

The Persecution of Christians Internationally

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Thank you, Rabbi Bulka and the congregation, for hosting this unique event. Earlier today, the ceremony at our National War Museum commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day, the most unspeakable evil of the 20th and quite possibly any century. Rabbi Bulka, Prime Minister Harper, MP Elizabeth May, who is with us tonight, and many other speakers spoke eloquently there about the systematic, state-sponsored intended annihilation of Jewish Europe.

The words of Jesus, “Love one another as I have loved you” link explicitly love of God and love of neighbour. The two great commandments, found in both the New Testament and the Torah, complement each other. Love of God is love of neighbour; love of neighbour is love of God. Similar thoughts can be found in the holy books of other spiritual communities. Courageous Christians and members of other religions saved Jewish neighbours during the Holocaust, well knowing that, if discovered, they would be shot by the Nazis. There is at least one survivor of the Holocaust here tonight whose life was saved by a series of brave Christians.

There are religiously free countries of many faith backgrounds. Paul Marshall, author of books on religion and politics, says Latin America has become one of the most religiously free regions in the world. The countries of Central Europe have in recent years been largely free from religious persecution, as have many in Africa, and several in Asia.

Pew Research Center

A 2011 Pew Forum (on Religion and Public Life) (<http://www.pewforum.org/>) study estimated that Christians today constitute about 2.1 billion followers. Approximately one-tenth of them are being persecuted in varying degrees by governments or fellow citizens in 131 of the world’s independent countries. Another source estimates that approximately 105,000 Christians are murdered annually because of their faith. In other words, about one Christian is killed every five minutes somewhere on earth.

Open Doors, a Christian organization, issues an annual listing of the worst-offender countries. Here are a few examples:

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, home to more than one million Christian foreign workers, bans churches and private acts of Christian prayer. The monarchy permits its religious police to raid private Christian services and to bring participants up on charges of

blasphemy. Concurrently, author David Aikman notes, there is a “steady drumbeat of anti-Christian propagandizing by Saudi media outlets.”

Iran

There is quite rightly much international concern for Baha’i’s in Iran because they have no legal rights and many have been murdered. Aikman reports that Iran is probably second only to China in having the fastest-growing Christian house-church community. Dozens have been arrested and jailed for attempting to worship. The regime has recently sentenced a convert to Christianity to death. (The victim, Yousef Nadarkhani, is a pastor of a group, some of whom are converts. Because of the country’s Orwellian penal code, those who seek to leave Islam face the real prospect of death.)

China

The repression of Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong and Uighur Muslims in China has gained worldwide attention.

The Beijing party-state has also made an unsuccessful effort to bring its burgeoning Christian population to heel. The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), which controls all religions in China, manages the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) for Protestants and the “Catholic Patriotic Association”, which does not even recognize the Pope. The number of Christians attending state-approved churches totals 20-30 million. The remaining estimated 50-75 million Christians belong to unregistered ‘house churches’.

Sudan

Governments in north Sudan have tormented Christian and animist minorities in the south for decades, culminating in the racially-motivated genocide in Darfur that began in 2003. (Although Sudan’s president has been indicted by the International Criminal Court, and in spite of the elation that greeted the semi-independence he granted to South Sudan in July 2011, the violence has not ended.) Christians in the South Kordofan region are today enduring aerial bombardments, targeted killings, kidnappings of children, and other atrocities. U.N. reports indicate that 53,000 - 75,000 civilians have been driven from their homes in recent months (See today’s opinion piece by Eric Reeves: <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?shva=1#inbox/136df3d41191e1fa>).

Pakistan

Christians living in Pakistan comprise about 1.6 percent of the estimated 170 million population. They live in constant fear of the country’s blasphemy laws, which carry the death penalty and are still used against religious minorities. In 2010, Asia Bibi, a Christian mother of five, was sentenced to death for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad. When Punjab Gov. Salman Taseer explored

ways of freeing her, he was murdered. On March 2, 2011, Pakistan's federal minorities minister, Shahbaz Bhatti, was gunned down. A Christian, Bhatti had predicted his death for months while defending his faith and religious freedom.



Minister Bhatti in Ottawa approx one month before his death

Conclusion

In my opinion, the West should use the billions of dollars in aid it gives to offending governments as leverage to stop the persecution of minorities, including faith ones. (The U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron has recently indicated that there will be no British aid to countries mistreating religious minorities.)

While the world continues to grapple with the issue of worldwide persecution of Christians, democratic governments must protect our own religious minorities, including those viewed with suspicion by some, and ensure that all can worship, live and work without fear. Author Ayaan Hirsi Ali observes, "the protection of the freedom of conscience and speech . distinguishes free societies from (those that are) unfree..." Presidential candidate John Kennedy made a similar point in 1960: "An attack on one religion is an attack on all."

This is why it's prudent to ban the incitement of hatred against identifiable religious and other communities at home, as Canada's Parliament did years ago in our Criminal Code. Governments which don't do so often find that the violent groups attacking others eventually turn on the very governments who sought to curry political favour with them by permitting the persecution of minorities.

Human dignity is ultimately indivisible today. It's through mutual respect that we can build a world in which all peoples, religions and cultures can genuinely feel at home. Harmony and peace can occur in this century only if spiritual communities co-operate. His Holiness, the Dalai Lama--who incidentally will speak later this week in Ottawa--has called for a century of compassion based on equality for all faiths, cultures and peoples. We must all do so as well.

Thank you.

References:

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