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Global Warning

Editorial

BY: LINCOLN E. STEED

As I write this, NATO is enforcing a no-fly zone to protect anti-Qaddafi forces in Libya. It at once evokes memories of despots reduced to hiding in spider holes, and the gunboat diplomacy once so effective for great powers. We have the bizarre image of the local despot holding forth on his fight against al-Qaeda, even as we worry that the rebels may be little more than an assortment of fundamentalists. Is this the fruiting of the Arab spring that has held the world's attention since a Tunisian street vendor burned himself alive and ignited protests from Egypt to Saudi Arabia?

We are indeed witness to a revolutionary moment sweeping an entire region of the world. Comparisons are dangerous when made too directly, but this is evocative of the unrest that stirred Africa, particularly Kenya and the Congo, after the colonial pullback in the 1950s and 1960s. It reminds me of the chaos that overwhelmed Southeast Asia in that same post-World War II colonial era. It reminds me, too, of the Prague Spring of the late sixties. It reminds me, as it does many others, of the collapse of the Soviet empire and the jubilant young people pulling down a suddenly-not-so-strong Berlin Wall. It puts me to mind of the ecstatic crowds holding Gamal Abdel Nasser aloft in an Egypt free of colonial influence and the playboy King Farouk.

But even as it reminds me of these revolutionary antecedents I know it is profoundly different—not least because second-act revolutions like Egypt's seldom approach the white robes of the first ceremony.

First we must acknowledge the context of the apparently spontaneous. The world financial system broke two years ago. And while we do not yet see how the capitalist engines can reinvent themselves out of this, we do know that the poor around the world have been pushed to greater desperation by rapidly rising prices of food and basic commodities. That always breeds social upheaval.

We have watched as most of the players in the region have overplayed their hand. The expected graft and corruption have become untenable to the "street." The policies of the governments, while arguably in the reasonable self-interest of the regimes, have become disconnected from the everyday expectations of the citizenry. The Western powers give the appearance of empowering this grand betrayal, which more quickly removes a sense of legitimacy. What is more amazing than the uprising is why it took so long.

He may have been wrong about other things, and he may have got the dosage horribly wrong, but George W. Bush was right about the pent-up demand in the area for self-determination. Iraq may well be a significant part of the causality of the Arab Spring.

Then there is the popular conception of these being the Twitter and Facebook revolutions. I do not hold to that view per se. These social engines did not create the mood; they at best facilitated its late-stage expression and coordination. What is vastly more pertinent to the changing consciousness is the emergence and availability of Al Jazeera—a credible, in-your-face incitement to Arab sensibility. The West feared it for its potential to turn the region against it. But the entranced street has lashed out at the immediate inhibition to their need for expression. And yes, the Internet has clearly done there what it is doing globally—accelerate by its instant nature the dissemination of information and put the processes of history on steroids.

There is another not-at-all inconsequential factor: religion. It amazes me how assiduously the commentators ignore it. They ignored that the secular Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein was engaged in a death struggle against radical Islam. They ignored the religious implications of the Iraq-Iran war, which killed 1 million. They ignored that the post-invasion Iraqi civil war was in large part between religious factions. They think "surge" and forget that it was an alliance with Sunni Islam, which brought some measure of control and began to thwart radical Shiite Iran. And those same people generally fail to make sense of the Middle East because they ignore the religious factions of various regimes or their more and more untenable secularity.

The plain fact is that while there are many contributing elements to the Middle East shock wave the religious part of the narrative is...
the most important. Remember, this is a post-nationalist moment for a region that has sent Nasser's fellow officer Mubarak on his way. The colonial dislocations have left many of these geographical constructs the camping place of several tribes, not one people. What they share is the all-embracing commonality of Islam . . . a religion stirring itself after some centuries of subservience.

While we ought not to believe all that the departing leaders said, it is worth remembering that Mubarak warned for decades of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood; President Saleh of Yemen for years has ridden the tiger of al-Qaida and radical revolt. Moammar Qaddafi to the end has railed against the al-Qaida attack on him (he might have been a terrorist, but not that kind), and Saudi Arabia has both fed radical ideology and persecuted it in a game that shows signs of getting out of control.

While Tunisia was the first country to see large public demonstrations, Egypt is certainly the most significant and, given the advance signals given there, arguably the one leading the way. There was a presidential election scheduled for September 2011, and it was expected that the Muslim Brotherhood would openly challenge for power. Rising religious tensions were immediately evident with the January 1 bombing of a Coptic Christian church in Alexandria. The underlying issues are many, but the complaint was that Copts were detaining some women who had converted to Islam. This is a curious issue, because a Pew survey in 2010 showed that 82 percent of Egyptian Muslims, who make up at least that proportion of the population, support the imposition of severe penalties, even death, for conversion from Islam. So much for freedom of religion in the fullest sense! And what does this say for the hoped-for secular state at the end of the inevitable power plays?

There is no doubt that in the early days of the Egyptian revolution religion was secondary for many of the demonstrators. There was even a revolutionary camaraderie between young Copts and Muslims. There is also no doubt that the mosques quickly became, as one would expect in a majority religion society, centers of political exhortation and planning. More and more the Islamic "religious right" emerged. Late in the piece I listened with dismay as one of the youth leaders of the original uprising said he was afraid for his own future, as the Muslim Brotherhood had taken over. Elections have yet to be held. At a minimum the Brotherhood will be a significant parliamentary force. They may even emerge immediately as the power makers. They may even prove to be socially responsible and tolerant of secular diversity. Just as the American Religious Right is!

A religious community not willing to extend to others the rights they demand for themselves is not at all helpful for religious freedom. It may not even be much help to general civil liberties.

A person of faith can only pray that religious freedom in practice and profession is advanced as the world writhes its way through revolutionary times. We must not confuse faith with wishful thinking. We must hold up the increasingly counterintuitive banner of religious freedom. It can be a revolutionary banner if adopted.

Lincoln E. Steed in the editor of Liberty Magazine.
Anguish And Anger: What Future For The Copts Of Egypt?

By: Reuel S. AMDUR

The turmoil in Egypt has led to the spilling of considerable quantities of ink and blood since it all started on January 25. The regime of Hosni Mubarak is already a footnote on the pages of history, but the near and longer-term future remains to be spelled out. One concern is what it all means for Egypt's long-suffering Coptic minority, which has frequently been the victim of violence. Periods of instability can give more opportunities for fanatics to act out.

There are various estimates of the Christian portion of the Egyptian population, but it is generally believed to be between 10 and 20 percent—most being Orthodox Copts, an ancient denomination predating Islam. Tradition ascribes its founding to the apostle Mark. This branch of Christianity separated from Rome following the Council of Chalcedon, over the issue of Mary. Rome called her the mother of God—Copts called her the mother of Jesus. For Catholics the result was development of the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception. Over the years Copts have been victims of violence and of official discrimination. On New Year's Day a suicide bomber blew up his explosives-laden car in front of a Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt, killing 25 and wounding dozens. Because of the extent of the planning and technical expertise, it was suggested there was an al-Qaida link—certainly radical Islam. While Copts have been victims of many other attacks, these have typically been more amateurish in nature, although the violence has been real enough.

Less than two weeks after the Alexandria massacre a policeman boarded a train in Samalout, bound for Cairo, and fired his weapon at Copts, killing one and wounding five, while shouting, "Allahu Akbar [God is great]."

Yet in spite of all the difficulties faced by Copts in Egypt, some have risen to prominent positions in government and in business and the professions. Nor are relations between Muslims and Copts entirely negative: after the New Year’s Day bombing, many Muslims were prepared to stand guard at the Alexandria church during their Christmas service this year, and when the police would not allow them to do so, large numbers of Muslims attended the Mass. (December 25 on the Coptic and Julian calendars occurs on our January 7.) Many Muslims and Copts are friends and associates and often live together in the same neighborhoods. Yet the incidents are not infrequent.

Almost a year before the killings in Alexandria, on January 7, 2010, six Copts leaving church after Christmas Mass were cut down in a hail of bullets in a drive-by shooting. A Muslim guard was also killed. After the Christmas massacre, there was more trouble for the Copts. Immediately following, many local teens were arrested in dawn raids, apparently to prevent protests. There was some rioting by Christians, possibly at least in part as a result of the arrests. Two women were burned to death in a nearby town, where houses were set ablaze and businesses looted and destroyed. The next month, a policeman shot and killed a man in Teta, in an incident that the government claimed was because of an accident during the cleaning of the weapon. A relative who witnessed the incident denied the official version.

