

## JOURNALISM

## Persecutions

by Philip Jenkins

I don't know if I was more shocked by the article itself, or by where it appeared. Though I have heard the argument that gay advocates vastly overstate the prevalence of hate crimes in order to support a far-reaching political agenda, who would have thought that such a coldly skeptical demolition of their case could have appeared in the ultra-liberal *New York Times*? But there it was, under a front-page headline: "A Move to Face 'Persecution' Facing Gays Worldwide," with "persecution" framed in quotes. And the opening paragraphs followed this same theme, with various atrocities recorded, but always in scornful terms which cast doubt on the reality of the victimization: We read of people gathering to support "what they call gay martyrs," or marching in support of "the gays they are told are suffering" in countries around the world. Although specific crimes are described, there is a powerful suggestion that these are so ludicrously overstated that they may not be real. The bulk of the article focused instead on the balanced and moderate opinions of objective experts who denounced the ballyhoo about hate crimes and urged that anti-gay sentiment be understood in the context of traditional social attitudes. As one distinguished think-tank authority remarked, "There are local forces, local interests, so it's not subsumable under one kind of conspiracy against gays." If the audience being agitated by these wild charges of anti-gay persecution were a little more sophisticated, they would realize that this sort of violence goes on all the time, and there really is no need to get so excited. The worst possible course of action would be to pass ill-considered emergency legislation to force the federal government to protect potential victims of persecution, a policy which could only make things worse. Many might

feel that the whole article was astonishingly callous to the well-documented sufferings of the victims of hate crimes across the world, but it was refreshing to find such a wildly atypical piece in the *Times*. Clearly, the editors are willing to expose humbug and posturing from whatever part of the political spectrum it comes.

Yes, of course, I am joking—well, partly. The article in question was indeed printed on the front page of the *Times*, on November 9, 1998, under the byline of Laurie Goodstein, and all the quotes did appear exactly as worded, except that in each instance, I have changed the name of the minority group being subjected to torture and murder: It was originally Christians, not gays. Once we realize that, we can comprehend the whole mystery of how a paper like the *Times* might have discovered a category of hate crime which it is prepared to tolerate, or at least to cover as if the persecutors required equal time with the victims. In this instance, the crimes are only of interest in demonstrating how powerful right-wing pressure groups use such apparently trivial issues to mobilize support among the ignorant faithful, and to galvanize Christians to become politically active. So much for the voiceless Christian victims, those inconceivably poor Africans, Asians, and Arabs who self-evidently fall into the category of "torturees," Graham Greene's classic term for those who can be maimed and killed with impunity. We can almost hear the newspaper's sneer: If not for political advantage, why else would American Christians care about such people?

The *Times* would never have treated any other ethnic, social, or religious group as dismissively as the persecuted Christians of Sudan and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or China. Goodstein even rejects the *concept* of anti-Christian persecution. After all, as "experts say" (those famous experts again), "what outsiders often label Christian persecution is often a complex brew of racial, economic, political, tribal and religious rivalries." Now, I have tried diligently, but I cannot decipher how that description cannot equally be applied to any other form of hatred or discrimination, most conspicuously, to antisemitism. Nor can I discov-

er why the fact of being such a "complex brew" should mean that observers should take less account of it. Let me test this against an imaginary news story:

Though the mob destroyed the synagogue and killed several believers at prayer, authorities explained that the event should not be viewed too seriously, as the perpetrators were motivated by a complex brew of ancient rivalries and emotions.

No, it doesn't read too convincingly, does it? Or at least, it would not in the context of any group besides Christians, who, as we are explicitly told by the *Times*, are still in the doghouse "over the indifference or even complicity of some Christians in the Holocaust and in genocidal wars in Rwanda and Bosnia." Nevertheless, "Christians are seeing themselves as the victims and martyrs of the moment." I especially admire the phrase "of the moment," with its implications of a faddish cause *du jour*. The *nerve* of those people, whining just because a few hundred thousand of their fellow believers are beaten, beheaded, raped, and tortured each year.

We have to be precise about our terms here. All religiously motivated attacks on Jews are hate crimes evoking *Kristallnacht* and the holocaust; all attacks on homosexuals are manifestations of pervasive hatred and bigotry, requiring massive public re-education; the notion of "anti-Christian persecution" is, however, a "misguided oversimplification," however blatant the element of religious bigotry. In fact, even to express concern about this last kind of organized terrorism is in itself a form of hate crime, chiefly directed against Muslims. I hope that's all clear.

Incidentally, all due credit should go to Goodstein for her rhetorical talents. Anyone else writing such a story might have been tempted to lead with one or two of the straightforward and well-documented recent instances of humble Christian believers executed or murdered for their faith, but this might have run the risk of arousing sympathy for the victims. (For many such instances, read the heart-rending case studies in *Their*

*Blood Cries Out* by Paul Marshall and Lela Gilbert or in Nina Shea's *In the Lion's Den*.) Instead, Goodstein chose to quote former sufferers now on the lecture circuit, with the implication that their spectacular accounts were over-adorned in order to appeal to the gangs of ignorant yahoos she imagines filling churches across America. It takes a serious professional journalist to achieve that level of distortion without actually misstating a single fact.

