

MUSLIM PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

By Robert Spencer



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“Get out your weapons,” commanded Jaffar Umar Thalib, a 40-year-old Muslim cleric, over Indonesian radio in May 2002. “Fight to the last drop of blood.”¹

The target of this jihad was Indonesian Christians.

Christians, Jaffar explained, were “belligerent infidels” (*kafir harbi*) and entitled to no mercy. This designation was not merely a stylistic flourish on Jaffar’s part. On the contrary, *kafir harbi* is a category of infidel that is clearly delineated in Islamic theology. By using this term, Jaffar was not only inciting his followers to violence, but telling them that their actions were theologically sanctioned.

Jaffar’s words had consequences. The death toll among Indonesian Christians in the chaos that followed was estimated to be as high as 10,000, with countless thousands more left homeless.² Journalist Rod Dreher reported in 2002 that Jaffar Umar Thalib’s jihadist group, *Laskar Jihad*, had also “forcibly converted thousands more, and demolished hundreds of churches.”³

What happened in Indonesia was treated by the international press as an isolated incident. In fact, however, the violent jihad there was part of the ongoing persecution of Christians by Muslims throughout the Islamic world. This violence, reminiscent of barbarous religious conflicts of seven

hundred years ago, is the dirty little secret of contemporary religion. Fearful of offending Muslim sensibilities, the international community has averted its gaze, allowing the persecution to take place in the darkness. Nowhere else is religious bigotry legitimated by holy writ, in this case the Quran, or by a significant number of religious leaders, in this case imams. Nowhere else does religious bigotry have such bloody consequences. Nowhere else does such religious bigotry take place almost entirely without comment, let alone condemnation, from the human rights community.

Christian persecution by Muslims has become a familiar narrative, repeated with terrifying frequency in Muslim controlled areas throughout the world, but especially in the Middle East.

Murdered Christian Clergy in Iraq

On April 5, 2008, Youssef Adel, an Assyrian Orthodox priest at St. Peter and Paul church in Baghdad, was killed in a drive-by shooting as he was opening the gate of his house.⁴ This attack came just weeks after the death of Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of the Chaldean Catholic Church, who was kidnapped in the Iraqi city of Mosul on February 29 while three Christians with him were also killed. On March 12, the kidnappers phoned a church in Mosul to announce that Archbishop Rahho was dead, and indicate where the body could be found.⁵

While mosques proliferate throughout the west, Christian clergymen have become an endangered species in Iraq. In October 2006, a Syrian Orthodox priest, Fr. Boulos Iskander, went shopping for auto parts in the Iraqi city of Mosul. He was never seen alive again. A Muslim group kidnapped him and initially demanded \$350,000 in ransom; they eventually lowered this to \$40,000, but added a new demand: Fr.

Boulos' parish had to denounce the mildly critical remarks about Islam made the previous month by Pope Benedict in an address in Regensburg, Germany, that had caused rioting all over the Islamic world. The ransom was paid, and the church dutifully posted thirty large signs all over Mosul denouncing the Pope's statements. All to no avail: when Fr. Boulos' remains were discovered, he had not only been murdered but dismembered.

Five hundred Christians attended the funeral. Looking at the crowd, another priest commented: "Many more wanted to come to the funeral, but they were afraid. We are in very bad circumstances now."⁶

There is no doubt of that. The murders of these three clergymen took place against a backdrop of increasing danger for Christians in Iraq. In March 2007, Islamic gangs knocked on doors in Christian neighborhoods in Baghdad, demanding payment of the *jizya*, the religion-based tax assessed by Islamic law against Christians, Jews, and other non Muslim groups who live in Muslim lands.⁷ Meanwhile, Christian women throughout the country are threatened with kidnapping or death if they do not wear a headscarf. In accord with traditional Islamic legal restrictions on Christians "openly displaying wine or pork" (in the words of a legal manual endorsed by Cairo's venerable Al-Azhar University), liquor store owners in Iraq have likewise been threatened.⁸ Many businesses have been destroyed, and the owners have fled.

In fact, half of the nation's prewar 700,000 Christians have fled the country since 2003. The difference in the violence they face is one of degrees. Even in the relatively secular Iraq of Saddam Hussein, where the notorious Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz was a Chaldean Catholic Christian, the small Christian community faced random violence from the Muslim majority. Aside from outbreaks of actual

persecution, including murder, Christians were routinely pressured to renounce their religion and to marry Muslims.⁹ Iraqi Christians today are streaming into Syria, or, if they can, out of the Middle East altogether. An Iraqi businessman now living in Syria lamented that “now at least 75% of my Christian friends have fled. There is no future for us in Iraq.”¹⁰

