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If we focus on current trends in the 1990's two things are clear: the current persecution of Christians is both growing both in its worldwide spread and in the number of people affected.

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Persecution: Interpreting the Information on the Internet

John Roxborough

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1 INTRODUCTION AND ISSUES

The advent of email, the internet and then the development of the World Wide Web have enabled minority groups to tell their stories to a global audience. While governments may interfere with the flow of information, close down sites, and present alternative views, it is difficult for them to prevent access to dossiers and evidence located outside their boundaries. Material on the Web can speak when the subjects of the story themselves may be silenced.

Access to the Web enables minority groups to tell their stories and researchers to locate that information. While there can be no guarantees about the quality of the information, or the critical skills of the researcher, today there is unprecedented access to information about persecution and the responses of concerned groups in other countries. The ability to further disseminate information into the hands of media, politicians and praying Christians is enormous. The challenge remains to seek for quality in what is reported, and exercise discretion in making information public, judgement in analysis and wisdom in determining strategies to ameliorate suffering.

Material on the Web about persecution raises the same questions that have long existed with print media: is this sensationalist, reliable, self-critical, capable of influencing governments, friendly or hostile? What are the assumptions and viewpoints of the writers and those who make their material available? Is there a concern for accuracy about events, people, places and dates? Is the detail more or less specific than the sensitivities of the situation require? As with print, the facility that gets information out also makes it available to those who may use it against minority groups, except that the scope is vastly greater. Concerns about the uncontrolled nature of material on the Web relative to print

also apply, though information processed through known organizations will have been subject to a measure of editorial judgement. Even so, responsibility for interpretation is still very much with the reader. Unmoderated chat rooms and posted discussion material have few controls, and disinformation is also out there to confuse the unwary. Readers always need to ask themselves what is genuine, rather than just plausible, and what may be distorted, even sincerely, by enthusiasm or fear or a desire for vengeance. It is important to recognize integrity, whatever its viewpoint.

Situations of persecution are seldom if ever pure matters of religious discrimination and it does not quite go without saying that Christian compassion extends to suffering in general, not just that related to a person's Christian confession. Attitudes towards Christians are often mixed with issues of class, caste, social and ethnic group, community fears and injustices and their exploitation. People committing acts of persecution or providing a climate of discrimination may be doing little more than acting out the prejudices of media owners, and may see themselves as protecting their own interests or correcting ancient wrongs. The Web enables researchers to be aware of these dimensions as they explore the context and history of persecution. It is also possible to evaluate a range of responses, including prayer, aid, intervention, international political pressure, and publicity.

Christians need to be aware of the different approaches being taken by different groups. Some will align themselves more with one approach than another and that should not be surprising. The Web helps ensure that those outside are not captive to one line of interpretation and that anyone with a computer, telephone line and modem, and an internet account is well placed to make their own judgement.

A number of printed sources help provide a context of interpretation, though their own assumptions and intentions should be taken into account. Some have a tendency to uncritical or sensationalist reporting, others may have been so dry in being factual that gains in objectivity of one kind can lose the emotional dimension of real suffering by real people. It is helpful to make distinctions between different types of situations, and to have a framework for dealing with the difficult fact that those most personally affected may lack understanding about what is going on.

Reasonably balanced in its passion and analysis, and perhaps the most comprehensive general survey currently available is Paul Marshall, *Their Blood Cries Out* (Dallas: Word, 1997). Marshall is concerned to mobilize a broad spectrum of opinion to get religious freedom higher on the United States foreign policy agenda. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 and the formation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom which held its first meeting in June 1999 are fruits of the campaign of Marshall and others.

Marshall's January 1998 article in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* is also helpful in its analysis and in its distinctions (as between discrimination and persecution, and between pressure from independent groups and that which is 'part of the legal code itself').¹ However, political engagement is not without ambiguity. Not all think that North American concepts of religion and religious freedom are universal,² or that politicizing issues is always wise. Marshall appears to have difficulty hearing the

¹ 1. 'Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 22.1 (January 1998), pp. 2-8

² 2. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, 'Exporting Religious Freedom' *Bulletin of the Council of Societies for the Study of Religion*, 28.2 (April 1999), pp. 41-42

significance of some of these concerns.³ It is important to take note of the unfortunate legacy of 'extraterritoriality' which provided for the defence of Christians by foreign governments in China. Persecution of missionaries was used by the French government as a pretext for their nineteenth century expansion into Vietnam. Today having a foreign government on your case may be helpful, or it may be dangerous. This is not a matter for well-wishers to decide without reference to those affected.