Over the years Copts have suffered a number of pogroms and less-extensive killings, as well as assaults on houses and property and on their churches and monasteries. In 1999 Copts in el-Kosheh felt the wrath of their neighbors in three days of slaughter and...
received their support but returned only partial protection in order not to upset
internationally. Egypt gets significant military aid from the United States, for example. As far as the Copts are concerned, Mubarak
control by a balancing act, placating different factions in his own government and in the country as whole and maintaining relations
All of this must be seen in the context of the Mubarak government. It was authoritarian but not totalitarian. Mubarak maintained
Brotherhood control.

In 1981, because Copts were even then fed up with government failure to protect them from violent attacks, the Coptic pope
Shenouda III canceled public Easter ceremonies. Traditionally, government representatives attend these ceremonies. In response
to this snub, Anwar Sadat, who was then president, banished Shenouda to a remote desert monastery. Mubarak released him, as
a result gaining gratitude from Shenouda and from the Coptic community.

In looking at the causes of these various incidents we can sometimes identify specific triggers, but there are also some larger
general factors. Let us first start with some specifics. In the case of the Alexandria slaughter, the story is that two wives of Coptic
priests, desirous of obtaining a divorce, which is forbidden to them under Coptic Church regulations, attempted to convert to Islam
for that purpose. It is alleged that Copts prevented them from doing so. The attack on the Nagaa Hammadi parishioners was
related to an accusation that a Copt had raped a young Muslim girl. Other incidents involved property disputes, individual conflicts,
and personal relationship issues—for example, young Copt males involved with Muslim girls. And, as in a previously mentioned
incident, there has been incitement by some imams.
While the Nagaa Hammadi killings can be seen as a primitive kind of revenge in a country in which the legal system has been, as
Samaa Elisyari of the Canadian Council of Muslim Women described it, "corrupt and inefficient," the main factor is the vulnerability
of minorities. Ehab Lotayef, a Muslim active in Canadian Egyptians for Democracy, said that other religious minorities also face
discrimination, including non-Orthodox Coptic Christians, Baha'is, and even Shiite Muslims. Egyptians carry identity cards
indicating religion, and only recently did a court rule that Baha'is had the right to that designation on theirs.

Even Sunni Muslims whose beliefs are not in accord with orthodoxy can be targeted. A notorious example is the case of Nasr Abu
Zayd, a distinguished scholar of Islam, whose works were deemed by some people in positions of power to be heretical. As an
apostate under Sharia law a Muslim woman may not be married to a non-Muslim, his wife was ordered by the court to divorce him.
They fled the country.

Both Copts and Muslims interviewed identified the growing influence of Wahhabism, the austere and primitive form of Sunni Islam
dominant in Saudi Arabia, as an important factor in the anti-Copt violence. Saudis have funded Muslim religious institutions and
programs around much of the world to promote this brand of Sunna. Some Egyptians who worked in the Gulf States brought this
strain of Islam back with them.

The Muslim Brotherhood, which is somewhat influenced by Wahhabism, is an important element in Copt insecurity, though they
have spoken out clearly against the massacres in Alexandria and Nagaa Hammadi, as well as the al-Qaida slaughter of Christians
in a church in Iraq. Even while outlawed, the Brotherhood formed the main opposition to the government of President Hosni
Mubarak. In Parliament its members are formally listed as independents. The Brotherhood has considerable popularity because it
provides a variety of social services. By contrast, under Mubarak "the government didn't providing anything for its citizens," as
Elibyari observed. The Muslim Brotherhood is not totally unified in outlook, ranging from somewhat moderate to more rigid. One
leader of the movement has proposed a special tax on all non-Muslims. Nabil Malek, a Copt who heads the Canadian Egyptian
Organization for Human Rights, encapsulated the classical Muslim position on non-Muslims in this way: "Non-Muslims have rights
but not equal rights." That observation applies to the attitude of the Egyptian government under Mubarak, and the future
government's policies remain to be seen.

What would life be like for Copts should the Brotherhood come to power in Egypt? In Gaza, under the Brotherhood-oriented Hamas,
liquor sales have been closed down by threats of Islamists. The Hamas rulers have not officially banned Western-style attire for
women, but they have not prevented head covering being imposed by local authorities or activists. A Christian bookshop was
attacked by extremists, and there has been some harassment of Christians, though not sanctioned. Hamas itself has been
challenged by more extremist Islamist elements. One should not be surprised if similar kinds of things happen in an Egypt under
Brotherhood control.

All of this must be seen in the context of the Mubarak government. It was authoritarian but not totalitarian. Mubarak maintained
control by a balancing act, placating different factions in his own government and in the country as whole and maintaining relations
internationally. Egypt gets significant military aid from the United States, for example. As far as the Copts are concerned, Mubarak
received their support but returned only partial protection in order not to upset
those Muslim elements that are virulently anti-Christian.

Copts in Egypt are in a difficult situation. They have a well-founded fear of Islamic extremists, and they have gotten at best desultory protection from the Mubarak government. The Alexandria slaughter could well be the incident that forces the new government’s hand on that score. In the past, the concern was that if they complained too loudly they risked losing even that protection. If they said nothing, nothing would be done for them. They tended to give support to the dictatorship in hopes that their support would pay off. As well, they remembered the fact that Mubarak released their pope from imprisonment in the monastery.

As Hosni Mubarak is being pushed out, Pope Shenouda continues to give him full support. On January 31 he called Mubarak and told him, "We are all with you, and the people are with you." However, according to the newspaper Al-Masyr Al-Youm, the Coptic Youth Movement has joined the opposition. "The regime is responsible for the sectarian problems suffered by Copts," charged Rami Kamel, speaking for the movement. As well, media accounts reported that during one demonstration Christian participants stood guard while their Muslim comrades prayed. One slogan used in the demonstrations was "Cross and Crescent Together!"

During the dictatorship international pressures provided the one largely uninhibited form of influence on government policy toward the Copts. For that reason, the sizable Coptic diaspora has played a vital role. We can expect that the diaspora will continue to speak out should events demand. Their enemies complain that they encourage foreign interference in matters that should stay in Egypt, but this criticism is evidence that the international publicity is having an impact. Copts around the world have demonstrated in protest against the Alexandria massacre, and political and religious figures across the spectrum condemned the atrocity, including U.S. President Obama, Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada, President Nicolas Sarkozy of France, Sunni and Shiite clerics in Lebanon, and Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas.

After the Christmas bombing, Copts also raised voices in protest around the world. Thousands rallied before the United Nations in New York on January 19, 2010, and two days later before the White House. Other protests occurred in Berlin and Vienna. Up to 8,000 rallied in Sydney, Australia, and others demonstrated in Melbourne, Australia.

The cries of anguish and anger by Copts were heard by governments. A group of congressmen and a senator called upon Egypt to ensure "equal protection of the law and equal rights for all citizens" and complained of "a systemic pattern of violence against Egypt's Coptic Christian population." Italian foreign minister Franco Frattini promised to raise the issue with his counterpart during a visit to Cairo. Pierre Poilievre, parliamentary secretary to the Canadian prime minister, spoke in support of Coptic rights at a commemorative service in which Egyptian embassy officials were present.

Toward the end of the Mubarak era there were some positive developments. Copts were granted a few favorable decisions on church repairs. The law requires local government approval before a church can carry out repairs, but one court gave permission without such approval, and in Alexandria, where police arrested a priest for doing repairs without authorization, the court found him not guilty. Most significantly, one of the men accused of the killing in Nagaa Hammadi was found guilty on January 16 this year and sentenced to death. Let us leave aside the issue of capital punishment: this decision appears to be a first in which attacks on Copts have been treated with such severity. Previously, incidents of anti-Copt violence have been ignored, given limited punishments, or blamed on the Copts themselves. The Alexandria bombing appears to have sealed the fate of the Nagaa Hammadi criminals.