Coptic Christians victimized in Egypt

In Egypt, Coptic Christians have suffered discrimination and harassment for centuries. Rather than being mitigated by the growing tolerance and interconnection of the global community, the jeopardy of Christians is increasing today, with mob attacks on churches and individual Christians becoming more frequent. In February 2007, rumors that a Coptic Christian man was having an affair with a Muslim woman – a violation of Islamic law – led to a rampage that resulted in the destruction of several Christian-owned shops in southern Egypt.¹¹ And besides physical attacks, Christians have been restricted from speaking freely. In August 2007, two Coptic rights activists were arrested for “publishing articles and declarations that are damaging to Islam and insulting to Prophet Mohammed on the United Copts web site.”¹²

Mistreatment of Christians in Egypt frequently meets with indifference – or worse yet, complicity -- from Egyptian authorities. In June 2007, rioters in Alexandria vandalized Christian shops, attacked and injured seven Christians, and damaged two Coptic churches. Police allowed the mob to roam free in Alexandria’s Christian quarter for an hour and a half before intervening. The Compass Direct News service, which tracks incidents of Christian persecution, noted: “In April 2006, Alexandria was the scene of three knife attacks

on churches that killed one Christian and left a dozen more injured. The government appeared unable or unwilling to halt subsequent vandalism of Coptic-owned shops and churches...”¹³

The ordeal of Suhir Shihata Gouda exemplifies the experience of many Egyptian Christians, and principally of Christian women, who are frequently victimized by Muslim men.¹⁴ According to the Jubilee Campaign, which records incidences of Christian persecution:

[A Christian woman named Suhir] was kidnapped on February 25th [1999] by a group of Muslims who forced her to marry a Muslim man, Saed Sadek Mahmoud. After Suhir failed to return home from school, her distraught father rushed to Abu-Tisht police station to report the incident, but instead of assisting him, a police officer began assaulting Suhir’s father...beating and cursing him. Three days later, Suhir’s father and brother returned to the police station to ask for help and they were subjected to the same abuse, as a result of which the father had to be admitted to hospital for treatment.

Suhir herself managed to escape, but was recaptured “and beaten for running away and is currently under heavy guard.” Her Muslim “husband” accompanied a mob to her father’s house where they threatened to kill all the Christian men in Suhir’s home village, and carry off all the women, if her family took legal action.¹⁵

Bishop Wissa of Egypt’s Coptic Orthodox Church painted a grim picture in an interview with the Protestant organization Prayer for the Persecuted Church in May 2000:

One man in his 20s was in the field working when he was approached by armed Muslims. He was asked to renounce Christianity and to verbally say the two statements of faith that would convert him to Islam.

When he refused and did the sign of the cross, he was shot in the head and killed.

Another young man had a tattoo on his arm of St. George and the Virgin Mary. They also asked him to renounce his faith. When he refused, they cut off his arm that had the Christian tattoos and chopped it up. They finished him off with their daggers and then burned his body.

A 17-year-old boy, who is a deacon at the church, was going to look for his sister in the fields. He too was asked to renounce his faith, and when he refused, he was shot. After they killed him, they asked the young girl to lay next to her brother and they killed her right there.

The Egyptian government, caught between the demands of Sharia and its secular laws, couldn't entirely ignore these acts of murder. It compensated each of the families of these victims, albeit in a manner that only underscored the relatively cheapness of a Christian life: each family received eight hundred dollars. And this was only because of the notoriety of the cases. The families of other victims, however, get neither recompense nor justice. One man's son was on his way to school when Islamic militants stopped the school bus on which he was riding and ordered the Christians to separate from the Muslims. They demanded that the boy renounce his faith. When he refused, says Bishop Wissa, "they killed him with an axe, and then they drove over his body with their car." Authorities called the death a vehicular accident, and denied the father compensation — just as they did previously when Muslim militants destroyed his shop.¹⁶

Jihadist Aggression against Christians in Pakistan

In Pakistan the situation for Christians is no better. Fr. Emmanuel Asi, chairman of the Theological Institute

for Laity in Lahore and secretary of the Catholic Bible Commission of Pakistan, said in August 2007 that Pakistani Christians are frequently denied equality of rights with Muslims and subjected to various forms of discrimination. Jihadist aggression, he said, can "at any time" bring "every imaginable kind of problem" upon Pakistan's Christians.¹⁷

As in Egypt, Christians in Pakistan have been subjected to mob violence and threats. In August 2007, Christians (as well as Hindus) in Peshawar in northern Pakistan received letters from a jihadist group ordering them to convert to Islam in a matter of days or "your colony will be ruined." The deadline passed, but according to Compass Direct, the Christians continued "to live in fear, canceling church activities and skipping services."¹⁸ They had good reason to be worried, since jihadists had made good their promises to attack Pakistani churches in the past. In an attack in a Peshawar church on October 28, 2001, for instance, eighteen Christians were murdered during the Sunday morning worship service.¹⁹ In another church attack on March 17, 2002, five Christians were killed and forty wounded. The entire Pakistani Christian community lived under the shadow of an al-Qaeda threat to kill "two Christians in retaliation for every Muslim killed in the U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan."²⁰

In addition to group attacks, there is also individual harassment. Pakistani Christian schoolteacher Cadherine Shaheen was "pressured to convert to Islam." When she resisted, she was finally told that if she did not capitulate she would face serious consequences. Soon she was accused of blasphemy. All the area mosques posted copies a poster bearing her name and picture. "This was a death sentence for me," says Shaheen. "It's considered an honor for one of the Muslim men to kill a blasphemer. Just before me, the Muslims murdered a school principal accused of blasphemy. I was next."

