





# LIGHT

KINGDOM • CULTURE • MISSION



Summer 2019  
Volume 5, Issue 1

## A HIDDEN WORLD

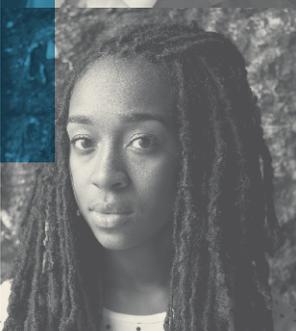
Christian Faithfulness  
in the Face of Persecution



# Is your church doing all it can to confront the abuse crisis?



RUSSELL MOORE • BETH MOORE • RACHAEL DENHOLLANDER • GARY HAUGEN • JACKIE HILL-PERRY • AND MORE



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# Why We Should Care About Persecuted Christians

No matter how globalized the world has become, cricket is still paid more attention to in the United Kingdom than baseball, and in the United States the reverse is true. We tend to pay attention most to what's close to us, or "relatable."

And, for many people, international issues aren't "relatable" and don't seem relevant. Yet, if you want to see the relevance of international religious freedom and the persecution of religious minorities, you really don't have to look very far.

For example, look at any Baptist church. The Baptist church in your community may seem local because of the sign for a bake sale or food drive for local flood victims, but that Baptist church is part of the story of international religious persecution. The Baptist movement didn't start in a megachurch sanctuary or a street-corner revival tent. As Baptists, our story began as a refugee group fleeing religious persecution to find sanctuary in another country.

That's not just our past. The Bible continually reminds the people of God to remember their long-ago stories of persecution and desperation. "You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," God said through Moses (Lev. 19:33-34). When we remember our own story—one of persecution and of God's mercy through that persecution—we find compassion for those who are facing it now.

The Baptist church sign in your community should remind you not only of the past story of persecution but also of present reality. No such church signs—openly announcing evangelism campaigns and worship services—now exist in places such as North Korea or China or Saudi Arabia or Iran. But those of us who worship in relative tranquility are called to solidarity with those who are in harm's way. A church that ignores the persecuted around the world is a church that has forgotten its own identity.

But freedom from persecution is a right for all created in the image of God, not just Christians. God brings the nations to him by the gospel of grace through faith, not by those who would substitute the sword of the Spirit with a sword of steel. The rising tide of violence against religious minorities—whatever their religions—should be a shock to the consciences of Christians. The persecution of Uighurs in China, Yazidis in Iraq, and Jews almost everywhere should drive Christians to prayer and action. An authoritarian or totalitarian state that can take dominion over the conscience can take dominion over anything, and that we should oppose.

At the same time, a focus on religious persecution should give us hope and joy. If we don't pay attention, we are robbed of the exuberance of seeing the kingdom of God pressing forward in places like Cuba and Sudan. Though scary in the moment, persecuting regimes are temporary. The executed martyrs are victims on earth, but in the heavenly places are the enthroned overcomers (Rev. 20:4). And, one day, Jesus' prayer will be fully realized, and the kingdom of God will come on earth as it is in heaven.

On that day, there will be no Pharaohs, no Caesars, no Ayatollahs, no central committees. There will only be a Christ, and a God who is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), reigning over a people too numerous to count (Rev. 7:9). Whatever our nations of background, we'll have unity. Maybe then we'll even agree on what football is. Even if not, we'll agree on who the King of glory is. For he'll be standing right in front of us, with nail scars on his hands and a wound in his side but with no persecution in sight.



A CHURCH THAT  
IGNORES THE  
PERSECUTED AROUND  
THE WORLD IS A  
CHURCH THAT HAS  
FORGOTTEN ITS  
OWN IDENTITY.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Russell Moore".

RUSSELL MOORE  
PRESIDENT, ERLC

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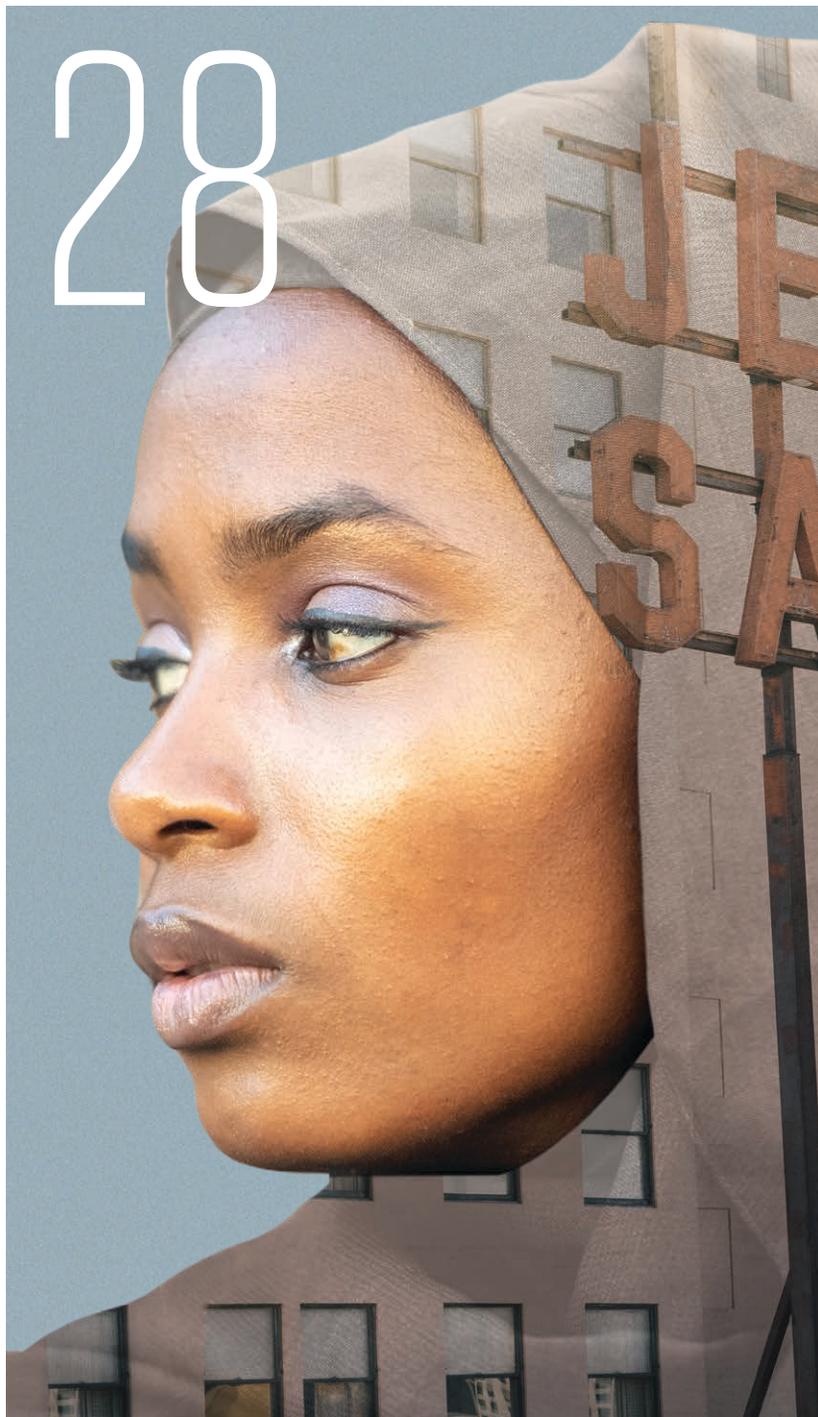
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# LIGHT

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# Of Whom the World Was Not Worthy

Our church is studying Mark 7 and reading, afresh, the courageous martyrdom of John the Baptist. John's message of repentance was popular, until it wasn't, and the head of state silenced him by taking his life.

In America, we are worried about the growing antagonism toward biblical Christianity and the places where it conflicts with the cultural ethos. At the ERLC, we are working every day to ensure that Baptist Christians can live out their callings without fear of government intrusion. But while we fight for the preservation of religious liberty here, we must not forget that for many of our brothers and sisters around the world, there is no religious liberty at all.

So, we wanted to devote an entire issue of our magazine to highlight areas around the world where this freedom is most imperiled. We are doing this because we want the American church to know and pray and speak up for those for whom preaching the gospel is a life-and-death risk.

I'm grateful to our incredible policy team in Washington, D.C., lead by Travis Wussow. He and several others have worked tirelessly to feature the stories of global issues. And we've invited other friends to contribute. Jayson Caspar, frequent foreign correspondent for *Christianity Today*, joins us with a powerful piece about the complicated relationships in Egypt between Christians and Muslims in a post Arab-Spring context. Bryant Wright, senior pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church and past president of the Southern Baptist Convention, writes on a theology of suffering and martyrdom. Linda Lowry from Open Doors shares an update on some of the most dangerous places to be a Christian. And we have interviews with Ambassador Sam Brownback and Nina Shea, both of whom help us understand the complexities of international religious freedom.

As we put together this issue, I kept coming back to a passage in Hebrews that describes the brave martyrs down through church history. These people gave their lives for the proclamation of the gospel, and it was said of them, "the world was not worthy." But Heaven knows their name. And now, as you read these pages, we hope you will remember our brothers and sisters who courageously live out their faith for the sake of the One who called them.



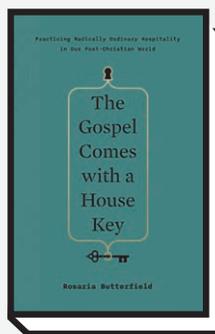
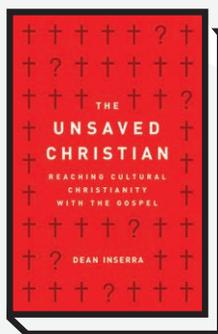
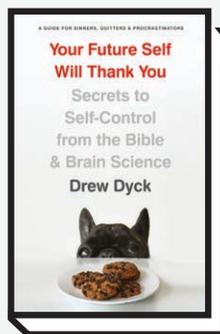
DANIEL DARLING  
EDITOR, *LIGHT* MAGAZINE



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BUT WHILE WE FIGHT  
FOR THE PRESERVATION  
OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY  
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FORGET THAT **FOR MANY  
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AND SISTERS AROUND  
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NO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY  
AT ALL.**

# Books



## 1 Your Future Self Will Thank You by DREW DYCK

Somewhere along the way “habits” became a bad word in the evangelical world. In *Your Future Self Will Thank You*, Drew Dyck seeks to show how habits can and should be used to cultivate the self-control to which Jesus calls us. Not only that, but self-control is a way believers may both cultivate love for God and guard against temptation. Ultimately, Dyck notes, “biblical self-control is about keeping our love in the right order.”

Behind the premise of this excellent book is a recognition of the reality of humanity as both fallen and limited. It shows a wide-ranging familiarity with the very best of Christian and secular resources on willpower and habit formation and synthesizes this material nicely. In all, Dyck’s book is remarkably helpful: saturated in Scripture and grounded in biblical wisdom. In our evangelical world where so much of the collective imagination centers on “celebrity” Christian leaders and emotional spiritual experiences, Dyck provides a useful return to the centrality of the “ordinary” in the Christian life. So much of the Christian life is about the little habits, the seemingly unseen decisions, and Dyck’s focus on these provides a much-needed resource for the church. —DANIEL PATTERSON

## 2 The Unsavable Christian by DEAN INSERRA

We are in a renaissance for global missions and church planting. Young Christians everywhere are raising their hands and asking the Lord to send them to the least churched and most unreached people groups in the world. For this, we should be grateful. But as we go to the cities and the nations, we should not forget that some of the most religiously saturated areas of our country are also the most lost. This is the provocative yet true assertion Dean Inserra makes in *The Unsavable Christian*. Inserra knows of what he speaks, having planted a church in the middle of the Bible belt in his home city of Tallahassee, Florida. I found this book deep and insightful while also humorous. Inserra does a thorough analysis of cultural Christianity and offers churches a blueprint for reaching those who think they know Jesus but don’t. —CHELSEA SOBOLIK

## 3 The Gospel Comes with a House Key by ROSARIA BUTTERFIELD

*The Gospel Comes with a House Key* presents a rich theology of hospitality, calling Christians to see our homes as gifts to be given to the broken, lonely, and spiritually destitute.

“Radical Ordinary Hospitality,” as Butterfield terms it, is marked by open invitations, the disruption of regular routines, and living below our means in order to use God-given resources to serve others. Hospitality, and even more fundamentally, true Christian friendship, is at the heart of how we bring life to the world and proclaim the truths of the gospel to people in need of mercy and healing.

This book encourages Christians to see hospitality as a means of restoring dignity to all of our neighbors—the prisoner, the immigrant and refugee, the drug addict, and the dying. It is through open homes, willing hearts, and ready hands that God brings his Kingdom to earth. —LAUREN RAE KONKOL

# The Contested Public Square

A REVIEW Josh Wester

It is often said that Christianity is too political. To our shame, Christians—especially in the United States—have too-often been swept into the fray of partisan politics in ways that are less than helpful to our public witness. Yet, the situation is more complicated than it appears. This is because authentic Christianity cannot be separated from politics. The problem is not that Christianity has become too political, but that most Christians have badly underestimated just how political our faith really is.

In *The Contested Public Square: The Crisis of Christianity and Politics*, Greg Forster offers an invaluable introduction to the robust tradition of Christian political thought. He narrates the sweeping history of Christianity's rise from obscure sect within first-century Judaism to modern, global religion. Each chapter gives attention to a distinct period in history as Forster draws out the political ideals that emerged from Christianity's repeated confrontation of new questions and circumstances.

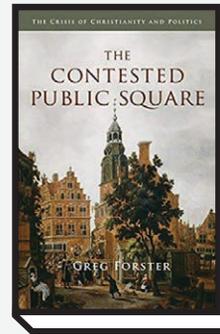
## CONTEXT WE NEED

While space does not permit a detailed exploration of Forster's work, there are at least three major themes appearing throughout the book. The first is that contemporary Christian political thought was birthed from a robust tradition. Though the early church lived as a persecuted minority, with many saints suffering martyrdom at the hands of Rome, the political influence of Christianity was felt from the very beginning and eventually penetrated the heart of the empire. Forster's treatment of the early church and the theology of Augustine, Aquinas, and the

Reformers demonstrates persuasively the richness and depth of Christian political thought as it was forged through history.

The second is that Christian political thought is built upon principles, but few prescriptions. From the outset, Forster makes clear "the New Testament offers nothing that can even remotely be called a general theory or philosophy of politics" (26). Instead, he argues that God bestows upon humanity both reason and conscience to enable them to navigate political questions (30). But far from undermining its value, Forster makes this assertion to underscore the significance of the accumulated wisdom of Christian political theory. This lack of explicit instruction does mean that Christians will sometimes reach different conclusions regarding specific issues. But ultimately, Forster demonstrates that the Christian tradition represents the time-tested application of basic biblical principles about such things as justice and the state to political questions in the real world.

Finally, Forster demonstrates that Christianity's political philosophy has been immensely influential throughout history. Far from being a religion of utility, Forster highlights again and again the myriad ways that Christian thought has meaningfully shaped the course of human events. Aquinas' natural law theory essentially undergirds our legal system, while the concept of the nation-state emerged largely as a result of the Reformation. Similarly, the roots of liberal democracy and the idea of religious freedom can both be traced back to the Christian political tradition.



THE PROBLEM IS NOT THAT CHRISTIANITY HAS BECOME TOO POLITICAL, BUT THAT MOST CHRISTIANS HAVE BADLY UNDERESTIMATED JUST HOW POLITICAL OUR FAITH REALLY IS.

These concepts and many others derived from the history of Christian political thought continue to influence the way we think about society and state.

## IDEAS WE CAN USE

Forster writes as an evangelical for evangelicals. The reality is that most of us aren't well-versed in the ideas covered in this book. But we are still called on to live as citizens, and to think and act politically when we exercise our right to vote. In roughly 250 pages, Forster introduces readers to the riches of Christian political thought in a way that is practical, accessible, and clear. And within these pages, he serves as a faithful guide, helping us navigate the contours of the Christian tradition.

