

## **FREEDOM OF RELIGION**

In 1948 the concept of freedom of religion was enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But an incredibly large number of human beings still do not possess it. The lofty words of the declaration have not stopped flagrant human rights violations. Our century is the bloodiest in history, and it is also a century in which more Christians have suffered from their persecutors than during any other time. Never in all history, since the crucifixion of our Lord, have so many men and women been martyred for their Christian faith. This martyrdom has often meant not only death, but also persecution, discrimination, and loss of jobs. Christians today stand far closer to the early church than their grandparents did. And our secular society does not show much interest in the protection of religious freedom. Today, religious freedom is sacrificed on the altar of Mammon. Dictatorial regimes as well as Free World leaders adjust considerations to economic priorities.

### **Religious freedom under communist regimes**

The former USSR became infamous for its relentless persecution of Christians. In 1960, in the western town of Kulunda, Nikolai Khmara was arrested and sentenced to prison for his activities in an unregistered congregation. Just two weeks after his trial, his family was informed that he had died in prison. Though they were told not to, the Kulunda Christians opened Nikolai's coffin and discovered his badly mutilated body. His tongue, fingernails and toenails had been torn out; his body was covered with burns. Fellow prisoners later reported that his tormentors had ripped out his tongue because he refused to stop talking about Christ.

The communist regime in China has fiercely persecuted Christians since it won the civil war in 1949 and took over the country. Despite the opposition, the church continues to grow. Perhaps 50 million Chinese are now Christian. In the late 1980s Christianity spread "particularly among young people." The regime has attempted to prevent the further growth by jailing ministers, missionaries, evangelists, and by prohibiting and suppressing religious ceremonies and activities. Evangelists in particular have been warned not to upset the country's "delicate religious balance."

Communist Cuba is also notorious for its oppression of the Christian faith. Armando Valladares wrote in his prison memoirs that he had heard the cries of prisoners shouting "Long live Christ the King," interrupted by the crash of the firing squad rifles that ended their lives. Valladares dedicated his book, published in 1987, "To the memory of my companions tortured and murdered in Fidel Castro's jails, and to the thousands of prisoners still suffering in them."

### **Religious freedom under Islam**

Izetbegovic, the leader of Bosnia's Muslim Party of Democratic Action, argues in his book *The Islamic Declaration* for "the incompatibility of Islam with non-Islamic systems.

There can be neither peace nor coexistence between the Islamic religion and non-Islamic social and political institutions." The only free practice of religion permitted by Islamic-controlled governments is Islam. Wherever Islamic governments are in full control, Christians are persecuted.

After Sudan was declared an Islamic Republic in 1983, the government began a campaign to pressure the Christian south of the country, the homeland of the Dinka tribe, to conform to the Sharia (Islam law). A brutal civil war followed. It is well documented that Christians have been sold into slavery and starved, and their pastors have been crucified.

In Tasikmalaya, a small city in West Java, Indonesia, Muslim rioters destroyed four churches and four schools in 1996. The rioters scrawled obscenities and slogans such as "No to Jesus" and "No to Jews," and left at least three dead in their wake. On February 5 and 6, 1997, some 30,000 Muslims in Pakistan attacked and burned churches, schools, and businesses in three primarily Christian towns. A private medical clinic, homes of clergy, and a Roman Catholic girls' boarding school were also destroyed. The incidents are only a fragment of the news reports telling stories of severe persecution by Muslims.

### **Who is a martyr?**

Already in the New Testament, there was a close association between witnessing for Jesus Christ and sealing this witness with one's death. The root meaning of "martyr" demonstrates this truth; it is one who "gives testimony" (Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1). The apostles were witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 4:33). "Martyr" became the equivalent of blood witness, one who chooses to die for the sake of the faith rather than to deny it and live.

The first martyr was Stephen (Acts 7:54-60; 22:20). In time he was called the "perfect martyr" as well as the protomartyr. The direct consequence of his martyrdom was the expulsion and scattering of Christians from Jerusalem, except the apostles.

But the scattered Christians did not cease witnessing. In 44 A.D. King Herod Agrippa I beheaded James the brother of John and had Peter arrested (Acts 12:1-25). Peter was freed to carry on his ministry until the persecution of the emperor Nero in 66, when both he and Paul were martyred. Nero believed that Christians were guilty of arson, and he cruelly tortured them in his gardens.