A leading columnist, Makram Mohammed Ahmed, said, "I call upon the government to eliminate the reasons for sectarian tension, or we can have a bombing like this one [in Alexandria] every day." So what kinds of changes are needed? In a basic sense, Egypt needs to move toward being a country for all its citizens on an equal basis. It needs to allow churches to be repaired and constructed under the same rules as mosques are. It should not require special permission to fix a leak in a roof. There is no reason to include religion on identity cards. Sharia should not be the law, and heretical views should not subject the holder of such views to special government attention. If a woman wants a divorce, she should not have to change her religion to get one. It should be no more a Muslim country than the United States is a Christian one. What is needed is a separation of mosque and state. All of
this is not quite enough. The police and correctional officials also need to be placed under firm control. Arbitrary arrests must be stopped, and torture by police and in prisons must be halted. These changes would be a good start, but will they occur? As with everything about Egypt, time will tell.

Reuel S. Amdur writes from Val-des-Monts, Quebec, Canada.
Section 295-C: Not Science Fiction

Opinion

By: An Observer

On one level it sounds so modern, so Western, so civilized: "Section 295-C" of the "Pakistani Criminal Code." On the other hand, as interpreted in the courts, it sounds like something from the Middle Ages, because, if violated, "Section 295-C" can lead to a death sentence.

Death sentence? That's not Middle Ages. Even in America, some states still kill people on death row. One slight difference, though. In America, a death sentence—when it is carried out (which is less and less frequently)—is generally for first-degree murder; in this case, in Pakistan, under "Section 295-C," it's for, of all things, blasphemy.

Talk about the Middle Ages! This, though, isn't the Middle Ages. It's now—the twenty-first century.

The Charge

The story centers on a Christian woman in Pakistan named Asia Bibi, who faces death by hanging for, allegedly, blasphemying the prophet Muhammad.

Though her case has made international news, and has caused an outcry around the world, including a plea by the pope for pardon, details remain spotty. According to news reports, Asia Bibi, a woman in her 40s and mother of five, was working in the field with other women. Asia, the only Christian, was in a religious discussion with them, and they were trying to get her to convert to Islam. At one point, when she brought them water to drink, some coworkers refused, saying that she was a Christian and, therefore, "unclean." Apparently, in their version of Islam, you can't drink water that has been "contaminated" by a Christian.

Next, supposedly, she said something about how Jesus had died on the cross for them but what did the prophet Muhammad ever do for them. The women, offended, reported her to the local imam. At one point a mob threatened her and her family. The police came, supposedly to protect her, but she was then arrested and charged with blasphemy and convicted, the sentence being death by hanging.

According to Shahzad Kamran, of the Sharing Life Ministry Pakistan: "The police were under pressure from this Muslim mob, including clerics, asking for Asia to be killed because she had spoken ill of the prophet Muhammad. So after the police saved her life, they then registered a blasphemy case against her."

Section 295-C has its roots in nineteenth-century colonial legislation that was simply there to protect places of worship. It was under rule of General Mohammad Zia ul-Haq in the 1980s, as part of his effort to Islamize the state, that it became so draconian. Under the law, anyone who speaks ill of Islam and the prophet Muhammad faces the death penalty. Activists, though, argue that its "vague" terminology has led to its misuse. Section 295-C reads, in part, that "derogatory remarks, etc., in respect of the Holy Prophet," "either spoken or written or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly,. . . shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine."

Although no one has been executed under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, as many as 10 people have been murdered while on trial. Many fear this will be the fate of Asia. In fact, if she were released, she and her family would have to flee; otherwise, her fate would be sealed. Some worry that even now, in prison and under protection, Asia Bibi is not safe. Indeed, earlier in December, a pro-Taliban Muslim cleric offered a $5,800 reward to anyone who killed her. Another cleric volunteered that he was not worried if she was freed or not, because any good Muslim would be happy to kill her.

Religious Assassination
Supporters of various religious parties wave party flags while shouting slogans during a rally in Lahore, December 24, 2010, demanding punishment for Asia Bibi.

Not all Pakistanis agree with what's happening. Many are appalled. In fact, the case of Asia Bibi has revealed a deep rift in this already greatly troubled land (one, we might add, armed to the teeth with nuclear weapons) between the Muslim extremists and others of the Muslim faith. Though Pakistan's leaders want to keep up a good relationship with the West, especially the United States, they also have to placate the extremist wing, and thus might not be inclined to antagonize them by showing her leniency.

Indeed, the degree of intensity was revealed with the assassination of Salman Taseer, the governor of the most populous state in Pakistan, Punjab. Taseer strongly opposed Section 295-C and sought a presidential pardon for Asia Bibi. For his trouble he was gunned down by one of his own bodyguards because he had visited her in prison and stated that the law was unjust. Though some condemned the killer, others, the extremists, view him as a national hero.

Because of the outcry over Asia Bibi and her death sentence, there has been some talk about modifying the law. The result was massive civil disobedience, including a strike, where protestors said that the law would be changed “over their dead bodies.” Public transport came to a standstill in the city of Karachi, where demonstrators blocked traffic in protest. At this point, most of that talk about changing the law has stopped because the government fears such a change would play into the hands of the extremists.

“I state with full responsibility that the government has no intention to repeal the blasphemy law,” Religious Affairs minister Syed Khurshid Shah said.

International Outcry
Asia Bibi's case has not gone unnoticed around the world. Numerous international human rights organizations have taken up her cause (in fact, during her trial, she had 10 lawyers, something unheard of in Pakistan for an impoverished farm worker).

Even Pope Benedict got involved, issuing the following plea: "Over these days the international community is, with great concern, following the situation of Christians in Pakistan, who are often victims of violence or discrimination. In particular, today I express my spiritual closeness to Ms. Asia Bibi and her family while asking that, as soon as possible, she may be restored to complete freedom. . . . I also pray for people who find themselves in similar situations, that their human dignity and fundamental rights may be fully respected."

However well-intentioned Benedict's words, it might only add to the fervor against her in Pakistan, being seen as more "proof" of Christian plots against Islam.

Religious Persecution in Pakistan
Asia Bibi's case, as well as the assassination of Salman Taseer, is only part of a larger picture of religious strike and intolerance in Pakistan. For starters, though blasphemy convictions are common, most convictions are thrown out on appeal, even if those accused are often killed by mobs.

One of the worst attacks on Christians, who make up only 4 percent of the Pakistani population, occurred in a town in the province of Punjab, where a mob of more than 1,000 Muslims burned 14 Christians to death. The attacks were triggered by reports of the desecration of the Koran. To this day, the details are unknown.

Last July two Christian brothers, accused of writing a blasphemous letter against Muhammad, were gunned down outside a courtroom. Hence a conviction or even an accusation under this law is often a death sentence, activists say.

At this point, no one knows what will be the fate of Asia Bibi and her family. Even if released, she will have to flee, that's for sure. Whatever the ultimate outcome, Section 295-C of the Pakistani Penal Code reveals the depth of the rift between Western values of religious freedom and those of extremist Maulana Yousef Qureshi (R) addresses a rally in Peshawar, December 3, 2010. The hardline, pro-Taliban Pakistani Muslim cleric offered a reward for anyone who kills Asia Bibi. Qureshi, the iman of a major mosque in the northwestern city of Peshawar, offered a US$5,800 reward and warned the government against any move to abolish or change the blasphemy law.
Islam, a rift not likely to be closed anytime soon.
Special Pleading For The Persecuted: Never Needed More

BY: PAUL MARSHALL

On Friday, August 14, 1998, Samir Oweida Hakim and Kamer Tamer Arsal, two Coptic Christians, were murdered in the village of el-Kosheh near Luxor in Upper Egypt. Most of the local villagers believe that the murderers were Muslims, though no one claims that the reason for the murders was itself religious.

Apparently concerned that an interreligious murder (even one with no religious motive) might cause more tension in the village, the police were determined to find Christian culprits. Consequently on August 15 they began rounding up and interrogating large numbers of Christians.

They picked up men, women, and children in groups of up to 50 at a time. Their victims were tied to doors, beaten, whipped, suspended from the ceiling and, including women and children, subjected to electric shock with clamps attached to all parts of their bodies. Those tortured were also insulted by "cursing the cross, Christianity, the saints, Pope Shenouda, and church leaders, and called atheists and polytheists." According to the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Egypt's most respected human rights organization, before they had finished several weeks later, the police had abused a total of 1,200 people.

