

**Martyrdom with a Message:  
How Persecuted Christians Witness to Religious Freedom**

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## Introduction

The title of my talk is “Martyrdom with a Message: How Persecuted Christians Witness to Religious Freedom.”

In discussing what my title should be with my dear friend Dan Philpott, who contributed greatly to organizing this wonderful conference, it occurred to both of us that it would be useful to have a title and theme for my remarks that puts a bit of a twist on the way we think about Christian martyrdom and Christian persecution.

The reason for that is that there is a tendency to focus on martyrs as passive victims in discussions of Christian martyrs in history and the present day. In other words, what is important about martyrs is what happens to martyrs — martyrs are objects, in other words, not subjects, not agents.

This focus on martyrs as passive victims is — laudably — certainly not the tendency of this wonderful conference. Instead, we have heard remarkable stories of martyrs who were important not only or chiefly because of the victimization they suffered but because of what they did. We have heard remarkable stories of persecuted Christians who are remarkable not because of the persecution happening to them but because of what they are doing in the face of persecution — because, in short, of the courage and creativity they are demonstrating in the face of terrible opposition and suffering.

Those of us at Georgetown’s Religious Freedom Project — working closely with our good friend Allen Hertzke of the University of Oklahoma — have recently launched a two-year research initiative that is animated by this idea. It focuses on the ways in which persecuted Christians have been not mere victims but active witnesses to freedom.

Persecuted Christians and martyred Christians **have** carried a powerful message, throughout history and right up to the present. At the core of that message, of course, is the Christian faith and its fundamental theological truths. But the point I want to stress now is that the core theological truths of the Christian faith have consistently entailed a distinctive social and political message.

Yes, Christian communities, especially minority Christian communities, have often been persecuted throughout history, facing terrible opposition, right up to today’s “Global War on Christians,” as John Allen calls it. But even when Christian minorities have faced persecution and martyrdom, they have with remarkable frequency acted — to quote Pope Benedict XVI — as “creative minorities.”

And yet, as John Allen powerfully noted yesterday, the powerful witness of creative Christian minorities in the face of persecution has almost been universally ignored. But even when it is not ignored, the way it is treated is often myopic. It is treated almost exclusively as a humanitarian problem — that is, a problem of human rights; or it is treated as religious problem — that is, a problem for the church.

Here I want to focus on Christian persecution as a political issue. In other words, the important issue is not just what happens to those Christian communities that experience persecution; the important issue is also what happens to **the common good of societies that permit persecution**. That is, when societies organize or permit the persecution of Christian churches, what opportunities for civic and political progress do they forego, and what civic and political harms do they invite?

These two issues — the historical and the contemporary — are integrally interrelated because the profound civic consequences of Christian persecution today can be appreciated only in light of an historically rooted understanding of the Christian church's characteristic civic contributions — and particularly its innovative contributions to freedom.

To put it another way, we cannot fully understand the characteristic civic costs of Christian persecution around the world today without a prior understanding of the church's characteristic contributions to freedom in history. We cannot really know what damage persecuting societies tend to do to themselves without grasping what civic and political good Christian communities tend to do across the time and space of history. We cannot fully understand the civic loss vast portions of the world are suffering when they persecute, drive out, and even destroy Christian communities without a prior understanding of what the world has gained from the courageous witness of Christian communities across nearly two millennia.

### **Why care?**

But before I talk about the message and witness that persecuted Christians have often brought, I first want to say a bit more about why we should focus on these issues at all. Why, really should we care, about persecuted Christian communities? Why should the wider world care? And why should we care about the civic contributions persecuted Christian communities have made in history and the present day?

**The first reason is a sheer quantitative reason — the sheer magnitude of Christian persecution is enormous.** As John Allen noted yesterday, the Christian church probably suffers a greater share of global religious persecution than any other religious community. According to the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, some 100 million Christians are victims of severe religious persecution — about three-quarters the total number of such victims worldwide. That's a different source and statistic than the ones John Allen quoted yesterday, but remarkably consistent with what he quoted. In other words, the sheer fact that Christian persecution represents such a large part of the global epidemic of religious persecution makes it important to understand in its own right and a strategic starting-point for understanding the phenomenon of religious persecution as a whole. If we can put in place a system for understanding and dealing with widespread Christian persecution, as John Allen sagely observed yesterday, we will be in an excellent position to understand and deal with other kinds of persecution as well.

