

Christianophobia

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Rupert Shortt

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
Author	vii
Introduction	viii
1. Egypt	1
2. Iraq	9
3. Pakistan	14
4. Nigeria	18
5. India	21
6. Burma	27
7. China	30
Conclusion	34
Notes	39

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that many faith-based groups face discrimination or persecution to some degree. A far less widely grasped fact is that Christians are targeted more than any other body of believers. In my book *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack* (Rider, 2012), I quote figures from the Pew Forum and the World Evangelical Alliance estimating that 200 million Christians (10 per cent of the global total) are socially disadvantaged, harassed or actively oppressed for their beliefs.¹ Exposing and combating the problem ought in my view to be political priorities across large areas of the world. That this is not the case tells us much about a questionable hierarchy of victimhood. The blind spot displayed by governments and other influential players is causing them to squander a broader opportunity. Religious freedom is the canary in the mine for human rights generally.

A glance at the position on several continents confirms the picture. In the large area between Morocco and Pakistan, for example, there is scarcely a country in which church life operates without restrictions. Syria has been one of the exceptions until now. As I write, however, the country is enduring full-scale civil war, and tens of thousands of Christians have been ousted from places including Homs and Qusayr. The prognosis for the rest of the Middle East is hardly encouraging: there is now a serious risk that Christianity will disappear from its biblical heartlands. Anthony O'Mahony of Heythrop College, London, echoes other scholars in estimating that between a half and two-thirds of Christians in the region have left or been killed over the past century.² Comparable tragedies have unfolded elsewhere. About 100,000 Catholic civilians in East Timor were murdered by agents of the Suharto

regime during the 1970s, 80s and 90s, for example; and two million Christians and other non-Muslims perished in Sudan's civil conflict during the period 1985–2005.

Christians in parts of Nigeria live in regular fear of violent attack, and there is clear evidence that the attitudes underlying such aggression are fomented through official channels. One reason why Western audiences hear so little about religious oppression in the Muslim world is straightforward: young Christians in Europe and America do not become 'radicalised', and persecuted Christians tend not to respond with terrorist violence. Another explanation is linked to the blind spots that can affect *bien-pensant* opinion-formers. Parts of the media have been influenced by the logical error that equates criticism of Muslims with racism, and therefore as wrong by definition. This has further distracted attention away from the hounding of Christians, helping to cement the surprisingly widespread idea that Christianity is a 'Western' faith.

To frame my theme in this way is not to endorse talk about a supposed clash of civilisations, or to pretend that embattled Christians are always blameless, or to deny that immense damage has been done by Western interference in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Christians have obviously displayed great intolerance at times in the past – and continue to do so in pockets including Russia and the Balkans. It should also be stressed that much 'Christianophobia' – in China, North Korea and other Communist societies; in India; or in mainly Buddhist societies such as Sri Lanka and Burma – has nothing to do with militant Islam. My book examines 14 societies in detail and half a dozen in brief. The pages ahead focus on a small group of key countries to provide a précis of the argument.

1. Egypt

Ibrahim Habib, an Egyptian-born Copt, has lived in Britain since 1979, and practised as a doctor for most of this period. He grew up and attended medical school in Upper Egypt. As his testimony shows, he eventually decided to leave because of a growing tide of anti-Christian militancy:

Christians were either passed or failed; not a single one was placed in the 'Good', 'Very Good', or 'Excellent' categories. This meant that none of us Christians would achieve a high-flying career. The modern phase of anti-Christian violence in Egypt really began in 1972, with the establishment of the Gama Islamiya, a militant group. They started attacking Christian students on the university campus at Asyut, barging into our rooms and tearing down pictures of the Virgin Mary and other religious materials. A fight ensued. I and other Christians were expelled from university accommodation, but the Muslims who caused trouble were allowed to remain.

The upsurge in militancy can be blamed to a great extent on President Sadat. After the assassination attempt on Nasser in 1954, many fundamentalists were rounded up and sent to prison. Sadat, faced with heavy challenges from the Left, indulged the Islamists and let many in from Saudi Arabia. He also called Egypt a Muslim country, even though 15 to 20 per cent of the population were then Christian. That figure has now fallen to 12 per cent, because of all the emigration.

In the lead-up to my own graduation from Asyut in 1976, several Christian students were thrown from the balconies of buildings and injured. Others were killed. A local priest in Asyut, Fr Gabriel Abed al-Motgaly, was murdered. I felt that my decision to leave Egypt was vindicated, because a major flare-up took place in 1981. A piece of land belonging to a Christian in the al-Zawia al-Hamra suburb of Cairo was seized by Muslims who wanted to build a mosque. At least 80 people were killed in the violence, some people were burnt alive in their homes, and the police just looked on, according to eyewitness accounts.

There were many similar attacks on Christians in Upper Egypt as well, and no prosecutions, apart from in one case. A monk was murdered in front of the gates of his monastery at al-Moharaq. Two

men were arrested, and eventually received a prison sentence of three years.

The situation deteriorated steadily during the 1980s and 90s. Hundreds of Christians died in many attacks during this period. A few Christians I knew were given good jobs for propaganda purposes, and because they were very loyal to the Mubarak regime. But my own prospects would have faded if I'd stayed.³

Traditions of toleration run deep in Egypt, the Arab society with by far the largest Christian minority. Fifteen per cent of the population were Copts as recently as two generations ago; even now, there are still ten million Christians in the country. As Dr Habib indicates, the rot set in around four decades ago. The author and journalist Alaa al-Aswany ascribes the change to the quadrupling of oil prices in 1973, which gave Wahhabi extremists in Saudi Arabia a springboard to export their views around the world:

In Wabbabis' eyes, Copts are...infidels and polytheists prone to hating Islam and conspiring against it... Anyone who follows the portrayal of Copts on dozens of satellite channels and Salafist websites is bound to be saddened. These forums, followed by millions of Egyptians daily, openly declare their hatred of Copts... Often they call on Muslims to boycott them. There are countless examples, but I will cite here what I read on the well-known Salafist website 'Guardians of the Faith', which devoted a whole article to the subject, 'Why Muslims Are Superior to Copts'. 'Being a Muslim girl whose role models are the wives of the Prophet, who were required to wear the hijab, is better than being a Christian girl, whose role models are whores,' it says. 'Being a Muslim who fights to defend his honor and his faith is better than being a Christian who steals, rapes, and kills children ... Being a Muslim whose role models are Muhammad and his companions is better than being a Christian whose role models are Paul the Liar [sic] and the whoremongering prophets.' As this enmity towards Copts spreads, is it not natural, even inevitable, that it should end in attacks on them?⁴

A recent story highlighted by the American human rights campaigner Nina Shea helps to bring the tragedy of the Copts into clearer focus. In July 2008, Thomas, Catholic

Coptic Bishop of El-Qussia in Upper Egypt, gave a lecture in Washington, DC, called 'The Experience of the Middle East's Largest Catholic Community during a Time of Rising Islamization'. Bishop Thomas ended his address with a lament over the decline of an ancient community: 'We are worried about the large number of [emigrants] that are leaving Egypt, like all the Middle East; we are worried that the Christians are leaving this area.'⁵

Forthright but uninflamatory, the bishop's words prompted a vitriolic response in Egypt's government-controlled mosques and media. Thomas was denounced in hundreds of newspaper articles, many of which called for his arrest and prosecution. He was accused among other things of supporting a Zionist plot and of working as a Western agent. During Friday prayers shortly afterwards, the sheikh at the al-Rahma mosque in Qussia commended a violent response to the lecture: '[I say to] you the traitors, there are men among the Muslims who will spill your blood ... [M]y helpers will sever the legs of all those who assist the traitor [Bishop Thomas].'⁶

Oblivious of irony, the sheikh thus confirmed the truth of Thomas's initial comments. The conclusion drawn by Nina Shea from this episode is that Egyptians have been witnessing 'a reinvigorated effort by some of the country's more radical Islamists to establish Egypt's identity as a thoroughly Islamicized ... state'. More moderate elements in the Muslim Brotherhood have expressed a commitment to pluralism and democracy. But Salafists remain largely implacable. In February 2011, Ayman al-Zawahiri - soon to become leader of al-Qaeda after the killing of Osama bin Laden - described Copts as 'one of Egypt's main problems'. He also referred to Pope Shenouda III, the Coptic spiritual leader from 1971 to 2012, who was renowned for his open-handed attitude towards Muslims, as a 'Zionist traitor'.