No single volume can cover everything. And while there are certain points where I wish Forster's treatment could be more nuanced, if I could recommend only one resource on this topic, it would be this book. *The Contested Public Square* offers a roadmap from which Christians can make sense of the present by tracing their way back to the beginning. Perhaps if more Christians took the time to understand the robust political tradition that we've inherited, the current state of affairs would be more encouraging. ★

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**Joshua B. Wester** serves as the director of strategic initiatives in the Office of the President at the ERLC.

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# Pluralism and Gospel Ministry on the Arabian Peninsula

Brian Parks

Ever since the seventh century when Mohammed established Mecca as the most important city for Islamic worship and piety, the Arabian Peninsula has been seen as the land of Islam. Today the peninsula is comprised of seven nations: Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. Many of them have become independent nations only in the last 100 years, and Islam is the official religion in each of those nations. But Christianity has history here, too, and even now there is a growing evangelical

presence allowed and protected despite the Western media narrative.

The Apostle Paul spent some years in Arabia, and Arabian Jews are mentioned as being present on the day of Pentecost to hear Peter's public call to turn to Christ in faith. Since then, there have been pioneer missionaries like Samuel Zwemer in Bahrain and other countries nearby around the turn of the 19th century. Medical missionaries were welcomed to the United Arab Emirates in the early 1950s before the country officially formed in 1971. The

benefit of their friendship-building is still being felt today as church-run hospitals stand as a testament to their faithful work and the host country's welcoming attitude.

## **SURPRISING TOLERANCE**

The majority of the Arabian Peninsula countries have allowed the regulated establishment of church buildings and for Christians to gather for regular worship. Additionally, almost all of the governments have freely given the land on which these churches exist. Those compounds are the

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## VISITORS OFTEN COMMENT ON THE THRILL OF WORSHIPPING IN SERVICES SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE FROM UP TO 80 DIFFERENT NATIONS.

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only official places that church buildings are allowed. Still, an ordinarily cooperative relationship exists between government authorities and the leaders of the churches.

This tolerance and openness to Christianity's presence is often surprising to our Western friends and family. They ask whether the women in our family are required to wear a burqa or whether we feel safe being Christians here in a Muslim country. Wearing a headscarf is not required by the laws of the land, and we feel far safer here than in any major Western city. We have Muslim friends and neighbors who would help us at a moment's notice. Unfortunately, movies, television, and major news organizations don't communicate these facts well. And while there are anti-proselytizing laws in most of the Arabian Peninsula countries, conversations with neighbors, friends, and even strangers about religion are far easier and much more welcome than in the West.

### EXPATRIATE INFLUENCE

The population of the UAE is approximately 15 percent local citizens and 85 percent expatriate. And though South Asian Hindus make up the majority of that 85 percent, there has also been an influx of people who identify as Christian. When they arrive here, they often don't know that churches even exist in the country, but many find their way to churches nevertheless.

In the UAE, over the past two decades, there has even been what one pastor

friend has called "a slow-rolling revival." As a result, evangelical churches have not only been forming and meeting in the church compounds but even outside them with tacit government approval as well. In my city, one multinational evangelical church has planted three others throughout the country, which have, in turn, planted three more. And some churches have experienced revitalization and reformation in the past 20 years.

In addition to the growth in numbers and health of evangelical churches, there has been the growth of parachurch ministries. In one Arabian Peninsula country, a university student ministry has sprung up in the last 15 years that has grown to the point of being able to impact more than 23 other universities in two countries with Bible discussion groups and periodic conferences. Another parachurch ministry to high school youth has flourished in partnership with churches who welcome them in to assist in their youth ministry. These ministries have partnered with churches of a variety of different demographics.

One of the wonderful benefits of experiencing expatriate church life in the Arabian Gulf is the typically multicultural aspect of church membership. Some church services are conducted in languages indigenous to various countries, but many are what would be considered English-speaking International churches. Visitors often comment on the thrill of worshipping in services surrounded by people from up to 80 different nations. Cross-cultural church

life, though challenging in many respects, offers its members an environment that teaches lessons about the reconciling power of the gospel that few monoethnic churches have the privilege to experience. These church congregations are truly a taste of heaven and a preview of what believers will experience as described in Revelation 7:9-10:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

Challenges remain here, too. True religious pluralism is not yet a reality. Often the resistance to full individual religious freedom comes from the families of seekers rather than the government. Still, positive signs for Christians continue to emerge. For example, in an unprecedented step, the UAE welcomed Pope Francis for the first ever papal visit to an Arabian Peninsula country in February. He conducted Mass for over 130,000 people. The visionary leaders of the UAE have also declared 2019 The Year of Tolerance and created a cabinet level Minister of Tolerance. As Protestants, we can celebrate any advance in religious openness on the Arabian Peninsula.

The Apostle Paul says in Colossians 1:5-6:

"... the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing. . ."

That was true in Paul's time and, by God's grace, it's still true today, even on the Arabian Peninsula. ★

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**Brian Parks** is the senior pastor of Covenant Hope Church in Dubai.

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# A Theology of Suffering, Persecution, and Martyrdom

Bryant Wright

Several years ago, I had the privilege of traveling with the IMB on a mission trip through Southeast Asia. My son, George, accompanied us on that journey. In one country, we trekked into a remote jungle area. At the end of that long and arduous trek, George, who is in great shape, was in trouble. He was dehydrated and rapidly declining. It quickly became evident that unless God intervened, given the remoteness of our location, my son wasn't going to make it. We gathered to pray, and God answered. Miraculously, he orchestrated events that allowed George to be evacuated and receive medical attention. Looking back on that experience, I am thankful that God gave me a taste of what it means to suffer for the gospel. Facing the possibility of losing my son was a strong reminder of the risks required in

expanding Christ's Kingdom to the ends of the earth.

There are three types of suffering that Christians endure:

### 1. Suffering due to one's sinful choices.

This would include the emotional distress one experiences as the result of an extra-marital affair or suffering the consequences of incarceration as the result of illegal activity. A biblical example of this is the loss of David's child due to his sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 12:13-14).

### 2. Suffering due to living in a fallen, broken world.

This would include the suffering one experiences through natural disasters, disease, or random violence. Jesus shares an example of this type of suffering in Luke 13:1-5.

**3. Suffering due to gospel advance.** As the gospel advances, hostility will increase (Matt. 24:9-14). As the church forms and the gospel spreads, followers of Christ encounter opposition that leads to imprisonment (Acts 4:1-3, 5:17-18, 8:3, 12:3-4, 16:23-24), violence (Acts 5:40, 14:19, 16:22-23, 21:31-32), and even death (Acts 7:58, 12:1). Suffering experienced due to gospel proclamation is called persecution, and martyrdom is persecution that results in the death of the one proclaiming the gospel.

Paul understood that suffering was to be expected, not avoided. He understood this within the context of his own ministry (Acts 20:23) and trained others to expect the same (Acts 14:22; 2 Tim. 1:8, 11-12, 3:12). Aside from the outright heresy of the "prosperity gospel," many churches in



America, whether intentionally or unintentionally, proclaim a gospel of comfort. In this “gospel,” comfort and safety are prioritized over risk-taking and suffering for the gospel. This flies in the face of what Paul and Peter experienced:

“When you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:20–21).

As followers of Christ, we look to Jesus as the ultimate example of the necessity of suffering in advancing the Kingdom

of God. Jesus understood this reality and explained it to his disciples. Yet even his disciples questioned whether his suffering and death would be necessary to advance his Kingdom. Peter, in particular, took Jesus aside and rebuked him for even suggesting that he might suffer, let alone die. Peter’s response, in turn, earned a strong rebuke from Jesus (Matt. 16:21–23). Jesus told his disciples to expect suffering because he himself was going to suffer. In that light, how could his followers not expect to suffer as well (Matt. 10:23–25)?

The reality is that most American Christians will never experience the type of suffering demonstrated in the New Testament and experienced by our brothers and sisters throughout the world. How then can we stand with our brothers and sisters experiencing persecution?

**1. Pray.** Prayer is probably the simplest, yet most foundational way, for the American church to engage with those suffering for the cause of Christ. In Acts, when the early church experienced persecution, they prayed. The church prayed not for relief from suffering, but for boldness to endure (Acts 4:29). The church also prayed for individuals who were persecuted for their faith (Acts 12:5).

**2. Listen.** It is one thing to read about suffering, simply understanding it as an abstract concept. It is another thing to sit across from a person and hear about their suffering. We are given the opportunity to learn, but also the opportunity to pray.

This is one of the reasons I love going on international mission trips. I not only get to serve with our ministry partners, but I get to hear their stories—stories that inspire me to pray more.

**3. Advocate.** Once we hear stories from our brothers and sisters in persecution, we can share those stories with others. This results in more and more people being exposed to the plight of the persecuted church worldwide. Paul and Barnabas in recounting their missionary journeys to the church in Antioch, Phoenicia and Samaria, and Jerusalem likely included stories of suffering. Far from depressing their audience, we are told from Scripture that their words “brought great joy.” Let us similarly encourage our churches to continue to contend for the faith as we share stories of those who are contending for the faith in the harshest of circumstances.

**4. Send.** As we pray for the persecuted church, listen to their stories, and share their stories with others, we hope many will be inspired to go themselves, taking the gospel to some of the harshest environments and toughest places. At that moment, will we react in fear or faith? Will we be a hindrance to their going or a help in their sending? As Jesus sent his followers out as “sheep amongst wolves,” we need to be ready to send our church members out, not sugarcoating the risks they might face, but secure in the fact that this is not a task we take lightly.

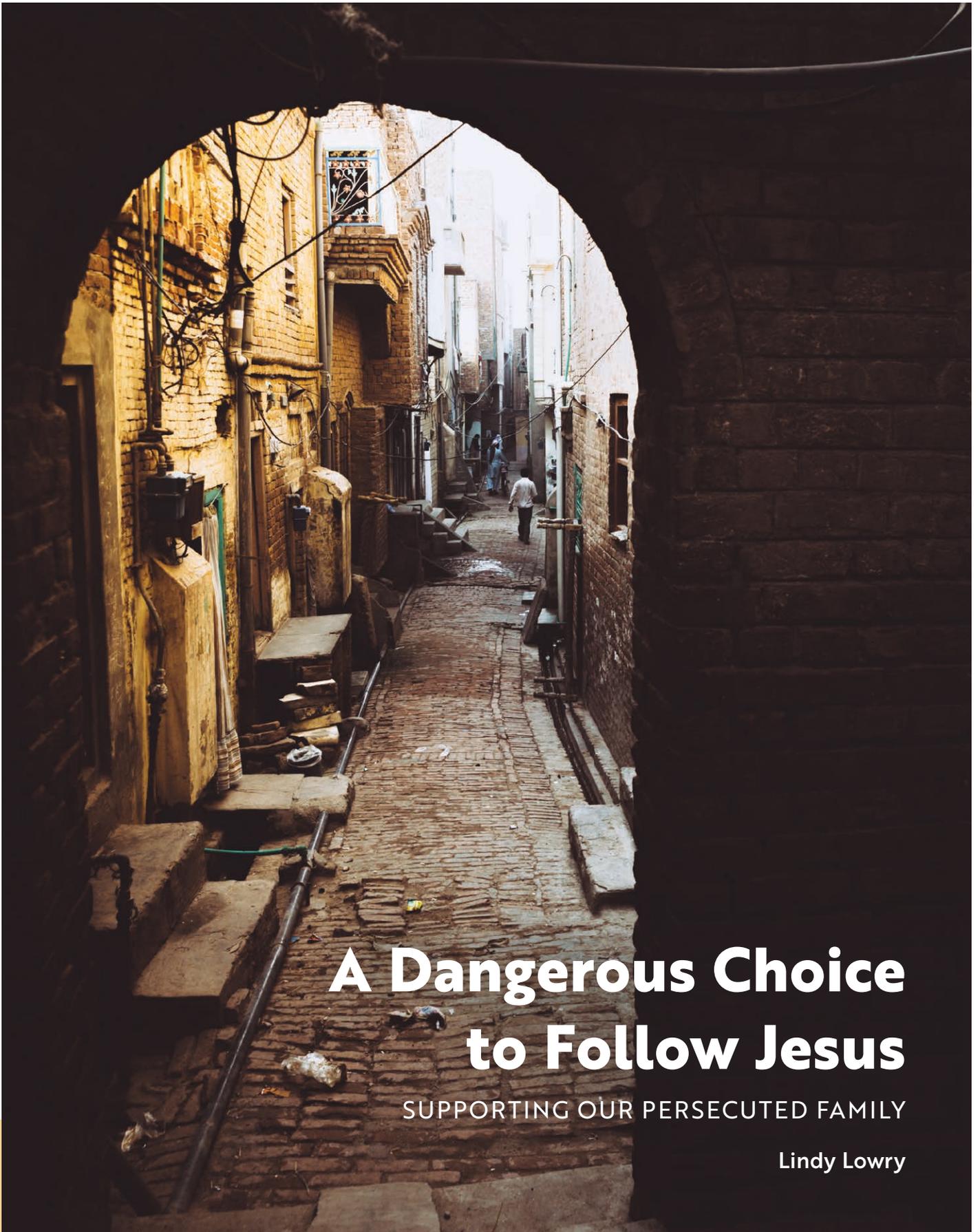
Church in America, let us stand with our brothers and sisters enduring persecution worldwide, and let us take our stand for the sake of the gospel and the glory of God. The apostle Paul reminds us, “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). ★

**Bryant Wright** is senior pastor of Johnson Ferry Baptist Church in Marietta, Georgia.

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AS FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST, WE LOOK TO JESUS AS  
THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE OF THE NECESSITY OF  
SUFFERING IN ADVANCING THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

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# A Dangerous Choice to Follow Jesus

SUPPORTING OUR PERSECUTED FAMILY

Lindy Lowry

**A**ugust 30, 2017, is indelibly marked in the minds of the Masih family. It would be the last day Ilyasab and his wife would hear the voice of their 17-year-old son, Sharoon.

After completing lower education in his village, Sharoon began attending MC Model High School in Burewala City, Pakistan. His first day didn't go well. He wasn't wearing the correct uniform; therefore, he was not allowed to attend class. To add more insult, the teacher slapped him in front of everyone.

That same day, Raza Ahmed, a Muslim student, stopped Sharoon, a Christian, from drinking water from the same cup he and his Muslim classmates were using. To them, Sharoon was an infidel.

After school, Sharoon told his mother that students hated him "because of his religion" and that "he was not comfortable to go to school."

Reluctantly, he went back the next day. He was in Islamic Studies class (a course all Pakistani students must take regardless of their beliefs) when Raza began to beat him after their teacher left the room. Raza continued to beat and kick him until he was unconscious. Pakistani media reports allege Raza's behavior (and possible negligence of school staff) contributed to Sharoon's death.

## **245 MILLION CHRISTIANS PERSECUTED**

The Masih family's story represents more than 245 million Christians worldwide who are persecuted for their choice to follow Jesus. The persecution we read about in Scripture is still happening today. Right now, Christians are under more pressure than in any other time in modern history.

While Christian persecution takes many forms, Open Doors—a Christian ministry focused on advocacy and relief for persecuted believers all over the world—defines it as any hostility experienced as a result of identification with Christ. Throughout the world, Christians like Sharoon and his family continue to

risk imprisonment, loss of their homes and possessions (including custody of their children), torture, beheadings, rape, and even death as a result of their faith.

In more than 73 countries, Christians are living and dying for their faith in places like Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran, and North Korea. Open Doors' 2019 World Watch List ranks the 50 most dangerous countries to be a Christian. Pakistan, where Sharoon's family continues to live, is number five.

## **SNAPSHOTS OF PERSECUTION**

Unfortunately, global persecution against Christians continues to increase. Trends show that countries in Africa, South America, Asia, and the Middle East are intensifying persecution against Christians.

In places like Nigeria, Christians face violent threats from Islamic extremist groups like Boko Haram and militant Fulani herdsmen. In its nine-year insurgency, Boko Haram has reportedly claimed more than 20,000 lives and displaced more than two million people.