On August 19 and 20 the local bishop of Egypt's ancient Coptic Orthodox Church, and two local priests, made official complaints to the authorities. When these complaints were rebuffed with insults and threats of further abuse, Bishop Wissa decided to make the matter public.

In response, on October 10, the general prosecutor for the area interrogated Bishop Wissa and Fathers Antonios and Shenouda for several hours and charged them with damaging national unity and insulting the government. In Egypt, under the government then, these charges carried the death penalty.

Half a world away in Washington, D.C., a series of related events took place. On October 9, 1998, the U.S. Senate passed S-1868, the International Religious Freedom Act, by a vote of 98 to 0. The following day, as Bishop Wissa was being arrested, the House of Representatives passed the same bill on a voice vote without dissent.

On October 27, 1998, then President Clinton signed the act into law as Public Law 105-292. The International Religious Freedom Act was the culmination of a long and fervent campaign by millions of Americans of all faiths concerned about precisely the kind of horrors visited on the villagers of el-Kosheh.

The law was a response to a worldwide epidemic of religious persecution. This epidemic has been largely unknown or ignored by most of our major media and by most Americans, churched and unchurched alike.

As 2011 began, a bombing of a Coptic Christian church indicated how little had changed over the years, even as forces for overt political change began to take the streets as early as January 25. But Egypt does not stand alone in its violations of religious liberty. In fact, one of the worst sites of religious persecution in the world is Sudan, which, while it is reaching toward a two-state solution, has not yet solved the underlying religious conflict. Sudan has dealt with its religious divide by pursuing a program of Islamization through genocide.

In China authorities repress Buddhists in Tibet and elsewhere, persecute Muslims in the eastern provinces, and arrest underground house-church leaders, doling out three-year labor camp sentences. Any religious believer refusing to submit to state control on the choice of religious leaders, seminarians, pastors, priests, bishops, sermon topics, religious organizations, and

During my 1997 fact-finding trip to China, 85 house-church Christians were arrested in two dragnet operations on May 14 in Zhoukou. Christians reported brutal beatings resulting in paralysis, coma, and death. Other methods of torture reported include binding detainees in excruciating positions; hanging them from their limbs; tormenting them with electric cattle prods, electric drills, and other implements; and crushing the ankles of victims while they are forced to kneel.

Apart from religious harassment in the remaining Communist countries, there are now intensifying attacks on all religious minorities throughout the Islamic belt, from Morocco on the Atlantic eastward through to the southern Philippines. While Islam has often been more tolerant than Christianity and countries such as Jordan and Kuwait remain so, in many areas this tolerance has collapsed. In Saudi Arabia any non-Islamic or dissident Islamic religious expression is forbidden. Christian meetings are outlawed; and worship services held anywhere else than in the embassies of powerful countries will likely be raided by the mutawa, the religious police, and members imprisoned. Any Saudi who seeks to leave Islam faces the real prospect of death. In countries such as Mauritania, the Comoros Islands, and Sudan, this threat is not only from vigilantes, but part of the legal code itself.

In Iran and Pakistan the threat comes from vigilantes with greater or lesser complicity by the government. In Iran there are strong indications that, besides the ongoing persecution and murder of the Baha’, government death squads have also abetted the torture and assassination of Protestant leaders in recent years. Elsewhere the agent of repression is mob violence, often prompted by radical Islamicist leaders. It is widespread in Nigeria, Liberia, Ghana, and the Philippines. In Pakistan in 1997 one Christian town, Shanti Nagar (population 20,000), was razed to the ground. In Indonesia, which has long been a place of toleration between Muslims, Christians and other minorities, there is a rapidly growing epidemic of church burnings, and attacks on Christian and moderate Muslim leaders. There are also direct attacks on religious minorities by radical Islamic terrorists in Algeria, the Philippines, Turkey, and Egypt.

In non-Islamic societies there is violence and discrimination against minority religious groups in Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan, and in the central Asian republics that were formerly part of the Soviet Union, especially Uzbekistan. It is a growing phenomenon in Myanmar in the State Law and Order Restoration Council’s war against tribal minorities, especially the Rohingya Muslims in the west and the Karen and other tribes in the eastern part of the country, where Christians constitute a large proportion of the minorities.

There is also widespread religious discrimination through legal control. India has affirmative action laws to ease the plight of the dalit, or “untouchables.” But while groups such as Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists are included, Christian untouchables (a majority of India’s 28 million Christians) have been explicitly excluded.

Discrimination is an increasing pattern in Russia, where repressive religion laws, backed by the Russian Orthodox Church, have been instituted at the federal level. Such laws are also widespread, and usually even more repressive, at the local level. There is increasing violence against religious minorities, including Jews, Protestants, Catholics, and dissident Orthodox groups. Similar patterns of discrimination against minority religious groups are pervasive in the Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Romania; present in many parts of Eastern Europe, including the Baltics, and growing in many of the CIS states.

You won’t learn much of this from our media. While there is now some attention to U.S. campaigns about persecution, the horror itself is still virtually absent from our news pages. For all the coverage of debates on China’s most favored nation trading status, there has been almost no attention to what goes on in China itself. The same pattern holds elsewhere.

As Edward Luttwak has noted: "Policymakers, diplomats, journalists, and scholars who are ready to overinterpret economic causality, who are apt to dissect social differentiations ever more finely, and who will minutely categorize political affiliations, are still in the habit of disregarding the role of religion. . . in explaining politics and even in reporting their concrete modalities."

Even when religious events are reported, they tend to be redefined according to America’s obsession with things "ethnic." When in 1997 Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad railed against speculators, "We are Muslims, and the Jews are not happy to see the Muslims progress," the Los Angeles Times described him as "race-obsessed." In Yugoslavia war between Orthodox, Catholics, and Muslims was routinely described as "ethnic." The Economist headlined a story in January 1997 about attacks on 25 churches and a temple in east Java after a Muslim heresy trial as "race riots."

Thankfully, this ignorance of religious persecution is now passing. As A. M. Rosenthal, columnist, and a former executive editor of the New York Times, put it in his December 30, 1997, column: "Early this year I realized that in decades of reporting, writing or assigning stories on human rights, I rarely touched on one of the most important. Political human rights, legal, civil, and press
rights, emphatically often; but the right to worship where or how God or conscience leads, almost never.*

The International Religious Freedom Act was an attempt to entrench a concern for international religious freedom within American foreign policy and to provide a variety of tools for addressing it. The act:

- created the office of an ambassador-at-large charged with full-time advocacy for religious freedom.
- establishes an independent, bipartisan commission to monitor religious persecution abroad. Of the ten commission members, three are appointed by the president and six are appointed by Congress; the tenth is the ambassador, who is a nonvoting chair. Five members will be of the president's party and four of the other party.
- requires that the commission produce an annual report on religious persecution and make annual recommendations to the president.
- requires that the president take at least some action—from negotiations to sanctions—against an offending country.
- allows the president to waive any action if there are "important national interests" which might be jeopardized.
- makes provisions for upgrading attention to religious liberty in USAID work, international broadcasting, and Foreign Service training.

The media has often portrayed the act as a creature of the Religious Right. However, it in fact drew support from a bipartisan group of legislators, and widely diverse groups such as the Southern Baptists, the Episcopal Church, the Dalai Lama, the Anti-Defamation League, the National Jewish Coalition, New York Times columnist A. M. Rosenthal, the Catholic Bishops Conference, Gary Bauer, and the Christian Coalition.

Other critics continue to maintain that such legislation "privileges" religious freedom above other human rights concerns. New York Times columnist Anthony Lewis opined back on September 12, 1997, that such legislation tells "other governments that we care less about such things as genocide, political repression, and racial persecution. It would also tell the world that we now favor a hierarchy... of fundamental rights." And he appeared ready to put political activists on top of the list, since for him politics seems to be more important than religion.

Kenneth Roth, then executive director of Human Rights Watch, once called a focus on religious persecution "special pleading" and "an effort to privilege certain classes of victims." But, as The New Republic's Jacob Heilbrunn responded: "This seems a remarkable attitude for a human rights activist, since, by definition, all arguments on behalf of all persecuted groups—racial minorities, political minorities, ethnic minorities, etc.—are 'special pleadings' intended to 'help certain classes of victims.'" And such concerns have not stopped the Human Rights Watch from its own priority list of "special initiatives," including "drugs and human rights" and "lesbian and gay rights."

