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**The Martyrdom of Christians
in the Twentieth Century**

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The history of Christian martyrs, according to the Bible, begins in Acts with the stoning of the apostle Stephen. Later in the book of Acts, the apostle Paul calls Stephen Jesus' martyr¹.

The Apostles, from the beginning, faced grave dangers, until eventually almost all suffered death for their convictions. Thus, within the lifetime of the Apostles, the term *martus* came to be used in the sense of a witness who at any time might be called upon to deny what he testified to, under penalty of death. From this stage the transition was easy to the ordinary meaning of the term, as used ever since in Christian literature: a martyr, or witness of Christ, is a person who suffers death rather than deny his faith².

The Greek word "*martus*" signifies a "witness" who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. The term in this sense appears first in Christian literature³; the Apostles were "witnesses" of all that they had observed in the public life of Christ⁴.

At first, the term applied to Apostles. Once Christians started to undergo persecution, the term came to be applied to those who suffered hardships for their faith. Finally, it was restricted to those who had been killed for their faith. The early Christian period before Constantine I was the "Age of martyrs". Early Christians venerated martyrs as

¹ It says in Acts 22:20, "And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him."

² St. John, at the end of the first century, employs the word with this meaning.

³ Hassett, Maurice. "Martyr." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 9. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 12 Dec. 2014

⁴ In Acts 1:22, Peter, in his address to the Apostles and disciples relative to the election of a successor to Judas, employs the term with this meaning: "Wherefore, of these men who have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus came in and went out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us, one of these must be made witness with us of his resurrection".

powerful intercessors, and their utterances were treasured as inspired by the Holy Spirit."⁵

"Martyrdom for the faith ...became a central feature in the Christian experience⁶." "Notions of persecution by the "world," ...run deep in the Christian tradition.

However, the history of Christian martyrs does not end with Stephen's death. During the first century after Jesus nearly all of his disciples suffered martyrdom for His sake.⁷

The history of Christian martyrs does not end with the death of the disciples. Thousands willingly gave their lives under Roman persecution by the emperors Nero, Domitian, Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Maximus, Decius, Valerian, Aurelian, and Diocletian. The Roman persecution lasted well into the fourth century. and did not end until Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of his empire. During the same time period, in Persia, where the Gospel had quickly spread, many others were also martyred for their faith.

Unfortunately, the history of Christian martyrs does not end with Constantine. Throughout the following centuries and up until present time, Christians have, and continue to, suffer martyrdom. This persecution has come by means of other Christians, other faiths, and political powers. This martyrdom gives testimony to the verse in John 15:20-21 where Jesus tells His disciples, "Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me."

In two millennia of Christian history, about 70 million faithful have given their lives for the faith, and of these, 45.5 million — fully 65% — were in the last century, according to "The New Persecuted" ("I Nuovi Perseguitati").⁸

⁵ "martyr." Cross, F. L., ed. The Oxford dictionary of the Christian church. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005.

⁶ The Sect-Church Dynamic and Christian Expansion in the Roman Empire: Persecution, Penitential Discipline, and Schism in Sociological Perspective by Joseph M. Bryant The British Journal of Sociology, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Jun., 1993), pp. 303-339 Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The London School of Economics and Political Science

⁷ James the son of Zebedee was beheaded in approximately 44 A.D. Philip was crucified in 54 A.D. Matthew was killed with a halberd, an ax-like weapon, in 60 A.D. James, who is thought to be the brother of Jesus, was beaten to death, Matthias was beheaded, Andrew was crucified, Mark was torn to pieces, and Peter was crucified upside down. Jude, Bartholomew, and Thomas were also martyred. Paul suffered martyrdom in Rome where he was beheaded. Other early apostles Luke, Barnabas, Timothy, and Simon were also killed for the sake of Christ.

⁸ Italian journalist Antonio Socci presented his work during a conference on "Anti-Christian Persecution in the 20th Century" held at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Athenaeum.

The 20th century may have been the most striking in the annals of Christian martyrdom.⁹

Summary statement Throughout Christian history, across all traditions of Christianity, and in every part of the world, some 70 million Christians have been murdered for their faith and hence are called martyrs¹⁰.