Shaheen went underground, whereupon Pakistani police arrested her father and brothers. Her father, age 85, soon died. Catherine made her way to the United States. “It’s horrible for Christians in Pakistan,” she now says. “The Muslims take our land, rob our homes, try to force us to accept Islam. Young girls are kidnapped and raped. Then they’re told that if they want a husband who will accept them after that defilement, they must become Muslim.”²¹

Religious Cleansing Elsewhere in the Islamic world

The same dispiriting story is repeated all over the Muslim world. In June 2007 Christians in Gaza appealed to the international community for protection after jihadists destroyed a church and a school.²² In Sudan, the Khartoum regime has for years waged a bloody jihad against the Christians in the southern part of the country, killing two million Sudanese Christians and displacing five million more.²³ In Spring 2003 jihadists burned to death a Sudanese Christian pastor and his family while carrying out an unprovoked massacre of 59 villagers.²⁴

In Nigeria, Muslim mobs have torched churches, enforced Sharia codes on Christians, and even horse-whipped female Christian college students whom they deemed improperly dressed.²⁵ Over 2,000 people were killed in 2001 in Muslim-instigated riots in the city of Jos. All over Nigeria, Islamic jihadists continue to try to impose the Sharia over the whole country, despite its sizable Christian population. A report warned that in Jos, “the conflict could recur, since Muslim militants are still bent on attacking Christians.”²⁶

Even in Lebanon, traditionally the Middle East’s sole Christian land, Christians suffer persecution -- marked most notably by an ongoing series of assassinations of Christian political leaders, including the bombing in a Christian suburb

of Beirut in September 2007 that killed Antoine Ghanem of the Christian Phalange party.²⁷ This has led to declining numbers and declining influence -- which in turn encourages yet more persecution. Communities that date back almost two thousand years to the dawn of Christianity have been steadily decreasing in numbers; now the faith is on the verge of disappearing from the area altogether.

Muslim militants in Algeria have targeted that country’s small group of Catholics for years. In 1994, they killed a priest, a nun, and four missionaries; in 1995, two nuns; in 1996, a bishop and fourteen monks. Many of those who were murdered were trying to establish friendly relations with the Muslim community. Bishop Pierre Claverie of Oran, killed in 1996, “had dedicated his life to promoting dialogue between Islam and Christianity; he was known as the ‘Bishop of the Muslims’ and had studied Islam in depth — indeed to such an extent that...the Muslims themselves would consult him on the subject.”²⁸

In early 2002 in Malawi, according to Compass Direct, two local Christians “have been stoned, threatened with machetes and warned by local Muslim leaders that they will be sent back to their original villages as corpses if they continue to hold meetings in their houses.”²⁹

According to Aid to the Church in Need, in Bangladesh “on April 28 1998, a crowd — instigated by the Islamists — ransacked and partly burnt down the Catholic girls’ college of St. Francis Xavier, the churches of Santa Croce and St. Thomas in the capital, and the Baptist church in Sadarghat. Some priests, nuns and even ordinary workers have been threatened with death.”

The occasion for this violence seems to have been a dispute over land: “The reason for the conflict was a plot of land belonging to the church which the adjacent mosque wanted for itself. Seven thousand people, incited via a loud-hailer

with claims that the mosque had been invaded by Christians and Jews, broke into the St Francis Xavier College, burning books, smashing crucifixes and statues of the Virgin, breaking down doors, windows and ransacking the dormitories.”³⁰

Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi is likewise intolerant of Christians. Aid to the Church in Need reports that in Libya, “The majority of the Christian churches were closed following the revolution of 1969, despite the fact that the words of the Constitution guarantee the liberty of religion. After expelling the Italian and Maltese Catholics, Qaddafi turned the cathedral in the capital into a mosque.”³¹

Since the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974, churches have been despoiled of icons, which have flooded the black market in Greece. The Turks have taken over many churches for secular uses, and even tried to convert the fourth century monastery of San Makar into a hotel. Christian Cypriots are forbidden to come near the building, much less enter it.³²

Muslim militants seem determined to drive all Christians out of the country. In Tur-Abdin in southwest Turkey in 1960, there were 150,000 Christians; today there are just over two thousand. Terrorism is employed where subtler means of persuasion fail: according to Aid to the Church in Need, “on December 3, 1997, a bomb exploded in the headquarters of the Ecumenical Patriarch, injuring a deacon and damaging the church.”³³ The Turkish government, meanwhile, has closed the last remaining Orthodox seminary, and with its requirement that the Patriarch of Constantinople be a Turkish citizen, seems intent upon destroying the patriarchate.