The effects of extremist pronouncements are not confined to cyberspace. Among the starkest recent examples of Islamist aggression against Christians were the murders of 13 worshippers as they emerged from St George's Church in Nag Hammadi, 25 miles from Luxor, in January 2010; and the bombing of the Two Saints' Church in Alexandria on New Year's Eve of the same year. Twenty Mass-goers were killed, and 70 wounded, in this attack, which was prompted by a false rumour that senior clerics were holding two female converts to Islam against their will.⁷

A compendium of significant incidents in recent years might flag up a report in the *Al-Midan* newspaper on October 13, 2005, which alleged that a play performed in St George's Church, Alexandria, had 'insulted Islam'. The work (part of a summer programme for young Copts) was really about strategies for resisting forced conversion to Islam, but word spread among local Muslims that the production was discourteous towards the Prophet Muhammad. A crowd of more than 5,000 surrounded the church: four people were killed and about 90 injured in the ensuing violence. Seven other churches in Alexandria and one in Cairo were attacked. Pope Shenouda received multiple death threats.

Over the new year period in 2000, 21 Christians and one Muslim were killed in the village of El-Kosheh, in Sohag Governorate, Upper Egypt. The conflict sprang from an argument between two traders, a Muslim and a Christian, on New Year's Eve. Shops were damaged or destroyed as the violence escalated; the Muslim who died was hit by a stray bullet. No one suggested that the killer was a Christian, but the death of the Muslim shopkeeper was followed by a large escalation in the violence. As the mayhem unfolded, the police reportedly watched without intervening, and in some cases actively took part in anti-Christian attacks.

Other examples flesh out the broader story. On November 7, 2003, an unidentified group attacked Christian homes and property in Gerza, a village near the northern city of al-Ayyat: five Copts were injured. A 78-year-old Copt, Nishi Atta Girgis, was killed, and five other Christians injured, when three churches in Alexandria were attacked on April 14, 2006. In May of the following year, the imam of the mosque in the village of Bemha, south-west of Cairo, instructed his flock to defend Islam in response to a rumour that a new church was to be built nearby. About 70 Christian-owned homes were set on fire in consequence, shops were looted, and dozens of Copts were injured. This fracas came hard on the heels of violence against Christian-owned property across Upper Egypt, after the spread of rumours about a love affair between a Muslim woman and Christian man.⁸

As has often been pointed out, many Egyptian Muslims think that Copts are implicated in what they see as a Christian assault on the Muslim world, because of George W. Bush's use of the term 'crusade' after 9/11. Others maintain that Bush's ill-chosen words and mistaken policies have provided a convenient excuse for aggression against minority groups which patently have no connection with Western governments. But however the motivation for violence is measured, the early twenty-first century has seen a steady rise in the strife endured by Christians. Coptic women have been kidnapped and forced to become Muslims, while converts from Islam to Christianity have been arrested and sometimes tortured. One convert died in police custody in November 2003.

Given the link between religion and social identity in the Middle East, it is unsurprising that conversion can look like an act of betrayal to many. Converts can bring shame on their communities; this then feeds a corresponding urge for restitution. A Muslim who becomes a Christian or

Baha'i, for example, may be shunned, physically harmed or even killed.

The Qur'an does not set out specific punishments for apostasy in this life. The notion that converts to other religions should be killed fed into all the main branches of sharia law via later collections of teaching, especially the Hadith. It is partly for this reason that Muslim attitudes should not be considered immutable – either by Islamists on the one hand, or hostile critics of Islam on the other. A growing number of jurists in the West insist on the priority of the Qur'an over the Hadith in this and other areas, and no less a figure than Egypt's Grand Mufti, Ali Gomaa, has urged that apostasy lies beyond the scope of human judgment. Many other senior Muslims are far less circumspect, though. When the Grand Mufti stated on 'Muslims Speak Out', a *Washington Post/Newsweek* online forum, that Muslims were free to change their religion, he was rapidly contradicted by Dar al-Iftaa, Egypt's most authoritative theological council. In fact, the council declared, 'Islam forbids Muslims from renouncing their faith ... if a Muslim did so [he or she] would be committing a mortal sin.' It added that apostasy was 'a sort of crime' that 'requires punishment'.⁹

We now have a vantage point from which to ponder the Arab Spring. Two main narratives have governed interpretation of this seismic period. Optimists maintain that governments across the spectrum are acknowledging a need to be more responsive to the demands of their people. Cheerier commentators can point to Tunisia, where there is a democratic government for the first time since the 1950s, and women occupy a quarter of the parliamentary seats. In Morocco, for the first time in the country's history, the Prime Minister has not been chosen by the monarch. Elsewhere, Jordan, Yemen and Bahrain are on journeys towards reform. The less sanguine can naturally base their

case on the Syrian bloodbath of 2011–12, and buttress it by pointing out that theocratic rebels hardly mark an improvement on secular forms of hardline rule.

Egypt's case lends credence to both sides, Tahrir Square in Cairo having become a symbol of pro-democracy activism before Hosni Mubarak's downfall, and of military violence after it. Copts have therefore been living on a knife-edge. Shortly before the President's resignation on February 12, 2011, more than 20 worshippers were murdered, and at least 70 others injured, when a car bomb exploded outside St Mark's Coptic Church in Alexandria. On March 20, vigilantes in the province of Qena entered the village where Ayman Anwar Mitri, a school administrator, lived, and cut off his right ear. Mr Mitri's alleged crime was to have let a flat to a woman his attackers claimed was a prostitute. They told him that 'Nazarenes' (that is, Christians) like himself were no longer protected by Mubarak's hated secret police, and would henceforth be liable to face Islamic justice. The perpetrators of this and similar attacks were Salafists. Their antics are a sign of how Christians (even those who don't face active persecution) are seen across large parts of the world: as somehow not fully part of their respective nations, despite long traditions of peaceful coexistence with the majority communities.

Muhammad Morsi's election as President in 2012 lent support to both sides of the argument. Egyptians now have their first-ever elected leader. That is a hopeful sign in principle, notwithstanding the country's gargantuan social and economic problems. But major questions clearly remain. Will the Muslim Brotherhood serve the interests of all communities, as it has promised, or will it seek to impose a theocratic model of government? Pragmatists have stressed that Turkey's ruling party provides the Brotherhood with its preferred way ahead, but this is

hardly a source of reassurance to Christians. In any case, will the army, and agents of the so-called deep state, really be prepared to give up power? One point cannot be gainsaid. Copts - whether in Cairo or Kensington or further afield - remain deeply concerned about the future of their battered Church.