Christians also need to be cautious about a defence of freedom which may carry an assumption about religion being an essentially private matter to which society ought to be indifferent. In our concern to prevent persecution we need to note that any response, including a failure to act, has consequences. The experience with NATO's attempts to help the Kosova Albanians highlights on a grand and tragic scale issues which Christians concerned about fellow believers also have to wrestle with. Our desire to do good is also capable of making things worse.

David Barrett's 'Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission', published each January in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, includes estimates of the number of Christian martyrs per year. The figure for 1999 was given as 164,000.⁴ Barrett's series of articles and his monumental *World Christian Encyclopaedia* are important not only for their figures and their country by country descriptions but also for the way in which his definitions often become de facto standards. The categorization of religious liberty into ten stages between state propagation of Christianity to state suppression is relevant.⁵ It will be interesting to see how it is developed in the forthcoming new edition which 'will report on and enumerate every known martyrdom situation in Christian history and identify thousands of martyrs by name'.⁶

Popular attitudes towards minority groups are as important as the declared policy of governments, and the dynamic between these is complex. Government policy may reflect, exacerbate, or moderate populist tendencies. Governments should not always be blamed for the actions of their citizens, and their ability to control situations based on hatred and fear can be limited. On the other hand these same factors can be a route to political power which is difficult to resist.

As well as questions of politics and relative numbers, awareness is needed of the debilitating and divisive effects persecution has on the church. Vernon Sterk provides an analysis of what actually goes on when a Christian community is under sustained pressure. His example is from Mexico, rather than the more usual cases from under communism or in relation to Islam, and his practical advice on preparing the church and identifying appropriate forms of reporting and support is useful.⁷ It is sobering to place alongside this the guidelines prepared for the United States Catholic Mission Association

³ 3. See James A. Scherer 'To the Editor' and Paul Marshall 'Author's Reply' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23.1 (January 1999), pp. 66–67. Scherer was commenting on Marshall's article 'Persecution of Christians in the Contemporary World' in the January 1998 issue.

⁴ 4. David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, 'Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 1999' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23.1 (January 1999), p. 25

⁵ 5. David B. Barrett, ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 777

⁶ 6. E. Michael Jaffarian, 'The World Christian Encyclopedia, First (1982) and Second (Forthcoming) Editions', *Missiology* 27.1 (January 1999), p. 32

⁷ 7. Vernon J. Sterk 'You can help the Persecuted Church: Lessons from Chiapas, Mexico' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 23.1 (January 1999), pp. 15–18.

on 'Crisis Management in the Event of Arrest, Disappearance, or Death of Mission Personnel'.⁸

Issues facing the church under persecution require wisdom, not just commitment. Good Christians can take diametrically opposite stances over co-operation with authorities, and it does not necessarily mean that one group is faithful and courageous and the other faithless and weak. It is rather too easy for outside groups to be drawn into polarized debates between different groups of Christians without taking account of what is going on. The tensions of the situation lend themselves to dramatic condemnations which may be understandable in the situation itself, but which do not need to be amplified by those at a distance. If it is difficult for outside supporters to minister to both factions, at least they can avoid making the situation worse. This should be one of the lessons from the experiences with Communist Russia and with the Chinese churches whereby the World Council of Churches supported registered churches and evangelical groups supported unregistered. In the Russian situation Keston College (now Keston Institute) was one of the few which sought to bridge the internal divides and to be fair to the different ways in which people responded. It was not always thanked for its objectivity.

It is helpful if Christians can relate their concerns to human rights in general. Religious and political freedom issues can be quite subtle in ways we do not always appreciate. Different cultures have different understandings of the way in which religious beliefs affect people's relationship to society. The assumptions we carry from our own political traditions and religious experiences may not be as universal as we think. Those whose Christian experience carries them easily into corridors of power do not readily identify with Christians in underground churches and are easily persuaded such groups would be trouble-makers in any country. Those who feel on the margins in their own society find it hard to sympathize with those who submit to state restrictions for the sake of legality and the possibility of some influence with the government.

A desire to obtain freedom for fellow-believers quickly raises issues about the freedoms of those who have a different religion, or whose form of Christianity appears less than orthodox. For Evangelicals it can be a litmus test of our own commitment to freedom if we observe what is happening to groups with which we may not have much natural empathy. The treatment of Moonies in England, Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia, and cults in France and other parts of Europe may stretch our sympathies, but they also provide warning signs for minority Christian groups in general.

