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978-0-521-19705-2 - The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century

Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke

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## The Price of Freedom Denied

### *Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*

*The Price of Freedom Denied* shows that, contrary to popular opinion, ensuring religious freedom for all reduces violent religious persecution and conflict. Others have suggested that restrictions on religion are necessary to maintain order or preserve a peaceful religious homogeneity. Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke show that restricting religious freedoms is associated with higher levels of violent persecution. Relying on a new source of coded data for nearly two hundred countries and case studies of six countries, the book offers a global profile of religious freedom and religious persecution. Grim and Finke report that persecution is evident in all regions and is standard fare for many. They also find that religious freedoms are routinely denied and that government and the society at large serve to restrict these freedoms. They conclude that the price of freedom denied is high indeed.

Brian J. Grim is senior researcher in religion and world affairs at the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, D.C. Dr. Grim is also the co-principal investigator for the international religious demography project at Boston University's Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs, where he co-edits the World Religion Database ([www.WorldReligionDatabase.org](http://www.WorldReligionDatabase.org)). His findings on international religious demography and religious freedom have been covered by all the major news outlets, including the BBC, CNN, the Associated Press, and Reuters, and he frequently presents to high-level governmental and nongovernmental groups. Dr. Grim has extensive overseas experience. From 1982 to 2002, he lived and worked as an educator, researcher, and development coordinator in China, the former USSR, Central Asia, Europe, Malta, and the Middle East.

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The most enduring and illuminating bodies of late-nineteenth-century social theory – by Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and others – emphasized the integration of religion, polity, and economy through time and place. Once a staple of classic social theory, however, religion gradually lost the interest of many social scientists during the twentieth century. The recent emergence of phenomena such as Solidarity in Poland; the dissolution of the Soviet empire; various South American, southern African, and South Asian liberation movements; the Christian Right in the United States; and Al Qaeda have reawakened scholarly interest in religiously based political conflict. At the same time, fundamental questions are once again being asked about the role of religion in stable political regimes, public policies, and constitutional orders. The series Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion, and Politics will produce volumes that study religion and politics by drawing on classic social theory and more recent social scientific research traditions. Books in the series offer theoretically grounded, comparative, empirical studies that raise big questions about a timely subject that has long engaged the best minds in social science.

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*Dedicated to our wives and families:*

*Julia Beth Grim*

*and*

*Melissa Malika (Ge Tian-en)*

*Joel Yusup (Ge Tian-ci) and Jamie Lynn*

*Andrew Nurullah (Ge Tian-fu)*

*Abigail Adellet (Ge Tian-le)*

*Terri Finke*

*and*

*Matthew, Jill, and Maria*

*Stacey, Lucas, and Theodore*

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# The Price of Freedom Denied

*Religious Persecution and Conflict  
in the Twenty-First Century*

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*Pennsylvania State University*



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## Preface

### *Religions' Shared Experience of Religious Persecution and Conflict*

Violent religious persecution is nothing new. Nowhere is this clearer than in the prominence that persecution plays in religious rituals and identity. The pronouncement by Moses and Aaron that Pharaoh must let God's people go, recorded in the Old Testament book of Exodus, is reflected in annual commemorations by the three major monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each year, the Jewish holiday of Passover commemorates their rapid Exodus from persecution. The Passover is also closely tied with the Christian celebration of both Easter and the Eucharist, and Muslims have historically also commemorated the Exodus from Egypt led by Moses on *Ashura*, the day the Prophet Muhammed initially designated as a day of fasting.<sup>1</sup>

But the significance of violent persecution for the Abrahamic religions is not confined to the Exodus from Egypt. Jews commemorate other persecution and deliverances, ranging from Hanukkah to the World War II Holocaust. Among Christians, many of the most venerated apostles, missionaries, and saints were also persecuted and martyred. The Muslim calendar itself is dated from the Al-Hijra, or Muhammed's migration from Mecca to Medina to escape violent persecution.<sup>2</sup> And today, *Ashura* is primarily associated with commemoration of the martyrdom (at the

<sup>1</sup> Shahul Hameed (2007), "Out of Egypt: The Story of Passover in the Qur'an," *Reading Islam: Mohammed and the Message*, [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article\\_C&cid=1175751840758&pagename=Zone-English-Discover-Islam%2FDIELayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&cid=1175751840758&pagename=Zone-English-Discover-Islam%2FDIELayout) (accessed 5 August 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://original.britannica.com/eb/article-9039809/Hijrah>.

