



Written by on December 10, 2008

Faith Triumphs Over Persecution

Every Christmas, Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, an event recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus was born in a stable, the Gospel writers tell us, because there was no room in the inn, and He later suffered the ignominious death of being crucified between two thieves. During the 33 years in-between, He never possessed wealth, at least not in the material sense. He never commanded armies or ruled over countries. His kingdom, He said, was not of this world. He never even wrote a book.



Yet 20 centuries later, not only have countless books been written about Him, but even the years on our calendar are numbered according to when He was born.

“One Solitary Life,” an essay adapted from a sermon by Dr. James Allan Francis, captures well the influence Jesus has had on world history: “I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.”

This is so despite the fact that during antiquity as well as during modern times, many of those armies and rulers have waged war against Jesus and His followers. In fact, the 2,000-year history of Christianity is replete with attempts by tyrannical governments, often fanning the fears of mobs, to extinguish it. Yet despite the purges and persecutions, Christianity has not only survived, it has outlived empires that once attempted to destroy it and has grown to the point where two billion people today call themselves Christian.

Martyred for Christ

Christianity gained its foothold in the Roman Empire, a vast area that included Palestine. The first known martyr of Christianity was Stephen, a leader in the early church, who was stoned to death by a mob in Jerusalem in 35 A.D. Peter and Paul were executed by the Romans under Nero during the period 64-67 A.D.

When, following the great fire in Rome in 64 A.D., some Romans accused Nero of having ordered the burning, he sought to deflect blame from himself to the small Christian community. The historian Tacitus wrote that “to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace.”



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The persecutions of Christians continued under succeeding emperors. Though no one knows how many Christians were tortured or put to death, history records several instances. During the reign of Septimius Severus from 193-211, St. Clement of Alexandria would record: "Many martyrs are daily burned, confined, or beheaded, before our eyes."

The Emperor Valerian issued an order in 258 establishing the death penalty for those who held the Christian faith. The bishop of Alexandria, Dionysus, wrote of the persecutions: "Men and women, young and old, maidens and matrons, soldiers and civilians, of every age and race, some by scourging and fire, others by the sword, have conquered in the strife and won their crowns [of martyrdom]."

But things were to get worse for Christians. During a persecution of Christians that occurred under the emperor Maximinus in the city of Nicomedia in Bithynia, Asia Minor, historians of the period described the flow of "rivers of blood." Victims of this persecution included Anthimus, the bishop of Nicomedia, and numerous others memorialized as the "20,000 martyrs of Nicomedia."

The bloodletting undoubtedly convinced many contemporaries that Christianity could not possibly survive. But survive it did, and eventually the persecutions ended and an emperor converted to Christianity.

The most brutal suffering of Christians in the Roman Empire ended in 311, when the emperor Galerius, possibly as an act of remorse for having previously persecuted Christians, issued a deathbed edict of toleration for the followers of Christ. Two years later, Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and issued his Edict of Milan, which provided for the full restoration of Christians' citizenship rights. Constantine's conversion had been inspired by a vision of Christ that included the "Chi Rho" symbol (the first two letters of the word "Christ" written in Greek that appear to be the letter X superimposed over a P), which was revealed to him with the promise "In Hoc Signo Vinces" ("In this sign, [you shall] conquer.") After Constantine's subsequent victory in the battle of Milvian Bridge, he became a strong supporter of the Christian church.

Instead of destroying the Christian faith, more than two centuries of persecution by the Romans had resulted in the conversion of the empire. As the early Christian writer Tertullian proclaimed, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church." How could any historian credibly argue otherwise? Though Christians were fed to the lions, it was not Christianity that met its demise but, eventually, the mighty Roman Empire. This turn of events was all the more remarkable considering that the Roman Empire was the greatest power on Earth, and Christianity was, and is, a religion of love and not of the sword.

For almost 15 centuries after the Edict of Milan, Christianity flourished in Europe and in lands settled by Europeans, and Christians in these lands escaped persecution simply for being Christians. Certainly, there were internecine battles among Christians that resulted in equivalent suffering, and missionaries bringing the faith to pagan lands sometimes suffered physical harm at the hands of hostile natives, but no European Christian was forced to deny Christ in order to save his life.

Beginning in the 18th century, a series of revolutions and wars began toppling the old Christian dynasties of Europe that had defended the faith, and victorious revolutionaries renewed the persecution of Christians and brought back suffering not seen since the reign of Diocletian. The most infamous of these, the French Revolution, was primarily a war against Christianity. When the "enlightened" revolutionaries gained control of the French government, they slaughtered thousands of Christians, made war on the Catholic Church and its clergy, banished Christian symbolism from public places, and irreparably converted French culture from a Christian to a secular one. Yet the French revolutionaries



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could not destroy Christianity any more than the Roman Empire could.