**In addition to that quantitative reason, there is a second, qualitative reason for being concerned about persecuted Christian communities** — namely, that the situation of

Christian communities is a useful barometer of the true quality of civic life and political health and freedom throughout the world.

The fact is that millions of Christians live as vulnerable religious minorities around the world. And the situation of these Christian minorities is a useful test of the wider state of global freedom. According to the Pew Forum, more than 200 million Christians “live in countries where they are a religious minority.” The report goes on to observe, “If all these Christians were in a single country, it would have the second-largest Christian population in the world, after [only] the United States.”

The situation of these Christians can be likened to a canary in the coal mine — that is, it is not only important in itself, but it is an index of the quality of the civic environment in which they live. As Lord Acton observed in his great essay, “The History of Freedom in Antiquity,” **“The most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities.”**

**A third reason it is so important to focus attention on persecuted Christian communities and their contributions is that these topics suffer so much neglect due to deep-seated blind-spots in the academy.**

On the historical side, a certain established orthodoxy has settled over scholarly thinking concerning the relationship between the Christian church and political freedom. Consider the work of political philosopher John Rawls, who has exerted a towering impact on generations of political scientists, philosophers, legal scholars, practicing lawyers, public policy professionals, and judges. In his major works of political theory, such as *Political Liberalism*, Rawls begins with what might be considered the equivalent of a Genesis narrative concerning the origins of political freedom. Once upon a time, there was “Christianity,” which was “authoritarian,” “expansionist,” and dominated by an elite of “clergy” who had special access to the Truth and to the means of Grace. Far from making positive intellectual or institutional contributions to the historical development of political freedom, on this near-canonical account, Christianity created intractable problems for freedom that only liberalism could solve. Indeed, to put it more bluntly, Christianity was the problem

In other words, according to a view dating back at least to the Enlightenment, and which is evident in the work of John Rawls and many other influential scholars, the Christian church and political freedom are completely at odds. In a major study by Perez Zagorin, it is taken for granted that, quote, “a Christian theory of persecution...long antedated any concept or philosophy of religious toleration and freedom.”<sup>1</sup> A spirit of intolerance and militant proselytization is so embedded in Christianity’s DNA, on this view, that it is believed doctrines of liberalism, democracy, and freedom of conscience had to emerge independently of Christianity and indeed in direct revolt against Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 16.

If this account of the conventional wisdom now prevailing in the academy may seem far-fetched, consider that in a recent issue of the academic journal *Contemporary Sociology*, a senior sociologist at the University of Pennsylvania summarized, quote, “the net effects of religion and faith on happiness.”

What did he conclude was the net effect of religion on happiness? Quote: “a few thousand of years of horrible wars, genocide, slavery’s ideology, sexual exploitation, torture, devaluing others as not human, terrorism, and organized hatred.” And what this widespread view encourages is the belief that whatever persecution Christian communities are experiencing must be deserved — must be a legitimate response to the Christianity’s own intolerance. According to the prominent New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, for example, this was the real reason for Roman persecution of early Christianity. Johnson writes, and I quote, “Rome’s unusual intolerance in [Christianity’s] case was a response to [Christianity’s] own intolerance of diversity.”<sup>2</sup>

Such views are not confined to ivory towers. Consider a court case involving the 1999 murder of an Australian missionary and his two young sons by Hindu extremists in India. The highest court in the world’s largest democracy, the Republic of India, issued a judgment about this case, in January 2011 that, and I quote, “though [the missionary] and his two minor sons were burnt to death while they were sleeping inside a station wagon..., the intention was to teach [him] a lesson...about his religious activities, namely, converting poor tribals to Christianity.... It is undisputed that *there is no justification for interfering in someone’s belief by way of...conversion....*”<sup>3</sup> Based on this logic, the Indian Supreme Court commuted the sentence of those found guilty of murder in the case from death to life imprisonment.

Christians may face persecution, in other words, but they deserve the persecution they experience.

### **What is the truth?**

If that is the prejudice, what is the truth? How **have** persecuted Christians acted as witnesses to freedom? How **have** they borne a message of religious freedom and political freedom? In history and the present day? Of course, given limited time, I can only offer what will inevitably be a crude and hasty summary..... For more details, stay tuned and keep an eye on the Religious Freedom Project’s unfolding research on “Christianity and Freedom.”

There is a significant and growing body of evidence that persecuted Christian communities have incubated innovative doctrines of individual and institutional religious freedom, which, in turn, generated new concepts of political freedom.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, “Religious Rights and Christian Texts,” in John Witte, Jr. and Johan D. van der Vyver, eds., *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective: Religious Perspectives* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff Publishers, 1996), 66.