2. Iraq

In 1990, there were between 1.2 and 1.4 million Christians in the country. By the time of the second Gulf war in 2003, this figure had fallen by about half a million.¹⁰ Today, fewer than 200,000 remain. A sense of the particular horrors being endured by Christians probably began to filter into Western public consciousness after October 31, 2010. This was the date of an attack by ten al-Qaeda militants on the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, when over 50 people were murdered and many more maimed. But although it is commonly assumed that Saddam Hussein's Baath regime afforded protection to Christians, the idea requires heavy qualification. The truth is that Christians suffered displacement and discrimination, if not outright persecution, throughout the later decades of the twentieth century. There were almost 250 Christian villages in northern Iraq at the end of the Second World War, for example; even by the end of the 1960s, dozens of them had been destroyed.

The year 2003 nevertheless marked a watershed. Chaos followed the American-led invasion in the spring of that year; with chaos came an explosion of sectarian strife. Iraqi Christians became more vulnerable than ever: as one of them later put it, 'Extremist Sunnis and Shiites are at war over everything else, but united by a common denominator, the persecution of Christians.'¹¹ For some, the more targeted nature of the attacks was encapsulated by the beheading in 2006 of a kidnapped Orthodox priest, Fr Boulos Iskander, even after a ransom had been paid. Between 2006 and 2010, 17 Iraqi priests and two Iraqi bishops were kidnapped in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk. All were assaulted or tortured by their captors. Most were released, but one bishop, four priests, and three junior clerics were killed. In most cases,

those responsible declared that they wanted all Christians to be expelled from the country.

The systematic desecration of Christian places of worship began with an assault on a church in the northern city of Mosul in 2004. On August 1 of that year, a bomb was detonated at St Peter and St Paul's Church in the Christian town of Al Dora. Five other churches around the country were bombed on the same day; 12 people were killed, and many injured.¹² By early 2011, at least 66 other churches had been bombed or invaded: 41 in Baghdad, 19 in Mosul, five in Kirkuk, and one in the city of Ramadi, about 70 miles west of the capital. Two convents, a monastery, and a church-run orphanage had also been bombed.¹³

Speaking about this turn of events during a visit to Ireland in 2011, the Chaldean Catholic Archbishop of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, Bashar Warda, emphasized the price paid by laypeople – shopkeepers, mothers and children, the elderly – as well as by church leaders. He said that common expressions of sectarian belligerence included direct threats in letters with bullets enclosed; text messages mentioning potential targets by name; direct, person-to-person threats on the street; threatening language from policemen and army personnel; burglary and extortion; threatening graffiti, including quotations from the Qur'an on the walls of Christian homes; and the periodic appearance of armed men outside Christian households.

Later in the address already cited, Archbishop Warda told two stories that crystallized the trauma facing his fellow believers. One was about a Mr Dahan, the father of a teacher at a church-run kindergarten. He was the first of at least eight Iraqi Christians to be killed in Mosul before the elections of 2010. The abduction that ended with his death was the second time that he had been kidnapped. Two years before, he had been seized, beaten and stuffed into the back of a car until his relatives had paid a ransom

of \$5,000. The family did not move after this, because Mr Dahan himself refused to leave. As a family member put it, 'Our father said, "If all of us Christians leave, who is going to stay in the land of the prophets and pray in our churches?"' He added, 'We were all born in Mosul and we will die in Mosul.' The second story involved a priest, Fr Mazen, from the town of Qaraqosh (also called Bakhdida) in the north, who was kidnapped four days after his ordination. He was released; but a year later, armed men entered his home and killed his father and two brothers in front of his mother and sister-in-law. Despite this tragedy, Fr Mazen has continued to serve the displaced families in his congregation with unflagging faith.

'There are thousands of examples of such senseless injury and killing,' the archbishop added. 'The grief and sorrow in our congregations is palpable, where not one person has been unaffected by tragedy since 2003. Moreover, each family has suffered decades of losses from the Saddam regime, the sanctions prior to the occupation, the devastation of the Gulf war as well as the Iran-Iraq war. Iraqis are a people who have experienced immense suffering but who are also strong, resilient, and prepared to claim their right to existence.'¹⁴

History casts a revealing sidelight on the current affairs explored in this chapter. The hounding of local Christians seems to me all the more heartrending given that the roots of their communities are almost as old as the New Testament itself. Westerners are often shamefully ignorant when it comes to the Middle East's patchwork of faiths: as I have urged, many even assume that Christianity is an import to the region, 'rather than an export from it', as Rowan Williams has said. The Archbishop of Canterbury expanded on this insight during a parliamentary debate about the persecution of Christians in 2011.¹⁵ He reminded his audience that for two millennia, the Christian presence

in the region had been an integral part of successive civilizations: 'a dominant presence in the Byzantine era, a culturally very active partner in the early Muslim centuries, a patient and long-suffering element, like the historic Jewish communities of the Maghreb and the Middle East, in the complex mosaic of ethnic jurisdictions within the Ottoman Empire and, more recently, a political catalyst and nursery of radical thinking in the dawn of Arab nationalism.' To be ignorant of this was:

... to risk misunderstanding a whole world of political and religious interaction and interdependence and to yield to the damaging myth that, on the far side of the Mediterranean or the Bosphorus, there is a homogeneous Arab and Muslim world, a parallel universe... . The Middle East is not a homogeneous region, and the presence of Christians there is a deep-rooted reality. We are not talking about a foreign body, but about people who would see their history and their destiny alike bound up with the countries where they live, and bound up in local conversations with a dominant Muslim culture, which they are likely to see in terms very different from those that might be used by Western observers.¹⁶

Dr Williams later told me how some London schools had illuminated his point by their inept treatment of refugee children from the Middle East. Arab pupils had been pulled out of assembly by over-zealous staff who assumed that they were all Muslims, when many were in fact Orthodox Christians.

It would be a false picture of Iraqi Christians which did not record their heroism. We have been reminded that they are very far from resigning themselves to a slow demise, not least because falls in the Christian population in some parts of the country have caused numbers to swell elsewhere. For example, the diocese of Erbil has grown by 30 per cent in recent years, so that housing and school places are in short supply. Housing costs have risen steeply: rent levels have leapt by 200–300 per cent to take

advantage of rising demand. In his address to Irish churchpeople, Archbishop Warda said that Christian schools in his diocese were having to run two shifts a day to cope with demand, while class sizes had risen substantially. Thanks to charitable donations from outside Iraq, new churches were being built. Damaged buildings were being restored.

A new Catholic primary school had recently been built to ease the burden of public education in the area. Church leaders were overseeing the construction of low-cost housing for displaced families as a long-term investment against rising land values. Diocesan leaders were also seeking to develop church investments to stimulate jobs. 'Lastly,' the archbishop said:

... we want the presence of the Church to be apparent [through] a vibrant ... parish life symbolized by church buildings and obvious public spaces. We do not want to hide our faith or identity out of fear for our lives. We want to be seen and remembered by all Iraqis; those who threaten us, but [especially] those willing to stand in solidarity with us... This is not a time to hide our faith or our identity... In Iraq, forty years of war and oppression have strengthened our endurance and our resolve to stand strong and to claim our legal and historical right as a Church and as a people ... We have not come this far to give up.