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hands of other Muslims) of Imam Hussein, whose progeny Shia Muslims regard as the rightful bloodline to succeed the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>3</sup>

The experience of violent persecution is not confined to Abrahamic religions. Religious persecution has touched all major religions.<sup>4</sup> For example, during Diwali, the Festival of Light celebrated by Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs, lighted lamps symbolize the victory of good over evil within every human being. But for Sikhs, the holiday is especially poignant. It is associated with the killing of Bhai Mani Singh, the priest of the Golden Temple – Sikhism’s holiest site – on that holiday in A.D. 1737.<sup>5</sup> Singh was arrested for not paying a religious tax and was asked by the judge who had jurisdiction in that part of India to either renounce his faith or face death. Singh refused and suffered brutal limb-by-limb torture as the method of his execution. In the case of the Sikhs, such violent persecution has even become a part of the daily Sikh prayer (*Ardas*):

Those Sikhs, both men and women, who, for the sake of their religion, offered their heads; let their bodies be cut piece by piece; let their heads be scalped off; suffered torture under the body cutting wheel; let their body be sawed through the middle; who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the reformation of the Gurdwaras; but they did not relinquish their religion; who stuck to the principles of “Sikhi” up to their last breath, think of their heroic performance and say “WAHEGURU” [God or Infinite Creator].<sup>6</sup>

Virtually all religions have stories to tell of the faithful being imprisoned, tortured, murdered, and maimed, but how prevalent is violent religious persecution? Barrett and Johnson estimate that more than two hundred million persons have been killed related to their religious affiliation during the past two millennia.<sup>7</sup> We don’t have evidence to support or refute this claim, but three familiar twentieth-century examples establish that violent persecution in the recent past not only affected millions, but also continues to be a pressing issue today.

<sup>3</sup> Vali Nasr (2006), *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, New York: Norton.

<sup>4</sup> Some go so far as to suggest that often religions do not teach people to avoid suffering but, rather, how to make a physical pain, personal loss, or worldly defeat sufferable. See Geertz (1966).

<sup>5</sup> Singh & Singh (1950).

<sup>6</sup> See “ARDAS – THE PRAYER,” <http://www.gurbaani.com/prayer2.htm> (accessed 5 August 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Barrett & Johnson’s (2001:227) estimate includes any person killed related to adherence to a religion since each religion’s advent: 80 million Muslims killed, 70 million Christians, 20 million Hindus, 10 million Buddhists, 9 million Jews, 2 million Sikhs, 1 million Baha’is, and 11 million from other religions and ethnically based religions.



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- At the turn of the past century, there were more than three million Christians in Turkey accounting for more than 20 percent of the total population at the time, but today that community is decimated – at most, some three hundred thousand remain, accounting for only about 2 percent.<sup>8</sup> Most were Armenians who were driven out, killed, or left to die around the time of World War I.<sup>9</sup> This violent persecution, which radically and lastingly altered the religious demography of Turkey, is an extremely controversial topic in Turkey to this day. In 2007, Turkey threatened to curtail U.S. military access to Turkish bases and recalled its ambassador from Washington for consultations in response to the U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee’s approval of a resolution asserting that the Turkish massacre of Armenians nearly a century ago constitutes genocide.<sup>10</sup>
- When the Nazis came to power in 1933, roughly nine million Jews lived throughout Europe. By the end of World War II, it is estimated that six million died or had been executed.<sup>11</sup> The horror of this violent persecution is an indelible part of modern European history, and few in the West deny those atrocities. Ironically, some of the best evidence of this persecution came from the Nazi authorities themselves, who documented through reports, photographs, and film “the public humiliation of Jews, their deportation, mass murder, and confinement in concentration camps.”<sup>12</sup> Even still, Holocaust denial occurs today and is supported by at least one head of state, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In 2005, Ahmadinejad described the Holocaust as “a myth” and suggested that Israel be moved to Europe, the United States, or Canada.<sup>13</sup>
- During China’s Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), paranoia toward all who challenged Mao’s vision of a revolutionary society led to massive social upheaval throughout the country, displacing and abusing millions. Intellectuals, those with foreign connections or possessions, religious groups, and anyone else charged with being a counterrevolutionary were severely oppressed. Religion was singled out not only

<sup>8</sup> World Religion Database estimates.

