

LIMEN

Journal of the Hungarian Migration Research Institute

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Frontispiece:

The Ugandan army patrolling the refugee settlement in Rwamwanja, January
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Interview with International Jurist José Luis Bazán Ph.D., on Christian persecution in Africa

23 September 2020

1. How do you see the persecution of Christians in the 21st century? Do you think it is true that Christians are the most persecuted minorities on our Globe as Opendoors states?

Facts and narratives are quite different things. The persecution of Christians as a worldwide phenomenon is an irrefutable truth and an undeniable factual reality. However, facts and realities can be hidden or pre-selected, distorted, watered down... through the creation of “prefabricated” narratives that betray the factual reality. And this is what, unfortunately, happens with the narrative of the “persecution of Christians” as described in the Western world, in particular. Most of the time “persecuted Christians” is a non-existing topic in Western public opinion: the dominant media either do not report it or do it but veiling the reality: e.g., the conflict in the Middle Belt of Nigeria is described as an “intercommunal conflict” between herdsmen and farmers for natural resources, in a context of climate change. However, most of the times herdsmen (who are Muslims) are the aggressors, while farmers (who are Christians) are the victims. Islamic terrorist herdsmen invade the lands of farmers (who are the legitimate owners) and destroy them, burn their houses, villages and churches, kill their religious leaders, rape women and girls... Both groups, herdsmen and farmers, are unfairly placed in a symmetric position: both are considered “victims” (of climate change, poverty, etc.) under a false narrative that is misleading, and, even, immoral. Islamic terrorism exists represented by radicalized herdsmen, which is denied by the mainstream media and policy-makers, including international organisations’ leaders.

On the other hand, regarding the expression “minorities”, I would like to make a couple of comments: it is true that persecuted Christians are, sometimes, a minority group (as it happens, e.g., in the Middle East) from the sociological point of view. But majority groups can also be persecuted: in their own countries. This may sound strange to Western ears, but this is also factual. A radicalized minority can persecute a peaceful majority in its own homeland. Although not at the level of persecution, but of intolerance and discrimination, we see this in Western societies:

in countries where the majority of citizens declare themselves Christians, their own laicist governments and media stereotype and associate them with negative connotations, adopt beligerant legislation that breaches their fundamental rights (such as the right to conscientious objection to abortion or euthanasia; or denies their parental rights in their children's education). Social harassment, hate speech and crimes are also carried out against Christians in traditionally and culturally Christian countries: e.g., in France. In accordance with the figures of its Minister of Home Affairs, in 2019, there were 1,052 Anti-Christian acts, 687 Anti-Semitic actions, and 154 Anti-Muslim acts. Why are all these figures not spread and well known by European public opinion?

2. How do you see the general status of Christianity in Africa? Do you think it will be the next driving force for Christianity?

Christianity in Africa is healthy, vibrant, committed and... growing. A Pew Research Center study made it clear that, generally speaking, Africa is the most religious continent in the world: 98% of Ethiopians, 88% of Nigerians, 86% of Ugandans and 75% of South-Africans say that religion is *very important* in their lives. On the other hand, we find poor levels of religiosity in Europe (10% in UK, Germany and Sweden; 11% in France; 22% in Spain, with Greece being one of the highest, with 56%).

African Christians, generally speaking, are also highly committed to their religion. By way of comparison, we see that the percentage of Christians who say that their religion is *very important* in their lives in Europe goes from 9% in Denmark to 59% in Greece (UK: 11%; Germany and France: 12%; Italy: 23%; Spain: 30%; and Poland: 32%). The US is remarkably more committed, as 68% of Christians consider their religion very important. Contrary to Europe, we find much higher percentages in Africa: e.g., in South Africa (79%), Nigeria (82%), Ghana (89%) or Ethiopia (98%).

However, war, violence, poverty, corruption and other evils poison African countries and affect their peoples, including Christians, who, in their millions, suffer enormously due to these injustices. Moreover, Africa is also the scene of an increasing Christian persecution, mostly, by Islamic terrorist groups, making martyrdom a daily reality for African Christian communities. It is not unusual in some parts of Africa to be killed just for going to mass, following a procession or living in a Christian

neighborhood. It is clear that internal and external powers work towards imposing their agenda of Islamization, in particular in the Sub Saharan Africa.

On the other hand, African Christianity is already a source of richness and a model for other Christians worldwide: their sense of community and appreciation of family and life, the joy of living and celebrating, their capacity to permeate religion in all aspects of daily life, the intensity of their commitment - which enables them to be a witness for Christ even at the cost of their own blood -, their fidelity to the truth of God and the human being, their resilience and their capability to discover the meaning and value of life despite difficulties and suffering... The world, and in particular, Western countries, need to learn from the example of the Church in Africa, from their faithful pastors. Africa is “exporting” faith, priests and religious people to other continents: this reality will also make the African perspective more visible in the Church in the recipient countries. Africa is certainly a driving force in the Church, and it will be even more in the future as, demographically, its percentage will increase, and its spiritual strength is great.