In Indonesia, the massacres of Christians by *Laskar Jihad* in 2002 described above were not the beginning or the end of the plight of Christians there. In Java in 1996, Muslims destroyed thirteen churches. Thirteen more churches were torched in Djakarta in 1998 by mobs shouting, “We

are Muslim gentlemen and they are Christian pigs” and, paraphrasing the Qur’an, “Kill all the pagans!” One Muslim shouted at an army officer who was trying to protect some Christians to “stand aside and allow Islamic justice to take its course.”³⁴

Human rights organizations report that Indonesian jihadists, often abetted by local government officials, have forced the closing of 110 churches in Indonesia between 2004 and 2007.³⁵ Because of the violence, incidents of commonplace Christian charity have been transformed into homilies on what appear to be the perdurable differences between Islam and Christianity: Aid to the Church in Need tells of “eight Sisters of the Little Child Jesus, on arriving in Cileduk, a suburb of Java, were attacked by stone-throwing Muslims; they responded by building a care centre for children, an old people’s home and a school.”

And in the most horrific instance of Muslim persecution of Christians in Indonesia, in October 2005, three Islamic jihadists beheaded three Christian girls and severely wounded a fourth as they walked to school near the city of Poso.³⁶ For this ghastly triple murder, an Indonesian court sentenced the organizer of the attack to twenty years in prison; his two accomplices both got fourteen years.³⁷

Christians who have converted from Islam suffer special hatred. But those born to the faith don’t have it much easier. Saudi Arabia, the holy land of Islam, has been especially harsh on religious minorities. Even foreigners must submit to draconian Saudi religious laws:

In 1979, when the Muslims requested the intervention of a special French unit into the Kaaba, against a group of Islamic fundamentalists who were opposed to the government, the soldiers of the intervention force of the French national police (GIGN — *Groupe d’intervention de la Gendarmerie nationale*) were obliged to undergo

a rapid ceremony of conversion to Islam. Even the Red Cross was obliged, during the course of the Gulf war, to drive around without the symbol of the Cross and not to display its banner.³⁸

Adds former U. S. Foreign Service Officer Tim Hunter, who served in Saudi Arabia from 1993 to 1995, “On occasion they beat, even tortured, Americans in Jeddah for as little as possessing a photograph with a Star of David in the background or singing Christmas carols....The Mutawa [Saudi religious police] chained, beat and cast clergy into medieval-style dungeons.”³⁹

Amnesty International reports that an Indian named George Joseph, who was working in Saudi Arabia, “was reportedly arrested outside his home in May [2000] as he returned from a Catholic service with a religious cassette tape.”⁴⁰

In early 2003 the Saudi government reaffirmed that there was not and would never be a church in the Kingdom. “This country was the launchpad for the prophecy and the message, and nothing can contradict this, even if we lose our necks,” said Prince Sultan, the Saudi defense minister. Responding to complaints that American military and diplomatic personnel were not allowed to practice their faith, he called them “fanatics” and declared: “There are no churches — not in the past, the present or future. . . . Whoever said that [churches should be established] must shut up and be ashamed.”⁴¹ Reports in early 2008 that Pope Benedict XVI and the Vatican were in talks with Saudi officials to open a church in the Kingdom were put in perspective quickly by Anwar Ashiqi, president of the Saudi centre for Middle East strategic studies, in an interview on the Arab television network al-Arabiya. “I haven taken part in several meetings related to Islamic-Christian dialogue and there have been negotiations on this issue,” he explained. However, “it would be possible to launch official negotiations to construct a church in Saudi

Arabia only after the Pope and all the Christian churches recognise the prophet Mohammed. If they don’t recognise him as a prophet, how can we have a church in the Saudi kingdom?”⁴²

The religious cleansing of Christians in the Muslim world does not surprise anyone familiar with the origins of Islam. The prophet Muhammad declared: “I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslims.”⁴³ According to a modern Islamic legal manual, Christians are “forbidden to reside in the Hijaz, meaning the area and towns around Mecca, Medina, and Yamama, for more than three days.”⁴⁴ In fact, the highways in Saudi Arabia that lead to Mecca and Medina feature, a good distance away from the holy cities, exits marked “Non-Muslims Must Exit Here.”

The Punishment for Conscience is Death

Converts from Islam to Christianity are often hunted in the Muslim world, where virtually all religious authorities agree that such individuals deserve death. Muhammad himself commanded such a punishment: “Whoever changed his Islamic religion, then kill him.”⁴⁵ This is still the position of all the schools of Islamic jurisprudence, although there is some disagreement over whether the law applies only to men, or to women also.