In North Korea, Christians are considered enemies of the government. If their faith is discovered, they are arrested and often sent to hard labor camps where they're forced to endure daily interrogations, beatings, and inhumane conditions.

In India, persecution led by radical Hindu nationalists is rapidly increasing as Christians face discrimination and violence against them and their churches. In an effort to make India an all-Hindu

nation, nationalists have publicly vowed to wipe out Christianity by 2021.

And in places like Afghanistan, Iran, and Somalia, following Jesus openly is a death sentence from Islamic extremist groups like al-Shabaab. In other countries like Bangladesh and Tajikistan, Christians are marginalized and ostracized by cultures that treat them like second-class citizens or as part of the "untouchable" caste.

Global persecution is part of the enemy's plan to defeat the Church. Scripture clearly tells us we have an enemy that prowls like a lion, seeking to kill and destroy (1 Pet. 5:8). When Christians are attacked, ostracized, falsely accused, imprisoned, or killed, it's because they have chosen to bear the name of Jesus.

## **ONE BODY, ONE FAMILY, ONE CHURCH**

That's why Scripture is so clear that we are part of *one* global body, one family, one Church. Together, we are advancing the Kingdom.

Sharoon Masih's family is our family. And just like our immediate family, we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters in Christ. God doesn't mince words over how he has called us to respond to one another, wherever we are.

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, the Apostle Paul tells us that "when one part suffers, all suffer together. When one part rejoices, all the parts rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26). In Hebrews 13:3, we're told to "continue to remember those in prison as

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**THE PERSECUTION WE READ ABOUT IN SCRIPTURE  
IS STILL HAPPENING TODAY. RIGHT NOW,  
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if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

In other words, what happens to believers in Pakistan or North Korea is happening to the entire Church. When we grasp this, we begin to see the power of Jesus’ prayer to the Father in John 17. He asked that we would all be one in him. The call for unity is a call that’s dear to the heart of God.

### **CONNECTING TO YOUR PERSECUTED FAMILY**

As part of the body of Christ, we’re compelled to engage and connect with our brothers and sisters. Open Doors offers numerous ways you can engage with persecuted believers around the world.

**1. Pray.** The number one request from persecuted believers is prayer—“pray that we will be strong in the face of persecution.” Ask God to give you his heart for believers who endure persecution because they follow Jesus. Learn more at [opendoorsusa.org/prayerapp](https://opendoorsusa.org/prayerapp).

**2. Read.** The stories of persecuted believers are many. Their faith will inspire you. And throughout many of these stories, we see God’s hand moving over his people. You can connect with thousands of believers at [opendoorsusa.org](https://opendoorsusa.org).

**3. Share.** God has invited us to join him on his mission to “make witnesses to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We do that by

sharing what he’s doing in our lives and in the lives of others—both local and global. He has called all of us to “declare to the next generation the praises of the Lord and his might, and the wonders he has performed.”

Fulfilling Jesus’ Great Commission to make disciples to the ends of the earth requires a response from all of us who are part of the family of God. We can’t afford to look the other way when the Church is suffering for their choice to follow Jesus. *Together*, we are the largest expression of the Son of God on earth. ★

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**Lindy Lowry** is a writer and editor on staff with *Open Doors USA*.

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# Sudan and the Suppression of Freedom

Steven Harris

In February of this year, Omar al-Bashir declared a year-long state of emergency in the wake of escalating, nationwide protests calling on him and his regime to step down. Commentators rightly interpreted Bashir's declaration as providing the mechanism whereby the forceful crackdown on revolutionary protests and demonstrations could be achieved, and the suppression of freedom legitimized. However, in an unexpected turn of events, Bashir was forced out of office by the Sudanese Armed Forces on April 11. The military coup was reportedly led by those closest to him. Bashir, who himself seized power in a 1989 military coup, was on the verge of pushing for

constitutional amendments that would have allowed him to seek a third term.

Though initially in response to a rise in the price of bread, the protests that resulted in Bashir's removal came to represent the collective outcry of the Sudanese people against decades of oppression, violence, and human rights violations.

Under Bashir and the ruling National Congress Party, restriction on free thought and expression was normative—particularly ideological sentiments that criticized and diverged from that of the ruling party. Various forms of media had been censored, newspapers had been confiscated, and journalists and critics had been detained (in some instances, tortured).<sup>1</sup>

## WHY A CIVIL SOCIETY IS GOOD

Scholars have argued that one of the effects of a vibrant civil society is the checking of state power and the resisting of corrupt authoritarian rule.<sup>2</sup> In other words, civil society spaces create the conditions in which democratic ideals and principles can be developed. They constitute the arena where citizens, apart from government influence, can individually and collectively engage in the work of imagining alternative sociopolitical forms of life. To be sure, not all facets of civil society are directly concerned with governmental affairs. However, many aspects of civil society give substantive attention to topics that reflect on governmental leadership—like morality,

behavioral norms, and authority, for example. Religious communities fulfill the definition of that facet of civil society in which the central mission and organizing principles are wholly other and distinct from statecraft. Yet, it is within religious communities in general, and churches in particular, where citizens have a tendency to talk not only about personal change, but societal change as well. It is no wonder, then, that the status of religious freedom in Sudan remains poor.

### RESTRICTING RELIGION

In its 2019 report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom redesignated Sudan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC). In October 2018, it was reported that 12 Christians were arrested from a local church in Darfur. Nine of those arrested were detained for five days, beaten, and subjected to other measures of torture. Of those nine, eight detainees were released only *after* they denounced their Christian faith and announced conversion to Islam. The remaining detainee, a priest, was charged with apostasy after refusing to return to Islam. He was released on bail the next day.<sup>3</sup>

In February 2018, it was reported that an evangelical church building belonging to the Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical Church was demolished. Though

the official charge cited complaints of public disturbances, other reports indicate that the land was desired for Muslim business interests. The 29-year-old church building was one of 27 churches that the Sudanese government identified as soon to be demolished (two of which were demolished in 2017). Since 2014, the Sudanese Minister of Guidance and Religious Endowments has refused to issue permits for the construction of new church buildings.

### THE FUTURE OF FREEDOM

As of today, a Transitional Military Council (TMC) has taken power in Sudan for a stated period of up to two years. However, street protests continue as demonstrators insist that the military rulers immediately transition to a civilian-led government. The United States has also weighed in on the process, with the following statement being released by the State Department on May 8, relaying details of a conversation between Deputy Secretary of State John J. Sullivan and the Chairman of Sudan's TMC, General Abdel Fattah el-Burhan:

The deputy secretary expressed support for the Sudanese people's aspirations for a free, democratic, and prosperous future. He urged the TMC to move expeditiously toward a civilian-led interim government.

. . . Finally, he reiterated the United States' expectation that the TMC respect the human rights of all persons, and encouraged the TMC to allow peaceful protest and freedom of expression consistent with Sudan's human rights obligations.<sup>4</sup>

The last statement by the deputy secretary is particularly important, given the United States' consideration of removing Sudan from the State Sponsors of Terrorism List (SST) as part of a path toward normalization of relations. With Bashir officially removed from power, it will be important to monitor whether the transitional process proceeds in a truly free and democratic direction. Washington has asked the country to expand its efforts to combat terrorism, facilitate access to humanitarian aid, and promote human rights and freedom of religion and press. These changes now appear to be within reach. However, the most recent reports on the region indicate that the current standoff between the transitional military and the protest leaders has come down to whether Islamic Sharia law will be the basis for legislation in the future Sudanese government. For now, the road to Sudanese freedom remains promising. ★

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**Steven Harris** serves as an ERLC policy director, with a particular focus on the U.S. Senate.

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<sup>1</sup> Part of this article has been adapted from a formal testimony given before the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee (Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organization). For the full testimony, see: <https://erlc.com/resource-library/issue-briefs/congressional-testimony-protecting-civil-society-faith-based-actors-and-political-speech-in-sub-saharan-africa>

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of civil societies on the continent of Africa, see, Ebenezer Obadare, ed., *The Handbook of Civil Society in Africa* (New York: Springer, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> See, <http://www.acjps.org/sudan-9-victims-of-torture-forced-to-announce-to-islam/>

<sup>4</sup> See, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2019/05/291554.htm>

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**UNDER BASHIR AND THE RULING NATIONAL CONGRESS PARTY, RESTRICTION ON FREE THOUGHT AND EXPRESSION WAS NORMATIVE—PARTICULARLY IDEOLOGICAL SENTIMENTS THAT CRITICIZED AND DIVERGED FROM THAT OF THE RULING PARTY.**

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# What the Church Should Know About Refugees and Christian Persecution

Q&A WITH ELIZABETH KENDAL

Lindsay Nicolet



**Lindsay Nicolet:** How should Christians think about refugees according to the Bible?

**Elizabeth Kendal:** I can't help but think that if the Church was to be bold and courageous followers of Jesus—filled with compassion, faithful in prayer, committed to mission, and compelled by hope rooted in promise—then we might eventually have less refugees in the world.

Most refugees living among us have suffered enormous loss. Many have missed out on education and are instinctively fearful. Their resettlement may be hampered by culture shock and difficulties with language. While the government has a responsibility to ensure services are available, the Church is to meet a refugee's needs for faithful friendship, deep inner healing, and spiritual guidance. All that is required is compassion, mercy, grace, some degree of understanding, and a willingness to give generously and sacrificially of one's self in obedience to the command: Love your neighbour as yourself (Luke 10:25-37).

**LN:** What are some misconceptions that Christians have of refugees?

**EK:** One misconception is that refugees are inherently dangerous. If the receiving government is doing its job properly, and assessing asylum claims diligently, then that will not be the case.

Refugees hail from states known for their poor human rights. They are usually either political dissidents or members of persecuted ethnic or religious minorities.

Another misconception is that the children of refugees—particularly those born and/or raised in the West—will be fine. However, it is becoming increasingly clear many children of refugees are having a tough time. Though born and/or raised in the West, they often feel dislocated (from their roots) and disconnected (from everyone around them). Unfortunately, some will experience racism and discrimination.

It is absolutely imperative that the Church be engaged. The Church needs to

be there holistically, for the whole family, for the long haul. The difficulties of resettlement cannot be overstated.

This brings me to another misconception: That those who are persecuted or living in a conflict zone will always be better off here in the free Christian West. While those who have fled violent persecution must not be returned to danger, much more should be done to help people stay in their homelands, or at least in their region.

In Iraq, war has decimated the church. Though Christian leaders plead with believers to stay—to help rebuild and to maintain the Christian presence—they know they have nothing to offer other than poverty, hardship, and danger. If governments were to get alongside vulnerable and persecuted Christian communities—providing advocacy, financial aid and practical assistance—then more people might be able to stay in their homeland and among their people.

**LN:** What would our persecuted brothers and sisters around the world want Christians in America to know?

**EK:** Like Lady Zion who repeatedly cries in Lamentations 1 and 2, “Look and see,” they want their fellow believers in America to look and see. They want you to know they exist. For they truly believe that if you were to see and to know, then you would care, and you would act. And the thing persecuted believers want and ask for more than anything—is prayer.

Unfortunately, most Christians in the comfortable, prosperous, free Christian West do not see and do not know of the suffering of their brothers and sisters. The result is a suffocating silence, which is why persecuted Christians are the most invisible people on the earth. This is despite their commonly being indigenous peoples: like the Assyrians in Iraq, the Copts in Egypt, the Nuba in Sudan, the Kachin in northern Burma, or the Papuans in eastern Indonesia.

**LN:** Are there any facts about persecuted Christians that we would be surprised or shocked to know?

**EK:** People might be shocked to know that the impact of persecution on the Church can be devastating. Not all persecuted Christians are faith superheroes who go from strength to strength, enduring so they might keep us supplied with endless inspirational stories. Many persecuted Christians are new believers; lacking scriptures and trained pastors, many have barely started “building on the rock” (Matt. 7:24-27) when the storms of life break in upon them. Many are youths wondering if they want to remain in, or be condemned to, endless hardship and generational poverty on account of their faith. The persecuted Church really does need our prayers and our support.

However, I think the greatest shock would come from knowing that many persecuted Christians—especially those

in the Middle East—no longer look to the West (the political entity) for help.

Of course, God never said that the world would save the Church. Rather, God saves his people by grace through faith. This is not just God’s paradigm for personal salvation, it is God’s paradigm for everything.

**LN:** How can the church in America support our international brothers and sisters?

**EK:** We can speak up and shatter the silence that renders persecuted Christians invisible.

We can give financially so as to help sustain the persecuted church which desires to be a light in the darkness but often struggles to survive.

We can also go; for difficulty is no excuse to abandon mission. Displaced and destitute believers need teachers, health-care workers, builders, and friends. The lost need to hear the radical, saving, and life-transforming gospel of Jesus Christ.

And of course, we can pray. Intercessory prayer—advocacy to the highest authority in the universe—is serious business with God and one of the most neglected and underrated privileges of the modern Western Church.

What’s more, as we engage with and intercede for our persecuted brothers and sisters, I sense God is doing a new work among us: He is knitting us together using chords of love forged in the flames of persecution. I believe he is doing this in answer to the High Priestly Prayer of our Lord, “. . . that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me . . .” (John 17:20-26). ★

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“THE CHURCH NEEDS TO BE THERE HOLISTICALLY, FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY, FOR THE LONG HAUL. THE DIFFICULTIES OF RESETTLEMENT CANNOT BE OVERSTATED.”

—Elizabeth Kendal

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# Blasphemy Laws and the Gospel of Christ

WHY COERCED RELIGION IS WRONG

Russell Moore

Every once in a while, Christians in North America will hear about one of our number being prosecuted, or even executed, for “blasphemy” somewhere in the world. This usually happens in Islamic countries that forbid, for example, anyone from converting from Islam to anything else, especially to Christianity. Most Christians are rightly outraged by such authoritarian tyranny. But we should also take the opportunity

to remind ourselves why such blasphemy laws are wrong. Such a reflection is not just about international human rights but also about the very core of our convictions, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It’s somewhat easy for us to see that a Christian prosecuted for refusing to deny Christ over and against a murderous state is being treated wrongly. But this is not just a matter of identity politics, “us” against “them.” Blasphemy laws

are wrong no matter what the religious makeup of the state using them might be. If a Christian majority existed in a country, with the will to enforce all the laws it could, would this country be justified in outlawing Islam or atheism or Wicca? No.

We oppose blasphemy laws not just because we believe in concepts of democracy, freedom, rule of law, and natural rights (although all that’s true and good). We oppose them because we believe the

gospel. The use of coercive state power to prop up religious belief is a repudiation of those beliefs themselves. A religion that needs state power to enforce obedience to its beliefs is a religion that has lost confidence in the power of its Deity.

### THE GOSPEL IS BIG ENOUGH

We should fight for the rights of religious minorities—whatever their religions—to be free from state harassment, to be able to worship in their houses of worship, to live out their lives in accordance with their convictions, and even to seek to persuade people that their beliefs about God or gods are right. That's not because we believe their claims, but precisely because we don't. If we really believe the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, we don't need bureaucrats to herd people into cowering before it.

The gospel is big enough to fight for itself. And the gospel fights not with the invincible sword of Caesar but with the invisible sword of the Spirit. When we seek to freely persuade our neighbors, and not to coerce them, we are confessing that the Spirit of God is mighty enough to convict of sin, and to pull down strongholds and fortresses of the mind and the conscience.

Christians learned this the hard way. Some of us have tried to follow the way of the flesh and to enforce our gospel the Caesarian way. This doesn't lead to the triumph of Christianity. It only covers paganism in a Christian veneer. The Church of England is more pageantry than coercion these days, but the state establishment hasn't led to revival in the United Kingdom. The old Puritan colonies of New England drove out dissenters, true enough, and Christianity was as official as could be, and those places are now as burned over and secular as it gets in the United States.

We don't just object to the religious persecution of Christians because we don't want to be persecuted ourselves. We ought to work with freedom-loving people of any

faith and of no faith at all to see to it that no person is imprisoned or executed for religious belief or practice. That's not because we think all religions are relative nor is it because we think religion doesn't really matter all that much. We believe the opposite of those things.