3. You are also dealing with the dark side of the life of Christians in Africa: persecution. How do you see it?

When the Church and their faithful fulfill their mission and vocation, we must expect opposition and persecution by earthly powers, by those interested in dominating and subjugating societies, peoples, families and individuals. The way of persecution may change: as Pope Francis mentioned, a kind of “white collar persecution” might exist, that may entail social isolation, media harassment or stereotyping, the misuse of legal actions to surrender the dissenter, a lack of professional opportunities, discrimination at work, discrediting personal reputation and honor, the impossibility of or restrictions to practice one’s religion in the public sphere, etc. The irony is that the persecutors usually take the flag of human rights and rule of law twisting them beyond rationality and common sense in order to exclude dissenters, trying, even, to put them in jail applying the rule of (an unjust) law. For example, a UN “expert” publicly stated that any ban on abortion implies torture, or at least, an inhuman and degrading treatment of women who are willing to commit abortion. If defending the life of vulnerable human beings is a serious crime deserving prison in a democratic country, what kind of human rights and democracy are we talking about? The sad reality is that under the “human rights” headline we find powerful

actors instrumentalising the human dignity rationale for their own profit, expelling dissenters from society. The same applies to political correctness and the misuse of hate speech to promote censorship and facilitate the adoption of certain policies without political or social opposition.

Besides this type of persecution, we find the “classical” (if we can say so), bloody and physically violent persecution (killings, rapes, destruction of homes, coercion, forced conversion, human trafficking....) against Christians, which is increasing. Pope Francis has clearly stated that “the Church has more martyrs now than during the first centuries.” This is neither an overstatement nor an exaggeration. All credible international reports show the very same reality: Christians in many African countries are suffering a bloody persecution, that, in some cases, meets the requirement of genocide.

But what is the international community doing to stop the genocide of Christians in several parts of the world, such as Iraq, Syria or Nigeria? Even the word “genocide” is avoided by governments and policy makers as they are aware that once a process is labeled as genocidal, there is an international legal obligation to stop it under the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948. There is no objection to speak (and rightly so) about the genocide of Yazidi in Iraq, of Muslim Uighurs in China or the Muslim Rohingya in Myanmar. But when Christians are suffering from genocidal actions, very few voices appear in the international community asking for action to protect them.

Double standards have become the norm in confrontational and polarized political struggles. E.g., for some, “Black Life Matters” seems to have certain exceptions: it does not matter if the unborn babies are black (in Africa or elsewhere), or “Black Life” does not matter if they are not living in Western countries (where, by the way, black and other minorities are simply used as a political tool). Which of those political movements go to the street to fight for the Black Life of Christian Africans persecuted in their own countries?

4. Do you think that the persecution of Christians in Africa is mainly the consequence of social-economic issues (resource competition, ethnic tensions), or is religious ideology (Jihadism) also an important factor?

A correct analysis of a particular situation requires processing accurate and sufficient relevant information: all major factors and variables should be considered and

given their proper space and dimension. Cultural, social and political context (including language) may influence the analysis, too in a way that could reduce its accuracy and credibility. Some years ago, in the “Brussels political bubble”, the “R” word (meaning “Religion”) was something to be avoided in any statement, report or document. Things have changed: the former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, tried to present the potential role of religion in a more positive way, in preventing and solving conflicts. But still, in many corners in and out of Europe, religion is seen more as “the problem” than a solution to conflicts.

Still, the problematic view on religion is predominant, and there is a tendency to put it aside or downgrade its role in societies. For example, the way some policy-makers (and governments) have adopted an “international religious freedom policy” was through the creation of a new narrative (again, the term appears) on religious freedom, which are also used as a tool for other political agendas (e.g., women’s “empowerment”, including the so-called “reproductive health and rights” that certainly include intentional abortion). In this regard, the *Report on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality* (27 February 2020) by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief is a scandalous document in which, instead of protecting and promoting religious freedom (as foreseen in his mandate), he undermines religious freedom by lobbying for an inexistent “right to abortion” and actively expanding the so-called “LGBT rights” at the cost of religious freedom. This is a real danger for the integrity of a fundamental human right, the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

This narrative is misleading and has very little to do with the protection and promotion of religious freedom and other fundamental rights. African women (as other women in the world) suffer this ideological neo-colonization by some Western countries (and some international organisations) that try to impose their liberal agendas upon them, linking their ideological programmes to social and economic emancipation of women and girls. The liberal Western narrative about Africa is that there are too many Africans and that they have to “control their population” (meaning, spreading abortion and contraception) either voluntarily or by pressing them. And of course, that their immense resources should be exploited mainly by Western companies. The social-economic answer is, in this perspective, the main variable that explains why Africa is in trouble, why many States have failed, and why violence takes so much protagonism in their societies.