At Cairo’s Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious and influential institution in the Islamic world, an Islamic manual certified as a reliable guide to Sunni Muslim orthodoxy states: “When a person who has reached puberty and is sane voluntarily apostatizes from Islam, he deserves to be killed.” Although the right to kill an apostate is reserved in Muslim law to the leader of the community and other Muslims can theoretically be punished for taking this duty

upon themselves, in practice a Muslim who kills an apostate needs to pay no indemnity and perform no expiatory acts (as he must in other kinds of murder cases under classic Islamic law). This accommodation is made because killing an apostate “is killing someone who deserves to die.”⁴⁶

IslamOnline, a website manned by a team of Islam scholars headed by the internationally influential Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, explains, “If a sane person who has reached puberty voluntarily apostatizes from Islam, he deserves to be punished. In such a case, it is obligatory for the caliph (or his representative) to ask him to repent and return to Islam. If he does, it is accepted from him, but if he refuses, he is immediately killed.” And what if someone doesn’t wait for a caliph to appear and takes matters into his own hands? Although the killer is to be “disciplined” for “arrogating the caliph’s prerogative and encroaching upon his rights,” there is “no blood money for killing an apostate (or any expiation)” – in other words, no significant punishment for the killer.⁴⁷

An Afghan named Abdul Rahman knows all this well. In February 2006, he was arrested for the crime of leaving Islam for Christianity.⁴⁸ The Afghan Constitution stipulates that “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.”⁴⁹ Even after his arrest, Western analysts seem to have had trouble grasping the import of this provision. A “human rights expert” quoted by the *Times of London* summed up confusion widespread in Western countries: “The constitution says Islam is the religion of Afghanistan, yet it also mentions the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 18 specifically forbids this kind of recourse. It really highlights the problem the judiciary faces.”⁵⁰

But in fact there was contraction. The Constitution may declare its “respect” for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it also says that no law can contradict Islamic law. The Constitution’s definition of religious freedom is

explicit: “The religion of the state of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is the sacred religion of Islam. Followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites *within the limits of the provisions of law*” (emphasis added).

The Islamic death penalty for apostasy is deeply ingrained in Islamic culture -- which is one reason why it was Abdul Rahman’s own family that went to police to file a complaint about his conversion. Whatever triggered their action in 2006, they could be confident that the police would receive such a complaint with the utmost seriousness.

After an international outcry, Abdul Rahman was eventually spirited out of Afghanistan to relative safety in Italy. Despite the publicity, his case was hardly unique. Sudanese Al-Faki Kuku Hassan, whom news reports describe as “a former Muslim sheikh who converted to Christianity in 1995,” was arrested for apostasy in March 1998 and held, despite international protests, until his declining health (he suffered a stroke in Spring 2001) led to his release on May 31, 2001.⁵¹

Muhammad Sallam, an Egyptian convert to Christianity, was arrested in 1989 and tortured; he was arrested again in 1998 and spirited away to an unknown destination. Two other converts to Christianity in Egypt, Dr. Abdul-Rahman Muhammad Abdul-Ghaffar and Abdul Hamid Beshan Abd El Mohzen, were held in solitary confinement for extended periods in the late 1980s.

In Morocco, authorities jailed Christian converts as well as a Salvadoran Baptist musician, Gilberto Orellana, who was accused of converting a Muslim to Christianity.⁵² Even in comparatively tolerant Jordan, where freedom of religion is guaranteed by the Constitution, “Muslims who convert to other religions suffer discrimination both socially and on the part of the authorities, since the government does not fully recognise the legality of such conversions and considers the

converts to be still Muslims, subject to the Sharia, according to which they are apostates and could have their property confiscated and many of their rights denied them.”⁵³

Robert Hussein Qambar Ali, a Kuwaiti national who converted from Islam to Christianity in the 1990s, was arrested and tried for apostasy, even though the Kuwaiti Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion. Mohammad Al-Jadai, one of Hussein’s prosecutors, explained: “Legislators did not regulate the question of apostasy in the Constitution because they never thought this kind of thing could happen here. The freedom of belief in the Constitution applies only to the religion of birth.”⁵⁴

When Hussein asked during a court hearing to see a memorandum from the prosecution, the prosecutor told the judge, “His blood is immoral! This document contains verses from the Holy Qur’an and should not be touched by this infidel!” Then the prosecutor began quoting a passage from the memorandum that made abundantly clear the relationship between Kuwait’s ostensibly tolerant secular law and the Sharia: “With grief I have to say that our criminal law does not include a penalty for apostasy. The fact is that the legislature, in our humble opinion, cannot enforce a penalty for apostasy any more or less than what our Allah and his messenger have decreed. The ones who will make the decision about his apostasy are: our Book, the Sunna, the agreement of the prophets and their legislation given by Allah.”

An Islamic court condemned Hussein to die. Professor Anh Nga Longva of the University of Bergen, Norway visited Kuwait in 1997 and found passions running high over the case: “I found a surprisingly strong consensus across the liberal/islamist divide. Practically everyone agreed that Qambar’s conversion was a serious crime and as is the case with all crimes, it had to be punished. They also agreed that depriving him of all his civil rights was an

adequate punishment. The only topic which gave rise to some disagreement and a subdued sense of unease within some circles was the question of the death penalty.”