We come before the state with the same kind of confidence Jesus did in the court of Pilate. Jesus knew where Pilate's authority was, and where it wasn't. With the calm tranquility of the one who knew he was in the right, Jesus simply said, "If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting" (John 18:36). But, he said, "My kingdom is not of this world."

### THE WORD STANDS

Let's let the Word of our God stand there with all the other words. And then let's see what Word can convict hearts and move wills, without the coercion of jails or guillotines. Let's love our neighbors as they seek to persuade us that "Everything Is God" or that "Reality Is an Illusion" or that "There Is No God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet" or that "The Aliens Alone Can Save Us." We know such things are not true, and cannot save. With that confidence, let's do what the apostles taught us to do, and carry an "open statement of the truth" to "everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2). That message to a world full of religions is that "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Tim. 2:5-6). That message is that the crucified and resurrected Jesus of Nazareth is himself

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"the Way, the Truth, and the Life," and that no one comes to the Father except through him (John 14:6).

The way to salvation is open to anyone who will look to Christ and repent of sin. The way they are united to Christ is not through terror of being imprisoned or through the fear of starving to death, but through faith (Rom. 3:24-26). Faith doesn't come through the threats of a police force, but through hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:5-17). And such faith doesn't consist in pretending to be Christians for the sake of losing something but in a new creation that comes about through the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor. 5:17). Let other religions try coercion; they will fail. We are ambassadors not of coercion but of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19-20). That seems like weakness over and against state power, but, then again, so did the cross.

Our message is not "Submit or be compelled." Our message is "You must be born again." And the new birth comes by the invisible working of the Spirit through the open proclamation of the preaching of the gospel. The new birth does not happen by Caesarian section. ★

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Russell Moore is the president of the ERLC.

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# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

*THE ERLC'S WORK IN GENEVA*

Jeff Pickering



**A**t the turn of the 20th century, artists from around the world submitted proposals in a contest to enhance the grounds of the University of Geneva. The park improvements were chartered to mark the 400th birthday of the city's own John Calvin and the 350th anniversary of the university he founded. The winning design was inaugurated in 1909 as the Monument international de la Réformation with 10 concrete statutes of theological titans sculpted into the old city walls of Geneva to represent the fortification of this city's role in the Protestant Reformation. Over a century later, advocates from the Southern Baptist Convention traveled to Switzerland in the same spirit of one of the leaders honored in that monument, the Baptist forebear Roger Williams, to fortify religious liberty abroad through the United Nations Office at Geneva.

The United Nations Geneva offices are located in the Palais des Nations on the coast of Lake Geneva. Among the agencies headquartered there is The UN Human Rights Council. In 1986, the UNHRC established a Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). The UN offices in John Calvin's city are significant to the work of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission because of the ample opportunities there to advocate for religious freedom.

## **SBC AND CONSCIENCE FREEDOM**

Messengers to the annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention make known year after year their commitment to conscience freedom through resolutions calling on the state to protect the fundamental right of religious liberty. To date, the Convention has passed well over 100 resolutions addressing the issue both at home and abroad because of the SBC's significant interest in Great Commission cooperation overseas.

Our local churches send men and women to serve nearly every country and people group doing relief, development, and mission work. Southern Baptists serve their neighbors in foreign countries struck by natural disasters through disaster relief networks like the Baptist Global Response and promoting justice



in local communities alongside organizations like International Justice Mission. The ERLC's international work is focused on advocating for the most vulnerable, such as religious minorities in countries hostile to religious freedom and countering the mundane threat of everyday violence against the poor.

All of these international efforts led the ERLC team to the UN office in Geneva because of the SBC's commitment to religious liberty and the Commission's responsibility to carry out that resolve abroad.

The ERLC holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council as a nongovernmental organization. This status, which the ERLC has held for nearly 15 years, gives the organization access to meet with Member States and diplomats on the UN grounds, as well as participate in official UN sessions, events, and various deliberations. As an organization with official status, the ERLC is recognized as representative of the civil society sector in meetings with ambassadors and diplomats.

With this special consultative status, the ERLC engages the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The UPR in Geneva is a process driven by the Member States to review one another's human rights records. When a country is scheduled for review, the ERLC submits reports on the threats to the country and opportunities for

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OR OF NO FAITH AT ALL.

greater religious freedom. The ERLC appeals directly to the diplomatic community on the ground in Geneva to raise FoRB issues in their recommendations.

### **A FOCUS ON MALAYSIA**

In 2018, the ERLC participated in the UPR process for Malaysia. The ERLC submitted two reports at the UN, one in partnership with the Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) on the country's Hudud Law, and the other with the St. Charles Institute (SCI) on forced religious conversions. The ERLC also worked in close partnership with Malaysian attorney, Eugene Yapp, who is an advocate for religious freedom in Kuala Lumpur and the Religious Freedom and Liberty Partnership (RFL), a nongovernmental organization promoting freedom for their fellow Malay in submitting a third report.

The ERLC chose to focus on Malaysia because this country enjoys a rich history of pluralism and a constitution that protects religious freedom. Though more than 60 percent of this Southeast Asian country practices Sunni Islam, there is a small and vibrant Malaysian Christian

minority of about 10 percent. Churches, seminaries, and other ministry efforts were historically allowed to exist and thrive for the last 200 years.

Malaysia registers the religion of all its citizens and prints that religious identifier on government-issued ID cards. Practicing Christians are at times even registered as Muslims because of forced conversions, marriage arrangements, or even simple clerical errors. Once a person is registered as a Muslim they are permanently treated as Muslims by the state. A Christian in such a situation who chose to marry another Christian would be unable to have their marriage legally recognized. Their children would then be registered accordingly as Muslim and required to attend Islamic schools. Such an administrative error would even lead this person to receive a Muslim burial at death. Due to the expanding influence of Sharia law in Malaysia, conversion from Islam to any other religion is totally prohibited. All of this is true even for those who are actual followers of Christ yet governmentally registered as Muslims.

The ERLC produced a film titled *Malaysia: A Fight for Freedom and Identity* to share these stories of people harmed by Malaysian state authority through these antiquated laws with the international advocacy community. The film released in Washington, D.C., during an event ERLC co-hosted with RFI during the week of the U.S. Department of State's inaugural Ministerial for International Religious Freedom. This was but one instance of the many ways that the ERLC shares the stories of persecuted Christians and religious minorities throughout the world.

In Geneva, Malaysia's UPR session took place during the Human Rights Council's November 2018 meeting. After meeting with many of the member states and sharing the above film with them, the ERLC was heartened to see 10 member states offer recommendations related to FoRB issues.

Representatives from the United States recommended that Malaysia, "enhance protections for the right of freedom of religion or belief for all people in Malaysia, including the right to freely choose and practice their faith." Other notable recommendations came from Croatia, "guarantee freedom of religion or belief to all, stemming racial and religious intolerance, including against the Christian community," and from Kenya, "Undertake administrative, policy and legislative measures to guarantee freedom of religion and belief for all in Malaysia consistent with their constitution." Albania, Haiti, Iraq, Spain, Venezuela, Brazil, and Sri Lanka also made recommendations related to FoRB issues.

In March 2019, Travis Wussow and Phillip Bethancourt, ERLC's executive vice president, were in Geneva to hear Malaysia's official response to these recommendations. Unfortunately, the Malaysian delegation was unmoved. According to our partner Yapp, the number of States which encouraged action on FoRB issues demonstrates, "increased awareness that Malaysia is no longer as moderate as is made out to be and is at likely risk towards the path of extremism." The threats to religious freedom of our Malay neighbors are substantial, and the eyes of the world's diplomatic community took notice. The ERLC is committed and

will continue to work to protect our Christian brothers and sisters from further pressure and for the religious freedom of all Malaysians.

## TURNING TO THE NORTH

For the remainder of this year, the ERLC will turn the prioritization of its international religious liberty work north, from Kuala Lumpur to Pyongyang. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is up for their state's universal periodic review in 2019. The situation for religious liberty in North Korea is among the worst in the world. We seek to highlight Chairman Kim Jong Un's persecution of his countrymen as the international community pays particular attention to the despot's cruel regime. The ERLC is developing a film with brave North Korean defectors to provide opportunities for them to share their stories. By bringing these heroes of courageous faith into the spotlight of international attention, we hope to inspire change in this dark corner of persecution.

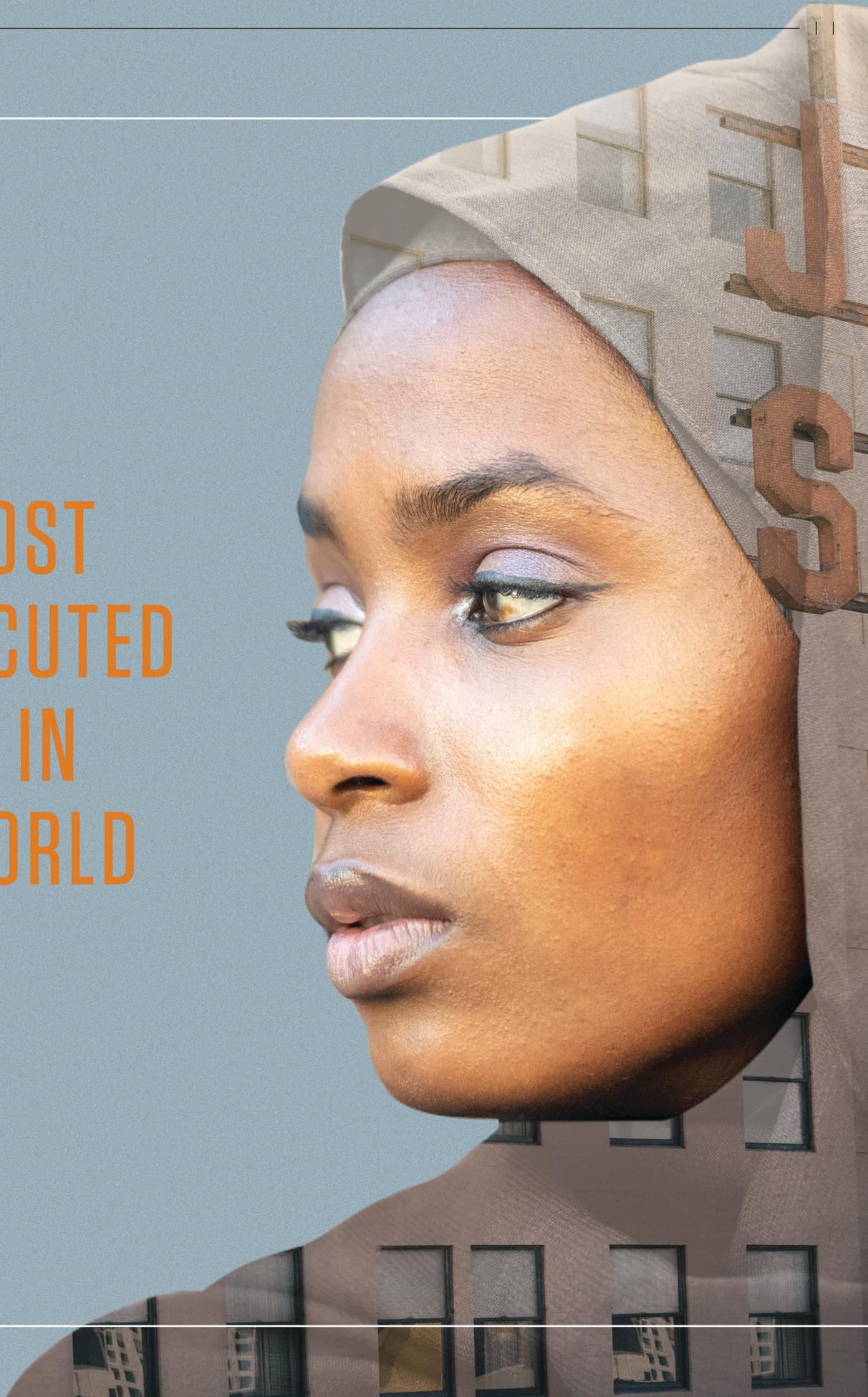
In the years to come, the team will share stories of courageous brothers and sisters in Christ whose freedom of religion and belief is trampled by state authority. We will make the case, wherever such authority is abused, for the kind of government we believe God institutes, a government that is not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

People are made in God's image, created with a conscience not under Caesar's authority but the Lord's. We promote religious liberty with decision makers in Geneva because we seek the common good of all people, those of all faiths or of no faith at all. And we can make this case for every person in every country and in every culture because human dignity does not spring up from national origin or citizenship but endowed as foundational from our Creator. With this belief sure and our commission clear, the ERLC will continue to leverage the United Nations office in Geneva to proclaim liberty for captives of conscience throughout the nations. ★

MESSENGRS TO THE  
ANNUAL MEETINGS  
OF THE SOUTHERN  
BAPTIST CONVENTION  
MAKE KNOWN YEAR  
AFTER YEAR THEIR  
COMMITMENT  
TO CONSCIENCE  
FREEDOM THROUGH  
RESOLUTIONS CALLING  
ON THE STATE  
TO PROTECT THE  
FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT  
OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.

**Jeff Pickering** serves as associate policy communications director in the Washington, D.C. office of the ERLC.

# THE MOST PERSECUTED GROUP IN THE WORLD





# CHRISTIAN WOMEN

Chelsea  
Patterson  
Sobolik



Christian women are the most persecuted group in the world.”

The first time I heard that statistic, I was sitting safely at church in Washington, D.C. David Curry, the president of Open Doors USA, came to speak about the plight of persecuted believers around the world. As he shared their stories, my heart was deeply grieved as I learned about how women and girls are doubly persecuted for their faith and their gender.

The founder of Open Doors USA, “Brother Andrew” earned the nickname “God’s Smuggler,” for his work smuggling Bibles into countries where it was illegal to own a Bible. One of the most notable stories was early in his ministry, where he successfully smuggled Bibles across the border into communist Romania. This small Eastern European country was my birthplace. I was born a little over a year after communism fell, but my time in Romania was brief, as I was adopted into an American family. I didn’t grow up under religious persecution, but I have friends in Romania who have shared vivid stories of their time under communism and the persecution the country faced for decades.

Religious persecution isn’t a thing of the past, ceasing when communism ended. Christians are heavily persecuted in many areas of the world. One in 9 Christians will experience high levels of persecution, and gender-specific discrimination and persecution is rampant throughout the world.

The United Nations estimates that approximately 200 million girls are missing from the world due to sex-selective abortions, abandonment, or intentional murder. In addition to the millions of females that are missing, women and girls are routinely abused and mistreated, physically and sexually.

The definition of “gender discrimination” is simple, but the issue is complex.

## INDIA

An area of the world that’s of particular concern is the country of India. Approximately 239,000 girls under the age of five die in India each year due to neglect, simply because they are girls. Over the past decade, 2.4 million girls have lost their chance at life, either being abandoned, or murdered, because their families didn’t want another female. If a girl does manage to survive, Indian girls routinely receive less education, have poorer nutrition, and receive less medical attention than boys. The plight of Indian women is heartbreaking; one-third of women are illiterate, there are no laws preventing spousal rape, young women become child brides, and sex-selective abortion and female infanticide are common practices.

