

Does Rising Persecution Mean an End to the Christian Faith and Its Impact?

Hostility toward and ill treatment of Christians because of their religious beliefs and practices can be historically traced from the first century of the Christian or Common Era to the present. Even a brief review of the ill treatment of Christians by non-Christians, officials and even fellow Christians through the centuries clearly reveals the tenacious resistance and resilience of Jesus' followers and their dedication to the Son of God.

During His personal ministry on earth, Jesus taught His chosen apostles and other followers they should expect persecution and suffering. He acknowledged He was sending them out as sheep among wolves, but He also promised help in time of trouble (see Matt. 10:16-23).

Jesus' predictions of ill-treatment quickly materialized. Chapter 12 of the book of Acts reveals King Herod Agrippa's murder by the sword of the apostle James and the imprisonment of the apostle Peter.

The latter's escape from prison with the help of an angel can still stoke excitement and faith among believers.

Despite the ill-treatment of early Christians, the religion grew rapidly. By the beginning of the fourth century, Christianity had penetrated most regions of the Roman Empire. An estimated 7 million individuals had become Christians by A.D. 324 despite the martyrdom of some 2 million believers.

The last or Great Persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire took place under several emperors in the early fourth century. The emperors issued decrees repealing Christians'

legal rights and ordering that they respect traditional religious practices, particularly sacrificing to the Roman gods. The Christian clergy became special targets, but the Edict of Milan and the rise of a new emperor in the eastern part of the Empire in A.D. 313 offered a relatively comprehensive acceptance of Christianity and much less persecution.

Despite periods of confusion, persecution and uncertainty, Christianity increased its influence in the Roman Empire. Emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity and legalized the religion throughout the empire in A.D. 313. Ten years later Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Since the Roman Empire, Christianity has continued to grow into the world's largest religion. In the *World Christian Encyclopedia* in 2001, Dr. David B. Barrett and George Thomas Kurian estimated some 2.7 billion individuals were converting to Christianity annually. Some billion, approximately one-third of the world's total population, currently profess to be Christian. In the United States, 75% of the residents identified as Christians in 2011, but in 2021, only 63% claimed to be Christian, a decrease of 12%. KQED reporter Becky Sullivan has suggested the shrinkage of white Christians in America ceased the same year.

The growth of Christianity throughout the globe has not prevented the persecution of Christians even in the 21st century. According to Wikipedia, current Christian persecution includes maltreatment of Christians by other Christians, persecution by terrorist groups and maltreatment by countries which favor their state religions.

Some Christians seem to persecute other people of Christian faith linguistically and legally. The linguistic persecution downplays conversational technique and procedures while emphasizing controversial ideas and principles with disrespect

and assumed spiritual supremacy. In an online article titled "Christians Persecuting Other Christians," pastor, author and publisher Jack Wellman proposes that Christians should not attack each other over ideas and beliefs nonessential to the faith. Attacks by believers disclose to unbelievers that Christians are willing to persecute each other verbally and psychologically over even minor points of doctrine.

Christian-to-Christian maltreatment very often reveals, in Wellman's educated opinion, "the two-faced nature of many believers" and a reluctance to show love for others. Sincerity, unity and understanding can greatly reduce Christian-to-Christian persecution and promote ways of living with differences.

One Christian denomination sometimes mistreats another denomination, and that mistreatment can involve censorship, coercion, sieges or acts of terrorism. In the 19th century, U.S. nativist Protestants engaged in what is known as sectarian violence against recent non-English-speaking, multiracial European Catholic immigrants; the violence involved discrimination. The U.S. is today characterized by diversity, but the possibility of further sectarianism sometimes shows its ugly head.

Ruthless and brazenly cruel terrorist groups have been and continue to be persecutors of Christians around the world. These groups include paramilitary organizations, cults and loosely organized crowds of people who justify their actions according to their own objectives and worldviews. In July 2019, Lindy Lowry shared an online article titled "11 of the Top Persecutors Around the World Today" under the auspices of the organization Open Doors USA.

Lowry began with the declaration that the persecution of Christians is increasing each year and then provided a list of the top persecutors, including the following 10 groups: ISIS or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria; Al-Qaeda in the Middle

East; Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea; Hindu nationalists; Al-Shabaab, the Eastern African version of Al-Qaeda, according to Lowry; Boko Haram and the militant Fulani herdsmen of Nigeria; radical Islam; drug cartels and the Chinese Communist Party. Satan himself was listed as the "Ultimate Enemy: Persecutor of Persecutors." To this list, Iran's Quds Force, a branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard, and other groups could be added.

Christian persecutors have employed a variety of vicious techniques in the quest to reduce the influence and even presence of Christians. The persecutors have forced many believers from their homes and treated many as social outcasts.

One or two groups have burned Bibles and have sought to destroy any religious expression not compliant with their faith. They have kidnapped many Christians and have claimed thousands of Christian lives. These persecutors may raid private homes and target Christian leaders. Often, they do not permit Christian parents to teach their children about the Christian faith.

Numerous governments around the world permit the persecution of Christians. In its 2020 annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom identified 12 countries where Christians are regularly persecuted; the U.S Department of State labeled the nations "countries of particular concern." The department placed another 13 countries on a "special watch list" in relation to the persecution of Christians.

The Christian faith remains of central importance to many people throughout the world. It has endured longer than most empires and continues to wield more influence than the greatest cultural achievements. Future persecution will not eliminate Christianity or its social and spiritual impact.

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