Historically, religious freedom was the first international human right—it was enshrined in treaties ending the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European wars of religion. It is the very first right in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Yet in recent years it has been neglected in foreign policy and in international human rights concerns.

Paul Marshall wrote this when he was a senior fellow at the Center for Religious Freedom, Freedom House, Washington, D.C. In view of recent events in Egypt and elsewhere, his championing of the persecuted is even more pertinent.

Honoring Freedom

Excerpt From First Freedom Center
Press Release

Three renowned advocates for freedom were honored at the First Freedom Awards gala held January 13, 2011, at the Downtown Richmond Marriott, Richmond, Virginia. The First Freedom Center is a religiously and politically neutral 501(c)(3) organization that sponsors multiple education programs and events to advance the fundamental human rights of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.

“The First Freedom Center is proud to recognize profound contributors to the advancement of religious liberty for the 2011 First Freedom Awards,” stated First Freedom Center president, Ambassador (ret.) Randolph M. Bell. “In honoring these champions of religious freedom, we shine light on one of the most pressing issues facing humankind today. The ongoing quest to ensure that all societies of the world respect religious freedom as a fundamental human right is at the core of shared aspirations for stability, peace, and the protection of human dignity.”

In commemoration of National Religious Freedom Day (January 16), the First Freedom Center annually recognizes an international, national, and Virginia award recipient. This year’s recipients were Asma Jahangir, John Graz, and J. Brent Walker.

Asma Jahangir was honored with the International First Freedom Award. As the special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief from August 2004 to July 2010, she served as senior authority appointed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights to investigate the status of religious freedom worldwide. Jahangir is an advocate of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and has been twice elected as chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan. She is also director of AGHS Legal Aid Cell, which provides free legal assistance to the needy. Jahangir was placed under house arrest and later imprisoned for participating in the movement to restore political and fundamental rights under the Pakistani military regime in 1983. She has served as a leading figure in defending cases of discrimination against religious minorities, women, and children. Jahangir has authored two books and five papers and has received a number of international and national recognitions for her work.

John Graz was honored with the National First Freedom Award. Since 1995 Graz has served as secretary general of the International Religious Liberty Association (IRLA). More than a century old and organized by the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its purpose is nonsectarian, with many faiths represented on its board of directors. Graz also serves as the IRLA liaison to the United Nations in Geneva. Graz initiated the annual IRLA Meetings of Experts for Religious Freedom and has organized additional world congresses on religious freedom. With his team Graz has developed an IRLA world network in more than 80 countries. Currently a member of the board of the International Academy of Religious Freedom, Graz has also written widely on religious freedom, is the publisher of the journal Fides et Libertas, and is the executive producer of the television show “Global Faith and Freedom.”

J. Brent Walker was honored with the Virginia First Freedom Award. Reverend Walker is the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC). Based in Washington, D.C., the BJC works with a wide range of religious groups and is dedicated to defending and extending religious liberty for all. Brent Walker is widely published and speaks frequently on church-state issues at conferences and seminars. Walker also provides commentary on church-state issues to national print and broadcast media, including CNN, Fox News, PBS, NBC, NPR, the Washington Post, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, the Atlanta Constitution, the Tampa Tribune, and the St. Petersburg Times.
We Must Not Be Intimidated
Sulema Jahangir, Accepting For Asma Jahangir, Presented Her Mother's Speech

BY: ASMA JAHANGIR

I am here in the place of my mother to accept this very prestigious First Freedom Award 2011. My mother deeply regrets that she was unable to attend because of a critical personal crisis and now the volatile situation in Pakistan. She is truly humbled and wants me to extend her deep gratitude for this great honor and privilege that you have bestowed upon her. She would like to thank the council of the First Freedom organization for selecting her for this award, and she would also like to thank all her friends both in Pakistan and internationally who aided her in the struggle against religious intolerance and for the promotion of human rights. I will now read on her behalf the acceptance speech that she has prepared for this award.

Ladies and gentlemen, the recent assassination of the governor of Punjab, the largest province in Pakistan, in broad daylight by his official guard for being opposed to the law of blasphemy has brought the concept of freedom of religion to the forefront of political debate in Pakistan. The background to the blasphemy law is an amendment that was brought into the Pakistan Penal Code in 1986 by a military dictator, Ziaul-Haq. The law is loosely worded and its implementation has shown that it is easily misused, and indeed, several people have been arrested under it who have asserted their innocence. There are also those who were accused under the law and murdered in cold blood without being given a chance to prove themselves innocent. This is precisely the arbitrariness of this law—that the accused must prove his or her innocence rather than the other way round. The punishment is a mandatory death sentence.

The murder of the governor is yet another example of the exploitation of the law and religious emotions, but it goes much further. The message now from the clerics and the orthodoxy is that anyone who criticizes the law has themselves committed blasphemy and therefore murdering them is justified. The killer has been made into a hero and garlanded by several lawyers and religious groups which has created an atmosphere of terror and fear in the country. Sadly, the media also played a role in encouraging incitement to violence against those who question the misuse of the blasphemy law. There are nevertheless brave voices in Pakistan who are challenging the very well-knit and well-resourced groups of ultra-right-wing Muslims.

Ladies and gentlemen, freedom of religion and belief is a key to progress in any society. In Pakistan, freedom of religion is being increasingly denied, hampered, and asphyxiated. Religious minorities remain in perpetual threat, but Muslims are also vulnerable. As a lawyer and a human rights activist, I have participated in a struggle for over 30 years to help in developing a more tolerant society in Pakistan. Unfortunately Pakistan has remained a victim of the politicization of religion since its very inception.

Pakistanis have paid dearly for religious intolerance. In the year 2009 there were more civilian casualties of terrorist violence in Pakistan than in Iraq and Afghanistan, and this pattern continued in 2010. Ladies and gentlemen, intolerance breeds intolerance. It cannot be contained in one geographical area or attributed to one single society. Although a democratic culture and education are antidotes to an atmosphere of intolerance, yet these alone are not sufficient unless we are able to change our politics and embrace diversity.

During my work as a United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief I was struck by the bold admissions made by some governments of their right to discriminate on a religious basis. In the Maldives, for example, citizenship is connected to
religious belief. A non-Muslim cannot be a citizen of the Maldives. In a number of countries there are levels of privileges and rights that are extended to citizens based on their religious identity. Member states of the United Nations agree in theory that a person has a right to choose his or her religion, but in practice conversion to another religion is accepted only as long as it is the religion of the majority. Very few countries of the world extend a right not to believe in any religion. During my work as a special rapporteur many people told me that their religion was different when they talked to me in private. I thought that this was the saddest story of the twenty-first century. Registration and identification of religion by the state is yet another way of discriminating against religious minorities. Religious symbols which in the past were quite acceptable are now a subject of great controversy. Two such examples are the law made in France against head scarves and the referendum on minarets in Switzerland. Immigration laws are no longer religious neutral, and a number of countries have developed subtle ways of discriminating against religious and ethnic groups. Religious persecution continues to be practiced in a large number of countries, and the victims are often the vulnerable classes.

My visits to many countries as a United Nations special rapporteur on freedom of religion and belief were often depressing, but there were also some positive trends. In Sri Lanka, where religious violence had broken out post the tsunami in 2004, a vibrant debate followed, after which the government was able to facilitate a dialogue between the Buddhists and the Christians that resulted in an agreement for shelving an anti-conversion bill. Religious differences are very well tolerated in a number of Latin American countries. There are a large number of examples where multicultural civil societies have been able to act collectively to prevent violence on the basis of religion. In my experience common decency exists in all classes, rich or poor, and therefore to come to the simple conclusion that education alone will end religious intolerance is unfounded.

I have witnessed thousands of people living in shanty towns who come from different faiths and beliefs and enjoy celebrating each other's religious festivals. There are no taboos in these communities. They may not share the same faith or belief but they are bounded together by the curse of poverty, which makes them interdependent. In contrast, people who most often exploit and politicize religion to advance their own agendas are affluent, skilled, and literate. It is not only literacy that is vital, but the quality of education which develops a sense of security to accept and enjoy diversity.