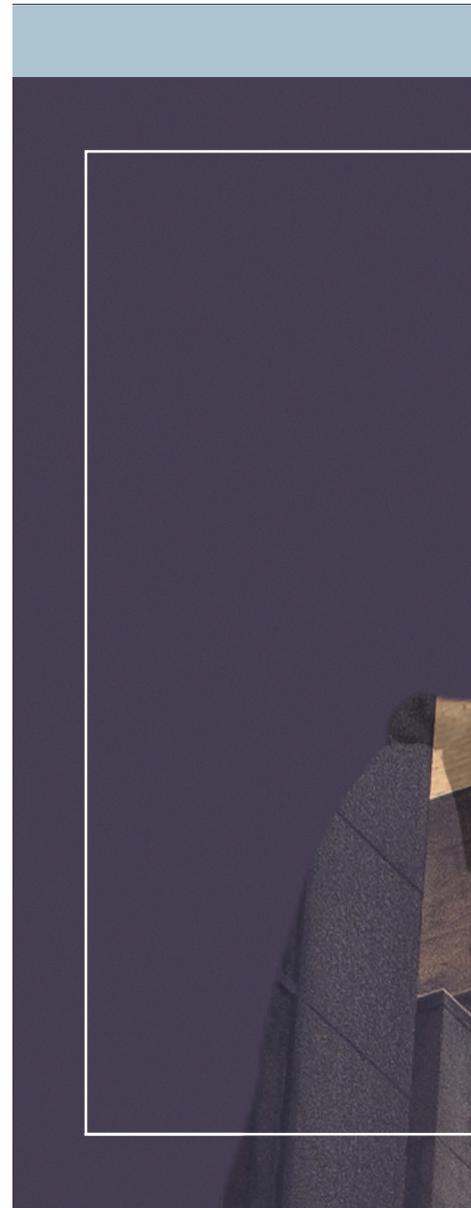
An Indian woman, interviewed for a documentary titled “It’s a Girl,” tells how she murdered eight of her children, because they were born female. After she gave birth, she tells about how she’d strangle her daughters after they were born.

Many families feel like they have no choice but to kill their daughters. In their minds, they justify quickly killing the child, instead of allowing her to grow up in extreme poverty, or having to come up with the money for a dowry.

Another horrible practice in India is dowry deaths. A “dowry death” is the murder or suicide of a married woman because of a dispute over her. Last year, an estimated 87,000 women were killed in dowry deaths around the world, and 50,000 of those women were killed by their spouse or family members. Women commit suicide, or are murdered by their husbands or in-laws for not meeting dowry demands. In India, it’s also more difficult for “ugly and handicapped girls” to get married, because the groom’s family would demand larger dowries. This practice is technically illegal in India, but is rarely prosecuted. Dowry deaths make the home one of the most dangerous places for women to be in the world.

## CHINA

The country with the most notable population of girls missing is China. The two most populous nations on earth, India and China, eliminate more girls each year than the number of girls that are born in the United States. Prospective parents prefer sons above daughters, and Chinese girls are routinely aborted, abandoned, or end up in orphanages. In 1979, the Chinese government instituted the “One Child Policy.” Under that restrictive policy, families that had more than one child were at risk of having their wages





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reduced, or losing social services.

In parts of the world, particularly in China and India, some of the deadliest words are “It’s a girl.” Sex-selective abortion affects girls disproportionately, and in many places, it’s legal to abort a child if they happen to be the unfavorable gender: female. The term “gendercide” describes this practice. In China, the men outnumber the women by 33 million, and in India, a girl is aborted every minute.

#### **OTHER FORMS OF GENDER PERSECUTION**

Another form of gender persecution

is female genital mutilation, which is a removal of some or all of the female genitalia for nonmedical reasons. The humiliating procedure is most often performed on girls between birth and 15 years old. It’s estimated that more than 200 million girls and women have been subject to this cruel process. The traumatic event, often including being physically restrained while the procedure takes place, will emotionally affect women for the rest of their lives.

An issue that’s received attention over the past few years is the issue of human trafficking. According to the

International Labour Organization, there are an estimated 40.3 million victims of human trafficking globally, and 75 percent are women and girls.

The issues highlighted so far are just a few of dozens of examples where women and girls are discriminated against, and persecuted because of their gender.

#### **CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND PERSECUTION**

Let’s zoom in a little further, and talk about the plight that Christian women face around the world. Women are already discriminated against because they are

NOWHERE IN THE BIBLE DO WE SEE THAT ONE SEX IS SUPERIOR TO THE OTHER. INSTEAD, WE SEE OUR SAVIOR UPHOLDING THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN DURING HIS MINISTRY ON EARTH.





women, but when they are found to be Christians, the suffering and persecution against them increases. Christian women are doubly persecuted.

Christian persecution is growing globally. In 2019, an estimated 245 million Christians will experience high levels of persecution because of their faith. This is a 14 percent increase from last year. One of the trends from the Open Doors USA annual “World Watch List” report is that women are an increasing target. It’s important that we recognize how vulnerable our sisters are around the world, especially in the parts of the world where women already face such strong gender discrimination. In Nigeria, the terrorist group Boko Haram captured a 15-year-old woman, killed her father, and then repeatedly raped her because she refused to renounce her faith. Sadly, her story is common in countries with high levels of persecution.

### THE BIBLE ON GENDER DISCRIMINATION

As Christians, we uphold the truth that all people are created in the image of God—both male and female. Scripture is clear that men and women should be treated with the same levels of dignity and respect. Nowhere in the Bible do we see that one sex is superior to the other. Instead, we see our Savior upholding the dignity of women during his ministry on earth.

Women in ancient culture were vulnerable and mistreated. In a patriarchal society, the prayers of Jewish men included a prayer of thanksgiving, “Praised be God that he has not created me a woman.” Some Jewish writers taught that women should never leave the home, except to go to the synagogue.

Jesus’ treatment of women was countercultural. In one of the most remarkable stories in the Gospels, we see Jesus tenderly interact with the woman at the well. Not only was he speaking with a woman in public, she was also a Samaritan. Cultural protocol dictated that Samaritans and Jews didn’t interact, much less a Jewish man interacting with a Samaritan woman.

Scripture doesn’t name the woman, but it doesn’t have to, because Jesus did something more important. The Samaritan woman came to the well in the middle of the day, when she thought no one would notice her drawing water. She was an outcast of society, shamed for her promiscuous behavior, yet in her conversation with Jesus, he treats her with kindness and interacts with her honestly. He doesn’t shy away from addressing her sin, but offers her living water.

### WHAT CAN WE DO?

So, how can we follow Jesus’ lead?

Pray. Our first and most important action should be to pray for our persecuted sisters across the world. Our prayers deeply matter, and we can be a part of actively advocating for our sisters around the world through our prayers.

Pray that persecution against women and girls would cease.

Pray that the Lord would change the hearts of those doing the persecuting.

Pray for healing for girls and women who have experienced discrimination.

Pray that cultures would begin to value women.

Christians should help reimagine a world where it would be unthinkable that any woman is persecuted because of her sex. We should help raise awareness on this issue and speak on behalf of our sisters around the world.

A practical step is to prayerfully consider whether the Lord is leading your family to adopt. There are thousands of girls that are eligible for adoption in countries such as India and China. If your family isn’t called to adopt, perhaps you can help financially support another family who is called to adopt.

The statistics in this article are hard to comprehend, and heartbreaking. But may they propel us to our knees and into action for our vulnerable sisters around the world. ★

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JESUS  
SHALL  
REIGN



# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND THE GREAT COMMISSION

Casey B. Hough

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Jesus commissioned us to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [He] has commanded.” Yet, not all nations want Christians within their borders. Whether through laws or violence, many nations have sought to make Christianity and its missionary efforts illegal.

This reality leads us to the question: How does the concept of international religious liberty relate to the command of the Great Commission? Or, to state it another way: How should Christians think about their responsibility to make disciples of the nations while also working for justice and peace in the world through foreign policy that promotes and rewards international religious liberty? I believe there are at least two truths that we need to remember when thinking about this issue.

## ***FIRST, OBEDIENCE TO THE GREAT COMMISSION DOES NOT REQUIRE INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.***

We must remember that the Great Commission was faithfully obeyed for centuries before anyone ever spoke about religious liberty. Christianity was birthed in a context in which religion and the state were often inseparable. Any concept of obedience to the Great Commission that requires a context of religious liberty must be rejected. Christians are not required to ask if the nations permit the preaching of the gospel. The nations do not have the authority to silence King Jesus’ gospel.

As Matthew 28:18-20 reminds us, the Christian gospel fundamentally challenges the legitimacy and limitations of all other authorities. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, who promises to be with those who obey his commission. If we understand this passage correctly, then we recognize that there is no such thing as a truly closed country.

Christians will not be able to stand before Christ one day and say that the reason that they did not obey the Great Commission is because they were told by a foreign government that the gospel of Jesus Christ was not welcomed there.

Governments simply do not possess the authority to make Christians ignore Christ's commission. This reality, however, does not mean that some governments will not abuse their God-ordained authority (Rom. 13:1-7) and use it to persecute and kill Christians. Of course, this should come as no surprise to followers of Christ. In Matthew 5:10, Jesus told us, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In Matthew 10:17-18 and 21-22, Jesus warns his followers, saying, "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles . . . Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Elsewhere in Matthew 16:24-25, Jesus tells his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up

his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

To follow Jesus is to embrace a life of temporary self-denial and suffering for the sake of eternal salvation, to the praise of his glory. And, while some in this life will experience a degree of ease and comfort, others will face unbelievable suffering. Hebrews 11:32-38 makes this clear. Faith does not always result in Davidic triumphs over giants. Sometimes faith leads to being "tortured, refusing to accept release, so that one might rise again to a better life."

Others, on account of their faith, will "suffer mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They will be stoned, they will be sawn in two, they will be killed with the sword. They will go about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated, wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth." But these are also the people that Hebrews describes as being "people of whom the world was not worthy."

Make no mistake about it: Obedience to Christ is never contingent upon the nations giving us permission to make disciples. We have all the permission we need, because all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to Jesus. Though the nations may not welcome us, we must still go to them in obedience to Christ's commission to make disciples.





*CHRISTIANS ARE NOT  
REQUIRED TO ASK IF  
THE NATIONS PERMIT  
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THE GOSPEL.*

If it is true that our faithfulness to the Great Commission does not depend on the nations welcoming us within their borders, then why should Christians even care about international religious liberty? The answer to this question is found in the second truth that we must remember as Christians.

***FAITHFULNESS TO THE GREAT COMMISSION ALSO ENTAILS OBEDIENCE TO THE GREAT COMMANDMENT, WHICH WILL MANIFEST ITSELF IN A LOVING CONCERN FOR THE CIVIL FREEDOMS OF OTHERS.***

In 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Paul writes to Timothy, urging “that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.” Paul states that “this is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” According to this passage, Paul wants Timothy and the church to pray for a context in which they might freely live a godly and dignified life. And while it would be anachronistic to read the concept of international religious liberty back into the biblical text, we should still recognize that a practical implication of 1 Timothy 2:1-4 is that freedom to live a peaceful, quiet Christian life serves to fulfill God’s greater purpose of seeing all people without distinction “be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.”

As we see in Luke’s account of his missionary work, Paul was not afraid of a religious public square. In fact, as Acts 17:16-33 reveals, Paul welcomed the opportunity to engage other religions because he knew that the gospel of Jesus Christ

was more compelling, more powerful, and unthreatened by competing religious claims. Paul did not call for the tearing down of temples, the burning of idols, or the disposal of other religious books. He knew that such personal acts of repentance

would come with time as the “word of the Lord prevailed” (Acts 19:18-20). Paul did not look to the state to coerce repentance. He simply prayed that the state would grant him the freedom to have the opportunity for a public debate wherein he could “destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Paul knew that the actions of the government would never change the hearts of sinful people. Sinners needed the gospel, not government intervention. Paul, however, also knew that his God “made nations rise and fall” (Job 12:23). He knew that “the king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will” (Prov. 21:1). And he knew that while suffering was an inescapable aspect of fulfilling the Great Commission (2 Cor. 1:5-6; Col. 1:24), it was always right to make your requests known to God (Phil. 4:6). In this case, Paul’s request was that he and other Christians would be able to live with an appropriate degree of religious peace and freedom under the Roman government. If this was Paul’s prayer, then surely it can be ours as well.

We should neither require international religious liberty for our obedience to the Great Commission nor should we be apathetic to the need for it around the world. A Great Commission concern for the nations will always be accompanied by a Great Commandment love that seeks the civic good of our neighbors around the world. ★

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**Casey B. Hough** is pastor of Copperfield Church in Houston, Texas.

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# NO MORE FREE RIDES

WHAT IF AMERICAN CHRISTIANS' FAITH  
ACTUALLY COST THEM SOMETHING?

Mike Schueler

American Christianity is cheap.

That's what I remember thinking as I listened to Ibrahim (not his real name) talk about the day he faced-off with an angry mob sent to destroy the small house church he'd begun in a village at the edge of the Sahara Desert.

Serving as a journalist for the International Mission Board, I'd been sent to write about work in a North African country where Christianity was struggling under intense persecution. This is where I met Ibrahim, a former Muslim who was now a church planter.

Armed with spears, machetes, and guns, the mob was ready to kill, if necessary. Ibrahim didn't want to die, but he wasn't ready to back down either. Islamic authorities had ignored his church for months, but the 26-year-old's brazen evangelism had become a problem. The church was simply winning too many souls to overlook. Acting on orders from the village chief, the mob first trashed the round kuzi (coo-zee) where Ibrahim and the other believers met to worship, ripping apart the hut's thatch roof and smashing its mud-brick walls. Next, the

## **IN OUR MODERN ERA, THE HARASSMENT, ARREST, AND MURDER OF CHRISTIANS FOR THEIR FAITH WERE SURELY ISOLATED INCIDENTS - NOT THE NORM. HOW WRONG I WAS.**

chief turned his attention to the box of Bibles his men had found inside. He was going to burn them. That's when something inside Ibrahim snapped.

"We're not going to let you burn those books," Ibrahim shouted as he charged from the huddle of frightened believers to confront the chief.

"You've become heretics in the way of Islam," the chief shot back. "You've become believers in Jesus. This would have been different if you kept it to yourself, but you're telling other people, and I can't allow that to happen."

As they argued, Ibrahim's mind flashed to passages in the Bible where he'd read of the beheading of John the Baptist, Christ's crucifixion and the stoning of Stephen. Suddenly, Ibrahim realized he wasn't afraid. Ripping the box of Scripture from the chief's hands, he walked briskly back to the believers as the mob erupted with rage. Ibrahim calmly stared them down.

"We were full of the Holy Spirit," he told me. "We knew that if they threw a spear at us or stabbed us or shot us and we died, we would be in heaven."

Waves of awe—and shame—washed over me as I listened to his story. Could I ever be that bold with my faith? What had I ever sacrificed to call myself a Christian? In the end, Ibrahim and the believers were protected from physical violence, but their allegiance to Jesus cost them dearly. Dragged before the local Islamic authorities, they again refused to deny Christ and were subsequently banished from their village under threat of death if they returned. Area mosques blared their names from loudspeakers, publicly marking them as infidels. No one would hire them or eat with them. Their marriages and children were now considered illegitimate. The believers and their families were forced to survive in ramshackle tents miles outside the village, cut off from civilization. Ibrahim's son was only a few months old at the time. Even in death, they would remain outcasts, the burial rights to their family cemeteries revoked.