While accepting the role of social-economic factors (as well as others, such as lack of water or other resources) in creating a negative context leading to conflict and violence, as well as the tribal dimension that is present in African societies, the persecution of Christians can't be explained only by those reasons. An interesting UNDP report entitled *Journey to extremism in Africa* (2017) shows that the "religious ideas of the group" appears to be the primary motivation to join the extremists (40%), followed by "being part of something bigger than myself" (16%), "believed by religious leader" and "employment opportunities" (both, 13%), and "joining family or friends" (10%); however, the "ethnic principles of the group" represents only 5% of the motivation. The rest of motives are below 5%, including "political ideas of the group" (4%), "adventure" (3%), "service provision by the organization" (3%), "other" (3%), "believed by my teacher" (2%), "political marginalization" (1%) and "social isolation" (1%). The social-economic factor to join an extremist group in Africa represents a very low percentage in the motivation of the recruited people.

An overwhelming majority of extremist groups in Africa are jihadist groups, that is to say, Islamic terrorists that see Christians (and others that don't share their political goals) as enemies to be destroyed and eliminated, along with their culture and heritage. And they act accordingly, attacking Christian communities systematically, destroying their villages, their churches, and killing and kidnapping their religious leaders. These Jihadist organizations in Africa include a considerable number of groups, most of them with external support and finance, such as: the Al-Qaida affiliated terror groups al-Shabab and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (or JNIM), the Islamic State affiliate in West Africa (known as IS in the Greater Sahara or ISGS), Boko Haram, TWJWA (also known as the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, MUJAO), Al-Murabitun, Ansar al-Sharia (AAS) groups, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) – also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)-Sinai Province – Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the jihadist herdsmen in Nigeria and the new jihadist cells in Mozambique (Cabo Verde Province). To fight the persecution of Christians, we need to protect and defend them, their physical integrity, their livelihoods, their villages, their temples, public buildings and infrastructure: we can't allow terrorists to achieve their goals provoking a massive exodus of Christians from their homelands, as we have seen in the Middle East. This can't happen in Africa. We can't allow this to happen in that crucial continent. Pressure should be applied upon the responsible governments, including the recourse to international criminal justice.

5. Which are the main hotspots of Christian persecution in Africa?

The 2020 World Watch List, an Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution, shows the worrying situation of Christians in African countries: Somalia is the 3rd country in the world where Christians suffer the most intense forms of persecution, followed by Libya (4th), Eritrea (6th), Sudan (7th), Nigeria (12th), Egypt (16th), Algeria (17th), Mauritania (24th), Central African Republic (25th), Morocco (26th), Burkina Faso (28th), Mali (29th), Tunisia (34th); Ethiopia (39th), Kenya (44th), Cameroon (48th) and Niger (50th). This means that out of the 50 most dangerous countries for Christians, 17 are African countries. However, this does not mean that in the rest of the African countries Christians live without intolerance, discrimination or even persecution.

6. What was your most shocking experience in this field?

It is difficult to select one story from the many that, sadly, African Christians have suffered. What is surprising to me is how frequently they don't consider themselves to be "persecuted" victims but take it as a normal part of life that violence exists, that death is around them, and that maybe one day (tomorrow or the day after) they will be the victims. Another astonishing reality is the brutality of terrorists, killing whole families, parents and little children, the cruelty of their actions with pregnant women or the elderly. And not less shocking is the lack of response of certain public authorities to terrorism, that, in some cases, can not be attributed to the shortage of human or material means, but to an omission which, in the worst cases, can be interpreted as colluding with the aggressors, or just sharing their political goals.

7. How can ordinary Christians help their African brothers and sisters?

For many, to say that prayer and fasting are key tools in the spiritual fight against terrorism may sound naïve, if not stupid or even mad. But this is pure Christianity. This is our core belief: that hearts may be changed by the Holy Spirit; that a terrorist can be converted into an actor for peace and reconciliation, and that any of us can contribute to that process, even from a long distance, when we are in the Church or at home, or even walking on the street. Mgr Oliver Dashe

Doeme is Bishop of Maiduguri (North East of Nigeria), an area devastated by the terrorism of Boko Haram. He, himself explained that in 2014, when he was in his chapel before the Blessed Sacrament, praying the rosary, all of a sudden the Lord appeared. In the vision, the prelate said, Jesus didn't say anything at first, but extended a sword toward him, and he in turn reached out for it. "As soon as I received the sword, it turned into a rosary," the bishop said, adding that Jesus then told him three times: "Boko Haram is gone."

But faith does not prevent action; on the contrary, our sense of duty towards our Christian brothers imposes the obligation on us to do more to meet their needs, in a creative way, both in the Churches and in society. We, Christians, are also citizens, and we must exercise our rights and freedoms: to express our agreements and disagreements with political and social actors; to demand an immediate action from our authorities to provide protection for Christians elsewhere, and the use of international force to be the voice of voiceless persecuted ones; to ask them to provide humanitarian aid and international protection to persecuted Christians. Christians can also organize groups and networks to show their respective societies the reality of persecution of Christians through the testimonies of victims, events that may include photographic exhibitions, debates at Universities, letters to editors of newspapers, campaigns among families in Christian schools, in order to establish dedicated NGOs, translate reports into local languages, etc. And of course, to bring this point to the electoral campaign, looking for political compromise of the candidates.

