

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

March 2008 E-News

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Jesus told his disciples the gates of Hell would not prevail against his church though he knew the forces of evil would continue to try. He knew they would persist in their attacks even though they know that they cannot win. Then, in a discourse with his disciples after the rich young man went away sad because he did not want to give up his riches to follow him, Jesus responded to Peter's declaration that the disciples had given up everything to follow him. Jesus told them that all they had given up would be returned to them a hundred fold. Then he added this warning. They were going to be persecuted (Matthew 19:16-30)! He also said if they persecuted him they would also persecute those who believed in him too (John 15:20). Very few people today take Jesus' warning seriously, even though individuals and the church as a body have been persecuted since its founding.

Followers of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have always been persecuted. The Jews were persecuted long before Jesus was born. The persecution of the Christian church started with Jesus' birth when Herod tried to kill him. It has continued ever since. As the church grew during the first 300 years of its existence it was persecuted by the Romans.

Thousands of Christians were killed for their refusal to worship leaders of the state and their pantheon of gods. When the church gained ascendancy in the Roman world the persecution abated somewhat until Mohammed came upon the scene. He initiated Islam's persecution of Jews by beheading 600 Jews and selling their wives and children into slavery. He and his followers continued the persecution of Jews and Christians until today. They have always promoted their religion with the sword or guns. Then, although Christians persecuted Jews well into the 20th century, there was little persecution of Christians by others.

In time though, the church became corrupted, and this gave rise to a desire on the part of many authentic Christians to reform the church. The Roman Catholic Church in response began to persecute those among them who were espousing beliefs that they called heresy. These beliefs were not heretical, but they threatened the hierarchy of the church. The reformers desired to return the church to a more biblical structure, so these men and their followers were persecuted and many were killed. John Wycliffe, one of the earliest reformers, was not executed but many of his followers were. John Hus and Thomas Cranmer were burned at the stake. Others were executed by a variety of other methods. Martin Luther escaped being burned at the stake, and John Wesley escaped being killed by people in the established Church of England.

Through the centuries many groups have been persecuted and in many instances massacred. Among the latter were the Waldensians and the Huguenots by the French. Armenians were massacred by the Muslims of the Ottoman Empire.

Persecution of churches abated for a time, but was revived by the Nazis and Communists in Germany, Russia and the countries they conquered. When these two political religions finally came into power in Europe, Hell broke loose for both Jews and Christians.

In two important books Michael Burleigh detailed the persecution of both Jews and Christians in the 20th century. *The Third Reich*, published in 2000, does not specifically focus on the persecution of Jews and Christians, but *Sacred Causes* published in 2007 does. All persons will be appalled as they read these books. It is difficult to fathom the magnitude of the holocaust that took place in Germany (5,000,000) and Russia (20,000,000). He did not include China who did not have many Jews and Christians to persecute, but did persecute those who refused to accept their political religion (50,000,000). The Chinese holocaust was greater than the other two combined in the number of people killed.

Although Burleigh is not the author of the concept, he makes the point that just as the current destroyer is Islam, the motivating philosophies behind the past persecution of Christian and Jews are **political religions**. Others, before him, have noted that political religions existed. One is William McDonald. Early in my Christian life I read his book entitled *True Discipleship*. In it he included a letter from a young Communist that detailed his communist religious beliefs. This young man had a firm belief in communism. He put aside the possibility of marriage and family to promote his religion. His commitment was so profound he was willing to die to make communism victorious. There were dogma that he subscribed to and intended to propagate as a kind of gospel. His religion was communism.

As Burleigh unraveled the Nazi belief system one can discern its religious nature also. Both National Socialism and Communism had a God. It was the state. They had their apostles Hitler and Lenin. Although Stalin took over from Lenin, he nevertheless promoted Lenin as savior. There was worship of these demigods in various gatherings where persons declared their loyalty and devotion to them. Neither would tolerate opposition. Christianity was especially threatening to them since it demanded loyalty and devotion to the God who fosters life and promotes the fellowship of all men regardless of their race, ethnicity or political beliefs. Jews were singled out simply because they were Jews. They were often condemned because they were highly successful in most of the things they undertook. Both Judaism and Christianity were seen as threats to their political religions. The leaders wanted absolute acceptance and obedience to their religions of hate. Otherwise believers had to be eliminated.

As one reads these books, one is impressed by the similarity of the programs of political religions for the eradication of anything that smacked of Judaism or Christianity, especially of those who practiced them. It is because of the similarity of the methods of persecution that I think it a worthy task to ask why they did it, and seek some answers.

To begin to discover answers I must start with the observation that all men are inherently religious animals. Some may object to the statement that we are animals, but we are. Evidence to support their assertions is found in a book *Why God Won't Go Away* by Andrew Newberg, Eugene d'Aquili and Vince Rause. Using SPECT scans they have demonstrated that there is a built in circuit in the brain of mankind that lights up with prayer

or meditation. This means that we are hardwired for religious activity. They did not say it, but this circuit is not specific for Judaism or Christianity, but I propose that it can be activated by any religious beliefs including humanism and political religions. In their study they used Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer to light up the brain's "religious" circuits. If we accept the philosophical theory called dualist-interactionism of the mind-brain interaction, then it is easy to believe that political religions exist and profoundly influence the thinking and behavior of those who believe as do traditional religions.