In my work as United Nations special rapporteur there was lot of focus on interfaith dialogue. I have no doubt that such dialogue has its advantages. Nevertheless, any dialogue must at least be candid and honest. In the atmosphere that prevails in Pakistan this is simply not possible. Freedom of expression on religion is asphyxiated, and even those who share similar values of human rights speak in whispers. I fear that the more progressive sections of our society, who in my view are significant in numbers, are being perpetually intimidated and hopelessly marginalized by militant religious factions. We have to face huge challenges ahead. To meet these challenges, we need to build more effective alliances and strategies even though the democratic transition in our country is fragile and an atmosphere of fear has impeded creative thinking. Political parties with progressive agendas are weak, but their existence alone is an obstacle against the obscurantist forces that are determined to capture total power in Pakistan. At this stage we appeal to all those who stand against the politics of exploiting religion for oppressing the rights of people to support a democratic Pakistan.
It is a great honor for me to receive the First Freedom National Award in the city of Richmond. We are just footsteps away from the place where the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom was adopted—a document that went on to become the model of constitutions and statutes all around the world. . . .

I grew up in a family where the members had strong and divergent convictions on religion and politics; but we shared one essential value: freedom.

During the Second World War, my grandfather, Arnold Graz, a Swiss citizen, helped the French Resistance and assisted Jews fleeing France to navigate their way to neutral Switzerland. Because of this, he was arrested and sent to the Dachau concentration camp, where, like thousands of others, he perished.

My father and my mother were forced to flee France to protect themselves. My mother's brothers and sisters—all young people—left their small town and crossed the borders to join the allies in North Africa and in England. . . . I grew up listening to the story of the battle for freedom. I learned from their lives that freedom is not just an inheritance we can take for granted. No, freedom has a price. And we forget that price at our own peril.

Today religious freedom is under attack in many parts of the world. About 65 percent of the world population is living in countries where there is no religious freedom. Today peaceful believers are killed while worshipping in their churches. How many are discriminated against and persecuted day after day because of their religion?

The award you give me tonight is a strong message of encouragement for our association and for those who work with me. It will help us to keep on organizing congresses and symposiums around the world, visiting difficult countries and meeting their leaders, and encouraging people of different religious beliefs to defend the freedom for everyone to worship as they choose.

It will help us fill more stadiums with Festivals of Religious Freedom, building a grassroots movement around the world. After Luanda, Angola, and Lima, Peru—which each held a Festival of Religious Freedom attended by at least 45,000 people—our goal is to hold a World Festival in 2013 with 60,000 people.

I dream about a World Forum on Religious Freedom which could be held every year. . . . We just need to find a city which would be honored to identify itself as the world capital city of religious freedom. . . .

Jefferson and Madison and the other founding fathers had a vision of a country where no citizen would be persecuted for his or her religion. The dream became a reality, and it made America unique, and strong, and attractive. It gave America prosperity, and security, and peace.

If America were to lose its religious freedom, it would lose everything else. If it keeps its freedom, it will continue to grow.
Rendering Unto Caesar

BY: ROB BOSTON

Cornerstone World Outreach Church in Sioux City, Iowa, is a boxy and unimposing structure that looks more like a suburban high school that the focal point for a full-scale revolt against the Internal Revenue Service. Yet that's exactly what's brewing behind the church's door, thanks to Pastor Cary K. Gordon and his war against the Iowa Supreme Court. Gordon got angry in 2009, when the Iowa high court voted unanimously to strike down the state's ban on same-sex marriage. As Election Day 2010 approached, the Pentecostal pastor hatched a plan to retaliate.

In Iowa, justices on the seven-member high court must take part in retention elections every eight years. Three justices would be on the ballot in November, and Gordon aimed to mobilize churches across the state and take the judges out. As Gordon saw it, if enough pastors instructed their congregants to vote against the judges, the trio would go down—so he began mailing letters to religious leaders all over the state, imploring them to jump into the campaign.

"Pastors who join this effort are asked to commit to confront the injustice and ungodly decisions of the Iowa Supreme Court by boldly calling upon their flocks to 'vote no on judicial retention' for the three consecutive Sundays prior to Election Day," wrote Gordon to more than 1,000 Iowa clergy.

The church-sponsored scheme—dubbed "Project Jeremiah"—had one big drawback: It's illegal. Under federal law, churches and other nonprofit groups are barred from intervening in elections by endorsing or opposing candidates.

Gordon was well aware of the law, but decided to plow ahead anyway. In somewhat lurid language he beseeched his fellow pastors to openly violate the law. "Secular fundamentalists in the United States know the same thing Hitler knew," wrote Gordon. "The only thing that stands in their way of a total takeover of our American culture, the final removal of any mention of God from the public arena, and the shredding of the last remains of our Judeo-Christian value system, is the church of Jesus Christ."

Not all Iowa religious leaders were enchanted by the idea. Inevitably, complaints began filtering in. A defiant Gordon vowed to press ahead.

"The orthodox Christian pastors of Iowa do not and cannot recognize, with regard to the definition of marriage, the imaginary authority of the Iowa Supreme Court," Gordon wrote in a rambling e-mail statement that he distributed to the media. "History has already shown who inevitably wins when state wages war against the authority of the church of the living God. So let the battle between state and church begin."

Elsewhere in the statement, which was headlined "A Pastoral Letter to a Kangaroo Court," Gordon asserted, "Based upon the arguments posed by those who support gay marriage, it is a strong possibility that some of our Supreme Court justices do not believe in a God."

Gordon also told several reporters that he hopes the IRS moves against him. He said he regularly prays, "Dear God, please allow the IRS to attack my church, so I can take them all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court."

The Sioux City pastor's decision to jump into the retention election didn't surprise some locals. Gordon has long been active in Iowa politics and runs a church-affiliated group called the PeaceMakers Institute, which holds 501(c)(4) status, enabling it to be more political. He has also formed a political action committee called Sioux Citizens for Responsible Government, which has intervened in local elections.

Earlier this year some Sioux City residents expressed alarm after it was reported that five of the 11 members of the city's Human Rights Commission were either members or former members of Cornerstone Church.
But the anti-judge effort marked the first time Gordon had dragged his church into electoral politics—and it received a mixed reception.

Jeff Mullen, senior pastor of Point of Grace Church in Waukee, was eager to sign up and went so far as to create a special Web site attacking the Iowa jurists—IowaPastors.com. Mullen also joined forces with the Faith and Freedom Coalition, a new group launched by former Christian Coalition director Ralph Reed.

But Dan Lozer, who pastors United Church of Christ congregations in Sioux City and Hawarden, was wary of the Gordon overture. Lozer told the Sioux City Journal that he received Gordon’s letter but didn’t even finish reading it. Churches that want to endorse or oppose candidates, Lozer said, should first surrender their tax exemption.

Nonprofit groups have been barred from endorsing or opposing candidates since 1954, when then-Senator Lyndon B. Johnson sponsored an amendment to the tax code stating that any groups receiving 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status could not intervene in elections.

Most pastors happily abide by the rule, seeing intervention in electoral politics as a distraction and a potentially divisive factor for their congregations.

But around the country a handful of pastors are in open revolt. They insist that advising congregants on how to vote in elections—from local races all the way up to the White House—is part of their job description.

In Oklahoma, Baptist pastor Paul Blair has openly defied the law by endorsing candidates from the pulpit of his Fairview Baptist Church. In fact, Blair is a repeat offender. He endorsed U.S. Senator John McCain for president in 2008 and Republican candidate Mary Fallin for governor in 2010. Both times Blair taunted the IRS to come after him.

Blair’s electioneering stunts were part of a larger effort sponsored by the Alliance Defense Fund (ADF), an Arizona-based Religious Right legal group.

Founded by television and radio preachers in 1993, the ADF calls its scheme "Pulpit Freedom Sunday." The group insists that pastors have the right to be partisan in the pulpit and urges them to simply ignore the federal law. On September 26, 2010, about 100 pastors allegedly took part, although it’s unclear how many actually endorsed candidates from the pulpit (as opposed to discussing issues, which is legal).

In South Dakota the ADF listed the Church at the Gate in Sioux Falls as a participant. But Pastor Steve Hickey told the Rapid City Journal he did not endorse any candidates that Sunday.