<sup>3</sup> DARA SINGH vs. REPUBLIC OF INDIA, Jan 21, 2011.

First, there is evidence that persecuted Christians developed a remarkably robust concept of religious freedom very early in Christian history. Moreover, the evidence suggests that this concept was more than a tactical plea for tolerance in the face of Roman persecution. Rather, it was a principled, full-throated defense of an individual right of religious freedom for all people — I underline that phrase, **for all people** — not just Christians.

For example, a number of early church fathers who were part of Christian communities that faced cycles of aggressive persecution reflected and built on Pauline teaching concerning faith, freedom, and conscience. For example, long before Martin Luther, and even long before Augustine, several early fathers were drawn to Paul's teaching in the epistle to the Romans that "[e]ach one should be fully convinced in his own mind" and "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14: 5, 23).

Inspired by such Pauline teaching, and in the face of waves of persecution that put their own lives and their lives of their fellow believers in the balance, early church fathers such as Tertullian (ca. 160-220) and Lactantius (ca. 240–320) emphasized inner, uncoerced persuasion as the heart of religious faith.

This is powerfully evident in the *Apology*, Tertullian's first great work, written in about 197 or 198. Directly addressing those Roman magistrates who were actively persecuting Christians, Tertullian makes a case for religious liberty a central argument in his highly aggressive polemic. To repel the charge that Christians were guilty of sacrilege, he throws the charge back in the face of the Romans — how is that for courage in the face of the prospect of martyrdom? And he argues that the Roman policy of religious coercion was not a sign of their much-vaunted *pietas* — the piety the Romans boasted was the secret of their imperial success — but a sign of their lack of respect for religion and piety. "See that you do not give a reason for impious religious practice by taking away religious liberty (*libertatem religionis*) and prohibiting choice (*optio*) in divine matters," insisted Tertullian, the father of Latin Christianity, "so that I may not worship as I wish (*velim*), but am forced to worship what I do not wish."<sup>4</sup>

In a later writing, a letter to the proconsul Scapula, proconsul of Carthage, written in 212 AD, precisely 1800 years ago, in terms that are remarkable in a pre-modern thinker, he argued that "[i]t is a human right (*humani iuris*) and a natural power or natural privilege (*naturalis potestatis*) that one should worship whatever he intends (*quod putaverit colere*); the religious practice of one person neither harms nor helps another."<sup>5</sup>

I cannot underscore enough that the fact that we should encounter these passages in Tertullian is truly astounding. To the extent that people have any clear knowledge of Tertullian, they tend to know him for two things.

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<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *Apology* 24.6-10. For pointing me to these texts, I thank the patristic scholar Robert Louis Wilken.

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, Chapter II, 1-2. The translation of the same text in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, Volume 3, is more adventurous but still properly reflects its unmistakable radicalism: "However, it is a *fundamental human right, a privilege of nature*, that every man should worship according to his own convictions: one man's religion neither harms nor helps another man" [emphasis mine].

FIRST. If they have read their Edward Gibbon, they know that Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* gives an account of Tertullian that is, shall we say, less than flattering. The picture Gibbon paints, partly based on passages from Tertullian's work, *On the Theater*, is of a harsh and moralistic early Christian theologian.

SECOND. They might know him as the source of the following quotation: "The blood of Christians is [the] seed [of the Church]." Of course, you will recognize that quotation as the source of the title of our conference.

Together, these two isolated bits of information about Tertullian — Gibbon's unflattering portrait of Tertullian as a fanatic and the famous quotation about the blood of Christians — yield a somewhat distorted image of Tertullian.

If one knows nothing else about Tertullian, they imply a picture of the church father as humorless, masochistic, and puritanical — someone who was puritanically repelled by pleasure and morbidly attracted to suffering.

The truth is that Tertullian was infinitely more complex. For one thing he could be extremely funny — notwithstanding our image of him (inherited from Gibbon) as a grim and moralistic fanatic. He even joked about — of all things — Christian martyrdom. He poked delicious fun at the Roman tendency to blame every disaster or calamity on the Christians. Here is Tertullian's description of this Roman tendency in his famous *Apology*: "If the Tiber rises so high it floods the walls, or the Nile so low it doesn't flood the fields, if the earth opens, or the heavens don't, if there is famine, if there is plague, instantly the howl goes up, **"The Christians to the lion!"**

To which Tertullian adds: "What, all of them? to a single lion?"