Definition of terms for a quantitative analysis of martyrdom, Christian martyrs are defined as **‘believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility’**. This definition has 5 essential elements that can be stated as follows:

1. ‘Believers in Christ’. These individuals come from the entire Christian community of Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, Marginal Christians, and Independents. In 2010, over 2.2 billion individuals can be deemed Christians, and since the time of Christ over 8.5 billion have believed in Christ.
2. ‘Lost their lives’. The definition is restricted to Christians actually put to death, for whatever reason.
3. ‘Prematurely’. Martyrdom is sudden, abrupt, unexpected, unwanted.
4. ‘In situations of witness’. ‘Witness’ in this definition does not mean only public testimony or proclamation concerning the Risen Christ. It refers to the entire lifestyle and way of life of the Christian believer, whether or not he or she is actively proclaiming at the time of being killed.
5. ‘As a result of human hostility’. This excludes deaths through accidents, crashes, earthquakes and other ‘acts of God’, illnesses, or other causes of death, however tragic.

The basic method for counting martyrs in Christian history is to list ‘martyrdom situations’ at particular points in time. A martyrdom situation is defined as ‘mass or multiple martyrdoms at one point in Christian history.’ It is then determined how many of the people killed in that situation fit the definition of martyr outlined above. Note that in any situation of mass deaths or killing of Christians, one does not automatically or necessarily define the entire total who have been killed as martyrs, but only that fraction whose deaths resulted from some form of Christian witness, individual or collective. We

⁹ See, www.zenit.org, Rome, May 9, 2002.

¹⁰ World Christian Trends by David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson (William Carey Library) World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd edition, by David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (Oxford University Press) Atlas of Global Christianity edited by Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh University Press)

try to include estimates of the total number of Christians, the percentage that are martyrs and a rationale for each case.

One adjustment to the total is to include ‘background martyrs’ or those very small or isolated or individual situations. They cover cases where a Christian is killed as a result of human hostility but where the circumstances have nothing directly or immediately to do with organized Christianity.

From odium fidei to odium ecclesia and beyond. In examining a list of Catholic workers killed in 2011, John Allen, Jr. reports, “Certainly, none of these cases fit the traditional definition of martyrdom, which require that someone be killed in odium fidei -- out of hatred for the faith. Even that standard, however, is being stretched these days. Pope John Paul II added martyrs killed in odium ecclesiae, out of hatred for the church, and many theologians believe martyrdom should include not only deaths for hatred of the faith, but also hatred of virtues essential to the faith. In any event, today's risks are hardly limited to classic instances of martyrdom, but a wide variety of circumstances in which Christians are in harm's way. Even if they're not attacked for religious motives, their reasons for being in that spot are usually rooted in their faith.”

Children as martyrs. Note also that the definition of demographic martyrdom includes those children and infants who lose their lives along with adult martyrs. In Nagasaki, Japan, on November 24, 2008, 188 martyrs from the early 17th century were beatified. Eighteen were children under five. When asked about this, Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins replied, “This is not the first time it has happened. Nowadays it is the criterion of the Congregation to accept as martyrs children killed in a context of religious persecution and belonging to a Christian community that includes adults, clearly aware of the reason for their deaths. Among the new blessed, then, in addition to the children we have entire Christian families. This underlines the fact that the Christian faith was lived deeply in those homes.” Thus many martyrs throughout Christian history have been children, even infants.

Martyrdom not exclusively an early Christian phenomenon When most Christians hear the word ‘martyr’ they tend to think of the Roman persecution of early Christians. The Ecclesia Martyrum or Church of the Martyrs often is thought to refer only to the earliest period of church history, the 10 imperial Roman persecutions. This is not the case. Martyrdom is a consistent feature of church history and occurs in every Christian tradition and confession. One can see that all of the 10 largest martyrdom situations occurred in the second millennium of the Christian faith. The rate of martyrdom across the world throughout the ages has been a remarkably constant 0.8%. One out of every 120 Christians in the past has been martyred, or in the future is likely to so be.