3. Pakistan

The chronic religious intolerance that affects Pakistan was vividly reflected by the murder of Shahbaz Bhatti, the country's Minister for Minorities and a Catholic, on March 2, 2011. His 'offence' was to oppose the country's anti-blasphemy laws, introduced by the country's then dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, during his Islamicisation programme in the 1980s. Mr Bhatti's killing came nine weeks after that of Salmaan Taseer, the Muslim governor of Punjab, who had also enraged extremists by speaking out in defence of religious minorities.

Besides standing up for Gojra's Christians, Shahbaz Bhatti had backed Aasia Bibi (also known as Aasia Noreen), a Christian sent to prison for alleged blasphemy in 2009. She had been working in the fields near her home in the Sheikhpura district of Punjab before being asked to fetch some drinking water for her fellow labourers. When she brought the drink, however, they refused to consume it, arguing that it must be 'unclean' because Aasia Bibi was not a Muslim. During an argument following this incident, she was attacked by a crowd of her neighbours who accused her of insulting the Prophet. A police investigation was launched, and in November 2010 Mrs Bibi, who has five children, was sentenced to death by a court at Sheikhpura. Both Mr Taseer and Mr Bhatti visited her in prison before their murders. Shortly after Mr Bhatti's death, it emerged that he had made a video to be publicized if he were killed. In it he declared: 'I am living for my community and for suffering people and I will die to defend their rights. I prefer to die for my principles and for the justice of my community rather than to compromise. I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ, who has given his own life for us. I know ... the meaning

of the Cross and I follow him on the Cross.’ At memorial events held a year after his death, it was noted that no one had been brought to justice for the crime.¹⁷

The blasphemy laws underlie a huge proportion of inter-communal strife in Pakistan. Introduced in stages in 1982 and 1986, this legislation derived from earlier laws, brought in by the British, to combat Hindu–Muslim clashes in 1860. Between partition and the mid-1980s, there was very little religiously motivated violence in Pakistan. In 1982, Zia criminalized the desecration of the Qur’an as a form of blasphemy. Criticism of the Prophet – by now also deemed to be a form of blasphemy – became a capital offence in 1992. Critics of this legislation point out that it contradicts freedom-of-religion clauses in the Constitution, and that it can be abused very easily – even a plainly malicious allegation of blasphemy can still be registered by the police under what is known as a First Information Report (FIR).

The fallout of this has been very severe. One hair-raising symptom of the worsening climate involved the suicide of John Joseph, Catholic Bishop of Faisalabad, in May 1998. He shot himself in protest at the death sentence handed down to Ayub Masih, a member of his flock. Mr Masih had been accused and found guilty of blasphemy, but the bishop blamed the conflict on a land dispute between the defendant and his Muslim neighbours. Thousands of Christians marched in support of Bishop Joseph after his death, even though Catholic teaching still holds suicide to be a grave sin. Hundreds of the demonstrators were arrested. Two were themselves indicted for blasphemy.¹⁸

Muslims are naturally liable to be accused of blasphemy as well. Muhammad Shafi and Muhammad Aslam, an imam and his son, were sentenced to life imprisonment and fined 200,000 rupees (approximately £1,500) on January 11, 2011 for blasphemy. The pair reportedly tore

down a poster from outside their grocery store in Multan, central Pakistan, and were charged because it contained verses from the Qur'an and was advertising an event on the anniversary of the Prophet's birth. Their lawyer has argued that the root of the accusations lies in rivalries between the Deobandi and Bareilvi movements within the majority Sunni community. He describes Shafi as a 'practising Muslim ... the imam of a mosque [who] had recently returned from a pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia'. An appeal was pending at the time of writing.

While the position of minorities is important, we can only grasp the real scale of Pakistan's human rights problems by looking at the effects of so-called apostasy. Lifelong members of religious minorities may be viewed with great suspicion in some quarters, but Muslims who have elected to renounce their ancestral faith are widely considered to be guilty of an abomination. A core distinction should be drawn between the Qur'an, which does not prescribe a punishment for apostasy in this life (only in the life to come), and traditional Islamic jurisprudence – texts such as the Hadith and Sunna – which mandate the death penalty for a sane male apostate, and lifelong imprisonment or harsh treatment for a woman in a similar position. It is these post-qur'anic bodies of teaching that have been used to justify a number of murders of ex-Muslims in Pakistan.

Since religion is always mediated through particular cultural climates, apostasy is best discussed on a country-by-country basis. The observations of Ziya Meral, a Turkish sociologist,¹⁹ give a useful sample of the differences between Muslim polities, as well as the scale of the problem. The apostate is at real risk of death in Saudi Arabia, Mauritania and Iran, even though the death penalty for apostasy is not codified in those countries. In other places including Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar,

Oman and Yemen, apostates face severe penalties sanctioned by sharia, including the confiscation of identity papers, the loss of property and the annulment of a marriage. Apostates are also punished under other sorts of law, such as 'insulting Turkishness' in Turkey and 'treason' in Iran, as well as blasphemy in Pakistan. At the time of writing, Sudan and Malaysia do have laws prescribing the death penalty for apostasy, and in Egypt, legislation allows for the abrogation of an apostate's rights as a citizen. The practical effects of these provisions are extremely disquieting. As Meral writes:

Apostates are subject to gross and wide-ranging human rights abuses including extra-judicial killings by state-related agents or mobs; honour killings by family members; detention, imprisonment, torture, physical and psychological intimidation by security forces; the denial of access to judicial services and social services; the denial of equal employment or education opportunities; social pressure resulting in loss of housing and employment; and day-to-day discrimination and ostracism in education, finance and social activities.²⁰

4. Nigeria

An orgy of violence at Christmas, 2010, in Plateau state, a deeply troubled region of central Nigeria, is an image of the country's chronic sectarian problems. Human Rights Watch and other groups calculated that more than 200 people, including children, were hacked to death, burned alive, 'disappeared', or wrenched off buses and murdered in tit-for-tat crimes.

The violence was triggered by bombings on Christmas Eve at two churches in Jos, the state capital. An Islamist website published a statement by Boko Haram (which roughly translates as 'Western education is sinful'), a militant group based in northern Nigeria, claiming responsibility for the attacks. After that, scores of Muslims and Christians were hunted down on the basis of their ethnic and religious identities. The tension intensified early in 2011. Eight young Muslim men driving to a wedding on January 7 were attacked after taking a wrong turning and fetching up in a Christian village, Barkin Ladi. On the following day, the army exhumed five of their bodies from shallow graves nearby. The three others are assumed to have been murdered as well. Muslim youths in Jos went on the rampage as these corpses were being disinterred. They attacked Christians, mostly ethnic Ebo market traders, around the well-known Dilimi market. Witnesses reported that the victims had been butchered with machetes and cutlasses: 48 Ebo civilians were killed. Later on January 8, at least 14 Muslims were murdered in Jos and its surrounding communities in revenge. In one instance, the Muslims on an interstate bus were separated from their fellow passengers and hacked to death. Then, on January 10, gunmen attacked Waren, a mainly Christian village south of Jos, burning homes and killing four women and

seven children, among others. During the month that followed, 42 Muslims and 51 Christians disappeared in suspicious circumstances in and around Jos. As often, the response of the authorities to all these crimes, both at state and federal levels, was paltry.