Well, if anyone had the right to joke about Christian martyrdom, it was Tertullian.

But the point is that he and his fellow Christians were sufficiently courageous in the face of persecution — and even sufficiently light-hearted, amazingly enough — that they not only could joke about persecution.

They were also able to respond to it with extraordinary theological and conceptual creativity. They did not respond to it in the way we might have expected them to respond, merely by heaping apocalyptic warning and condemnation on their persecutors. Nor did they simply reactively plead for mercy.

Instead, they aggressively and fearlessly appealed to the consciences of the Roman magistrates to recognize what they took to be universal principles of liberty and justice.

A century later, Lactantius, who became known in the Renaissance as the "Christian Cicero" because of the elegance of his Latin rhetoric and his interest in Ciceronian themes such as justice and civic responsibility, defended religious freedom in similar terms: "[N]othing is so much a matter of free will as religion," Lactantius argued in his great *Divine Institutes*. In

contrast to a conception of religion as having merely to do with bodily ritual, Lactantius insisted that the proper worship of God requires both a “full commitment” (*maximam devotionem*) and a “blameless life.”<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, because Christianity centered around the *ecclesia* — the church was literally an “assembly,” a word with inescapably political connotations — the defense of religious freedom for Tertullian, Lactantius, and other early Christians necessarily involved the defense of their right to form a distinct community accountable ultimately to God alone. As Tertullian wrote to the Roman Proconsul of Carthage in 212, “We have no master but God.... But those whom you regard as masters are only men, and one day they themselves must die. Yet still this community will be undying....”<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the freedom to which persecuted Christians bore witness was not just a freedom of private “cult,” a private freedom of worship. Rather, it was the freedom of a new community to organize itself independently of the political authority and to bear public witness to the Christian event. Messenger and message were thus indissolubly fused: an autonomous new messenger, the Christian *ecclesia*, taught and embodied a new freedom that was personal and public.

To put it most bluntly, persecuted Christians could bear witness to freedom because they already knew they were free. And they acted like they were free — even on pain of death.

On its face, therefore, the doctrine enunciated by the church’s early theologians ran radically contrary to ancient practice. In the “theocratic ordering of society” widespread in the ancient world, the pattern was “to endow the ruler who controls the physical apparatus of state coercion with a sacral role also as head and symbol of the people’s religion,” as in the claim that the Roman Caesar was *Pontifex Maximus*.<sup>8</sup> Occasionally, such theocratic systems adopted policies of limited religious tolerance, as in the edict of Emperor Ashoka in India — laudable as it was — that “a man must not...disparage [the sect] of another man without reason.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, early church teaching was not a merely tactical plea for forbearance. It was a principled doctrine of “religious liberty” *per se*. Indeed, the very phrase, *libertatem religionis*, is one that Tertullian seems to have invented. Furthermore, the early church grounded its conception and defense of religious liberty in a voluntarist and personalist view of the nature of religion. In addition, it was framed in terms of an individual power or right to adhere to the religion of one’s own choice — a power and right possessed by each and every person, not just Christians. Finally, it emphasized that religious liberty has necessarily communal and public dimensions, along with interior and individual dimensions — i.e. *libertas ecclesiae* as well as *libertas personae*.

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<sup>6</sup> Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, Book V, Chapters 19-20.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam*, Chapter V, 5-6, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Church*, Volume 3.

<sup>8</sup> Brian Tierney, *The Crisis of Church and State, 1050-1300* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 236.

Furthermore, this courageous, creative witness of the early persecuted church yielded important political consequences. Elizabeth Digeser, Robert Wilken, and other scholars suggest that Christian advocacy of religious freedom influenced imperial policy. By 310, Lactantius had joined the court of Constantine himself, and his *Divine Institutes* were recited in Constantine's presence. The result, it seems, is that the church father had such a significant impact that ultimately "Constantine followed the principles and rhetoric of the Lactantian policy of religious freedom."<sup>10</sup> Imperial edicts ending Christian persecution increasingly reflected early Christian arguments for religious freedom. The Edict of Milan, for example, echoed the arguments (and even phrases) of Tertullian and Lactantius by granting "both to Christians and to all persons the freedom [*libera potestas*] to follow whatever religion each one wished" (quoting the text of the Edict).