The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews exhorted the early church to stand fast in the faith in the midst of persecutions (Hebrews 11:32-12:12). The New Testament clearly shows that persecution is one of the norms of the Christian life. Jesus warned His followers: "They will deliver you up to tribulation, and put you to death; and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake" (Matthew 24:9). And Jesus associates the hatred of the world for the church with the hatred it has for Him. "If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you... But all this they will do to you on my

account" (John 15:18, 21 ). The apostle Paul did not promise a life of ease to converts. He told them: "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted. . ." (2 Timothy 3:12). In the book of Revelation, the term "martyr" receives its clearest expression in the full technical sense. Christians were slain for their witness (see Revelation 6:9; 17:6; 20:4).

## **The early church**

The early church was in an acute, direct and deadly conflict with the world. The way of Christ was costly and difficult. Believers had only one choice ultimately: to go where their faithfulness to Christ led them-death or exile (Matthew 10:23). Although the persecutions were often local in character and usually limited in duration, the threat of persecution was always a reality. As a consequence, the possibility of martyrdom had a central place in the spiritual outlook of the early church. The phrase "church of the martyrs" expressed its true nature. One scholar attributes the survival of the early church to "its clear and uncompromising idea of martyrdom."

The Roman government regarded the church as an upstart, stubborn and subversive sect which refused to compromise in the matter of emperor worship or the deity of Christ. The martyrs harboured no death wish but they rejoiced in the hope of the resurrection. They rendered to Caesar everything Caesar justly claimed, but they rather died than to worship false gods in the place of honour reserved for Christ alone. The church was persecuted because it insisted on the absolute and exclusive character of the Christian faith. It refused to accept other religions as equally true, as Christ is the only way to God the Father (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). The church taught that no true Christian could sacrifice before the image of the emperor as a test of civic loyalty. The performance of such sacrifice was considered an act of apostasy. Many Christians who refused to compromise were arrested and punished. The persecutions produced a crop of martyrs in the strictest sense, as many died for their faith. Persecuted Christians who were tortured were called confessors.

Despite official opposition Christians made an impact because of their spirit of love and communal charity. The general public regarded them as virtuous and essentially inoffensive members of the community. As the so-called Epistle to Diognetus puts it:

They live in their own countries, but simply as visitors.... to them every foreign land is a fatherland, and every fatherland foreign.... They have a common table, but yet not common. They exist in the flesh, but they do not live for the flesh. They spend their existence on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws and in their own lives they try to surpass the laws. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.... They are poor, and make many rich. They lack everything, and in everything they abound. They are humiliated, and their humiliation becomes their glory. They are abused - and they bless. They are reviled, and are justified. They are insulted, and they repay insults with honour.

When Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220), African Christian apologist and prolific author, reflected on two centuries of Roman persecution of Christians, he concluded, "The more you mow us down, the more we grow; the seed is the blood of the martyrs." The Christian apologist Lactantius (c. 240-c. 320) said that persecution of religion was wrong and that faith must always be a matter of individual conscience. Persecution is self-defeating and seeks to destroy the very thing it attempts to defend; ". . . if you want to defend religion by blood, torture, and in wrong-doing," wrote Lactantius, "it is not defended at all, but sullied and violated."

## **Veneration of martyrs**

The earliest authentic, extant account of martyrdom is that of Polycarp (c.70-c.155) of Smyrna, said to be a disciple of the apostle John. The proconsul urged Polycarp to deny his faith and swear to the fortune of Caesar. He said to him, "Swear, and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ." Polycarp replied, "Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Saviour?" When he refused to sacrifice to Caesar and to recant his faith, the authorities decided to burn him. Facing cruel death, he calmly prayed.

The account of his martyrdom tells how the Christians of Smyrna gathered his bones, buried them in a safe place, and expressed the desire to find them there again when they meet to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom. This is the origin of martyrology, the commemoration of the martyrs' sacrifice. The cult of the martyrs (saints) developed considerably over the centuries. Intercessory powers were attributed to them; places of worship were built over them. These excesses became one of the targets of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers judged prayers to the saints as a denial of Christ as the sole mediator between God and man (see Lord's Day 35). However, Protestants have always honoured the memory of martyrs. Protestant hymns extol martyrdom. The Reformed Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 says:

... those festival days which are appointed for saints, and abrogated by us, have in them many gross things, unprofitable and not to be tolerated. In the meantime, we confess that the remembrance of saints, in due time and place, may be to good use and profit commended unto the people in sermons, and the holy examples of holy men set before their eyes to be imitated by all.