In some ways Nigeria resembles a bundle of limbs, rather than a body politic as such. Its 140 million-strong population consists of almost 500 ethnic groups. Alone among the societies discussed in these pages, it contains Muslims and Christians in roughly equal numbers. By agreement between the British and the long-established local emirates, Christian mission in the north was heavily curtailed during colonial times. A small church presence was tolerated for the sake of non-indigenous migrant workers from the south, but evangelism among Muslims was largely banned. These factors help to explain the country's volatility (though large areas of the west and south are relatively calm), as well as its tight interlacing of politics and religion. All the most toxic strands in the post-colonial experience are there, too: military dictatorship for most of the period since independence in 1960, oil wealth that has promoted gigantic inequalities, terrorism in the Niger delta, a general absence of civil society, and widespread female genital mutilation.

More benign or competent rulers would not have had an easy ride. The chief divisions, between the mainly Muslim Hausa in the north, and the predominantly Christian Ebo in the east, masks numerous other conflicts, including between the Hausa and the substantially Christian Berom in Plateau state. The Yoruba, who occupy much of the south-west, are a mixed community with a Christian majority. Muslim influence rose during the dictatorship of General Sani Abacha between 1993 and 1998 – so much so that the south threatened formal secession. This was averted when the north accepted the

presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo – a Christian and former military ruler during the late-1970s – who won the election of 1999.

As a trade-off, northern states introduced sharia law. A dozen had done so by 2006, in defiance of Nigeria's secular constitution. Sharia had long been used to resolve family disputes involving Muslims. Christians were now threatened by an attempt to extend Islamic law into their own communities. In some northern states, Christian girls have been obliged to wear the hijab; and in the north-central state of Kano, for instance, a large body of enforcers frequently break into Christian households in search of alcohol. It is estimated that the expansion of sharia has led to the death of 60,000 people,²¹ most of them Christians or adherents of traditional religions. And, as in Pakistan and Egypt, punishment for ex-Muslim converts to Christianity is severe. *Religious Freedom in the World* reports that there are many documented cases in which child abduction has been combined with forced marriage and conversion to Islam in the sharia states. Bauchi, which lies to the east of Kano, is a case in point:

The State Shar'ia Committee has itself been implicated in these abductions in Bauchi state. Christian women are especially vulnerable in shar'ia states since, according to the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), 'a woman [who is] not married, irrespective of her religious background, is seen by Muslim enforcers of the Shari'ah as a prostitute.' In 2003, all girls of Bauchi state above the age of 16 were given 90 days to marry or face arrest on charges of prostitution. Eight women were subsequently arrested, fined, and given 10 lashes for being unmarried.²²

5. India

Between August and October of 2008, the eastern state of Orissa in India saw the worst outbreak of brutality against Christians since Independence. Hindu extremists murdered at least 90 people, displaced at least 50,000 more from their homes, and attacked about 170 churches and chapels. The victims included Hindus who had tried to defend their Christian neighbours. Most of the attacks took place in Kandhamal, but violence raged in 13 surrounding districts as well. The victims included a Catholic priest, Fr Bernard Bigal, who was killed, and Sr Meena Barwa, who worked in the Divyajyoti Pastoral Centre in Konjamendi. Hunted down by the mob, she was publicly stripped and gang-raped before eventually escaping and seeking police help. She has nevertheless rebuilt her life, returning to her studies and taking her final religious vows.

News of this disaster may have surprised people who associate Hinduism with nothing but spiritual serenity – and think that crimes such as the murder of Dr Graham Staines (the Australian missionary and medic burnt to death in 1999 along with his two young sons in the Keonjhar district of Orissa) are exceptions that prove a peaceful rule. But it is a mistake to see the trauma suffered by the Staines family as exceptional: 1999 was neither the best nor worst of times. In the previous year, the Delhi-based United Christian Forum for Human Rights recorded more than 120 attacks against Christians in India, including the torching of 30 churches in Gujarat.²³ Nor is the problem of recent origin. Hindu resistance to Christian mission has deep roots.

So today's aggression has been fed by perceived weakness. In 1909, the Hindu scholar U. N. Mukherji published a monograph entitled *Hindus: A Dying Race*,

which forecast the long-term decline of his co-religionists relative to their Muslim neighbours. The Hindu nationalist ideology that has arisen over the past century begins with a conception that India is a Hindu nation, in which Hinduism is the default way of life for Indians. This model entails a distinction between conversions away from Hinduism, which are seen as a threat to the national integrity of India and a key contributor to the alleged decline of Hinduism, and conversions *to* Hinduism, which are described by the term *ghar vapsi*, translated as 'homecoming', or 'reconversion'.

Related terms helpful for appreciating this subject in the round include 'communalism' – the fomenting of interfaith tension out of a sense that the interests of one religious community are unavoidably in conflict with those of another. In other words, relations between religious communities are seen as a zero-sum game, in which one community's gain inevitably involves another's loss. This view has in turn been yoked to the assumption that religious conflict is inevitable – all the more so when the perpetrators feel that police investigation of their crimes will be lenient or even non-existent.

The term 'Hindutva' was coined by V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966). He contrasted Hindus, who regard India as 'Holy-Land', with Muslims and Christians, for whom India could not be more than their 'Father-Land'. Adherents of these minority faiths by definition possessed a split loyalty: 'Their holy land is far off in Arabia or Palestine. Their mythology and Godmen, ideas and heroes are not the children of this soil. Consequently their names and their outlooks smack of foreign origin. Their love is divided.'²⁴ Savarkar's words were echoed by another significant figure, M. S. Golwalkar (1906–73), who declared that: 'All those not belonging to the national i.e. Hindu Race, Religion, Culture and Language, naturally fall out of the pale of the real "National Life".'²⁵

The more militant forces of Hindu nationalism are known collectively as the Sangh Parivar. Its chief organ is the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which has spawned numerous subsidiary groups. The Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) is the religious wing of the Sangh Parivar, and was heavily implicated in the anti-Christian attacks in Orissa. The VHP's youth wing, known as the Bajrang Dal, is also often behind violence against Muslims and Christians. Associated with the Sangh Parivar are the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), a mainly student body, and the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), set up after Independence to counter the influence of Christian missionaries. The Sangh Parivar's principal political arm is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India's main governing party between 1998 and 2004, but still a major force in regional government. It holds power on its own in Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh; and in coalition with other parties in Bihar, Jharkhand, Nagaland, Punjab and Uttarakhand.

India's political currents naturally do not all flow in the same direction: the country has an impressive constitution replete with pledges to uphold freedom of belief, as well as other liberties.²⁶ The problem is that this and other relevant pieces of legislation are ambiguous in places. Dalits who convert to religions other than Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism – usually Islam and Christianity – lose their status as Scheduled Castes, and thus their eligibility for remedial measures in the first place. Among the consequences of this are that many Christian and Muslim Dalits conceal their religious identity for fear of reprisals; and that those who attack members of these two communities know that they cannot be prosecuted under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. A challenge to this position is under way in India's Supreme Court; adherents of Hindutva naturally support the status quo.

At about the same time as the 2008 attacks in Orissa were unfolding, another tide of violence directed against minorities was flowing through the Dakshina Kannada district of Karnataka, the western Indian state abutting Goa. Christians and Muslims both lost their lives. The targets included all sorts and conditions of churchpeople, who were blamed for ‘insulting’ Hindu deities in a pamphlet allegedly produced by an organization called the New Life Fellowship Trust (NLFT). This publication was probably a malign hoax. The name ‘New Life’ on the front cover appeared to have been printed independently; the publisher turned out to be based a long way away in Andhra Pradesh; the NLFT denied producing it.