Intriguingly, Longva reports that those who were indignant over Hussein Qambar Ali’s conversion invoked the same Qur’anic verse he would have used to argue that Hussein was within his rights to become a Christian: “Those who opposed [the death penalty for Hussein] based their position on the Qur’anic verse 2:257 [in most Qur’anic verse numbering systems it is 2:256] that says ‘no compulsion is there in religion’. But more often than not, the same verse was quoted in front of me to show that precisely because Islam is such a tolerant religion, there are no possible excuses for apostasy.”⁵⁵

Longva quotes the disquieting summation of a Kuwaiti jurist: “We always remind those who want to convert to Islam that they enter through a door but that there is no way out.”⁵⁶ Hussein was eventually convicted of apostasy, but increasing international attention to this case enabled him to escape to the United States.

In August 2007, Mohammed Hegazy, an Egyptian convert from Islam to Christianity, was forced to go into hiding after a death sentence was pronounced against him by Islamic clerics. He refused to flee Egypt, however, and declared: “I know there are fatwas to shed my blood, but I will not give up and I will not leave the country.”⁵⁷ Early in 2008, his father told Egyptian newspapers: “I am going to try to talk to my son and convince him to return to Islam. If he refuses, I am going to kill him with my own hands.” As of this writing, Hegazy remains in hiding in Egypt.⁵⁸

While doing nothing to help Hegazy, in February 2008, the Egyptian government made what appeared to be a significant concession to that nation’s Christian minority when it allowed converts from Islam to Christianity to note

their new religion on their state-issued identity cards.⁵⁹

This seemed at first glance to be a major departure from the traditional death penalty for apostates from Islam. But Egypt, although it is not a Sharia state, has never looked kindly upon those who converted. While the new regulation seemed to be a step in a new direction, it turned out that the concession applies only to Christians who converted to Islam and then returned to Christianity. The converts' identity cards will bear that information. In light of the Islamic law making apostasy from Islam a capital offense, the converts' identity cards are the equivalent of a bulls-eye. Any Muslim who meets them and takes the death penalty for apostasy seriously will consider himself justified to kill them.

Qur'anic Justification for the persecution of Christians

“Like Christians, Muslims respect and revere Jesus. Islam teaches that Jesus is one of the greatest of God's prophets and messengers to humankind. Like Christians, every day, over 1.3 billion Muslims strive to live by his teachings of love, peace, and forgiveness. Those teachings, which have become universal values, remind us that all of us, Christians, Muslims, Jews, and all others have more in common than we think.”

So read an advertisement that the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) placed in California newspapers in March 2004. The ad's message about bridges between Islam and Christians appeared to have a Qur'anic precedent. The Islamic holy book asserts that Christians will be the closest friends to Muslims: “Strongest among men in enmity to the believers wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans; and nearest among them in love to the believers wilt thou find those who say, ‘We are Christians’: because amongst these are men devoted to learning and men who have renounced the world,

and they are not arrogant” (5:82).

But in the Muslim world there is no reason to play act at ecumenism. On the other hand, the Saudi Sheikh Marzouq Salem Al-Ghamdi recently preached in a mosque in Mecca that “Christians are infidels, enemies of Allah, his Messenger, and the believers. They deny and curse Allah and his Messenger . . . How can we draw near to these infidels?”⁶⁰

The Sheikh was ignoring Qur'an 5:82 in favor of another verse: “O ye who believe! Take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust” (5:51).

Besides these mixed messages, the Qur'an has a great deal more to say about Christianity and Christ. It teaches Jesus's Virgin Birth (Sura 19, which is entitled “Mary,” contains a long description of this event) and calls him Allah's “Word” and “a spirit proceeding from Him,” but it also denies the Trinity and insists that Jesus is not the Son of God (4:171). It places Jesus in a line of prophets including many Old Testament figures: “Say ye: ‘We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma'il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord. We make no difference between one and another of them, and we bow to Allah (in Islam)’” (2:136).

In the Qur'anic view, this line culminates in Muhammad, the last and greatest prophet whose revelation completes and corrects all previous revelations. Hence Muslims traditionally believe that Islam is the final revelation from Allah, but that Jews and Christians also received genuine revelations (hence their Qur'anic designation “People of the Book”), which they have criminally altered to exalt Jesus as the Son of God and remove references to the coming of

Muhammad. Christians also added the false doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ: “So believe in Allah and His messengers, and say not ‘Three.’ Cease! (it is) better for you! Allah is only One Allah. Far is it removed from His Transcendent Majesty that He should have a son” (4:171).

Consequently, there is an evasiveness in some Muslims’ claim that Islam recognizes Christianity as a legitimate faith. For the Christianity that the Qur’an recognizes is not Christianity as millions practice it around the world today. The Qur’an says of Jesus: “We sent him the Gospel. Therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him, a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah. Let the people of the Gospel judge by what Allah hath revealed therein. If any do fail to judge by (the light of) what Allah hath revealed, they are (no better than) those who rebel” (5:46-47).