## **Martyrologies**

Before, during and after the Reformation many books were written about martyrs. John Foxe (1516-1578) wrote the best seller now known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, referring to Protestant victims during the reign of the British Roman Catholic monarch "Bloody Mary." Another such book is Thielman van Braght's *The Bloody Theatre, or Martyr's Mirror*; its final form was published in 1660. It was written from an Anabaptist perspective. It also contains a collection of Anabaptist hymns which emphasize the doctrine of the suffering church. The

Dutch Roman Catholics also published a book of martyrs *entitled Catholics in the Netherlands: Petrus Opmeer, Book of Martyrs or The History of Dutch Martyrs, Antwerp, 1700*. The Reformed also had one of their own, written by Adriaan van Haemstede (born in 1525), who served Reformed churches in Antwerp and London. He wrote *The History and Death of Saintly Martyrs Until the Year 1559*. I have in my library a copy published in 1883 with a foreword by Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper points out that the book does not venerate saints, but tells what the Lord did through godly people. It is a book which describes the lives of those who gave their lives for the sake of the truth of the Gospel. Kuyper also stresses that we offend the memory of the martyrs if they receive the honour instead of the Lord.

### **Reformed faith and persecution**

Canada prizes religious freedom; but it is freedom within limits. No one objects to a privatized faith. We can believe or disbelieve whatever we want. However, some claim that the government "may not say what we can believe but can control what we do." However, if freedom of religion is restricted to believing in whatever we wish, while not being allowed to act on our beliefs then there is no real freedom.

The Christian faith cannot be confined to church and home. It is public truth and not something purely interior and private. Christians are in the world but not of it. They live to the glory of God. They confess that God is sovereign over all the earth and His people are obligated to serve Him in every sphere of life. The body of Christ, the church, has been called to live according to God's will in His world. It must fight against sin and the powers of evil (2 Corinthians 4). If the church compromises the faith and allows the government to define its mandate and what it stands for then it will be able to live at peace and without opposition. The church, however, must remain faithful to its calling. If the gospel is true, then it is dishonest and dishonouring to God if we do not clearly stand for it. We must be humbly aggressive in propagating the gospel and be true to it even at the utmost degree of sacrifice.

Herbert Schlossberg asked a pastor from the former USSR, who had emigrated to the West, what Westerners could learn from his experience during communist oppression should they fall under the same kind of persecution. Instead of passing on practical tips, he said only, "Hold the teachings of the Bible without fail."

Secular faith is not private but public. Our secular society, which has lost its Christian moorings, moves steadily towards diabolical tyranny. One area of controversy to do with government and church relations is education. Parents are responsible for the education of their children; and education involves teaching from a particular perspective. In Ontario, Christian parents who refuse to subject their children to government-sponsored secular ideology in the schools have to pay double. A substantial portion of their property taxes go to the public schools, on top of which they pay tuition for the Christian school.

Some other current issues are the promotion of the acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle and the lobbying for legislation prohibiting even the mildest form of corporal punishment for children. Schlossberg remarks that the

Christian faith is inseparable from action, and to be persecuted for the action is to be persecuted for the faith. In some cases, the question of persecution will not even arise until the church begins to be true to its calling.

This is not a time for indifference. Christians must stand in solidarity with fellow believers suffering from persecution. The apostle Paul exhorted the church to "carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). We should speak out on behalf of believers whose voices have been silenced and uphold them in prayer. This is not a time for timidity. In his plea for the persecuted evangelicals John Calvin denounced "moderate men" who allowed the church to suffer because they were "ashamed" of the gospel. Calvin told the King of France that he had embraced "the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself - a cause completely torn and trampled in your realm today." For the sake of the Gospel we must be prepared to be called "intolerant" and to be accused of "bigotry." The apostle Paul left us no doubt in the matter (Gal. 1:6-10). We must be like Martin Luther who, by the grace of God, dared to stand against the authority of the Church of Rome, which had so severely distorted the doctrine of salvation by faith and grace alone.

The world may try to stamp out the church, but it will not succeed. The victory belongs to the Lord. Jesus said that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church (Matt. 16:18). And the Book of Revelation gives us a vision of the Lord's triumph over His enemies: "They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for He is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful" (17:14). The martyrs lived and died in the hope of the risen and victorious Lord. They believed that not even persecution and martyrdom could separate them from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35).

We live with the sure hope that the future is ours through Christ the Lord. But God's people - faithful to the full counsel of God's Word - can expect persecution. Our task is to prepare ourselves - spiritually and intellectually - for the hard times the church will inevitably face in our increasingly anti-Christian age.

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