<sup>9</sup> Dadrian (2003).

<sup>10</sup> See article by Grim & Wike, “Turkey and Its (Many) Discontents,” <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=255>.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005143> (accessed 5 August 2010); also see Dawidowicz (1975).

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10007271> (accessed 5 August 2010).

<sup>13</sup> See <http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/12/10/iran.israel/index.html?iref=allsearch> (accessed 5 August 2010).

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because of its supposed foreign connections but also because it promoted loyalties and faith to things in the spiritual realm beyond the control of the revolution. All religious practice was banned and religious leaders and those continuing to practice their faith faced ridicule, exile, imprisonment, torture, and death. Not until the late 1970s were places of worship allowed to reopen.

These examples emphasize that the *physical abuse or displacement of people because of religion* (what we call *violent religious persecution*) is a form of social conflict that is often embedded in larger conflicts within and between societies and countries.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, each case listed happened as societies took radical steps to redefine their national character: Turkey as a nation of Turks with Islam as the binding identity, Germany as an Aryan nation that excluded so-called *Untermenschen* (“inferior people”) who were targeted because of their ethnic and religious identities, and China as a revolutionary state that aimed to rid itself of all cultural and religious elements that were considered superstitious or tied to foreign imperialism.

What the first three examples fail to illustrate, however, is that victims and perpetrators of violent religious persecution can quickly alternate. Once again, there is no shortage of examples. Whether it is the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina or the ongoing Palestinian–Israeli conflict, culpability becomes debated and victims can become perpetrators. Perhaps the most prominent example is Iraq. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Shia Muslims quickly went from being targeted to targeting others. The 2009 International Religious Freedom report<sup>15</sup> on Iraq reports that Sunni Muslims have received death threats in Shia neighborhoods, Shia Muslims have received death threats in Sunni neighborhoods, and religious minorities have received threats in both. Nor were these idle threats; the report went on to explain that “in many cases individuals either complied or were killed.” Depending on the neighborhood, each group alternated between victim and perpetrator.

<sup>14</sup> This definition of *religious persecution* is slightly different from the one used in Grim & Finke (2007) in order to acknowledge that the data on religious persecution used in our analyses include victims of physical abuse or physical displacement. We include victims who are targeted because of their own religious identity or the religiously related motivations of those who perpetuate the violence. Victims are typically targeted because they are the “wrong” religion, but they can also be targeted because they lack religion.

<sup>15</sup> 2009 *Report on International Religious Freedom*, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127348.htm> (accessed 5 August 2010).

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Certainly, these familiar cases indicate that violent religious persecution was a problem in the past and remains evident in some regions; but still, how prevalent is violent religious persecution today, and what are its root causes?

In the twenty-first century, no religion is held exempt from persecution. Jews remain targets in many regions of the world, not just in Europe. Adherents of minority Muslim faiths have been jailed, deported, and/or killed in Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Hindus remain victims of violent persecution in Bangladesh and elsewhere. Practitioners of Falun Gong, Roman Catholic bishops, Protestant house church leaders, and other religious figures are routinely jailed in China. Adherents of minority religions such as Jehovah's Witnesses are incarcerated in numerous countries. In other countries, such as Belgium, Germany, France, and Singapore, religions that operate freely in many countries are officially condemned as dangerous cults or sects. Christian peace activists have been kidnapped, tortured, and executed in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in Iraq. To be sure, it is the call for social justice by people motivated by their religious convictions that can sometimes trigger their persecution.

In the chapters that follow, we offer a descriptive profile of contemporary violent religious persecution and make an initial effort to explain why it is occurring. We conclude by asking why religious freedom matters and review the evidence that suggests that religious freedom can result not only in less violent religious persecution and less conflict but also in better overall outcomes for societies. The appendix summarizes the empirical tests of the thesis made in this book.

Finally, throughout we use the term "religious freedoms" to mean the freedoms embodied in Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one of the foundational documents of the UN: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." Accordingly, based on the ability of individuals to change religions, religious freedoms include the right for religious groups to propagate their message within society with the intent of winning new adherents. Also, based on the ability for individuals to manifest his or her religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance, religious freedoms include that one religion should not seek to control another.