When Muslims began to have contact with Christians on a large scale, this passage put them in an uncomfortable position: they held that the Gospel bore witness to Muhammad’s prophethood, and that accordingly if Christians judged by it rightly, they would become Muslims. But instead Muslims found that the New Testament affirmed the Christian understanding of Jesus that the Qur’an repudiated, and contained no trace of an idea that a later prophet would come with a final revelation. Thus Muslims began to teach that Christians had corrupted the pure Gospel that was given to Jesus by Allah.

This idea is still common in the Islamic world today. The Muslim scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali, translator of a popular English version of the Qur’an, includes an explanatory note in his Qur’an about the Gospel: “The Injil [Gospel] mentioned in the Qur’an is certainly not the New Testament, and it is not the four Gospels, as now received by the Christian Church, but an original Gospel which was promulgated by

Jesus as the Tawrah [Torah] was promulgated by Moses and the Qur’an by Muhammad al Mustafa.”⁶¹

Thus while there are, of course, many Muslims willing to live in peace and harmony with Christians, there are others who feel they are doctrinally justified by their faith to despise Christians as corrupters of Allah’s word and bearers of his curse.

This is a key source of much of the enduring enmity between Muslims and Christians. And that enmity is compounded by the Islamic doctrine of jihad: the idea that it is part of the responsibility of the Muslim community to wage war against unbelievers until they either convert to Islam, submit to Muslim rule (which involves accepting a number of humiliating regulations), or are killed. This triple choice, announced by Muhammad himself, is founded on the Qur’an, which states explicitly that it is to be extended to Jews and Christians: “Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the Jizya [a special higher tax rate] with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued” (9:29).

Persecution of Christians: A living tradition

Muhammad’s last military expedition was against the Byzantine Christians in the northern Arabian garrison of Tabuk, and shortly after their prophet’s death Islamic jihadists conquered and Islamized what had up to then been the Christian lands of the Middle East, North Africa and Spain. The jihad then pointed toward Christian Europe and continued there for centuries, with a high water mark coming in 1453 with the conquest of Constantinople. But in September 1683, the Ottoman siege of Vienna was broken,

and the Islamic tide in Europe began to recede. But the doctrines that fueled the jihad against Christians were never reformed or rejected by any Islamic sect. Consequently, with the renewal of jihadist sentiments among Muslims in the twentieth century came renewed persecution of Christians. This chilling story told by a woman who lived during the Ottoman Empire of the late nineteenth century captures the moment of that renewal in one household:

Then one night, my husband came home and told me that the padisha had sent word that we were to kill all the Christians in our village, and that we would have to kill our neighbours. I was very angry, and told him that I did not care who gave such orders, they were wrong. These neighbours had always been kind to us, and if he dared to kill them Allah would pay us out. I tried all I could to stop him, but he killed them — killed them with his own hand.⁶²

The Christian population in Turkey has declined from 15% in 1920 to one percent today. In Syria, it has declined from 33% to 10% in the same span. In Bethlehem, 85% of the population was Christian in 1948; today, 12% hold to the faith of the town's most celebrated native son.⁶³

The burden of the past lies heavy on the present for Christians in the Muslim world. Sheikh Omar Bakri Muhammad, a controversial pro-Osama Muslim leader who lived for years in Great Britain but is now barred from reentering that country, wrote in October 2002, "We cannot simply say that because we have no Khilafah [caliphate] we can just go ahead and kill any non-Muslim, rather, we must still fulfill their Dhimmah."⁶⁴ The Dhimmah is the Islamic legal contract of protection for Jews, Christians, and some other inferiors under Islamic rule; those who accept this protection, and the concomitant deprivation of various rights, are known as dhimmis. In 1999, Sheikh

Yussef Salameh, the Palestinian Authority's undersecretary for religious endowment, according to Jonathan Adelman and Agota Kuperman of the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, "praised the idea that Christians should become dhimmis under Muslim rule, and such suggestions have become more common since the second intifada began in October 2000."⁶⁵

In a recent Friday sermon at a mosque in Mecca, Sheikh Marzouq Salem Al-Ghamdi spelled out the Sharia's injunctions for dhimmis:

If the infidels live among the Muslims, in accordance with the conditions set out by the Prophet — there is nothing wrong with it provided they pay Jizya to the Islamic treasury. Other conditions are...that they do not renovate a church or a monastery, do not rebuild ones that were destroyed, that they feed for three days any Muslim who passes by their homes...that they rise when a Muslim wishes to sit, that they do not imitate Muslims in dress and speech, nor ride horses, nor own swords, nor arm themselves with any kind of weapon; that they do not sell wine, do not show the cross, do not ring church bells, do not raise their voices during prayer, that they shave their hair in front so as to make them easily identifiable, do not incite anyone against the Muslims, and do not strike a Muslim...If they violate these conditions, they have no protection.⁶⁶

These Sharia provisions have not been fully enforced since the mid-nineteenth century, but today's jihadists want to restore these laws along with the rest of the Sharia.