### **OPENED EYES**

It's an alarmingly common story in what used to be known as the 10/40 window, a geographic area including North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that



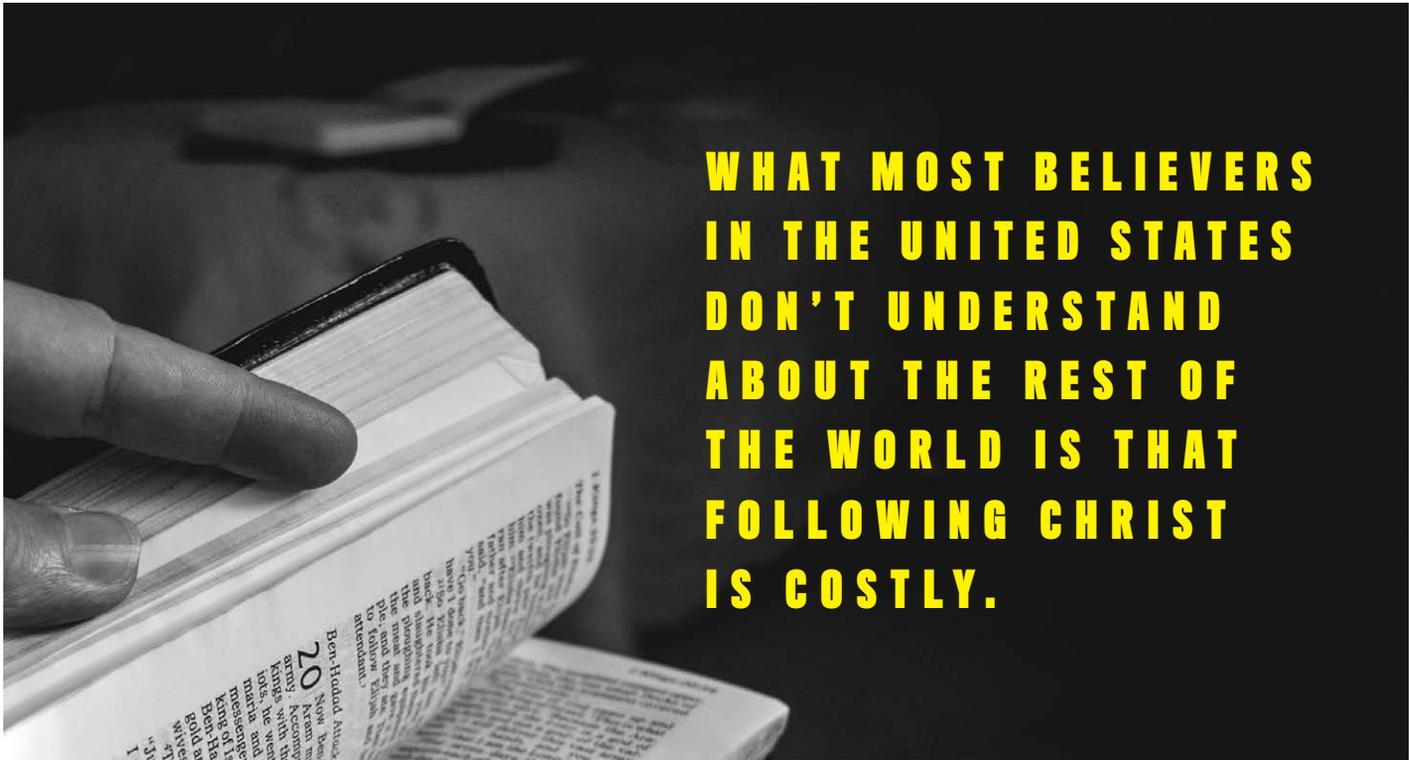
contains the majority of the earth's unevangelized peoples. But the truth is that the average American Christian knows little about the experience of believers like Ibrahim because they are deeply ignorant of the harsh realities faced by many Christian communities elsewhere in the world. Some of that ignorance is unintentional, but some is willful indifference. I know because I was one of those Christians.

As a young man in my 20s, it was easy to turn a blind eye to reports of fellow Christians' suffering. What I read or watched in the news was so opposite of my experience as a believer that it didn't seem real. In our modern era, the harassment, arrest, and murder of Christians for their faith were surely isolated incidents—not the norm. How wrong I was.

After joining IMB's staff in 2006, I spent the next decade traveling to more than 25 countries to write about the ways God was working among some of the most impoverished, isolated, and spiritually dark places on the planet. Along the way, I interviewed dozens of believers who've made tremendous sacrifices to follow Jesus, some enduring unimaginable suffering. Those journeys opened my eyes to the truth of following Jesus outside the safety of my American Christian bubble.

#### COSTLY COMMITMENT

What most believers in the United States don't understand about the rest of the world is that following Christ is costly. We don't understand because our Christianity is cheap. Not to Jesus, who paid the ultimate price for our sin, but cheap to us. We say a prayer, attend church for a few hours each week, and give some of our money. For most American believers, the closest we've come to a genuine sacrifice for Christ is an uncomfortable moment with a friend or family member with whom we've attempted to share the gospel.



## WHAT MOST BELIEVERS IN THE UNITED STATES DON'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD IS THAT FOLLOWING CHRIST IS COSTLY.

I am not advocating that we begin asking God for the same kind of hardships that are often required to follow him elsewhere in the world. But American believers must break free from a faith that is rooted in comfort. While we currently enjoy a level of constitutionally protected religious freedom that is unparalleled in modern history, there are threats lurking in the shadows. Just ask Jack Phillips, owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop in Lakewood, Colorado. His refusal to bake a cake for a same-sex couple's wedding went all the way to the Supreme Court. Without the help of attorneys at the nonprofit Alliance Defending Freedom, Phillip's 6-year legal battle with Colorado's Civil Rights Commission would have certainly bankrupted his small business. Following the Supreme Court victory, Phillips won a second battle when the state of Colorado dropped another lawsuit against Masterpiece Cakeshop over a similar complaint, this time from an attorney who requested a cake to celebrate a gender transition.

Persecution is a fire that refines authentic faith and consumes casual believers. I've seen this truth played out again and again among Christian communities from Afghanistan to Vietnam: places where churches are raided, ransacked, and burnt to the ground; places where believers are arrested, tortured, and imprisoned; places where marriages are torn apart and children taken from believing parents; places where death is a very real consequence for following Jesus.

I remember a young father I interviewed on another IMB assignment, this time in a war-torn country in Central Asia. I'll call him Faruq. When we met, he was already on the run from the police with his wife and two young daughters. Months earlier, authorities raided his home after an informant infiltrated the discipleship group he led. Faruq spent weeks in jail. Now, the family must move every few months to avoid arrest. But it's not just the police they are hiding from. If his wife's family finds them, they will kidnap his children. Faruq has believing friends who have been tortured for

leaving Islam. The teenage daughter of a couple he was discipling was raped as a scare tactic. Despite all this, Faruq won't let fear keep him from following God's call. Today, he continues to share the gospel and disciple new believers despite the danger to him and his family.

"I wanted to be Jesus' disciple and walk with him. I thought it was easy, but then I walked a little with him and I saw that Jesus is a tough guy to walk with," Faruq told me. "I was thinking that it is only physical things we have to give up for Jesus, because the disciples gave up their boats. . . . But that was not enough. The time came that I was going to have to give up my children, my wife, and even my life."

Imagine the impact American Christians could make if we followed God with that kind of abandon. Are we really willing to sacrifice for Jesus' name? Ready or not, we may soon find out. ★

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**Mike Schueler** is the director of Marketing & Communications at The Baptist Foundation of Oklahoma.

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**UZBEKISTAN  
AND THE  
ROLE OF  
INTERNATIONAL  
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**





*Q&A with  
Ambassador  
Sam Brownback*

**Jeff Pickering**

**J**eff Pickering from ERLC's policy staff recently visited the State Department to sit down with Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, Sam Brownback. The interview covered the ambassador's recent success in the story of Uzbekistan and the role of international religious freedom in U.S. foreign policy.

**Jeff Pickering:** What is the role of the U.S. ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom?

**Ambassador Sam Brownback:** Stand up for religious freedom around the world. That's what we do, and that's the role of this office.

**JP:** What is the history of this office in the State Department?

**AB:** It was created 20 years ago by an act of Congress, the International Religious Freedom Act. It was really, in essence, Congress forcing the executive branch to address issues of religious freedom. A lot of us in Congress at that time were getting cases of religious freedom brought to our office from constituents and constituent organizations. We would advocate for people who were in jail in far-flung places around the world. This act really tried to institutionalize the issue of religious freedom as a topic of foreign policy for the United States.

**JP:** How is international religious freedom a foreign policy priority of the United States today?

**AB:** We see it—this administration—sees it as foundational. You get this one

right, and you'll have less terrorism, more human rights, more freedoms of assembly and speech, and more economic growth. So for us in this administration, we look at this religious freedom like blocking and tackling in football. You really need to get this right if you're going to do anything else. And if you don't get this right, you're probably not going to be able to do these other things—human rights, economic growth, etc.—well either.

**JP:** What progress have you seen in the religious freedom space abroad since assuming your role as ambassador?

**AB:** I've been pleased. We've seen some country-specific efforts that have been rewarded. Uzbekistan is off the Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) list. We've seen international engagement broaden on this. We hosted the ministerial on religious freedom, which was the first of its kind. The United Arab Emirates also hosted the first regional ministerial in Abu Dhabi on textbook materials and how textbooks shouldn't denigrate minority religions. The Saudis were there, and the Pakistanis, and some others that have been, in some cases, quite awful on this issue. Taiwan also



hosted the second follow-up in Taipei earlier this month.

**JP:** Let's talk about the story of Uzbekistan. You've been very involved in the ongoing efforts in Uzbekistan. How did your office engage with that country in particular?

**AB:** Chris Seiple (a religious liberty advocate and President Emeritus of the Institute for Global Engagement)



contacted me early on and said, “I think they’re ready to change.” He had been contacted and was working with them. I was skeptical, the office was skeptical, because they had been on the CPC list for a long time. But they wanted to do it to be able to grow their economy, which was the right way to look at it. So I reached out to them, and they started to make tangible steps. We engaged further. Now they’re on the watch list still, but they’ve made substantial progress, and

we hope they’ll continue further and get off the watchlist.

**JP:** How did Uzbekistan move from the CPC list, which they were on since 2006, to the watch list?

**AB:** They did a number of steps. They let 1,500 religious prisoners free. They took 16,000 people off the blacklist that wouldn’t allow them to travel, many of which were there for religious affiliation

purposes. They registered two churches. They hadn’t registered a church for a decade. They had not allowed minors to go to religious institutions—neither mosques nor churches—and they allowed minors to [return]. They stopped raids on unregistered churches. There were a number of house churches, and if they found them, they would just raid them and arrest people. They stopped the raids. And then they passed a religious freedom road map resolution that they asked the UN Special



Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) to come and do a report on Uzbekistan. He did. After he wrote it, they passed a resolution basically implementing the report. But that's not law yet. Part of the resolution requires them to pass a new religion law. They're in the process of drafting that. They've made a number of steps, but they're still not there, and that's why we have them on the watch list.

**JP:** That's a story of diplomatic success. What have you and the State Department learned from working with Uzbekistan that can be applied to other countries?

**AB:** There needs to be motivation more than just shame. Prior, we were just using shame to say to the world that this was a bad actor on religious freedom. That just doesn't motivate many people. Uzbekistan is doing this because they want to grow their economy, they want to appear better to the west, they want to be seen as a country open to human rights. And we agree with them that this is one of the things they need to do. We're going to more countries and saying to them, "If you want to address your economic issues, grow your economy. If you want to address your terrorism issues to have less terrorism, one of the key things you need to do is provide more religious freedom to your people." And then it's a self-motivator at that point because most countries want their economy to grow, and they certainly want less terrorism. So, it has to be in the country's self-interest.

**JP:** Are there any other countries you've identified as those with potential to make similar progress?

**AB:** I was just back from Pakistan. We just put them on the CPC list. I'm telling

them, "Look, my desire is to get you off that list. But to do it, you're going to have to make some serious changes. And if you want to grow your economy, these are things you're going to need to do. If you want less terrorism, which you certainly do, this is something that will help you." We're starting to see some of those countries engaged, saying, "You're right. This has not been good in our country." They don't like the international negative publicity of saying this about minority faiths. Every faith in the world is a minority

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**"We look at religious freedom like blocking and tackling in football. You really need to get this right if you're going to do anything else."**

-Ambassador Sam Brownback

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religion somewhere, including the one in that country. It is very much global communications.

**JP:** Ambassador, what motivates you to come to work and to travel all around the globe to do this, to take on these daunting efforts?

**AB:** You see these people, when they get out and they're free, and all they ever wanted to do is to practice their faith peacefully, it is so rewarding. We're the only country in the world, really, that just puts a high enough value to fight for this. Some of the European countries do as well. I shouldn't take this away from that, but, for us, it's personal. It's in our

founding. It's what we are as a people, and we're passionate for it. And we're passionate for it around the world. And I'm delighted to carry that passion of the American people for it.

**JP:** Is there anything else you would like to share about Uzbekistan, the plight of persecuted Christians or other religious minorities, and the state of international religious freedom more broadly?

**AB:** I hope that people who read this don't just read it and say, "Well, I'm glad something is happening," or, "Too bad not more is happening," but rather will engage themselves. And there are ways to do it. They can do it through the Southern Baptist Convention. They can really, in almost every community of any size in the United States, find a diaspora from somewhere that is probably persecuted. I've run into it everywhere. They can find somebody locally who's from Rwanda and knows of a bunch of house churches that were closed

down. Just get engaged, find out what's taking place, invite a speaker to their church, see what they can do to rebuild a church that's been destroyed. I've seen countless Americans do stuff like that, and it is very effective. They don't have to have the government there doing it. It involves some getting activated, but there's no shortage of people that need their activism. ★

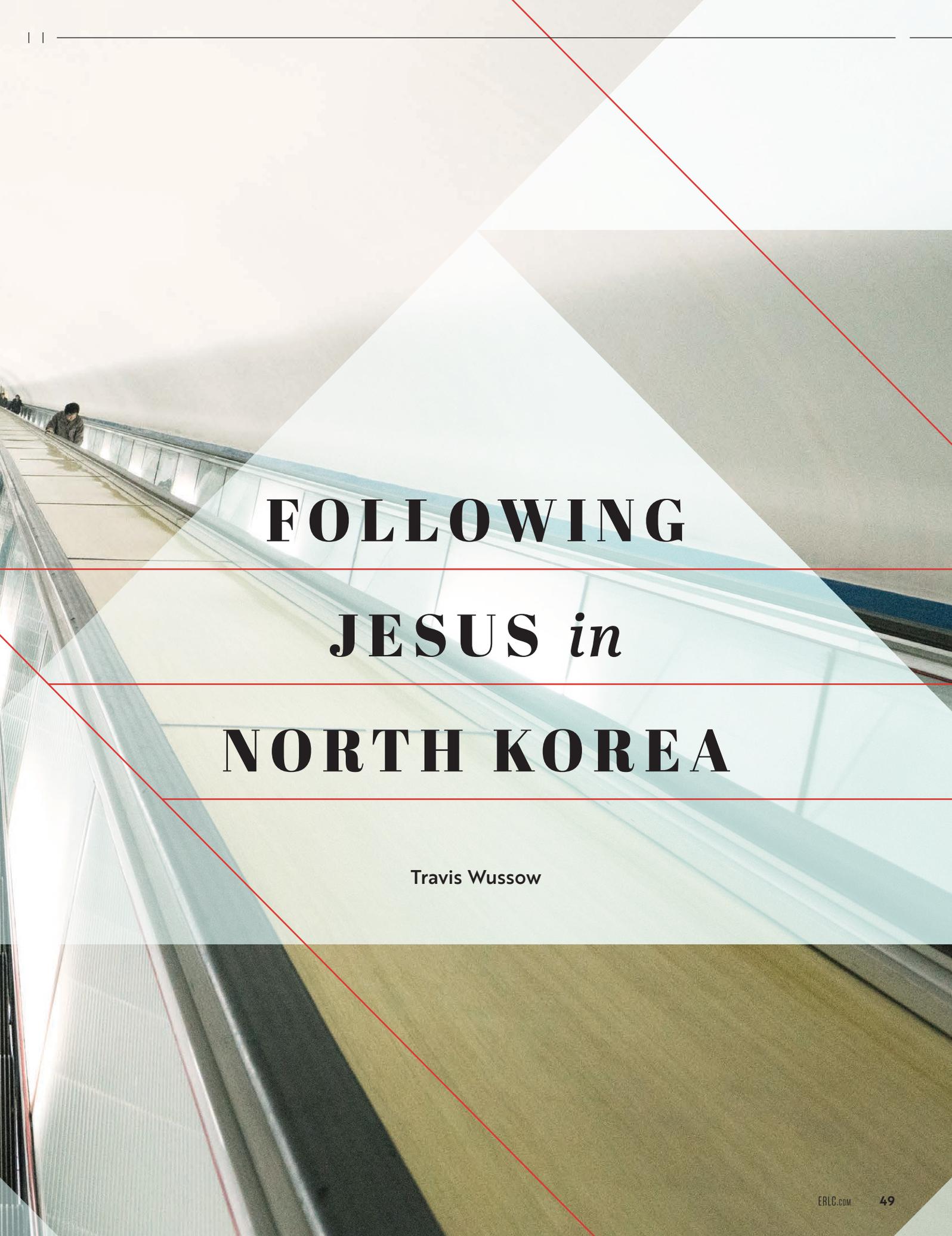
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**Sam Brownback** is the ambassador-at-large for International Religious Freedom.