The same revolutionary mind-set that fomented the French Revolution against the Christian Bourbon dynasty was also responsible for the Russian Revolution that destroyed the Christian Romanov dynasty. The rise of communism in Russia and the formation of the Soviet Union established a base from which tentacles reached out worldwide to engulf all of Eastern Europe, China, and Cuba. The suffering of Christians under communism exceeded in number (though not in brutality) even the worst of the persecutions under the Roman Empire.

Triumphing Over Communism

However, as in the days of the Roman persecution, the blood of the martyrs became, in many cases, the seed of stronger Christian faith. When Christians could not openly practice their religion outside of state control, they formed an underground church despite the dangers to themselves.

One of the pastors in the underground church in communist-occupied Romania was Rev. Richard Wurmbrand, who was imprisoned for many years by the communists, during which time he was frequently beaten and tortured. After being ransomed by two Christian organizations and making his way to the West, Wurmbrand authored more than 20 books, the most famous being *Tortured for Christ* (1967). In that work, Wurmbrand related the story of a Romanian pastor whom the communists “tortured with red-hot iron pokers and with knives. He was beaten very badly. Then starving rats were driven into his cell through a large pipe. He could not sleep, but had to defend himself all the time. If he rested a moment, the rats would attack him.”

Rev. Wurmbrand continued:

He was forced to stand for two weeks, day and night. The Communists wished to compel him to betray his brethren [in the underground church], but he resisted steadfastly. In the end, they brought his fourteen-year-old son and began to whip the boy in front of his father, saying that they would continue to beat him until the pastor said what they wished him to say. The poor man was half mad. He bore it as long as he could. When he could not stand it any more, he cried to his son, “Alexander, I must say what they want! I can’t bear your beating any more!” The son answered, “Father, don’t do me the injustice to have a traitor as a parent. Withstand! If they kill me, I will die with the words, ‘Jesus and my fatherland.’”

The communist torturers became enraged by the boy’s defiance. They beat him mercilessly, and his blood spattered the walls of the cell. But though they broke and killed his body, they never destroyed his faith; they never imprisoned his soul. Despite the seeming hopelessness of the communist dungeon imprisoning the boy, he died bravely praising God and country, and he escaped that communist dungeon to gain his eternal reward. His murderers were left with nothing but the lifeless shell that had once housed his spirit.

The public perception among many is that communism is dead, which if true means that it can no longer threaten Christians. In truth, Christians are still oppressed in China, Vietnam, and other communist countries. Yet Christianity refuses to die, even though Christians often die — willingly! — for their faith.

In Islamic Lands

The same is true in Islamic countries. Consider Iraq, where the plight of Christians has actually gotten worse since Saddam Hussein was toppled. (See “[Christians in Iraq](#)” by Warren Mass.)



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Compass Direct News reported in November about a 14-year-old Iraqi girl, Asya Ahmad Muhammad (also known by her Christian name, Maria), whose family had converted to Christianity. Two years ago, Maria's uncle came to her family's kitchen-utensil store in the outskirts of the heavily Kurdish city of Dohuk, Iraq, and cut her mother with a knife and also began beating both Maria and her little brother. Their offense? Converting to Christianity and "shaming" the family by working in public, a practice that offended the uncle's rigid fundamentalist Muslim beliefs.

Maria picked up a knife and stabbed her uncle, clearly in defense of her mother, brother, and herself, and the uncle died of the wound. Maria went to prison, but her sentence was reduced from three and one half years to two years and four months on the basis of her good behavior.

The uncle had previously attacked Maria's father, Ahmad Muhammad Abdurahman, for converting to Christianity in 1998. The uncle tried to kill him five times and also burned down his house in retaliation for his conversion. Yet, the court has ordered Maria's dad to pay the equivalent of \$8,670 in "blood money" to his brother's family to compensate them for his brother's death.

In a phone interview with the Christian organization Open Doors, Maria, who is now 16, said that being in prison had been difficult, but she was thankful to be back with her family.

"I am very glad because God gave me a miracle [of being reunited with my family], and I am very happy to meet my mother and my father," she told Open Doors. "My hope [is] in Jesus; I always prayed for God to comfort my mother [until] I see my mother, I see my family again."

