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Praying and Acting Under Persecution: A Review of Under Caesar's Sword

Charles Veenstra

Dordt College, charles.veenstra@dordt.edu

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Praying and Acting Under Persecution: A Review of Under Caesar's Sword

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution* by Daniel Philpott and Timothy Samuel Shah. Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 523 pp. ISBN: 978-1108425308.

Keywords

In All Things, book review, Under Caesar's Sword, Christians, response, persecution, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shah



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Praying and Acting Through Persecution: A Review of *Under Caesar's Sword*

Charles Veenstra

Title: *Under Caesar's Sword: How Christians Respond to Persecution (Law and Christianity)*

Editors: Daniel Philpott & Timothy Samuel Shah

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publish Date: March 15, 2018

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The persecution of Christians throughout the world does not get as much press attention as it should despite the work of significant groups attempting to spread the word. Open Doors, for example, regularly posts lists of the nations where persecution is the greatest. This organization also reports on its website that “215 million Christians experience high levels of persecution in the countries on the World Watch List. This represents 1 in 12 Christians worldwide.”¹

While knowing the figures is an important first step in understanding worldwide persecution, an even more difficult next step for Christians is knowing how to respond to persecution. *Under Caesar's Sword* represents a very significant attempt to investigate how Christians actually respond to persecution in various parts of the world. The editors collected papers from experts all over the world and combined them here into a significant volume in the Cambridge Law and Christianity Series. The authors of the individual chapters dig deeply into the nature and causes of the persecution and how Christians respond.

In an extensive introduction, the editors explain why Christians are persecuted, the variety of contexts of persecution, and an overview chart of Christian responses to persecution. The rest of the book narrows in on the persecution in different regions of the world and includes separate chapters devoted to the following areas: Iraq and Syria; Kenya, Nigeria, and Sudan; Egypt, Libya, and Palestine; Iran and Saudi Arabia; Post-Soviet Central Asia; Contemporary Russia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan; India and Sri Lanka; Communist Vietnam and Laos; Communist China, Muslim Indonesia, and Latin America. Notably absent from this list is North Korea, which has ranked at the top of the list of persecution of Christians for many years. The likely reason for their absence is that it is very difficult to find an expert who is able to talk with Christians in North Korea.

Each of the chapters follow a generally similar pattern. The authors first describe the political situation of the country—including the Christian influence. Then, the nature of the persecution in a particular country or area is developed in extensive detail. Finally, the second half of most chapters details Christian responses to persecution, which is—as shown in the title—the main purpose of the book.

Often when we hear about persecution, we immediately wonder how Christians should respond. Most often, Christians urge prayer—particularly for those who are suffering. Those prayers include asking for courage for the persecuted to stand fast. They quickly move to Bible texts such as: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). In that same chapter, verse 44: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” We can all agree that prayer is central. And while persecuted Christians do indeed pray fervently, this book provides extensive discussion of additional responses of those undergoing persecution as we shall note below.

Responses of persecuted Christians include fleeing the country as we see in Iraq, Syria, and other places in the Middle East. Fleeing often occurs after their property has been confiscated and/or they are threatened with death.

Another common strategy is to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to themselves. In some countries, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, Christians are not allowed to speak. This strategy may also involve quietly denying their faith publicly but maintaining it privately. In essence, they try to avoid any kind of confrontation.

In Arab countries, Christians often worship in languages that are not Arabic. In Iran, Christians avoid Farsi in all worship activities or risk having the doors of the church shut by the government.

Avoiding proselytism is another response. Some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are by law Islamic states. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to talk about Christianity without being charged with crimes against the state. Many Christians avoid getting involved in political discussions.

In Egypt, Christians make up approximately 10% of the population and 90% of them are Coptic. They are able to be more openly critical of the government than Christians in other Arab countries. When religious repression increases, so does the challenge from the Copts to the government. While some leave the country, many others participate in urging the government to provide security in churches. And throughout the Middle East, leaders of the church (Orthodox and Catholic) hold significant positions that allow them to bring some pressure to the governments.

Conditions for Christians in the Post-Soviet Central Asia are generally difficult. While governments may have laws on the books to guarantee religious freedom, enforcement is severely lacking. Where possible, Christians work with outside organizations. Setting up community rehabilitation centers for drug addicts is one way they get more approval from government. In many cases, proselytism has moved underground.

Christians in some African countries have responded in kind to violent persecution. In Nigeria, for example, the government does not provide sufficient security, so some Christians take matters into their own hands and this may involve military actions against other groups.

A significant challenge in some countries, such as Russia and China, is that the government will recognize a church as “official” and then regulate it so that it remains a servant of the government. These churches then do not encourage evangelism.

While books on persecution often focus on non-Western areas of the world, this book includes the chapter “Western Christians’ Responses to Denials of Religious Freedom” by Paul Marshall, a leading expert on persecution. This chapter is helpful not only because it shows how religious freedom is being limited but also because it contains a nice list of actions Christians can and are taking (legal, lobbying, compromising, education, and shaping culture through media) to confront persecution.

Many more stories of Christians’ responses are contained in this book. Essentially, the responses are different for nearly every country. To summarize responses is inadequate as this book makes them clear. All of the writers are experts in particular areas and their work is thoroughly documented.

This book deserves wide circulation. It will serve scholars well, but it is also written so that lay people can benefit from it because it is an encyclopedia of Christian responses. While it certainly does not diminish the importance of prayer, it shows that Christians all over the world are creative in challenging the injustice of persecution through both action and prayer.

FOOTNOTES

1. <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution> ↩