Blair, however, did not waffle. The Oklahoma preacher not only confirmed his participation—he crowed that the IRS has never sanctioned him for his 2008 endorsement of McCain.

"In two years we haven’t heard anything from them," Blair said. "Obviously, if we were doing something illegal we would have heard from them. We haven’t."

Blair may be living on borrowed time. The IRS has been restructuring its internal policies for dealing with church audits—a crucial first step for any investigation of a house of worship. A Minnesota church that was being investigated by the IRS for financial irregularities successfully sued the tax agency in 2006, asserting that the tax agency had not followed proper procedures for...
authorizing church audits.

In the wake of that ruling, the IRS announced new guidelines for examining houses of worship. The guidelines are still in play and, once implemented, could allow the IRS to proceed with investigating such congregations as Blair’s.

The IRS is apparently keeping an eye on things. The tax agency is notoriously reticent about commenting publicly on specific allegations of pulpit politicking, but a recent ABC News.com story on Pulpit Freedom Sunday quoted Robert Marvin, an IRS spokesman, who said, "We are aware of recent press reports, and will monitor the situation and take action as appropriate."

In the past, the IRS has been more aggressive about enforcing the law. In 1992 the Church at Pierce Creek near Binghamton, New York, lost its tax-exempt status after placing a full-page ad in USA Today insisting that it was a sin to vote for Bill Clinton for president.

The church, represented by attorneys with TV preacher Pat Robertson’s American Center for Law and Justice, sued the IRS but lost. In Branch Ministries v. Rossotti, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia in 2000 ruled unanimously against the church, upholding the IRS's right to revoke tax exemption in these cases.

Most clergy know that their congregations contain members of diverse political views. Few pastors are willing to risk alienating congregants and dividing their flocks by endorsing or opposing candidates. (In 2004 a Baptist pastor in North Carolina named Chan Chandler told his congregation that members who had supported John Kerry for president should quit. Instead, the congregation decided Chandler should leave.)

Polls also show that the overwhelming majority of the men and women sitting in the pews don't see houses of worship as appropriate vehicles for partisan activity.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported recently that 70 percent of Americans "oppose churches and houses of worship endorsing specific candidates for public office." The survey also showed that more than half of every major religious group opposed such endorsements.

And, despite all of the ADF's fulminating about pastors being "gagged" or "muzzled," many religious leaders say they can't fathom why they would want to link their churches to a politician's campaign.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty in Washington, D.C., told Associated Baptist Press that the ADF stunt is "misguided" and "unnecessarily divisive." He called it a threat to the integrity of the church.

"In every church I know of, it would be like setting off a bombshell in the sanctuary for the preacher to tell the congregants how to pull the lever in the voting booth," Walker said. "It would be incredibly corrosive of the church’s true mission to spread the gospel and be salt and light in the culture."

Added Walker, "As soon as the church throws in with a particular candidate or party, its prophetic edge is blunted."

That's not likely to persuade Pastor Gordon in Sioux City. In fact, he's feeling emboldened. Gordon's anti-judge campaign, which received support from the Family Research Council and the National Organization for Marriage (which blitzed the state in a bright-purple bus called the "Judge Bus"), was a success: On election day, all three judges—Chief Justice Marsha Ternus and Justices David Baker and Michael Streit—failed to garner more than 50 percent and will have to leave the court.

What the IRS thinks about church involvement in those results remains to be seen.

Rob Boston is assistant editor of Church & State magazine, published by Americans United for Separation of Church and State in Washington, D.C.
The Christian Persecutory Impulse: Tough Love
Part Three In A Series

BY: DAVID J.B. TRIM

This is the third in a series of five articles on the history of Christian persecution up to the end of the seventeenth century. (Editors note: the first and second articles can be found here and here.) This article and the remaining two provide an overview of how the existing consensus about persecution among both Catholics and Protestants gradually broke down. While subsequent articles examine how toleration actually came to be implemented, this article focuses on some of the first authors to argue powerfully against the existing persecutory paradigm. They were marginal voices at the time, but were not ignored, and, in rejecting the long-standing Christian persecutory impulse, they laid down an important marker for the future.

The preceding article explored the persecutory paradigm prevailing in Europe at the start of the Reformation and showed that persecution was primarily undertaken not out of hate (as is so often supposed), but instead out of love:

- love of God, who hates false religion and sin, even while loving sinners
- love of truth, which leads to salvation
- love of one’s fellow man, since the souls of countless men and women hung in the balance and might be eternally damned if they were deceived by the false doctrine of heretics, who must therefore be silenced
- love of heretics and blasphemers, whose sins were hated, but who, it was hoped, might be brought to their senses (and thus to truth and salvation) by force

Persecution was additionally undertaken to preserve social and political unity, but this had a distinctly religious dimension, for it was universally assumed that religious unity was essential to the health, indeed the very survival, of a polity or society.

As the previous article also showed, contrary to cherished myths in Protestant countries, the Reformation initially produced little or no change in the established way of thinking about religious diversity and persecution. But the Reformation did eventually have consequences for religious liberty.

The persecutory paradigm had emerged in Christendom when religious heterodoxy was demographically and geographically very limited. For more than 11 centuries, from the initiation of Christian persecution under Emperor Theodosius I until the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, most people, in most places, would never have witnessed an execution for heresy or blasphemy. Indeed, they would rarely if ever have encountered genuine religious dissidents.

One of the chief consequences of the Reformation was that the numbers of people potentially subject to the horrors of persecution greatly increased, and came to include good Catholics as well as “heretics”—a term that, as we saw in the previous article, Protestants continued to use for those whom they and Catholics alike condemned. Lutherans and Calvinists persecuted each other and Catholics, while Catholics persecuted both Lutherans and Calvinists (who they termed heretics!), and everybody persecuted Anabaptists and anti-Trinitarians. Even so, religious heterodoxy was a reality; adherents of the rival confessions existed in much greater numbers and across more of Christendom than ever in the 1,100 years before the Reformation.

This had two further consequences. First, violence against religious dissidents was far more common and thus entered the consciousness of common people in countries across Christendom. But second, the utility of that violence came to be doubted—the idea that persecution actually could purge respective bodies politic of heresy, or restore the unity of Christendom, had become highly dubious. What soon became apparent was that, in some nations, persecution would not suffice; instead, wholesale religious warfare would have to be waged and the moral and ethical implications of that were no less troubling than persecution.
Moreover, in countries where rival confessional parties were entrenched, it quickly became clear that war would have no greater success than persecution in restoring unity.

Thus, the persecutory paradigm became increasingly untenable in the century after the Reformation, as people across Christendom faced the fact that their society was confessionally divided. It was natural that new attitudes to religious diversity and to persecution began gradually to emerge. Now, there were always people who were not particularly bothered by either the execution of heretics or holy war; but the century after about 1550 was one of increasing and increasingly widespread religious violence, and the number of voices calling for alternatives to killing in the name of Christ and Christian unity increased. The Christian persecutory paradigm eventually collapsed in the face of the reality of religious division.

Rejecting Violence

The actual horrors of immolation alive, of breaking at the wheel, of hanging, drawing, and quartering, and of torture—all commonly applied against religious disidents—were now widely witnessed and spoke powerfully against the idealized view of persecution as an act of Christian love. Attitudes began to change. For example, in 1556 the former head of the English Church, Thomas Cranmer, was executed for heresy. Within three days a foreign Catholic ambassador wrote that Cranmer’s immolation had caused a great “commotion” among the common people, “as demonstrated daily by the way in which the preachers are treated, and by the contemptuous demonstrations made in the churches.”

The same year, a devout Roman Catholic urged the bishop of London to stop burning Protestants, because the hostile public response meant the heretics did more harm in their dying than in living.

Because executions were public, their horrors were evident to all, including members of the lower orders; and even though torture was typically conducted in private and referred to in public by euphemisms, there was some awareness of its horrors. For example, in 1581, also in England (which by this time was Protestant again), the authorities captured the Jesuit priest Edmund Campion, whom many contemporaries regarded as one of the finest writers and thinkers of the extraordinary generation that included Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser, and who had written a series of explosive tracts against the regime’s religious policy. Campion was tortured “not only [on] the rack, but also [by having] metal spikes driven between the flesh and fingernails and the nails pulled out.” When he finally went on trial for treason, he "pleaded 'not guilty' to the indictment" and was "ordered, as custom required," to raise his hand, but he had been racked so severely that he could not even do that and required assistance. Even though those attending were all devoted Protestants, many were taken aback, and word quickly spread. Found guilty, Campion suffered the execution reserved for traitors: "hanging, drawing, and quartering," that is, he was half-strangled, castrated, and disemboweled, while still alive—effectively, execution by being tortured to death.