A story from the blog focusonpersecution.com tells of the persecution of Christians by Laotian authorities in the village of Boukham in southeast Laos. Last July, 10 Laotian police officers stormed into the Boukham Church and ordered the congregation to stop worshipping God or face arrest. When the 63 Christians told the police that they could not stop because they must observe Sunday as a day of worship, the officers arrested Pastor Sompong and two other church leaders and took them away to the district lockup.

However, even after the arrests, the remainder of the congregation continued to pray. The police reentered the church and arrested another worshiper. Yet the remainder of the faithful continued on with their worship. The police then went into the church a third time and arrested a 17-year-old girl named Khamkun who was leading the congregation in worship.

The five Christians who were arrested were initially charged with "believing in Jesus and worshipping God." The charges were later changed to "spreading the gospel" and "conducting a religious meeting without permission." All five were released two days later and fined an equivalent of about \$42. Although the constitution of Laos supposedly guarantees freedom of religion and worship, the arrestees were told that if they want to *exercise* that freedom, they must first seek permission from the local authorities.

Not ones to be kept from practicing their faith, while in prison the five converted three other prisoners to Christianity! As in the early years of the faith, Christianity continues to spread despite oppression and persecution.

Rami Khader Ayyad had been the director of the only Christian bookshop in Hamas-controlled Gaza, and was affiliated with the Palestinian Bible society. However, Ayyad had received death threats for his missionary work, and in April 2007 his bookshop had been burnt during a campaign against "vice" launched by the militant group "the sword of Islam."



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But on October 6, 2007, as Ayyad closed his shop, he was kidnapped by a group of unknown men. Ayyad then phoned his wife and two children and told them that he would be late coming home. Two days later his body was found in a city street, tortured, and with two bullet wounds to the head. His body was also marked with multiple knife wounds.

Since the takeover of Gaza by Hamas, a terrorist organization, life has become increasingly difficult for the area's 3,200 Christians, who are Greek Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant. Ayyad was a Baptist, but perhaps the warmest tribute to him came from a Catholic priest familiar with his work. Father David Maria Jaeger, an Israeli Franciscan in the Holy Land, told AsiaNews:

Ayyad was an intrepid Christian, a glory for the entire community of believers in Christ who live in His homeland. The fact that he belonged to the Protestant community underlines that what unites us outstrips what divides us. And it's not the first time in the Region that the Protestant evangelicals enlighten us and teach us to have faith in Christ, free from conditioning, free from fear and a presumptuous "prudence," which all too often burden so many of us Christians.

Father Jaeger called Rami Ayyad "a martyr," and noted: "From the proto-martyr Stephan to today, the Church in the Holy Land has been enriched by the witness of so many martyrs. We can only place our hope in the ancient and comforting certainty that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians."

It is of course true that an observer today looking at lands where Christianity is persecuted could conclude that the persecutions are diminishing if not destroying Christianity because of the small numbers of Christians in many of those lands. But history teaches us otherwise. As already mentioned, an observer of the persecution of Christians under the Roman Empire during the third century A.D. would likely have concluded that Christianity would have been stamped out. Yet a few years later a Roman emperor converted to Christianity. Throughout 20 centuries, the faith of Christians has proven to be unconquerable, and there is no telling the extent to which today's Islamic lands might someday be fully open to the spreading of Christianity.

When Jesus was crucified, His enemies expected that that would be the end of Him as well as of his following. Yet, according to the Gospels, He rose from the dead and spent another 40 days on Earth. After His Ascension, His followers timidly hid behind locked doors for another 10 days, but after being emboldened by the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, they set forth to evangelize the world.

Since that time, His following has flourished and spread to the four corners of the Earth despite all of the persecutions that have followed the persecution of Jesus Himself. Recognizing this fact should give us hope this Christmas, just as it should give us hope on Easter and throughout the entire year, no matter how widespread or severe the persecution of Christians may be.

Some doomsayers point to the secularization of Europe and the United States, where materialism has often pushed spirituality to the back burner, as a sign that we are in a post-Christian era. Yet, the Christian faith retains millions of devout adherents in those areas, and has shown remarkable growth in the Third World. This optimism is reflected in a 2002 CBN.com article, "How Christianity Is Growing Around the World," by Charles Colson (founder of Prison Fellowship International). In his essay, Colson cited the book *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, by Penn State professor Philip Jenkin, to point to the explosive growth of Christianity in the Southern Hemisphere, especially Africa.

Colson maintains that this growth is "a sign that, no matter how bad things seem at home, God is at work throughout the world. Everywhere it's proclaimed, the Gospel is changing lives and societies."

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