Human rights concerns are frequently related to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations. These concerns are wider than issues of religious freedom. The Declaration of Human Rights (note article 18⁹) can be found online without difficulty.¹⁰

The diversity of information on the Web is confusing, but it also makes it possible to put individual cases in perspective. It is also important to develop personal links through email, and to be aware where different groups are coming from in the cases they present. It is easy to be overwhelmed, but there is an opportunity to be in direct affordable contact

⁸ 8. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 1985), p. 115f.

⁹ 9. 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.'

¹⁰ 10. See also the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights 50th anniversary information kit. <http://www.un.org/rights/50/kit5.htm>

with some particular part of the Body of Christ, be informed in prayer and action, and learn from the persecuted church.

2 NEWS BY ELECTRONIC MAIL

Electronic mail is immediate, it can be sent to defined destinations, its security is greater than the open information on Web sites, and it can be generated and exchanged through older generation computers and modems. Moderators of list servers which distribute compiled reports or share discussion have control over the initial recipients of their mailings. Some groups require a subscription, many just seek donations. Where information is likely to be sensitive, moderators check the credentials of those seeking to obtain information. It is still important for those placing information and writing reports to realize that though there are boundaries to what they write entering the public domain, they are quite permeable. Those who reproduce information need to be aware of how what they say will serve the interests of those referred to. It could be well for there to be some ethical guidelines developed.

Among those who provide email newsletters are Compass Direct,¹¹ the East-West Church and Ministry Report, Human Rights Without Frontiers, Keston Institute, Open Doors and the World Evangelical Fellowship Religious Liberty Commission. Many of these also have Web sites as noted below.

3 INFORMATION ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

Material on the Web is in full view of all those with access to the internet. No matter how obscure the site, the world can beat a path to its door. With the aid of search engines like Yahoo and Alta Vista, its contents will be noted and indexed for people to find with little difficulty. While this is usually what is intended, sometimes it may provide more exposure than may have been anticipated.

The Web sites of organizations tend to be concerned with events, campaigns, issues, political and religious motivation, and the support of the reporting organizations. Some provide links to other groups. Some also provide online copies of older reports. What follows here are a selected number of sites relating to security situations in countries, human rights generally, and the persecution of Christians. There are many other sites which originate and reproduce material on the persecuted church. These can be readily located by using a search engine on the Web.

For general information on the security situation in different countries see the United States State Department 'Travel Warnings' and 'Consular Information Sheets'.¹² The United States Government also issues country reports on Human Rights Practices.¹³

3.1 Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org/>)

Amnesty International was formed in 1961. It is directed at defined groups and individuals who are 'prisoners of conscience' and seeks to be even handed in its investigation of countries with a wide range of political and religious systems. Western

¹¹ 11. Compass Direct is widely quoted, but does not appear to have a website. It can be contacted by email at compassdr@compuserve.com

¹² 12. http://travel.state.gov/travel_warnings.html

¹³ 13. http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1997_hrp_report/97hrp_report_toc.html

governments have found it salutary to also be subject to scrutiny. The Amnesty annual report, news and resources are available online.

3.2 Human Rights Without Frontiers (<http://www.hrwf.net>)

Human Rights Without Frontiers is based in Belgium and has been particularly involved in monitoring the way in which European concerns about cults have spilt over into government action against a wide range of Christian groups which would be regarded as mainstream in the English speaking world. Its material is available in French, English, Italian and German, in print, and by email. Select material is also available on its website.

3.3 Institute for East-West Christian Studies (<http://www.samford.edu/groups/global/ewcmreport/>)

Although the situation of Christians in the former Soviet Union and East Central Europe is much better than it was under Communism, it is still far from ideal, especially for newer denominations, evangelicals and other religious minorities. The reports of the Institute are important for their analysis of the situation and informed practical advice for those contemplating work in the area. Along with its director, Mark Elliott, the Institute moved in 1999 to The Global Center, Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, Birmingham, Alabama, USA. The *East-West Church & Ministry Report* is available in print and as online email editions. The Spring 1999 issue has material on internet resources.¹⁴ Group discounts are available, and articles from earlier issues can be obtained from the website.

3.4 Keston Institute (<http://www.keston.org/>)

Keston Institute was founded by Michael Bourdeaux and for many years was unique in the integrity of its reporting and analysis of the situation of Christians of all denominations in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Its archive of *samizdat* (underground press material), now housed in Oxford, is a major resource. It monitors freedom of religion and researches religious affairs in communist and post communist countries. Sample material is available on its website, and its news service is available by email and print subscription. Keston founded the journal, *Religion in Communist Lands*, now *Religion State and Society*. It also publishes *Frontier*. Books and articles by Michael Bourdeaux, the late Jane Ellis and others associated with Keston are essential reading for understanding the history of Christianity under Russian communism as well as for engaging with the ongoing complexities of religion in countries which continue to operate with a totalitarian mind-set.