The idea that Christians must "feel themselves subdued" (Qur'an 9:29) in Islamic lands is also very much alive. When the first Catholic Church in Qatar opened in March 2008, it sported no cross, no bell, no steeple, and no sign. "The idea," explained the church's pastor, Fr. Tom Veneracion,

“is to be discreet because we don’t want to inflame any sensitivities.”⁶⁷

In the Philippines, the church in the nation’s one Islamic city, Marawi, has also done away with the cross. Catholic priest, Fr. Teresito Soganub, explains: “To avoid arguments and to avoid further misunderstandings we just plant the cross deep in our hearts.” Fr. Soganub, according to Reuters, “doesn’t wear a crucifix or a clerical collar and sports a beard out of respect for his Muslim neighbors.” He celebrates few weddings, since roast pork is a staple of wedding receptions for Filipino Catholics.⁶⁸

It is easy to see the need for such discretion. Preaching in a mosque in Al-Damam, Saudi Arabia, the popular Saudi Sheikh Muhammad Saleh Al-Munajjid recommended hatred of Christians and Jews as a proper course: “Muslims must,” he declared, “educate their children to Jihad. This is the greatest benefit of the situation: educating the children to Jihad and to hatred of the Jews, the Christians, and the infidels; educating the children to Jihad and to revival of the embers of Jihad in their souls. This is what is needed now...”⁶⁹

The Crime of Silence of Human Rights Groups

What Justus Reid Weiner, an international human rights lawyer, stated in December 2007 about Christians in Palestinian areas applies to Christians in the Islamic world generally: “The systematic persecution of Christian Arabs living in Palestinian areas is being met with nearly total silence by the international community, human rights activists, the media and NGOs.” He said that if nothing were done, no Christians would be left there in fifteen years, for “Christian leaders are being forced to abandon their followers to the forces of radical Islam.”⁷⁰

The nearly total silence manifests itself in the curiously

euphemistic manner in which human rights groups report on the plight of Christians, when they notice that plight at all. For example, Amnesty International’s 2007 report on the human rights situation in Egypt dismisses the suffering of Coptic Christians in a single sentence so filled with euphemism and moral equivalence and so lacking in context that it almost erases the crime it describes: “There were sporadic outbreaks of sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. In April [2006], three days of religious violence in Alexandria resulted in at least three deaths and dozens of injuries.”⁷¹ In reality, the strife began when a Muslim stabbed a Christian to death inside a church, and when armed jihadists attacked three churches in Alexandria that same month.⁷²

The passive voice seems to be the rule of the day where jihad violence against Christians is concerned. The 2007 Amnesty International report on Indonesia includes this line: “Minority religious groups and church buildings continued to be attacked.” By whom? AI is silent. “In Sulawesi, sporadic religious violence occurred throughout the year.”⁷³ Who is responsible for that violence? AI doesn’t say. Amnesty International seems more concerned about protecting Islam and Islamic groups from being implicated in human rights abuses than about protecting Christians from those abuses. It appears that Christianity – even indigenous Egyptian Christianity, which of course predates the advent of Islam in that country – is too closely identified with the United States and the West for the multiculturalist tastes of the human rights elite.

The situation is dire. Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregory III, who lives in Damascus, declared in April 2006 that “after 11 September, there is a plot to eliminate all the Christian minorities from the Arabic world....Our simple existence ruins the equations whereby Arabs can’t be other than Moslems, and Christians but be westerners....

If the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Orthodox, the Latin Catholics leave, if the Middle East is cleansed of all the Arabic Christians, the Moslem Arab world and a so-called Christian Western world will be left face to face. It will be easier to provoke a clash and justify it with religion. That is why I wrote a letter in July to all the Arab rulers, to explain how important it is that this small presence, 15 million Arab Christian scattered among 260 million Moslems, not be swept away.”⁷⁴

Yet some American Christians and non-Christians are surprised just to discover that there are ancient communities of Christians in Islamic lands at all, and have no idea that Christians in the Islamic world are being persecuted. Others are indifferent because of the growing movement of chic atheism which sees all religions as equally objectionable, whatever their individual behavior, and all victims of religious persecution as getting what they deserve. And many Westerners, particularly those in the human rights elite, are wedded to a moral paradigm in which only non-Western non-Christians can possibly fit into the human rights groups’ victim paradigm – a sad situation when the position of Christians all over the Third World is increasingly precarious.

And so Islamic jihadists and Sharia supremacists, with ever increasing confidence and brutality and virtually no protest from the West, continue to prey on the Christians in their midst. It a crime that is growing in consequence, and it has created a bloody ground where Islam and Christianity meet in the Third World.

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