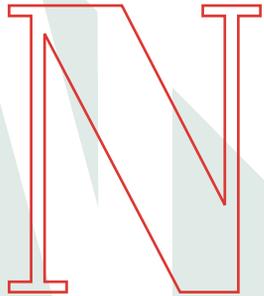
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**FOLLOWING**  
**JESUS *in***  
**NORTH KOREA**

Travis Wussow



North Korea is the most dangerous place on earth to be a Christian. Open Doors, which studies and reports on Christian persecution worldwide, has listed North Korea at the top of its World Watch List—an index of persecution against Christians—for 18 years in a row.<sup>1</sup>

But despite this, the church in North Korea is not small. Experts estimate that there are between 200,000 and 400,000 Christians in North Korea. While a relatively small minority of the overall population of 25 million, 300,000 believers represents a significant movement of God and strong remnant in North Korea. Before the Kim regime began in 1948, Christianity flourished all over the Korean Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Decades of missionary work starting in the 1880s preceded the Great Pyongyang Revival of 1907, which led to mass conversions and church planting work, centered in what is now North Korea.

Even a regime as brutal and autocratic as the Kim Dynasty cannot stop the work of God. As believers, we know that God is at work on every square inch of our planet and that God is drawing to himself a people—a family—made up of every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth. Right now, we have brothers and sisters in Christ striving to worship and honor God with their lives, and they face persecution, martyrdom, and struggles that are difficult for us in the comfort and freedom of the West to even imagine.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul used the metaphor of a body made up of many members—every follower of Christ is an integral part, joined up together as one. And as Paul told us, “if one member suffers, all suffer together.”<sup>3</sup>

In order for us to pray for and take action to support our brothers and sisters in North Korea, we need to understand what their lives are like as they seek to follow Jesus in a hostile

place. Here are three things you need to know about life as a follower of Jesus in North Korea.

### **NORTH KOREAN BELIEVERS CRAVE THE SCRIPTURES**

Believers in the United States have access to the Scriptures that would be unimaginable to a North Korean—or to believers in previous eras. The Scriptures are always at our fingertips, in any language, in multiple translations. We can listen to sermons on any passage or topic, buy books to encourage us and help us to grow spiritually.

In North Korea, possession of a Bible is a sufficient reason to be sent to a prison camp for the rest of your life. According to Open Doors, it is dangerous to possess or read the Bible either publicly or privately. Believers in North Korea carefully hide their copies of the Scriptures and divide them and keep them in multiple locations. In some cases, believers will memorize a book and then destroy the copy to minimize the risk of being found with illegal materials.<sup>4</sup>

It’s difficult to imagine risking so much to worship God, especially when even the Bible itself is in short supply, let alone Bible studies, commentaries, and sermons. As a result, the North Korean church treasures the Scriptures the way we ought to and recognizes the Scriptures as the essential Word of life. But we should pray for a day when Bibles and other religious materials can be freely shared throughout North Korea.

### **NORTH KOREAN BELIEVERS LIVE IN CONSTANT FEAR IN ALL AREAS OF THEIR LIVES**

North Koreans face persecution in both the public and private sphere of their lives. This intrusion into their private lives includes electronic surveillance of messages and emails but does not stop there. North Korea has a comprehensive regime for monitoring and reporting on its subjects, called *inminban*.

Beginning in the colonial era, *aegukbans*, or “patriotic groups,” began to form in neighborhoods throughout unified Korea. These groups were designed as mandatory “neighborhood watch” programs that aim at providing safety, food, labor, and order. After the Korean Civil War, North Korea renamed their watch program as *inminban* meaning “people’s groups.” The duty of the groups went from promoting peace to a three-fold program supporting surveillance, a normal function of life, and labor mobilization. Each group was appointed a leader, typically an older woman, who was forced to monitor her inhabitants closely. Her duties consisted of a weekly unannounced inspection of each home to be conducted in the middle of the night, close monitoring of the income and spending of each household, and reporting any suspicious activities to the local authorities immediately.

Throughout the late 20th century, successive Kim regimes began ramping down the broader *inminban* project. *Inminban* leaders



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became less willing to report discrepancies and focused mainly on securing food and labor. But when Kim Jong-un rose to power in 2011, a significant shift occurred. Religious material has been banned in the country for decades, but the Kim Jong-un regime has reinstated the roles of *inminban* and has cracked down on religious adherence. The *inminban* now has the duties of searching homes and punishing any violators found with religious materials, conducting religious practices, or even simply saying a prayer over their food. Violators are tortured in imprisonment camps and some face execution if they refuse to give up their beliefs.

Believers in North Korea face a pervasive, constant fear that friends, acquaintances, and even family members will report



# LET US NEVER FORGET OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS in NORTH KOREA. WHEN ONE PART of THE BODY SUFFERS, WE ALL SUFFER.

their religious activities to the *inminban*. There are stories of families who defected together, only to discover that both husband and wife were following Jesus in secret even from each other. The state's surveillance power comes into the home and separates even husband and wife.

## MANY NORTH KOREAN BELIEVERS FACE ARBITRARY DETENTION, SOMETIMES FOR LIFE

Of the 300,000 believers in North Korea, nearly one-quarter are in prison for their faith.

When the North Korean authorities find prohibited religious materials or suspect a person of being a practicing Christian, that person is sent immediately to prison. This prison will include interrogations under torture and solitary confinement. Secret believers will be asked repeatedly about any suspected religious activity and religious material found. Many hide their faith; those who confess to be followers of Jesus will be sent to the *kwansilo*, the notorious North Korean political prison camps.<sup>5</sup>

Even those who manage to hide their faith from the authorities are not immediately freed. Those found by a judge to be “not guilty” of being a Christian will be sent to a re-education camp for a period of years. These camps “re-educate” their residents through hard labor of 12 hours per day, malnutrition, poor sanitation, and dehumanizing living conditions. On the way to the re-education camp, the government will require the prisoner to be divorced by his or her spouse, leaving the prisoner alone and totally isolated. After a number of years, these prisoners have the opportunity to be released.

Secret churches exist even in these re-education camps, as prisoners struggle to follow Jesus even in these horrible conditions. Even there, God is at work.

Most of those found “guilty” of being practicing Christians will never be seen again. They are sent to one of North Korea's *kwansilo*, maximum security political prison camps where imprisonment is for life under horrific and brutal conditions. Physical abuse and sexual assault by prison guards are routine, a result of the unchecked power held by prison guards. Death

from summary executions and torture are everyday occurrences, as are death from starvation, disease from poor sanitation, and forced labor.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the *kwansilo*, believers gather in secret churches, holding on to their faith even as many know they will never be released. God strengthens and upholds these believers as they seek to live faithfully for God.

## PRAYER AND ADVOCACY

Living in the comfort and freedom of the West, these stories are almost impossible to imagine. It's difficult to believe it is possible there is a place on earth like this. But these stories are true.

What are we to do with this information?

First, we should pray fervently and specifically for the North Korean church—for protection of believers, and for comfort and courage for those imprisoned. But we should also pray for the closure of these camps and for the end of the Kim regime as we know it, which has perpetrated unimaginable crimes against humanity. Let us never forget our brothers and sisters in North Korea. When one part of the body suffers, we all suffer.

Second, we should insist that our elected officials prioritize human rights and religious freedom among the other security considerations of our foreign policy. For those of us who are citizens of the United States, we have the gift of a voice and access to elected officials who can in turn influence the foreign policy of the world's lone superpower. Let us use our voices to advocate for those whose voices have been silenced by the brutal North Korean regime.

We know that a day is coming when Jesus will wipe every tear from every eye. Until then, let us work toward a vision where justice and righteousness are found on earth, as they are in heaven. ★

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

<sup>2</sup> “Korea: Still divided 70 years on,” World Watch Monitor, <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2015/08/korea-still-divided-70-years-on/>.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:26 ESV.

<sup>4</sup> Open Doors, *Final World Watch List 2019 North Korea Country Dossier*, December 2018, available at <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/North-Korea-FINAL-WWL-2019-DOS-SIER-December-2018.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Lindy Lowry, “Naked, Shaved and Stripped of Her Name—Life in a North Korean Prison,” Open Doors USA, Feb. 7, 2019, <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/naked-shaved-and-stripped-of-her-name-life-in-a-north-korean-prison/>.

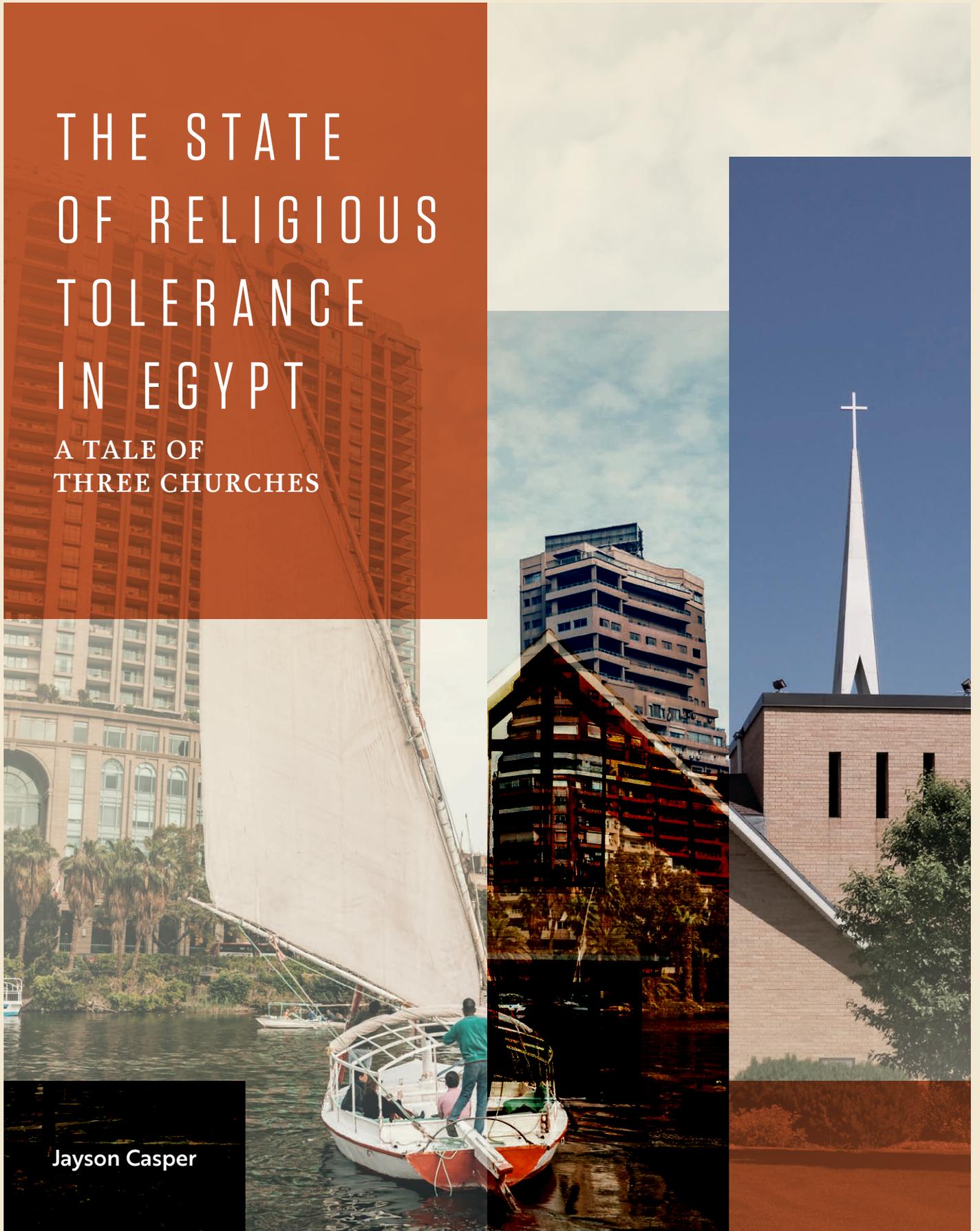
<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of State, “People's Republic of Korea,” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017, 6, available at <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/277333.pdf>.

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Policy intern Josie Peery contributed to this article.

# THE STATE OF RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE IN EGYPT

A TALE OF  
THREE CHURCHES



Jayson Casper

## THE CATHEDRAL

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt stood side by side with Pope Tawadros II, patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. Inaugurating the largest cathedral in the Middle East last January he spoke two remarkable words that reverberated through the national broadcast to Muslim homes throughout the nation. “Merry Christmas.”

If some Christians find this phrase under siege in America, they have no idea the power unleashed by the president’s words. Emboldened by the Arab Spring eight years earlier, and empowered by the Muslim Brotherhood presidency of Mohamed Morsi, ultraconservative Salafi Muslims sparked nationwide controversy by declaring no pious Muslim could utter the phrase.

Their point was theological—Christmas celebrates God becoming man in Jesus, and a Muslim cannot congratulate a Christian neighbor for such blasphemy. But the impact was social. Easygoing Egyptians had long wished each other good greetings on respective religious feasts. Salafis are better practicing Muslims than we are, many would admit, and a chill began to spread in community relations.

When then-defense minister Sisi overthrew Morsi following widespread protests against his rule, he did so with Pope Tawadros—and the head of al-Azhar, the leading Islamic institution in Egypt and the Sunni world—standing nearby in support. As president he became the first to attend a Christmas mass, a practice he has continued. He speaks strongly about the rights of Christians and their place in the nation. And in building a new capital city

he made sure the centerpiece landmarks would be the region’s largest mosque and church, built side-by-side. There is no Merry Christmas controversy today.

But do Sisi’s words fall on deaf ears? Are the arms of the state too weak? Or might he be of double mind, enthusiastic in gesture, apathetic in implementation? Two other church examples counterbalance the cathedral.

## THE MEMORIAL CHURCH

In the second year of Sisi’s presidency, the Islamic State branch in Libya beheaded 20 Coptic Christians and broadcast their savagery to the world. Sisi responded with an immediate strike against terrorist targets across the border, but also with a promise. He would build a memorial church in their hometown, deep in the rural areas of Upper Egypt. Home to large concentrations of Copts, but also conservative Muslims eyeing warily their neighbors, it sparked another controversy.

Muslims and Christians in Egypt generally get on well with each other. The struggle against colonial Britain united the religions, and President Gamal Abdel

and Copts—by choice—socialized increasingly behind the walls that encircle their churches. Even so, friendliness holds.

Yet some Muslims extend friendliness as long as the Islamic nature of their environment goes unchallenged. Christians might live in peace in a Muslim village, but if they dare to build a church it threatens the Muslim sense of superiority. Local officials are often complicit, made in the image of the society that employs them. Applications for construction sit in bureaucratic drawers even bribery cannot open. At best, Christians might be given tacit permission to hold rituals in a home, but no steeple dare mar the skyline of the village minarets. Yet many villages have both cross and crescent, with nary a problem.

Sisi’s decree to honor the Copts martyred in Libya did break through, but only with a struggle. After months of resistance, agreement was secured to build the church in a distant corner of the village, and not at the originally selected entering fairway.

But the post-Morsi powers-that-be sought to remedy this social injustice as well. The new constitution contained an article obliging parliament to pass a new

CHRISTIANS MIGHT LIVE IN PEACE IN  
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Nasser’s Arab Nationalism held equal promise for all. But following Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War, aided eventually by Saudi largess and the inspiration of the Iranian Revolution, a Muslim Brotherhood slogan gained in ascendancy: Islam is the Solution. National identity waned in favor of religion, and Christians followed in turn. A spiritual revival in the Coptic Orthodox Church merged with real and perceived discrimination,

church building law within its first term. They succeeded, and Sisi signed it into law, with a stipulation to establish procedures to retroactively license the hundreds of informal “house churches” that existed in their own buildings but bore no official stamp of recognition, often without signifying Christian regalia.

The law, endorsed by the Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches of Egypt, was hailed by many as a step in the right



direction. It set regulatory criteria for construction and repair, establishing a judicial procedure should a local official withhold his approval. But critics lamented that loopholes and vague wording led to the decision ultimately remaining in the hands of security, who could halt the process if it threatened social peace.

