

Book Reviews

Under Caesar's sword: How Christians respond to persecution

Daniel Philpott and Timothy Shah (eds.)

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Under Caesar's Sword fills a gap in the literature on how Christians respond to persecution. Its main conclusion is that these responses “evinced a *creative pragmatism* constituted by short-term efforts to ensure security, accrue strength through associational ties with other organizations and actors, and sometimes mount strategic opposition to the government” (3).

The volume contains contributions from many experts in the field of religious freedom. There are chapters on the persecution of Christians in the most challenging countries: Iraq and Syria; Kenya, Nigeria and Sudan; Egypt, Libya and Palestine; Iran and Saudi Arabia; Central Asia; Russia; Pakistan and Afghanistan; India and Sri Lanka; Vietnam and Laos; China; Indonesia; and Latin America. Many chapters include interviews and stories from the frontlines describing violence, imprisonment and displacement.

The editors identify three categories of Christian response “arrayed from reactive to proactive: strategies of survival, strategies of association, and strategies of confrontation” (11). Some authors use these categories; while others add nuance or create additional categories.

The type of persecution – whether it is societal or state-sponsored – matters in determining how Christians respond. Differences in denominational affiliation ideas and beliefs also influence Christian reactions.

In the chapter on Nigeria, Kenya and Sudan, Robert Dowd explains that Christians may choose to endure, flee, fight, appeal to the government, or reach out for help to those who share a religious identity with the persecutors. Inter-religious dialogue has been somewhat successful in Kenya and Nigeria, where the persecution is societal. Appeals to government have also helped. However, these strategies have not been successful in Sudan.

The tragic exit of Christians from Syria and Iraq due to civil war and persecution by ISIS has largely erased the historic Christian communities that have existed for millennia. This chapter is aptly titled, “On the Brink of Extinction.”

The Muslim-majority countries of Pakistan and Afghanistan face significant political challenges, particularly political instability. “Church bombings, suicide bomb-

ings, assassinations, and targeted killings are common in both nations” (229). However, the main responses by the Christian communities in Pakistan has been public engagement and resistance to oppression. Sara Singha summarizes, “Christians are not passive recipients to persecution but active participants in political reform” (229). In Afghanistan, Christians are a very small minority.

Sadly, in Russia and Central Asia, the Russian Orthodox Church has collaborated with state agencies to preserve its dominance and threaten the religious freedom of other Christians in the process. Although the dominant religions differ in India and Sri Lanka, other faiths are viewed as threats to Hinduism and Buddhism, respectively. Christianity in particular is seen as a foreign influence there. To be a real member of any of these societies means following the traditional or indigenous religion.

China has imposed serious and ongoing restrictions on Christians, who have taken very different approaches to persecution. Unfortunately, conflicts have resulted between those who have accommodated and those who have resisted oppression.

With regard to Latin America, the primary focus is on Colombia and Mexico, where drug lords have kidnapped pastors and Christian leaders and where, in some areas, Catholic leaders oppress Protestants. A section of this chapter focuses on Brazil, a country with low levels of persecution but where some evangelical leaders denounce any restrictions on religious freedom. The juxtaposition of the situations in Colombia and Mexico with that in Brazil is striking and somewhat incongruous.

Paul Marshall addresses rising pressures on Christians in the West due to the expansion of secularism and state authority, as well as a narrowing of the definition of religion. He details strategies of litigation, politics and lobbying, while highlighting the effectiveness of cooperation and compromise.

The final chapter, authored by Maryann Cusimano Love, covers transnational advocacy networks – religious orders, international development agencies, Christian denominations and other advocacy groups. She includes examples where various organizations have worked together to effect change, and she explains how players in this field are pressing for the creation of international governmental networks to advance religious freedom globally (487).

Overall, this book is highly recommended and worth the steep price tag. The chapters are well researched and insightful. There is no glossing over the fissures that have occurred in Christian communities where members take different approaches in responding to persecution. The large number of countries covered is an important strength of this book. I also appreciated the fact that it ends on a hopeful note with Love’s chapter on transnational advocacy networks. That chapter presents much for religious freedom advocates to work towards.

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