The police responded with a mix of heavy-handedness – a common alternative to indifference – and partiality. Christian protesters against the bloodshed were charged under non-bailable sections of the relevant legislation, while Mahendra Kumar, state convener of the Bajrang Dal, was bailed within a few days. An NCM team visited the region in September of 2008; its report concluded that the violence had been ‘well planned’. The document went on to criticise the government for failing to take preventive measures after the violence of the previous month, and the police for clamping down on the legitimate activities of Christian demonstrators.²⁷

Karnataka has recently seen the highest number of attacks on Christians and church property in India. Scores of incidents took place in 2010. On January 22, for example, at Mundolli village in the Uttara Kannada district, Hindu extremists desecrated a cross next to Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church. Two days later, at Bidarikere, in the Davangere district, extremists forcibly entered a church rented by the Indian Evangelical Mission during a service. They set light to Christian literature, attacked a pastor, H. Raju, and accused him of forcible conversions. A First

Information Report or FIR (the document triggering legal proceedings) was filed at a local police station on January 27 and three of the perpetrators were arrested. At the same time, in the village of Dudda, in Hassan district, a complaint was filed against two Christians, Sekhar Chandra and his wife, Kala, who had led worship services in their home under the auspices of Calvary Gospel Church. The police reacted by stopping the services; later, the couple were ejected from their house by their landlord with the assistance of Hindutva activists. On January 28, the Jesus Loves Holy Temple Church was burnt down in the town of Chitradurga.

At Gokula, in the Mysore district, over 300 Hindu extremists forcibly entered 22 Christian households on February 17. The intruders physically attacked the occupants, and tried to force them to declare in writing that they had converted to Christianity under duress. Several of the victims required hospital treatment. Some were denied medical attention, however, because the police removed others to the local police station by force. Officers, including an Inspector Nameraj, told the Christians that they should renounce their faith and yield to the extremists' demands. A case has since been registered against the attackers.²⁸ On February 28, in Karwar, part of the Uttara Kannada district, a further group of extremists allegedly led by a municipal councillor, Raja Gowda, forced their way into the New Life Fellowship Church. They falsely accused two local Christians, David Lambani and Satish Ambedkar, of forcible conversions. The two men suffered grievous bodily harm and needed hospitalization. The police registered an FIR against the attackers; no arrests were made.²⁹

Another state to have seen sustained problems is Chhattisgarh, west of Orissa. In Dinapur, a town in the Raipur district, around 25 militants forced their way into a service at the Believers Church of India on March 21. They

insulted the congregation and confiscated piles of Christian literature, threatening violence if the church members did not leave the area. One member of the congregation, a government worker, was told that she would lose her job unless she returned to the Hindu faith. Police detained the Christians for about three hours and endorsed the extremists' threats.³⁰

At Betul, in Madhya Pradesh, a dozen or so extremists entered an evening prayer meeting organized by the Evangelical Lutheran Church on April 17. Members of the congregation were physically assaulted. Many of them fled, but later realised that their pastor, Amit Gilbert, had not escaped with them. A search was launched: and Mr Gilbert's body was later found in the village well. His congregation believe that he had been killed earlier, because there was a large wound on the back of his head, and no water in his lungs or stomach. This case has been taken to court.³¹

6. Burma

Burma's by-elections in early 2012 are widely judged to have marked a step forward for a country dubbed a giant prison without walls only shortly beforehand. But the poll should also be seen in due perspective. The National League for Democracy (NLD) won almost all of the 45 contested seats, but there are 664 places in the Burmese Parliament altogether. The ruling party and armed forces remain firmly in control.

This much is familiar to the large audience aware of the country's history of dictatorship, its catastrophic human rights record, and the extremely harsh penalties faced by Aung San Suu Kyi and other pro-democracy activists. The treatment of tribal peoples such as the Karen has also drawn international censure. Less widely appreciated is the targeting of people specifically for their religion – although valuable studies of the oppression of Muslims and Buddhists have appeared in recent years.³² Anti-Christian discrimination has perhaps been the least-noticed problem of all – though in Britain the writer and human rights campaigner Benedict Rogers has done much to adjust the balance, notably through his ground-breaking report 'Carrying the Cross'.³³ Rogers's findings are based on extensive first-hand research among the Chin people on the India-Burma border, the Kachin people on the China-Burma border, the Karen and Karenni on the Thailand-Burma border, and in Rangoon and Mandalay, Burma's two major cities.³⁴

In an overview of the country, Rogers notes a paradox about the situation faced by Christians. On the one hand, churches appear to function normally in certain areas. On the other hand, the regime – known by the Orwellian title of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) –

displays a high level of anti-Christian bias. The main explanation lies in the interlacing of religion and ethnicity. As one Chin Christian woman put it: 'If you are double C - being a Chin and being a Christian - you have nothing in Burma, not a bright future at all.'³⁵ The statistics bear out her complaint. About 90 per cent of the Chin are Christian, according to the Chin Human Rights Organization (CHRO). The Chin population is reckoned to stand at 1.2 million, but CHRO believes that less than half of this community live in Chin state. About 100,000 reside in Rangoon, while 300,000 are in Kalaymyo, Sagaing Division, and a further 150,000 are clustered in other parts of the same region. At least 100,000 refugees live in India.

Christians form a significant proportion of the population in Kachin, Karen and Karenni states, and some have taken up arms against the regime. Where this has happened, government clampdowns have been draconian. In cities, the curbing of Christian activity is usually less direct. There may be restrictions on the building of new churches, on the renovation or extension of existing church buildings, and on the setting up of house churches. Openly professing Christians employed in government service find it virtually impossible to get promotion.

The matter has been memorably summed up by Johann Candelin, Goodwill Ambassador of the World Evangelical Fellowship, in a comment that applies to religious oppression in many contexts besides Burma's:

Persecution seems to pass through three phrases. The first is disinformation. Disinformation begins more often than not in the media. Through printed articles, radio, television, and other means, Christians are robbed of their good reputation and their right to answer accusations made against them. Without trial, they are found guilty of all kinds of misdemeanours.

The public opinion that easily results from being constantly fed such disinformation will not protect Christians from the next step, which is discrimination. Discrimination relegates Christians to a

second-class citizenship with poorer legal, social, political and economic standing than the majority in the country.

The third stage is persecution, which, once the first two steps have been crossed, can be practised with impunity without normal protective measures taking place. Persecution can arise from the state, the police or military, extreme organisations, mobs, paramilitary groups, or representatives of other religions.³⁶

7. China

The scale of the cataclysm that engulfed China under Mao is now widely grasped: Jasper Becker (author of *Hungry Ghosts*) and Frank Dikötter (in *Mao's Famine*) estimate that 45 million people died between 1958 and 1962 alone. The Dalai Lama fled to India in 1959, after the Chinese abrogated an agreement allowing religious autonomy in Tibet. Religion was proclaimed to be a matter of class struggle during the Cultural Revolution. Christian clergy were purged. Re-education officers were sent to villages across the country to wipe out practices deemed 'capitalistic' (an umbrella term that included religious rituals); then came the 'Smash the Four Olds' campaign – the quartet in question being old customs, culture, habits and ideas.