### THE CHURCH SUBJECTED TO INJUSTICE

It was practically an invitation. In one location among several, and following embarrassingly on the heels of the new cathedral inauguration, Muslim crowds gathered around the church chanting anti-Christian slogans and preventing officials from inspecting the to-be licensed church that had existed semi-tolerated in the area for years prior. The government, which decisively cracks down on any sign of political demonstration, backed down.

Such is the rule of law in much of Egypt, and church building is not the only complaint by Christians. The farther one travels from Cairo, the more local traditions are given leeway by officials over legislation that exists on paper. Take the example of a property dispute between neighbors. Tensions flare, and suddenly each side recruits its relatives and friends who near-brawl, or perhaps do. Police come in to calm the situation, but then dispute is often handled by local elders who either judge equitably or lead each party into concessions. Damages suffered are settled by informal fines; rarely is anyone sentenced to jail. It works, but it is not law.

But if one party is a Christian, generally speaking, there are not enough relatives to rally behind them, and it would be suicidal to do so anyway. Once a sectarian

fire is lit, it can rage in similar fashion as the above, but the just-under-the-surface sense of Muslim superiority can attract many beyond family lines. The dispute proceeds with Christian homes or farms vandalized, offending Christians attacked and injured, and then the police come in.

The dispute may have been legitimately contestable, though Muslims are almost always the aggressors. But both Muslims and Christians will be temporarily arrested, held until the elder-led “reconciliation” committee reaches its conclusion. The same pattern can be seen in the event of an illicit love relation between the faiths; real, suspected, or invented blasphemy against Islam; or perhaps a rumor over conversion to Christianity.

Church leaders may also be among the elders, and not infrequently damages will be paid to cover Christian losses.



MUSLIM CROWDS  
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TOLERATED IN THE AREA  
FOR YEARS PRIOR.

But it is also not uncommon for the aggrieved Christian—guilty or not—to be sent away from the village. Ceremonial hugs and kisses will be exchanged between elders and family patriarchs, and the Muslim aggressors—with the Christian detainees-cum-hostages—are set free. Prosecution never follows.

### WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

So how do we understand the situation of Christians in Egypt? Is this persecution? And how do we understand the presidency of Sisi? Does he care? Christians—at least in their spirits—can be divided.

There are some who say that Islam teaches Muslims to be against us, and the more devout, the more they flex their muscles. Don't let them come to America, they argue, and do what they did here to once-Christian Egypt. Others will say the

Salafi streak has infected large swaths, but that it is a corruption of Islam and the good nature Muslims generally have toward us. Nearly all will say that partnership with Muslims is the key toward peace, especially those who are “moderate.”

Does Sisi qualify? Most Christians will ask what other bet they have. Not a few genuine liberals will chide his human rights record, arguing that with thousands imprisoned, political oppression impacts the freedom of all. The middle class is pinched by his economic reforms, imagining back to a slightly more prosperous pre-Arab Spring era. Nearly all dread the return of the Muslim Brotherhood and their Salafi rival allies, preferring, if not fully trusting, the neutrality of the army to keep the civil nature of the state.

But is it a good bet? The army, drawn from the people in universal conscription,

has no Christians in senior leadership. Religious rhetoric is powerful, and grand cathedrals are symbolic. But applied citizenship is vital, and village churches are emblematic.

So where does “Merry Christmas” land? How should a perhaps flawed but historic church building law be interpreted? Will Sisi, and his campaign to reform religious discourse, lead Egypt very gradually into a new era of religious tolerance, if not almost-liberty? Or is it all a ruse to keep power and preserve a system that has long touted Christian rights while shrugging shoulders at the status quo?

Each of these three churches tells part of the story. ★

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**Jayson Casper** is a correspondent with *Christianity Today*.

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# CHINA AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

## Q&A WITH NINA SHEA

Chelsea Patterson Sobolik

Chelsea Patterson Sobolik from ERLC's policy team recently interviewed Hudson Institute's Nina Shea on the current human rights situation in China. They discussed the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities, the widespread use of technology, and how the U.S. can leverage their trade relationship to see change in the country.

**Chelsea Sobolik:** Can you give us an overview of the human rights situation in China over the past five years?

**Nina Shea:** Since the cultural revolution, religious tolerance has waxed and waned, though never has there been religious freedom as we know it in the United States. Sometimes persecution has been very bad, like right after Tiananmen Square, and sometimes it's eased. In the last two or three years, it's taken a reverse turn to the point where I fear for the continuation of Christianity in China. It was on the trajectory of being one of the world's largest Christian communities. And now, I'm wondering if it can survive as a true Christian religion at all.

**CS:** What accelerated that change over the past few years?

**NS:** I think that there was a growing boldness on the part of President Xi and his determination to get control of Christianity. At one point, Christianity was said to have more members than the Communist party, and they were viewed as a challenge to the single-party Communist state. They don't want any ideological competition or anything independent of their control. They want to control organization, speech, and association, so they didn't like the fact that Christianity was blossoming exponentially and largely doing so outside government control.

We've seen Beijing crackdown against the Falun Gong, an indigenous Chinese spiritual exercise movement. The group claimed to have had about 30 million followers. They were completely crushed inside China in the 1990s. China is quite capable of using the most brutal means to

crush movements it doesn't like, whether political, religious, or cultural.

**CS:** How is that playing out right now?

**NS:** We're now seeing extreme levels of crude repression again directed against the Uyghur and Kazakh Muslims of China. A million Muslims have been confined to indoctrination camps [located in] the desert in western China. They are tortured, psychologically abused, and enslaved. They can't leave, and they have no due process. They're forced to renounce their belief system and act in a way that's contrary to it, by being forced to drink alcohol and eat pork. China is ready to use the most brutal means, but they are reluctant to do so to a large extent with Christians because Christians have a stronger tie to the West and to countries with large markets, particularly the United States. They are more in the spotlight. Instead of using the most iron-fisted means toward Christians, China will turn to more restrictive regulatory and big tech measures to preserve its Christian communities.

**CS:** Can you touch a little bit on the surveillance state and how China is using technology to persecute religious minorities?

**NS:** China is using its own internet to censor people. They've gone to underground churches and attached facial recognition cameras to the pulpits, aimed on the congregations. They are keeping track of who's going to church. They have technology that opens social media on cell phones without passcodes. They track how much people exercise through their cell phones, and then limit their healthcare based on that. They are instituting a social credit score system which will score you on where you go, what you believe, what you're reading, and who you're meeting with. And those with low scores are excluded from government-run operations, such as government jobs, transportation, schools,

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CARRY THIS OUT."**

-Nina Shea

housing, pensions, and every other benefit in healthcare and education in general. They have banned Bible sales online. They have signs outside of churches saying that pensioners will lose their pensions if they attend church services. Youth are forbidden from attending church as well, and they and their families will be punished for violating this, both with fines as well as being cut off from government schools and other services.

**CS:** What has been the response of the international community?

**NS:** Unfortunately, the world is just awakening to this looming threat. The Chinese have been envisioning this now for a while, at least since President Xi. This is his vision. It frightens me because it's like a high-tech North Korea. He's replacing Jesus Christ's picture in churches with his

own. His sayings are being sent to people on their phones. There's a cult forming around him. This will be a threat to all around the world. Vice President Pence spoke about this threat in October 2018 at the think tank where I am a scholar, the Hudson Institute. Europe is just now beginning to recognize it. Other countries are not. I know the Taiwanese are very concerned about their future, independence, and sovereignty. So Xi's quest for control is bigger than just an attack against Christians, but that's certainly a piece of his plan.

**CS:** What has been the response of Western Christians?

**NS:** I don't think that Western Christian churches realize the full extent of China's aims to control and suppress religion and their newfound capabilities to carry this out. Christians here may be lulled by assurances that China has been set to be the largest Christian church in the world. They were right to project that for years, but Beijing is working to reverse this. Megachurches are no longer being tolerated, and many large underground churches are being closed. It is a shock to the system for even the Chinese Christian community that robust churches comprised of good citizens of China and which were tolerated for several years—like Zion Church in Beijing and Early Rain Covenant Church in Chengdu—were abruptly shut down last year, and their pastors and congregations were punished.

**CS:** What can the U.S. be doing in terms of bilateral trade with China to prioritize human rights?

**NS:** The U.S. has awakened, but it's only willing to speak up on trade and defense issues with China. There has to be a third "basket," as we called it during the Cold War under the Helsinki Final Act, a human rights category of discussion, and maybe even one specifically on religious



freedom. This would empower Chinese people to claim their fundamental rights and freedoms.

**CS:** How do we move from where we are today to incorporating that human rights component in trade discussions on the world scale—starting with our own country, but then elevating that a little broader, too?

**NS:** I think that we can take a lesson from the way China has tried to hide its human rights abuses. With the Uyghurs, China tries to cover it up, saying these are just vocational training camps, not

re-education camps. So it lies out of shame, which indicates that it sees it is in its own interest not to appear as a repressive, totalitarian state that deprives its people of all rights. That suggests a strategy for us to move forward. The more we can expose and bring to the surface China's oppression, the more that China will feel pressed to pull back. Western criticism hurts their brand. China aims to be the new political model for the future—a highly efficient, high-tech, expansive economic system, and at the same time, a highly repressive political system. The more that we can show what a dystopia it is, the more that the China model is discredited.

**CS:** What can the U.S. be doing in terms of our multilateral engagement at the UN Human Rights Council and the Security Council, pressing the UN to act a little bit more at the international level?

**NS:** Well, it would be tough because China is a member of the UN Security Council, so it would veto anything at that level. And the UN Human Rights Council is severely compromised and politicized. The best route would be for a coalition of the willing in the West to speak up about religious freedom and other basic human rights, since China is very eager to have access to Western markets. A coalition of Western governments must begin to press for basic religious freedom right now, and this topic should be included in the talks that the U.S. is holding on trade and defense. Trade and religious freedom should not be isolated initiatives separate from each other, and the U.S. should not be the only government raising human rights. China's crackdown, including through technology owned, sold, and invented in the West, is a very big problem, and it's bigger than any single country can take on.

**CS:** What can the U.S. do to get the developing world, which China has such a strong influence over through trade, to speak up on human rights abuses and violations?

**NS:** Frankly, the developing world can't do that much. Those countries don't have a strong voice, and will be crushed or isolated by China. It's very hard for them to stand up, which is why we need to take the lead. So, we should continue giving aid to Africa and elsewhere, and building relations with developing countries so they don't fall into China's orbit. ★

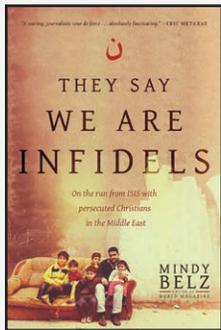
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**Chelsea Patterson Sobolik** serves as a policy director in the ERLC's Washington, D.C., office.

**Nina Shea** serves as the director of the Center for Religious Freedom at the Hudson Institute.

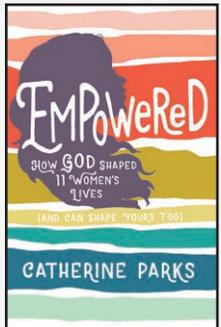
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# Global Christian Persecution



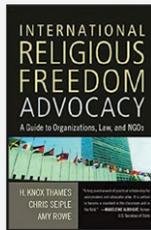
**They Say We Are Infidels: On the Run from ISIS with Persecuted Christians in the Middle East**  
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Tyndale Momentum, 2017

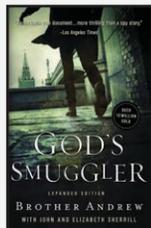


**Empowered: How God Shaped 11 Women's Lives (And Can Shape Yours Too)**  
CATHERINE PARKS

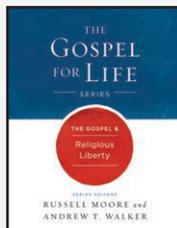
B&H Kids, 2019



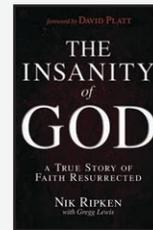
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H. KNOX THAMES, CHRIS SEIPLE, AND AMY ROWE  
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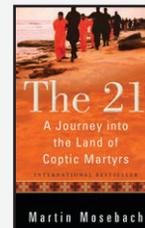
**God's Smuggler**  
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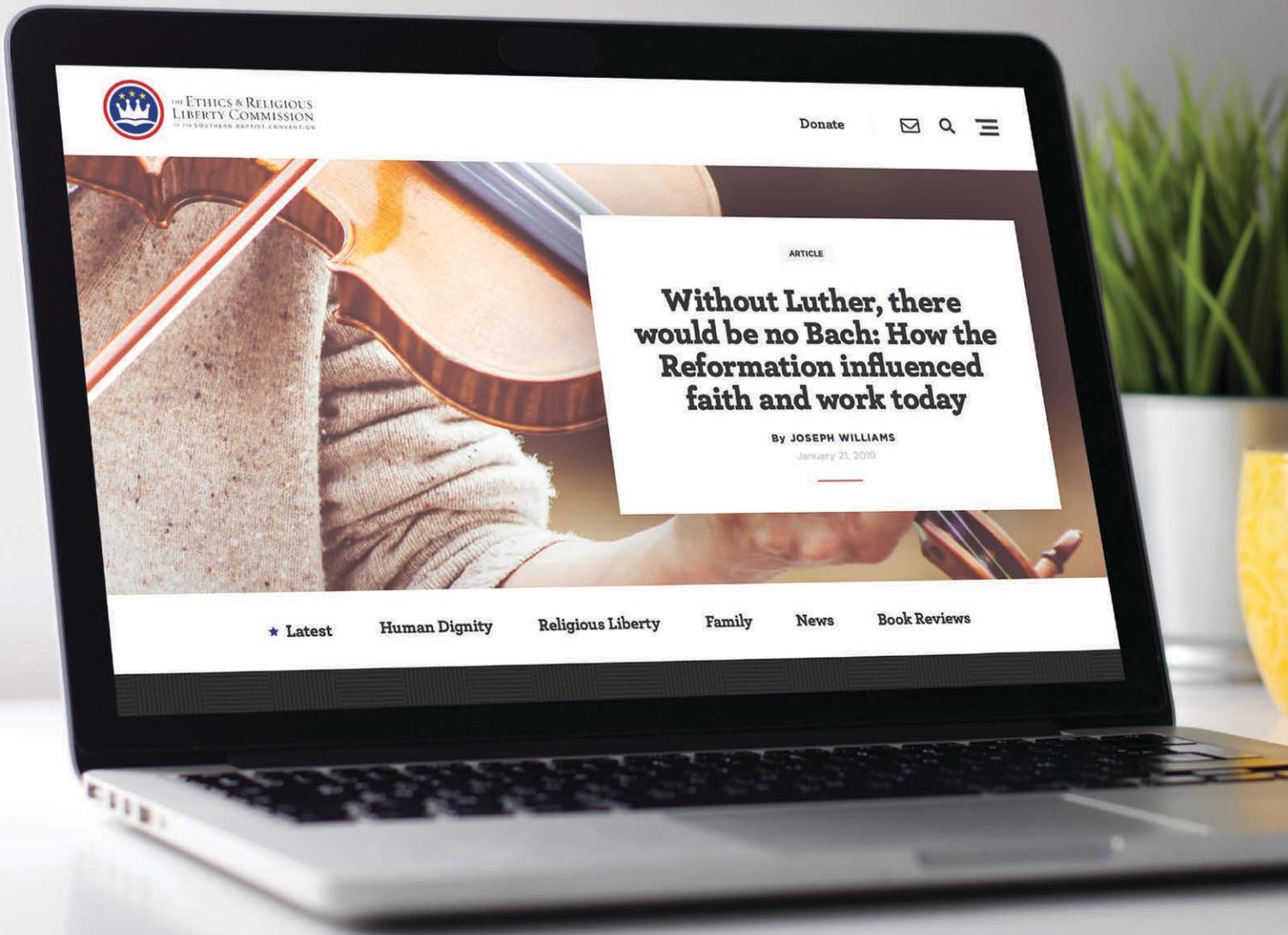
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