

The Guardian

As the Sri Lanka attacks show, Christians worldwide face serious persecution

Giles Fraser

It is ignored in the west, but Christianity is the most persecuted religion. Why is there such silence on the issue?

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I was up before dawn this morning, preparing for our first service of Easter. This meant that, around the same time as bombs were going off in churches in Sri Lanka, I was reading a passage to my congregation taken from the book of Ezekiel. The passage tells of dead bones coming back together, of bodies being re-clothed in flesh and of life being breathed back into them. Over in Sri Lanka, bones were being blown apart, and flesh stripped from skin. These people woke up this morning full of hope, excited in anticipation of the story of Jesus's resurrection. They put on their best clothes and polished their shoes. Now their blood is being mopped from the sanctuary floor.

I was talking the other day to the classicist Mary Beard about Christian persecution in Roman times - all that stuff about lions and the Coliseum. She was of the opinion that it might not have been quite as big a deal as later Christians made it out to be. And no doubt there is nothing quite like a few overegged stories of gory martyrdom to deepen a sense of group solidarity among a struggling religious community. Well, I bow to Mary's greater knowledge of

classical Rome. But while it may have been true that too much was made of Roman persecution, the very opposite is true now. We are living through one of the most serious phases of Christian persecution in history, and most people refuse to acknowledge it.

During the past century, Christianity has been all but driven out of the Middle East, the place of its birth. This time last year I was in Damascus, visiting the Christian community there. On the front of the church that I went to on Sunday morning there was a huge mural depicting the horrors of the Armenian genocide. These Christians were originally refugees from Turkey, and had arrived there fleeing the most sustained and horrendous persecution. How much of this story do we know? This week, the Israeli historians Benny Morris and Dror Ze'evi will publish a much-awaited account of the period. The *Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities* argues that from 1894 to 1924, the Turkish authorities systematically murdered some 2.5 million Christians. At the beginning of that period, in places like Anatolia, Christians accounted for 20% of the population. By the end of it, there were just 2% left. Throughout the 20th century and into the 21st, Christians have been driven from the Middle East with bombs and bullets, and with hardly a bat squeak of protest from the secular west.

Why no outrage? Yes, these horrendous murders will make the press for a day or two - but we generally care more about the fire in a famous cathedral than we do about those people who have their bodies blown to bits in architecturally less significant places of worship.

Why the blind spot - especially given that we do care about so many other forms of oppression? No, it's not a competition. But I do wonder whether on some unconscious level the secular and broadly progressive west thinks that Christianity had it coming. They associate Christianity with popes and their armies, with crusades and inquisitions, with antisemitism, British imperialism, Trump supporters and abortion protesters.

Christians in the west haven't helped. By describing as "persecution" the minor run-ins that Christianity has had with the law - about cakes for gay couples or street preachers, for example - Christians have debased the word persecution and made it sound like a manipulation designed to reclaim some lost place in the culture. Moreover, porky and pink-faced bishops in the House of Lords do not look like a persecuted species, and so when they talk about Christian persecution they look faintly ridiculous.



A memorial marking the 102nd anniversary of the mass killings of Armenians in Istanbul, Turkey, 24 April 2017. Photograph: Sedat Suna/EPA

And maybe there are some who don't want to talk about Christian persecution because they fear that it could easily be used - as it sometimes is - as an alibi for Islamophobia. Easier to fall silent about the murder of Christians than to be seen to side with those racists who blame Muslims for everything. I understand this - but it's still not good enough.

According to the widely respected Pew report, Christianity remains the world's most persecuted religion. And the only reason for mentioning this so crassly in terms of league tables is simply that it serves to highlight the deafening silence of our response to it. From North Korea (OK, obviously) to China, and increasingly even in places such as India - all around the world Christians are subject to real and sustained violence for the profession of their faith, the one that we proclaim most insistently today. That life is stronger than death. That love will ultimately triumph over hate.

And this means that we believe terrorism can never quench the proclamation of the good news of Easter. At Easter, darkness doesn't have the last word. That is why people were going to church in Sri Lanka in the first place, to listen again to this message: Christ is risen. Allelujah.

. Giles Fraser is a parish priest in Elephant and Castle, south London

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