some even fear us. This brings us to a second question that I would like us to consider tonight. I have shown some of the ways in which Christianity has been entangled with political, economic, and cultural movements that have not always reflected Gospel values. We have seen how the question of persecution is complicated by developments in history. At first, we Christians were opponents of democracy, religious freedom, and church-state separation, and now we view them as fitting expressions of fairness and justice. Today Christians are often persecuted, not because they are disciples of Jesus, but because their enemies fear them as the vanguard of “Western” values that appear to threaten traditional societies. To be sure, we Christians must protect ourselves against unjust attacks. At the same time, however, we have to ask a question: *To what extent should we examine our consciences and acknowledge that our enemies may have had good reason to fear us?*

### Conclusion

Let us recall that the word persecution means the act or practice of causing others to suffer because of their origin, religion, or social outlook. When we speak about the

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Clinton Thompson, *William Scott Ament and the Boxer Rebellion: Heroism, Hubris, and the “Ideal Missionary”* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009); cited in Wikipedia.

persecution of Christians, we mean that Christians suffer for what they are, namely, the followers of Jesus Christ. But tonight we have made an important distinction. It is a distinction between the gospel and the various movements – political, economic, and cultural – with which it has been entangled throughout history. We must distinguish between Christianity and the cultural currents, ideologies, and historical initiatives with which it is enmeshed.

How do we make this distinction? We Christians believe the gospel to be God's revelation. When we say this, we express our faith and piety. God has chosen us and revealed to us the divine life itself. God has invited us to be a chosen people. We respond by thanking God in praise and worship, and striving to do God's will.

To say that we are God's people, however, may sound like arrogance and *hubris*. Are we Christians claiming that we, unique as a group among other human beings, are wholly pure? Are we pretending that our cultural, economic and political "entanglements" do not really belong to us? Are they completely separate from our Christian selves? By distinguishing between Christianity and its entanglements, are we saying that the sins of the past do not touch us and cannot touch us?

This is hardly the case. We know that we are sinners. We have all fallen short of what God requires of us. God does not remain "on high," infinitely remote from us. No, God's Word is incarnate in history. It comes to expression in the spirit and the deeds of people. It is rooted in history, economics, and politics. There is no "pure" gospel, if by that we mean a Word whose *expression* is untouched by the material and historical dimensions of human life. The gospel is not an abstract idea, but the good news of humanity's closeness to God. It inevitably takes on the flavor and color of the people who profess it. We live out the gospel, not as disembodied spirits, but as flesh-and-blood human beings, rooted in our own histories and cultures. When we sin, we sin as Christians. By our sin, we show ourselves to be untrue to God.

Our sins do not show the gospel, however, to be simply a worldview or ideology. It is not merely a creed we have chosen, perhaps authoritative for today, but no more authoritative than any other program or creed. No Christian will concede that. For just as we say that the gospel is "incarnate," meaning united to our human nature, so also we say that it is a genuine revelation of God. It ennobles us and gives us dignity. We measure our Christian faith, not by human standards but by the divine. We recognize that we are not God.

God created us with the capacity for reflecting on reality, and subjecting it to a critique. The basis for it is the natural law, the conscience planted in our heart. We recognize it in our God-given instinct for truth, justice and goodness. To be sure, we are enmeshed in history. Its passion, prejudice, and blindness are ours. But we remain capable of asking, in the midst of our entanglements, about the true, just, and good. This is God's doing. It is the presence of God's Word living within us. We remain capable of distinguishing the gospel, God's pure revelation, from the empirical forms in which it is expressed in the world. Even in our imperfect human nature we can distinguish the truth from things that claim to be true – but are not.

As we look back in history, we can identify moments in which Christians have betrayed the gospel. We can see where we went wrong. To be sure, hindsight is easier

than foresight. It is easier to see the mistakes of previous Christians than our own mistakes. But the ability to judge right from wrong gives us confidence. The distinction between the Gospel itself and the entanglements with which it is expressed is a true one.

Christians indeed suffer from persecution. But we know that our enemies do not persecute us for no reason. They fear us and they identify us with “The West.” To be sure we have a duty to defend ourselves. But we also have a duty to understand what motivates the hatred of our enemies. This ability to understand is a gift from God. It is a consequence of God’s Word in history. It is the Gospel unfolding in us.

By understanding those who have persecuted Christians in the past, and by trying to understand them today, we are acknowledging reality. It is the reality of others and of us. God has given us this ability to understand even those who hate us. Our conscience sees differing viewpoints, makes sense of them, and *takes the step* to which every Christian is called: to do unto others what we would like them to do unto us. Taking that step is what it means to be people of the Word and followers of Christ. God’s Word is at work in us. Let us continue to take that step.