Some observers concluded from this that the apparatus of faith had been entirely swept away in the world's most populous nation.³⁷ Others, including Victor Goossaert and David Palmer, identify 'a parallel trend of political sacralisation' in Communist policies.³⁸ Others again judge that religious activity spread below the radar on a substantial scale, despite all appearances to the contrary. Whatever the exact truth of this, water returned to the desert during the reigns of Deng Xiaoping and his successors, Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao. Registered Catholics now number about 5.7 million; the Vatican puts the number of underground Catholics at 8 million. About 23 million Protestants belong to state-registered bodies, while unregistered Protestants are the largest Christian group of all – perhaps numbering between 50 million and 60 million.³⁹ Looser institutional structures have worked to Protestantism's advantage in this regard. Religious entrepreneurs running their own show and already offering

hope, faith and healing to the religiously unenfranchised from Peru to Manila could now set their sights on Beijing, Shanghai and other Chinese cities. Even non-Pentecostals have been inspired by that tradition's emphasis on what the Christian writer Lian Xi, author of *Redeemed by Fire*, has called 'a potent mix of evangelistic fervour, biblical literalism, charismatic ecstasies, and a fiery eschatology not infrequently tinged with nationalistic exuberance'.

The volatility of this mixture helps account for the harsher conditions that Christians are facing once more, particularly since the 2008 Olympics, before which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had talked the talk about progress on human rights in the face of international criticism. On the one hand, Communist high-ups believe as clearly as their early twentieth-century forebears that the mixture of industry and stability common in Protestant societies, above all, can be harnessed to boost wealth and social cohesion. Christianity is thus seen as both the medicine and the opium of the people in different respects. On the other, the authorities have an uneasy sense that Christian activism can bring down the mighty from their seats.

The idea of a correspondence between economic progress and progress on human rights thus requires qualification. More Christians are imprisoned in China than in any other country in the world. It is estimated that almost 2,000 members of house churches were arrested during the 12 months after May 2004 alone.⁴⁰ 'Troublemakers' typically still face several years' labour in 're-education' camps without anything remotely resembling due process, because public security officials have the right to imprison people for up to three years without trial.

More general readers are likely to be interested above all in the prospects for progress on religious freedom, and human rights in general, across China. Where Christians

are concerned, the short answer is that they have travelled a long way, but will remain on an arduous path for some time to come.

Given the Communist Party's goal of self-preservation, though, it is not surprising that it seeks to keep Christians and other people of faith under a very tight rein. On July 29, 2011, the authorities sentenced Shi Enhao, deputy leader of the Chinese House Church Alliance, to two years' 're-education through labour' – a sentence requiring no trial or sentence.⁴¹ Mr Shi was officially charged with holding 'illegal meetings and [of] illegal organizing of... religious meetings' by dint of his role as pastor to thousands of house-church members around Beijing. His congregations were then ordered to stop meeting for worship; robes, musical instruments and cash from collection boxes totalling nearly \$22,000 were confiscated. Especially instructive was an article by a government adviser, Ma Hucheng, published by the China Social Sciences Press, connecting the growth of Protestant Christianity with political dissidence. 'Western powers, with America at their head, deliberately export Christianity to China and carry out all kinds of illegal evangelistic activities,' he wrote. 'Their basic aim is to use Christianity to change the character of the regime... in China and overturn it.'⁴²

These words are no less informative for being intemperate. It would be hard to improve on the journalist Simon Scott Plummer's verdict on the irresistible forces and immovable objects described in this section. He begins by noting that the sheer variety of the elements – communal societies, Buddhist and Taoist temples, official and underground church congregations – makes it hard to imagine their uniting to mount a serious challenge to secular authority. 'A second factor', he goes on:

CHINA

... is that there is, as yet, no indication that they would like to. Buddhism may have the largest number of followers but, outside Tibet, has not defied the state in the way ... that the monks have in Burma under the junta. Christianity's links with the outside world may make it suspect but the number of faithful, perhaps around 80 million, while impressive in absolute terms, is only a small percentage of China's total population of 1.3 billion. And the indigenous churches have generally shunned political engagement. Finally, there is the Communist Party's determination to crush any dissent which poses even a whiff of existential threat.⁴³

Conclusion

Even though Christians face the assaults and crackdowns reported above in countries such as India, Burma and China, the lion's share of their problems arise in Muslim-majority societies. The Freedom House think-tank has produced a chart called 'Religious Freedom in the World'⁴⁴ examining the records of many countries. Of the 41 countries covered that were judged free in religious terms – that is, scoring 1, 2, or 3 on a scale of 1 to 7 – 35 are traditionally Christian. Only two traditionally Christian countries out of 45, Belarus and Cuba, were deemed to be 'not free' – that is, scoring a 6 or a 7. The other countries rated highly included three traditionally Buddhist domains: Japan, Mongolia and Thailand. Buddhist societies scoring poorly were those with Communist governments: China, Tibet, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam. Among the small number of Hindu-majority countries, Nepal scored poorly on both political and religious freedom, while India, unusually, was rated highly in the former category, and badly in the latter. This apparent anomaly is usually ascribed to the growth of Hindutva over recent decades.

The survey makes clear that the greatest curbs on religious freedoms take place in Muslim-majority countries. 'This pattern parallels problems with democracy, civil liberties and economic freedom, but the negative trend with respect to religious freedom is even stronger,' the scholar and campaigner Paul Marshall writes.⁴⁵ It is worth emphasising that there are religiously free Muslim countries – Senegal, for example. But Muslim-majority societies formed 12 of the 20 'unfree' ones surveyed, and of the seven territories receiving the lowest possible score, four were Muslim. This phenomenon extends outside the

Middle East. Islamic democracies such as Indonesia and Bangladesh also score poorly: not, in their cases, because of government repression, but through the spread of Islamist terrorism. These findings are corroborated by an even more recent survey published in Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke's major study *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious persecution and conflict in the twenty-first century*.⁴⁶

So we must also confront directly a question which has haunted a large portion of this pamphlet. Is there a problem with Islam as such, or is the trouble more a matter of contingencies? (After all, large parts of the Christian world were saturated with unsurpassed levels of violence 70 or 100 years ago.) Part of the answer to this question is theological. There is a theory that the idea of jihad is more deeply embedded in Islam than related notions in the other world religions – and therefore that Islam is more susceptible to violent extremism – because of the martial context in which Islam took root. It does not help that for the first half of the Muslim era, Muslims thought of themselves as being on top, both culturally and in terms of military power, for understandable reasons. The *ummah* extended from Córdoba in the west, to Baghdad, and in due course to the Far East: a vast belt of land greatly surpassing the reach of Christendom – and at times threatening to overwhelm it.

Defence advocates tend to reply that the Prophet Muhammad's ministry took place in a very hostile context, and that Islam's matrix was connected with the need to defend the community against dangerous opponents from the start. Supporters of this argument can sometimes turn the tables on Christianity by suggesting that although the New Testament is brimming with the language of peace, Christ's followers would in time become extremely violent towards non-Christians and perceived heretics. Thousands of 'witches' were murdered

in early modern Europe and America; Thomas Aitkenhead was executed in Scotland for blasphemy as recently as 1697. This is to say nothing of earlier inquisitions, or of the anti-Jewish pogroms that took place later in Christian societies. Nor is Christian-backed violence a thing of the past. In the 1970s and 80s, Lebanese Phalangist militias were dominated by Maronites in communion with the see of Rome. During the 1990s, Orthodox Christians (and ex-Communists who used their religious heritage as a flag of convenience) were guilty of extreme aggression against Muslims and Catholics in the Balkans.