When we examine a list of martyrs down the ages, as comprehensive as is known today, some startling findings emerge. Note that over 20 million were martyred in Soviet prison camps and that well over half of the 70 million Christian martyrs were killed in the twentieth century alone.

The twentieth century is the century of genocides. It started with the Armenian Genocide 1915, which cost the killing of more than 1.5 m. Armenian Christians. Also the genocide of the Syriac Orthodox Christians (approx. 500.000), the genocide of Greeks and other Christians in the Ottoman Turkey. The last century was the most bloodiest century in the 2000 history of Christianity. In the midyears of the century the persecution of Nazi dictatorship or in the camps of Soviet prison camps and so an. Even at the end of the twentieth century, two martyrdom situations stood above all the rest both in intensity and in sheer size: the massacre of Christians in southern Sudan and the genocide in Rwanda. While the Rwandan genocide was short-lived, the persecution of Christians during the civil war in Sudan was spread over two decades. Additional ongoing killings of Christians took place in Indonesia, India, China, Nigeria, and Mexico, to name a few better known situations.

There are five factors impacting martyrdom today

1. The world is less religious in 2010 than in 1910 but more religious than in 1970. In 1910, over 99% of the world's population was religious. By 2010 this had fallen below 89%. But this analysis hides the fact that the high point for the nonreligious was around 1970, when almost 20% of the world's population was either agnostic or atheist. The collapse of Communism in the late 20th century means that the world is more religious in 2010 than in 1970¹¹.
2. Christianity is fragmented. Christians are now found in nearly 43,000 denominations. These range in size from millions of members to fewer than 100 members and are listed for each of the world's 232 countries in the World Christian Database. The individual Christian is located in these on this slide. The next slide shows three huts in which a man stranded on a desert isle has a home, a church, and the church he used to attend¹²!
3. Christians and Muslims together could soon be 2/3s of the world's population. In 1800, 33% of the world's population was either Christian or Muslim. Today, together they represent about 55% of the world's population, or four billion people. By 2050 this percentage is expected to rise to 62% and by the end of the century it could be over 66%.
4. Christians are out of contact with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Recent researches reveal that as many as 86% of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian. This has to be viewed negatively in light of the strong biblical theme of incarnation that is at the heart of Christian witness.

¹¹ Here I would recommend God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics (Norton, 2011) by Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shaw.

¹² Note that the vast majority of denominations are in the Independent and Protestant traditions. By 2025, there will likely be 55,000 denominations.

5. Migration is increasing religious and ethnic diversity around the world. 200 million people are on the move today, carrying with them their cultural and religious backgrounds. At least 860 million have now settled permanently outside of their culture's main country. I recommend Ian Goldin's book *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped our World and Will Define the Future* (Princeton University Press, 2011). As the authors point out, never have so many people been on the move, and never have they been so unwelcome¹³!

According to the Syriac Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II¹⁴, Christianity is in danger of disappearing across entire countries in the Middle East, the land of its birth, according to a senior Orthodox Church leader. There have been repeated warnings about the decline of Christianity in Iraq under the Islamic State onslaught. Eight in ten Christians have left Iraq since 2003. The Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, has warned that Christianity is also at risk of disappearing in Syria and Lebanon. The massive decline of the Christian population in Turkey from 3.5m to 150,000 in the last 100 years alone could be repeated in Syria and Lebanon. "I am worried that Christianity is on the way out both in Syria and Iraq as well as in Lebanon," he stated. Already, in Syria, half of the Christians are either displaced or have fled abroad. Many are also fleeing Lebanon where there is terrible poverty.

It is a kind of a new "Martyrdom". A martyrdom of Christianity.

The first age could be called as the "Age of martyrs". I am afraid that the first century of the third millenium will be called as the Age of the "martyrdom of the Christianity" in its birthplace.

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¹³ Faith on the Move, a new study by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, focuses on the religious affiliation of international migrants, examining patterns of migration among seven major groups. "Migration, Religious Diasporas, and Religious Diversity: A Global Survey" by Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Bellofatto (Mission Studies, July 2012) focuses on the 859 million settled in diaspora.

¹⁴ See in, <http://www.christiantoday.com>, Posted 2016-08-30 By Ruth Gledhill.