3.5 Open Doors International (<http://www.solcon.nl/odi/index.htm>)

Open Doors was founded in 1955 to support the distribution of Bibles into Communist countries in Eastern Europe. It now has a global ministry 'to go where faith costs the most, to equip and encourage Christians who are suffering for their faith world-wide'.¹⁵ Its website includes a World Watch List¹⁶ which ranks countries and tracks changes since it began in January 1993. On a point system, those with less than 10 points are generally considered to have freedom of religion. There are currently 88 countries with points from

¹⁴ 14. Mark Elliott and Sharyl Corrado, comps., 'Internet Resources on Religion', *East-West Church & Ministry Report* 7.2 (Spring 1999), pp. 12-14

¹⁵ 15. Ministry Highlights <http://www.solcon.nl/odi/whatdone.htm>

¹⁶ 16. See <http://www.solcon.nl/odi/wwlist.htm>

10 to over 80. Muslim and Communist countries provide the most difficult contexts on this analysis. An indication is given of trends, the degree of uncertainty attached to the results, and an estimate of the Christian population in each country. The list is compiled with the aid of a questionnaire which is available on the Web for people to complete and submit.¹⁷ A short analysis is updated from time to time¹⁸ and maps for 1970 and 1995 can be found in the *Atlas of World Christianity*.¹⁹ A recent service from Open Doors USA²⁰ is a 90 second daily audio 'Frontline World Report'.²¹

3.6 World Evangelical Fellowship Religious Liberty Commission (<http://www.worldevangelical.org/noframes/2rlcintr.htm>)

The story of the development of the Religious Liberty Commission since its formation in 1992 is part of the revival of the work of the World Evangelical Fellowship and has proved one of its most necessary and successful commissions. Its website contains news items concerning the persecuted church²² and includes material on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted church.²³ Email news is available to approved subscribers.

4 CONCLUSION

It is appreciated that there are many other groups besides those mentioned here who also have a vital part to play in using the tools of email and the World Wide Web to share information about the persecuted church, to be advocates for relief, and to learn from those for whom faith in Jesus Christ carries a price socially, economically, in education, and even of life itself. I apologize to those who feel they should have been included in this brief article and who are not. Those that are mentioned are representative and serve to highlight some of the issues of interpretation that I have raised. It is hoped that what is shared here increases awareness of the electronic resources available and of the people that it is ultimately all about, and that it contributes in a small way to a better understanding not only of the complexities of being involved, but the necessity of doing so regardless.

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²² 22. <http://www.worldevangelical.org/noframes/2persec.htm>

²³ 23. <http://www.worldevangelical.org/noframes/2daypray.htm>

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The Unity of Martyrdom and Communion with Christ

France Quééré

Keywords: Confession, martyrdom, faith, suffering, hope, witness, communion of saints

THE UNITY OF MARTYRDOM

We have seen three periods, and three meanings of martyrdom: the name of Christ, the freedom of the Spirit, and social justice. We separated these ideas only for the sake of clarity and because the historical development prompted us to do so: it is true that some died confessing Christ, others because their conscience would not bend before any human master, and a third group because they were fighting against contempt for and annihilation of the poor.

However, we should go beyond this apparent contrast which dissolves in the profundity of the choices made. Constants appear, if only among the persecutors who have nothing to envy one another for from one age to another in terms of barbarism; they have done all the evil that it is possible to do to human beings. But let us see above all that the different approaches of our martyrs stem from a single centre, belief in Christ, and are constantly interlaced. Who would dare to confess Christ without concern for his or her impoverished brothers and sisters, and without holding his or her head high before Caesar? Who can claim to be free if they do not allow their neighbours to be, because they have no food, and if they do not invoke the supreme dispenser of freedom? Who can believe themselves to be vehicles of justice if they do not attend to the perpetrators of slavery and, taking the side of humanity, do not stand up to the power which takes only its own side; or if they do not serve, in the person of the poor, the figure of the one who made himself poor to crown them with his glory?

The Service of the Humiliated

Causes cannot therefore be dissociated, and the vast number of the oppressed is always present in the actions, taken of their own will, which lead Christians to martyrdom, even if they do not specifically defend their cause as Christian. Neither Jan Hus nor Polycarp died for themselves; had only their own interests been at stake, they would have taken a