It is regrettably possible that some readers disgusted by the *New York Times* story might be tempted to see it as a manifestation of a specifically Jewish prejudice against Christianity, and a tendency to minimize Christian sufferings. (Compare the astonishing scene in Spielberg's emetic production of *Schindler's List*, in which the horrific war-time experience of the Polish Catholic people is reduced to the one obscene moment in which a Christian girl derides Jews *en route* to death camps.) But the *Times* itself has historically led the field in raising the issue of anti-Christian persecution, and its chief warrior in this campaign has consistently been Jewish columnist A.M. Rosenthal. With his deep sensitivity to antisemitic rhetoric, Rosenthal is not prepared to let any similar slanders pass when they happen to be directed against any other group, and he is thus the first to complain when Muslim extremists denounce Christians or Bahais for poisoning wells and subverting society. (An equally exemplary role has been played by another Jewish writer, the Hudson Institute's Michael Horowitz.) Just as the whole anti-persecution campaign is not anti-Muslim in content, neither do its detractors come from any one religious or political tradition.

Goodstein's offensive article might be dismissed as an isolated manifestation of anti-religious bigotry, but it is much more significant than that. When one of the nation's leading newspapers is prepared to give such prominence to such an unabashed partisan tirade against any manifestation of Christian political activism, it suggests either a remarkable ignorance about the realities of that tradition or outright terror at the prospect of the slightest religious involvement in conservative politics (as opposed to liberal or radical campaigns). Goodstein's article may be the best argument I have read for the view that Christianity remains the one unacceptable religious tradition in the otherwise limitless toler-

ance of the United States. And her article has affected me profoundly: If I was not concerned before about the necessity to organize politically to support persecuted Christians worldwide, I am now fully converted to this view. It takes a rare journalist to transform one's opinion so completely with a single piece of writing.

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## RELIGION

### The Christian Challenge in Islamic Africa

by Pedro C. Moreno

Religious persecution in Africa is particularly interesting since countries there go from one extreme to another in terms of religious tolerance. The growth of Islam is reconfiguring Africa's religious landscape—at the cost of religious liberty.

Frontline Fellowship, an evangelical group based in South Africa which operates in Sudan and other countries, provides these estimates: Christians are restricted and pressured (often violently) in 17 African countries considered "officially Islamic." Out of Africa's 750 million people, 260 million are Muslim (half of whom live in the sub-Saharan region). The African population could thus be roughly categorized as 50 percent Christian and 35 percent Muslim. Animists (who overlap with the Christians and Muslims) make up the rest, together with very small percentages of Hindus, Jews, and Bahais.

The situation varies from country to country, but three of Africa's largest states are representative of conditions there now: Egypt, an example of the long-standing Muslim stronghold in Northern Africa; Sudan, an ethnically mixed country under harsh rule from its Muslim majority; and Nigeria, more representative of black Africa, which is in-

creasingly being Islamicized by its military regime.

The Arab Republic of Egypt gained independence from Great Britain in 1922, and in 1956, it declared itself an Islamic state. Religious minorities include six million Christian Copts, constituting ten percent of the population and forming the largest Christian minority in the Middle East; five to ten thousand Bahais; 5,000 Shiite Muslims; non-Coptic Christians; a small Jewish community; plus atheists and agnostics. Egypt's 1971 constitution guarantees equality of opportunity to all citizens regardless of race, ethnic origin, language, religion, or creed. Although the government applies Islamic law to all Muslims, it does not force adherents of other religions to comply.

For Egypt's Islamic fundamentalists, this is not enough, as the government is well aware. A former Egyptian minister of religious affairs bluntly told me that, while he recognized there were problems with religious liberty in Egypt, "We are trying hard to provide for an environment of religious freedom. If the Muslim fundamentalists took over the country, the first one to be killed would be me."

Under such pressures, Egypt lacks the legal safeguards to make its constitutional provisions regarding freedom of religion a reality. For example, the government requires every Egyptian citizen to carry an identity card which states the bearer's religion. Recent abridgments of religious liberty in Egypt fall into five main categories: prohibition on conversion from Islam, torture and loss of life, lack of social and economic freedom due to religion, curtailed freedom of worship, and censorship of religious texts. Persecution of Coptic Christians and others continues to this day, including the recent interrogations and torture of 1,000 Christians in El-Kosheh in relation to the murder of two Coptic men in Upper Egypt, and the indictment of three Coptic clergymen relative to the same crime.

Sudan is an even more difficult case. It is widely listed as a top violator of religious freedom. The Christian south experiences regular persecution by the Muslim-controlled government. Apostasy is punishable by death, and mass displacement, genocide, massacres, and even slavery are common.

Sudan became a republic in 1956 and then alternated between military and