Religions are belief systems with attached emotions. National Socialism is a belief system. Communism is a belief system. Islam is a belief system as is Christianity. But all belief systems have a spiritual aspect too. We Christians have the Holy Spirit who lives in us, and if we are authentic Christians he guides and directs our lives. If we are only nominal or even cultural Christians he still may influence our lives.

Other religions have a different spirit who is called the god of the world. He can live in them and guide and direct their activities too. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is a God of love. The god of the world is a god of hate. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fosters life; the god of the world fosters death. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is truth. The god of the world fosters lies. His most effective lie is that he does not exist. Burleigh in his discussion of political religions did not clearly say that the devil was behind the activities of the Nazis and Bolsheviks, but he implied that he was the guiding force in political religions; how can the devil do this if he does not exist?

Can it be there really is no Satan who is a force for evil in the world when there is so much murder and lying? If we deny his existence like so many do, what do we do with Jesus' temptation by Satan in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-3), or the statement of Jesus that He saw Satan fall from Heaven (Luke 10:18)? What do we do with his statement that Satan is a murderer and liar (John 8:44)? What do we do with his references to Satan being the source of some illnesses? Are these myths? What do we do with the Pauline (Ephesians 4:27, 6:11; 1 Timothy 3:6, 7; 2 Timothy 2:26), Petrine (1 Peter 5:8) and Johannine (1 John 3:8, 10) epistles and their many references to the devil's activity? Again, we find him in Revelation where we there are frequent references to the work of Satan (the devil). Were these authors deluded? If we believe that the Bible is inspired by God and is the source of all truth we cannot selectively deny the truth about Satan. The truth is that there are two spiritual forces in the world – God and Satan.

The time has come to get realistic about the current situation in the world. There is a battle of flesh and blood, and there is a spiritual battle going on. Most people are not aware of this and try to explain away the spiritual aspects of the conflict by attributing it to man's inherent depravity. But we have a spiritual explanation of this in the fall. Who was responsible for the fall? None other than Satan who as the tempter brought it about with his lies. Therefore, we really cannot explain the current situation by saying it is man's depravity. The forces of evil have continued their murderous activities throughout man's history and do so today. Their primary enemies are Jews and Christians. Jews because they are God's chosen people, and Christians because they will not worship him and because Jesus defeated him at Calvary. He continues to rage and tries to gain vengeance by destroying God's people or

keep them from worshipping God.

We will now narrow our focus and ask ourselves if Jews and Christians in America are being persecuted. The answer is yes! Not only does Islam want to kill us within and without, but we also have atheists who are on the attack with books like those by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. We have movies that deny the truth of Christianity such as the Golden Compass and Carrie. Many unbelievers in the academic world are quite hostile to Christianity. My wife and I experienced that hostility on a cruise recently. We had several academics who lectured us on various aspects of the history and science of the area we were cruising on, the Columbia and Snake rivers. One of them, a historian, spontaneously told the people that they should not believe in Christianity for it is not necessary to believe in God. He thought it was foolishness. We understood, though, that he could not believe because a person can only believe if they have the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). Clearly he had at some time rejected God's invitation to believe. Most of academia is hostile to the gospel and especially to Christian values. Their religion is humanism.

We must also include the ACLU that spends most of its time trying to eradicate God from our society by legal means. They have allies in the groups called Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and People for the American Way. These latter groups are vociferous in their effort to eradicate any religious influence from the government. Homosexual activists are also active in trying to eradicate the influence of scripture from the culture by changing the definition of sin and marriage.

Then there are the pro choice believers. Their lie is that people should have abortions if they want one. If Satan is a murderer what better way to achieve his purpose than through abortions? Our own holocaust has included the 40,000,000 babies aborted in this country. Who knows how many others have been killed in the other countries of the world. The Guttmacher institute says that 46,000,000 are performed worldwide each year.

Is persecution still with us? Yes it is. It is present all over the world. There are few countries where Christians are not being persecuted. The Voice of the Martyrs, in a 2008 special issue of their magazine, lists all of the countries where it is the worst. It is especially bad in the 10-40 (latitude) window, but as I have pointed out it is present almost everywhere else in some form or another. We have to accept the fact that it will not go away and in response do what Jesus told us to do.

We are to proclaim the Gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, be witnesses for him to the ends of the earth, make disciples, and love our enemies and pray for them. We definitely need to be in spiritual warfare by continuing to pray and worship God. Satan will not stop until Jesus comes back so let's gird our loins for battle. We cannot be afraid as the people of Israel were when they were to go into the Promised Land. They "chickened out" and were punished for their lack of courage.