As with the Bible, selective quotations from the Qur'an are unlikely to advance the discussion: it contains both the aggressive-seeming 'sword' verse (9:5 - 'When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. God is forgiving and merciful') and the tolerant-seeming 'Let there be no compulsion in religion' (2:256), traditionally seen as underlining the right of non-Muslims to convert freely. A more solid account of the Muslim position would focus on its concentric understanding of faith, with Islam at the centre; Jews and Christians, so-called People of the Book, in an intermediate position; and the representatives of *shirk* (polytheism) and *kufir* (those who reject religion out of ingratitude) at the edge.

In Muslim polities, Jews and Christians were traditionally given the status of *dhimmies*. They paid a special tax and enjoyed qualified rights. Notwithstanding the inequality of this relationship - and, of course, its monotheistic bias - it is reasonable to hold that the *dhimma* arrangement was a precursor of the public international law that did not evolve in Europe until the early seventeenth century. Another important consideration is that some Muslim jurists were

prepared to extend the definition of 'People of the Book' to cover Hindus, because of the scriptural status of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The Mughal Empire had an enormous non-Muslim population of Hindus and others.

Christianity's trajectory has been very different. It did not develop a formal understanding of interfaith toleration, despite the ethic of radical self-giving love towards all set out in the Gospels. Landmarks in the history of Europe such as the Treaty of Westphalia (1648) are reminders of how long it took for the principle of toleration to be accepted even *between* the Christian denominations. Nevertheless, as the anthropologist Jonathan Benthall has suggested in an important essay on the history of religious toleration, Christianity eventually became more self-critical – and subversive of its own apparent strictness – than Islam. One fruit of Jesus's special emphasis on the poor and marginalized has been a tradition of positive discrimination in the modern era. In Islam, the right to criticize the dominant faith rarely extends to the forces of *shirk* and *kufir* who are condemned so comprehensively in the Qur'an. It is also significant that Islam never evolved into movements analogous, say, to Liberal, Reform and Orthodox Judaism. Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), a Grand Mufti of Egypt, and Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), who ministered in what is now Pakistan, were two major reform-minded thinkers whose ideas failed to take wing. Today, Christians and others are surely right in calling on liberal Muslim intellectuals to show greater robustness in confronting awkward questions, including the crisis of institutional authority in Islam.

Yet as Benthall emphasizes, the situation should not be considered static. The lesson of the past is clear, he writes:

Islam has proved to be just as flexible as Christianity in accommodating popular forms of belief and practice. Second, its scholars were able to recognize Hindus as People of the Book, though on

most objective criteria they would have fallen more naturally into the category of *shirk*. If this leap of toleration could be made for the Hindus, albeit for reasons of state, why not today for other belief systems such as the indigenous cosmologies of Africa, Indonesia and Malaysia?⁴⁷

Just as Christianity has evolved, then, there are reasonable grounds for thinking that Islam will do so, too. It seems right to finish on an irenic note by emphasising that the points of contact between the two traditions are at least as significant as the differences. When they are true to their guiding principles, both faiths insist on the sanctity of the person as a seeker of God, and from this should duly follow a recognition of religious freedom as the first of human rights.⁴⁸ Whether this awareness will spread is not for me to predict. For the Christian, it is hope – not more malleable impulses towards either optimism or pessimism – that really counts. Hope, in St Augustine’s resonant words, ‘has two beautiful daughters: their names are anger and courage. Anger that things are the way they are. Courage to make them the way they ought to be.’

NOTES

- ¹ The 200 million figure includes Christians who face discrimination and other forms of hardship falling short of active persecution. See, for example, the findings published by the World Evangelical Alliance (www.worldevangelicals.org).
- ² Anthony O'Mahony, in conversation with the author.
- ³ Ibrahim Habib, interviewed by the author in April 2011.
- ⁴ Alaa al-Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What caused the revolution* (Canongate, 2011), p.129.
- ⁵ Nina Shea, 'Egypt's Copts: Will the region's largest non-Muslim religious community simply disappear?' *The New Republic*, June 10, 2011 (www.tnr.com).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ See for example, Yaroslav Trofimov, 'As Islamists flex muscle, Egypt's Christians despair', *Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 2011 (www.wsj.com).
- ⁸ Reuters, 'Lover rumour sparks Muslim-Christian clash in Egypt', February 13, 2007 (www.alertnet.org/thenews).
- ⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), 'Egypt: Religious Freedom Profile', September 2009 (www.csw.org.uk), p.7.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, the statement put out by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (www.catholicbishops.ie) on March 16, 2011, during the visit of Archbishop Bashar Warda to Armagh.
- ¹¹ Anthony O'Mahony, 'Chaldeans' Last Stand', *The Tablet*, 30 June, 2007.
- ¹² I reproduce Archbishop Warda's statistics used in his address cited above.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ House of Lords Hansard text for December 9, 2011 (www.parliament.uk).
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ CSW news report, 'No justice one year after the assassination of Shahbaz Bhatti', March 2, 2012.
- ¹⁸ CSW Pakistan report, 'Religious Freedom in the Shadow of Extremism', June 2011 (available online), p.13.
- ¹⁹ Ziya Meral, 'No Place to Call Home: Experiences of apostates from Islam: Failures of the international community' (CSW, 2008).
- ²⁰ Ibid., p.4.
- ²¹ Paul A. Marshall (ed.), *Religious Freedom in the World* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), p.310.
- ²² Ibid., p.311.

- ²³ *The Christian Century*, February 24, 1999.
- ²⁴ CSW India report, 'Communalism, Anti-Conversion and Religious Freedom', June 2011 (available online).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp12-13.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.29.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.31.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.37.
- ³¹ Asia News, 4 April 2010.
- ³² See, for example, the Chin Human Rights Organisation's report 'Religious Persecution: A campaign of ethnocide against Chin Christians in Burma' (2004), and Anne Schreiber, 'Human Rights in Myanmar/Burma: The Church under military dictatorship (Pontifical Mission Society Human Rights Office, 2004).
- ³³ Benedict Rogers, 'Carrying the Cross: The military regime's campaign of restriction, discrimination and persecution against Christians in Burma' (a CSW report available on the organisation's website).
- ³⁴ Rogers also draws on the researches of bodies such as the Karen Human Rights Group, the Chin Human Rights Organisation, the Free Burma Rangers, Christian Freedom International, the US State Department, and the US Commission on International Religious Freedom.
- ³⁵ Women's League of Chinland, 'Hidden Crimes against Chin Women', 2006.
- ³⁶ Rogers, 'Carrying the Cross', p.10.
- ³⁷ See, for example, R. C. Bush, *Religion in Communist China* (Abingdon Press, 1970).
- ³⁸ Victor Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), p.67.
- ³⁹ Marshall, *RFW*, p.128.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.129.
- ⁴¹ ChinaAid briefings, July 2011.
- ⁴² Compass Direct News, July 29, 2011.
- ⁴³ Simon Scott Plummer, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 6 April, 2012.
- ⁴⁴ Marshall, *RFW*, pp.5-7 (see also www.freedomhouse.org).
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ⁴⁶ Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious persecution and conflict in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); see especially p.169.
- ⁴⁷ Jonathan Benthall, 'Confessional Cousins and the Rest: The structure of Islamic toleration', *Anthropology Today*, vol.21, No.1, February 2005, p.20.

NOTES

- ⁴⁸ For a significant recent example of deepening dialogue between Muslims and Christians, see Miroslav Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad, and Melissa Yarrington (eds), *A Common Word: Muslims and Christians on loving God and Neighbor* (Eerdmans, 2010).