Increasingly there was repugnance at such brutal treatment on the basis of religious belief. In 1612 one Edward Wightman was burned alive in London, after being condemned by a Protestant ecclesiastical court as a "blasphemous heretique" for denying the Trinity. According to eyewitnesses, even the "common people" were "much startled" by "such burning of heretics . . . pitying in all pain, and prone to asperse justice itself with cruelty, because of the novelty and hideousness of the punishment." It is striking that although other anti-Trinitarians condemned about the same time were not released from prison, the death sentences that had been imposed on them were never carried out. Wightman was in fact the last person ever burned for heresy or blasphemy in England. King James I continued to persecute both Roman Catholics and Puritans, but wrote to the archbishops and bishops of the Church of England that he thought "the shedding of blood . . . should not be exacted for diversity of opinion."

Repudiating Persecution
Gradually the instinctive revulsion at violence began to be expressed in print, particularly in the 1550s and early 1560s by Reformed Protestants (Calvinists). This was ironic, because most Reformed theologians at the time, following Calvin, tended to be strongly intolerant; it reflected, however, the fact that Reformed churches were well organized and obdurate, and themselves resisted persecution where they were not in power, even while imposing it where they were.7

A Huguenot theologian, Augustin Marlorat, himself later martyred, declared that it is in being overcome that the saints, in turn, overcome—the sign of divine election lay in fact in being persecuted, rather than in persecuting.8 John Daus, an English Puritan, asserted that “the true church of Christ [is] known in this, that it suffereth persecution, and doeth not persecute again.” In contrast, one of the distinguishing characteristics of the “church of Antichrist [was] her bloody persecutions.”9 This hostility to persecution was given shape and argumentative force by the theologian Sebastian Castellio and another scholar Jacopo Aconcio (or Jacobus Acontius); they, like the Huguenots and Puritans, were writing from a Reformed context, although Calvin drove Castellio out of Geneva. They produced the first significant theoretical treatises arguing against all persecution.

In 1554 Castellio, who had been born in France but had emigrated first to Geneva and then to Basle, published (anonymously) what has been called the “first manifesto in favor of toleration,” though such a characterization of his views is premature.10 Initially at least, Castellio “did not say . . . that every man has the right to believe what he chooses and to assert his belief.”11 However, his views on toleration matured, and by 1562 he was arguing, on principle, that it was wrong to force people to violate their consciences.12

One of his major themes was that among followers of Jesus religious differences did not deserve the ultimate sanction. Fellow Christians, whose only fault was sincerely to differ from the majority view on issues where Scripture itself was often unclear, should not be punished more severely than thieves. And yet, Castellio reproved his readers, “those who confess themselves Christians are slain by other Christians without mercy by fire and water and the sword and are treated more cruelly than murderers or robbers.” “Who,” he exclaimed, “would today wish to become a Christian”—and he posed the disturbing question, What if those who had been punished actually were, not heretics, but martyrs? After all, Christ Himself had been killed by the religious leaders of His day for heresy and blasphemy!13 Similarly referencing the first Easter, the Italian Aconcio, who had emigrated to Protestant England, affirmed that church leaders of all sides were quick to condemn but slow to show the humility demonstrated by Christ, and that their mutual anathematizing engendered only dissension, not the unity for which Christ had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.14 Castellio and Aconcio also both strongly criticized the several sixteenth-century scholars—Catholic as well as Protestant, and including Luther and Calvin—who ingeniously interpreted Christ’s parable (recorded in Matthew 13) of the weeds in the wheat, which is typically seen as an argument for toleration, to allow for the persecution and even execution of the theologically heterodox.15

Arguing From Humanity
Another author who recognized that one man’s heretic was another man’s martyr, and thus rejected persecution was the English scholar John Foxe, whose Actes and Monuments of These Latter and Perilous Dayes (better known as Foxe’s Book of Martyrs) became a best seller in the newly Protestant England of Elizabeth I and remained one of the most popular books in England and the United States into the nineteenth century. Foxe became famous for his stories of Protestant martyrs, but it is important to note that he did not only complain about persecution of Protestants by Roman Catholics—his objection to persecution was not partisan. As the eminent historian Geoffrey Elton pointed out, after Protestants came to power in England, Foxe opposed putting religious opponents to death.16

Foxe twice tried to use his influence to stop executions. He wrote to Elizabeth I and to her Privy Council on behalf of Dutch Anabaptists condemned to be burned at the stake in London in 1575. He argued that it was inconsistent with the gospel “to burn with fiery flame . . . the living bodies of wretched men.”17 Demonstrating an unusual ability to see past doctrinal heterodoxy to common humanity, he explained that while condemning their erroneous teaching he wanted to save their lives, memorably declaring: “Vitae hominum, ipse homo quo sum, faveo”—“I am for men’s lives, since I am a man myself.”18 Two of the Anabaptists were burned in any case and one died in prison, but two were spared, possibly because of Foxe’s pleas. Six years later he also appealed, albeit unsuccessfully, for clemency for Edmund Campion.19
Foxe only stood to lose by these interventions at the highest levels of power. He was probably embarrassed primarily not by a principled belief in toleration, such as that which motivated Castellio and Aconcio, but rather by simple horror of the flames for which the Anabaptists were intended or the tortures intended for Campion. However, Foxe was consistent in his opposition to imposing the ultimate sanction on those one disagreed with about matters of faith: it did not matter whether those condemned were Protestants, Jesuit priests, or marginal Christians whose views were so extreme that Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists alike conceded in seeing them as heretical. Foxe did not believe that anyone should be killed in the name of Christ. In this, he was unusual; as we will see in the next two articles in this series, for most advocates of toleration there was at least one group too repellent and appalling to tolerate. Foxe’s arguments for mercy encompassed even those for whom he felt no sympathy.

Even he, however, had one group he did not think could be tolerated: Foxe was prejudiced against Jews (as Luther had been before him), believing that, because of their rejection of Christ, there could be no hope for them and denouncing them as full of spider-like “poison.” Yet as Elton observes, Foxe wrote at a time when there were no Jews in England; even if one granted his anti-Semitic presumptions, “Jews . . . could do him and the realm [of England] no harm,” whereas by his own logic, Catholics could—and still he urged “as much mercy” toward them as possible. This suggests a true generosity of spirit at odds with his appalling sentiments. Perhaps the key is that he had met Catholics and Anabaptists and so could identify with them in human terms; had he ever actually met Jews he might similarly have been more tolerant. While his anti-Semitism must not be merely dismissed as unimportant, it does not discredit his general willingness to see past ideological difference to common humanity.

The arguments of Castellio, Foxe, and others were often adopted by subsequent theorists of toleration. However, it is important to note that Roman Catholics as well as Reformed Protestants, and statesmen as well as scholars, identified the problems with the persecutory paradigm and argued for toleration. In the next article, we turn to the statesmen, for it was their arguments that resulted in the first laws providing for coexistence between rival religious groups and for protection, rather than persecution, of heterodox minorities.

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A Fundamental Principle

BY: BARACK H. OBAMA

Our Nation was founded on a shared commitment to the values of justice, freedom, and equality. On Religious Freedom Day we commemorate Virginia’s 1786 Statute for Religious Freedom, in which Thomas Jefferson wrote that “all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion.” The fundamental principle of religious freedom—guarded by our Founders and enshrined in our Constitution’s First Amendment—continues to protect rich faiths flourishing within our borders . . . .

Across the globe we also seek to uphold this human right and to foster tolerance and peace with those whose beliefs differ from our own. We bear witness to those who are persecuted or attacked because of their faith. We condemn the attacks made in recent months against Christians in Iraq and Egypt, along with attacks against people of all backgrounds and beliefs. The United States stands with those who advocate for free religious expression and works to protect the rights of all people to follow their conscience, free from persecution and discrimination.