More broadly, the early church's insistence on "*libertas ecclesiae*" created a permanent tension between two authorities or "two sovereignties," the Church and the State, and "[f]rom this tension would grow liberty."<sup>11</sup> In particular, Pope Gelasius' 5th century letter to the Byzantine emperor asserted both the church's sovereignty and limits to the powers of government. In so doing, the pope "'desacralized' politics and ... opened up the possibility of a politics of consent, in place of the politics of divine right or the politics of coercion."<sup>12</sup> Thus did the early church's distinctive principles contribute not just to the development of religious liberty but to a new concept of political freedom, which included incipient notions of limited government and an independent civil society not subject to the authority of the state.

On the *contemporary* side, persecuted Christian minorities today are carrying an extraordinarily clear and courageous message of political freedom and transformation. Christian churches today that are demanding a robust *libertas ecclesiae* — a robust freedom of the church — represents a serious challenge to the hegemony of the regime. For example, consider the extraordinary case of the Shouwang Protestant House church in Beijing, China. The Shouwang Protestant Church has undertaken strenuous efforts to win the simple and basic freedom to meet and to function — not, I note, anything like free elections or democracy or anything like that. But the Chinese government instantly understands that the demands of persecuted Christians for basic freedom have powerful political implications. After a government crackdown on the Shouwang Church, the state-owned *Global Times* newspaper commented, "a church should not become a power which can promote radical change. . . . Otherwise, the church is not engaged in religion but in politics, which is not allowed for a church." In other words, the Chinese government seeks to suppress this Christian church precisely because it is afraid of its potential to exercise *autonomous political and civic influence in society and serve as a counterweight to the state*. Based on a wide reading of history as well as the contemporary evidence, the Chinese government is quite right to be afraid. But the church continues to bear courageous witness, despite the ongoing pressure and persecution.

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Leithart, *Defending Constantine* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 112. See especially Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> J.M. Roberts, *The Penguin History of Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 94. See also Joseph Lecler, *The Two Sovereignties: A Study of the Relationship between Church and State* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952).

<sup>12</sup> George Weigel, "Catholicism and Democracy," in Weigel, *Freedom and Its Discontents* (EPPC, 1991). 38.

To put the point positively, when Christians enjoy freedom from persecution the implications are sweeping. Just as the decision to grant religious freedom to Christians and other religious believers in the Roman Empire through the Edict of Milan had enormous implications for the development of Western civilization, including the notion of a religious sphere rightly independent of the State, free and independent Christian communities in the world today are a vehicle for wider freedom and social transformation. National and transnational churches liberated from persecution can be multipliers for change and freedom along several dimensions — political, economic, individual liberties, and the rights and freedoms of women. We have seen this dynamic in U.S. history, from the colonial quest for religious and social liberties to the prophetic role of African-American churches leading the Civil Rights Movement.

Recent global history bears this out. As demonstrated in the recent book I co-authored with Dan Philpott and Monica Toft, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, Christian communities played a significant pro-democratic role in 41 of the 78 countries that experienced democratic progress between 1972 and 2009. That is, they found that Christian churches were a pro-democratic force multiplier in *more than half of all cases of democratic progress during that nearly forty-year period*, which is consistent with Samuel Huntington's earlier findings concerning the "third wave" of democratization between 1974 and 1991. Notably, according to *God's Century*, Christian churches were important agents of democratic change even in contexts where they were a small and sometimes persecuted minority community, such as in Taiwan and South Korea. However, Toft, Philpott, and Shah found that churches could play this positive role *only when they enjoyed at least a modicum of freedom from state control and repression*.

### **In conclusion....**

The relationship between the Christian church and political freedom is not an isolated concern or a merely theoretical issue. It bears on fundamental ethical and practical problems that go beyond issues of religion or theology to encompass basic questions of human rights, democracy, peace, and freedom from political oppression.

In the words of Associate Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, in a concurring opinion handed down early in 2012 in the Court's unanimous judgment in *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission et al*:

*Throughout our Nation's history, religious bodies have been the preeminent example of private associations that have 'act[ed] as critical buffers between the individual and the power of the State.'.... [HE THEN GOES ON:] [I]t is easy to forget that the autonomy of religious groups, both here in the United States and abroad, has often served as a shield against oppressive civil laws.*

In other words, what is at stake in the case of the global persecution of Christian minorities is not just how a particular religious group is being treated. What is at stake is how, if at all,

relatively unfree societies can build regimes of ordered liberty. As Lord Acton insisted, how much security such religious groups enjoy is the acid test of how free any society really is.