

# Book Reveals Muslim Persecution Against Christians

Jesus warned his followers that they would experience persecution, a prediction that was already coming true before the books of the New Testament were completed. Today, Rupert Shortt argues in his book *Christianophobia: A Faith Under Attack*, “the greatest curbs on religious freedoms take place in Muslim majority countries.”

Take Egypt, where Christianity grew deep roots in the centuries before Mohammed. Today, there are more than 10 million Christians among a population of more than 80 million. But Christians have faced increasing pressures in recent decades, and the overthrow of a dictator and a historic election that promoted the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohamed Morsi have complicated matters even more.

Shortt’s book documents how attacks and bombings of churches have increased since the election; forced emigration is shrinking the Christian population; Coptic Christians (the largest group of Egyptian Christians) face systematic obstacles to promotion in the army, police and legal professions; Coptic women have been abducted and forced to convert to Islam; and Muslims who convert to Christianity may be shunned, harassed, physically harmed and even killed.

Shortt is quick to point out he doesn’t blame Islam per se for the growing pressure on Christians. After all, Christians and Muslims marched hand-in-hand in 2011 during the Tahrir Square demonstrations against the Mubarak regime. Rather, an increasingly fervent strain of “politicized Islamism” has swept the Arab world, exploiting popular anxieties and endangering interfaith.

Still, Shortt notes the causes of conflict often are more mundane, such as differences in lifestyle, or fears that hard-working, thrifty and self-disciplined Christians may have an edge over their neighbors in the daily competition for survival. "I reject the ... fantasy that holds Islam to be uniquely violent," he writes. In fact, he asserts, "much anti-Christian prejudice and violence has nothing to do with militant Islam."

Throughout the Middle East, for example, both ancient grudges and modern statecraft contribute to Christians' vulnerabilities. The West has embraced, supported and armed a series of unpopular dictators, unintentionally increasing the credibility of groups like Al-Qaida. And interventions that may have seemed like a good idea to some at the time, such as restoring Iran's Shah to power in 1953, have more deeply entrenched both anti-Western and anti-Christian feelings.

Nor does Shortt hold Christians blameless in the rise of religious intolerance. For one thing, Christian churches in the region have their own long history of "violent intolerance." Christians in many countries have also been slow in embracing or promoting interfaith dialogue and tolerance. In other places, Christians have allowed inter-church divisions to weaken both their witness and the social fabric. Not all church leaders have been well trained or temperate. And in some cases, he writes, overzealous believers have allowed their exuberant house church worship services to antagonize their neighbors.

In Nigeria, where the population has roughly equal numbers of Christians and Muslims, religious conflicts play out against a backdrop of chronic sectarian problems among some 500 ethnic groups. When tensions rise, followers of Jesus and followers of Mohammed seem more apt to blame and attack each other rather than to love and work with each other.

"Muslims have (also) suffered grievously at the hands of

Christians," writes Shortt. In too many of these cases, the conflicts turn deadly. Shortt describes conflicts that erupted after the 2011 Nigerian presidential elections in which a Christian candidate was elected. The results led to outbursts of violence that left more than 800 people dead, more than 300 churches razed and some 65,000 people displaced.

In Iraq, he says, the American-led invasion of 2003 has been a "disaster" for a struggling Christian population that numbered between 1.2 and 1.4 million in 1990. Today the Christian population in this "cultural and spiritual heartland of Christianity" has dwindled to fewer than 200,000 souls.

The Christians who remain have witnessed the destruction and desecration of their churches, convents, monasteries and orphanages. Bishops have been murdered or beheaded in their churches. "Few populations on earth have suffered as acutely as Iraq's in recent years," he writes.

Shortt does not make out his exhibition of petty disputes, Western diplomatic miscalculation and Christian culpability to be excuses for anti-Christian violence. Nor does he explain why it may be important to believers to face up to these realities. Beyond the argument that the threat to Christians is vastly under-recognized, he draws few conclusions from his just-the-facts approach to the subject.

In some countries where Christians are persecuted, national constitutions officially enshrine religious freedom. The problem, writes Shortt, is that "beliefs may be manifested only in particular ways."

The danger is not in embracing Christian doctrine, but in living it out. In country after country, Christians who attend church worship services, read Christian literature, observe Christian holidays or wear crosses subject themselves to social ostracism, violence or criminal charges, and courts seldom support their constitutionally mandated rights.

Conditions are bad and getting worse. So, what can be done? If you were hoping the Arab Spring, with its promise of democracy, would bring relief, think again.

“Nowadays,” says Shortt, “where political systems reflect people’s values, they usually also reflect people’s strong religious beliefs.” Even in “secular” nations such as Turkey, a country “torn between two versions of itself,” religious values often trump official policies. In 1965, Harvard’s Harvey Cox predicted the imminent rise of “the secular city,” but Shortt sees religion on the rise. “God is winning in global politics,” he writes.

In some cases, Christians persevere amidst the persecution. Such is the case in China, where decades of suppression following Mao’s Cultural Revolution haven’t been able to halt the growth of underground and house churches that Shortt says have brought about “a spiritual renaissance” that is considered by some to be “the greatest religious revival in history.”

Elsewhere, one bright spot is the influence of individual, incarnational Christians who minister to people’s needs and serve as ambassadors of Christ. Shortt says these nurses and doctors in hospitals, teachers in schools and “Bible women” who work in villages around the globe are “translators” who “help interpret Christianity in local languages and cultures.”

Such committed individuals can’t singlehandedly eradicate the growing global problem of Christian persecution, but at least they can embody the message that Shortt conveys to all people of faith: “Good religion promotes conflict resolution; bad religion fosters discord.”

**Steve Rabey** is a Colorado writer, editor and consultant who has written more than 2,000 articles and more than 30 books ().