The Global War on Christians
Rev. Dwight Longenecker

As an Evangelical youngster I devoured a paperback classic called *Tortured for Christ*. Written by a Romanian Baptist pastor, Richard Wurmbrand, it was a simple tale of being imprisoned and tortured for his Christian faith under the Communist regime. Another Christian from behind the Iron Curtain—Peter Deyneka visited our home on one of his trips around the country. He ran the Slavic Gospel Association and over dinner invited me to join a youth mission team headed to France to smuggle Bibles into the Eastern bloc countries.

Hearing these faith stories and meeting such men branded into my imagination the fact that Christians were being persecuted. Knowing that men and women were imprisoned and tortured, that religious schools were banned and Bibles forbidden sharpened my own Christian commitment. If our brothers and sisters were being persecuted in such a terrible way, then Christianity must be worth something. If our faith was worthless why were the communists so afraid of us? If Christians were being persecuted there then it could happen here. If ordinary men and women were willing to go to prison, be beaten and even killed for the faith what did my middle class suburban Christian faith look like?

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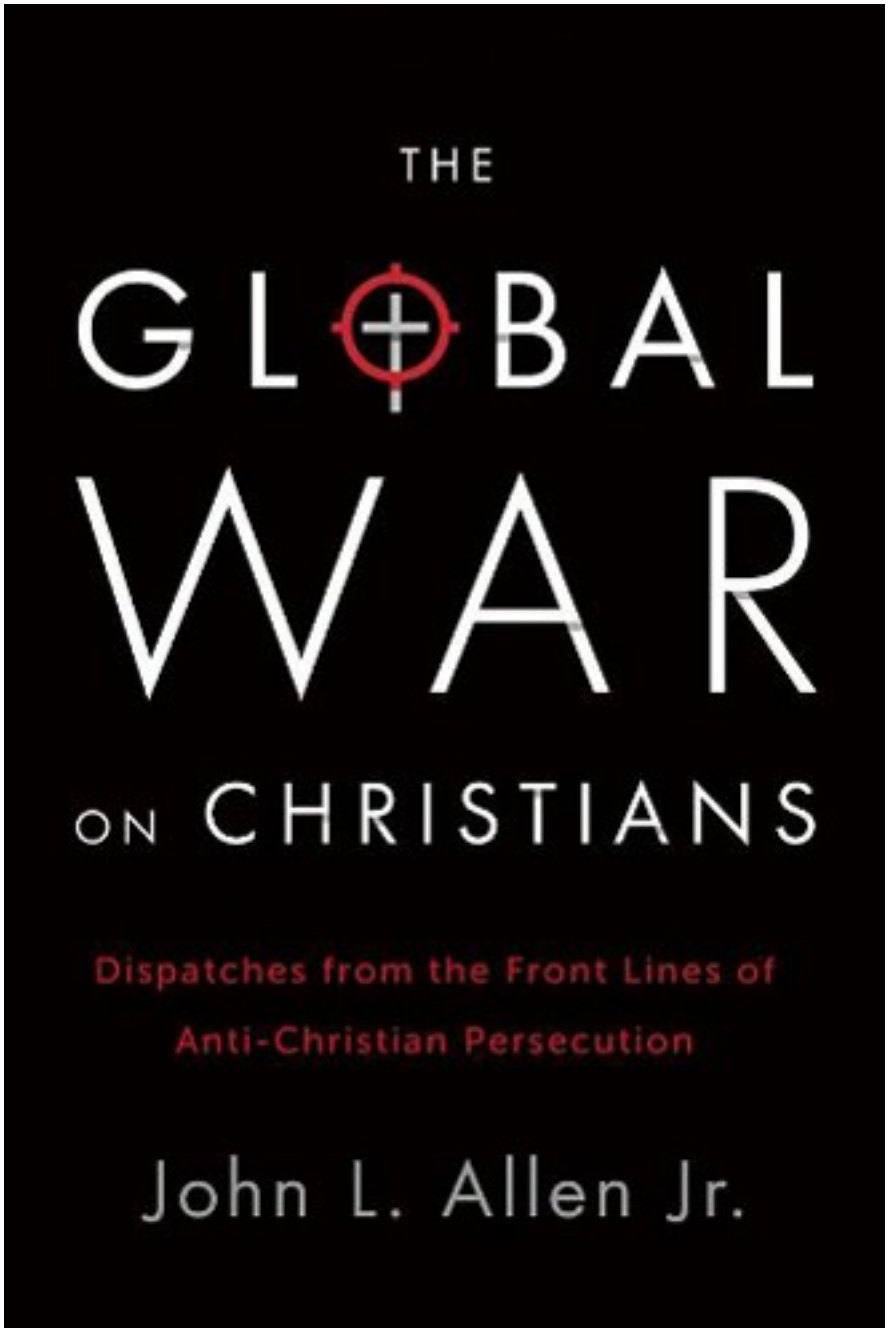
“We must prepare ourselves to suffer great trials before long, such as will demand of us a disposition to give up even life, and a total dedication to Christ and for Christ…. How many times has the renewal of the Church sprung from blood! This time, too, it will not be otherwise. . .
John Paul II



This is why John Allen’s book The Global War on Christians is so important. Foregoing the usual superlative blurbs on the back cover, the publishers have chosen the stark message, “It’s time to wake up.” As a Vatican correspondent, Allen is based in the hub of world Christianity, but he doesn’t simply report on the persecution of Catholics. Instead he takes the broadest view and tells the stories and reports the statistics of the persecution of the whole Christian church worldwide.

Just to get an overview, Todd Johnson, a researcher at Gorden Conwell Theological College believes the number of Christians martyred in the first decade of the twenty first century is about 100,000. That works out at eleven Christians killed every hour every day for the last ten years. Even the conservative estimates are shocking. Those who question Johnson's numbers still admit that at least one Christian is killed hourly somewhere around the globe. Of the millions of Christians martyred in the 2000 years of the church's history over half were killed in the twentieth century, and 80 percent of the cases of religious persecution in the world today are against Christians—and it's getting worse.
After a rapid overview of the problem as an introduction, Allen covers the subject in three main parts: "Anti-Christian Persecution Around the World"; "Myths About the Global War on Christians"; and "Fallout, Consequences and Responses." Allen's extensive research and thoroughgoing analysis provides an excellent objective treatment of a highly emotional and explosive topic. What I appreciated is not only that he told the stories of all Christian victims—no matter what their tradition–but that he also explained how the persecution can come from almost any political or religious persuasion.

Most of us would assume the persecution of Christians these days is mainly a problem of radical Muslims. While extremist Muslims do persecute Christians, it is also the case that extremist Hindus, radical Buddhists and members of bizarre religious sects attack Christians. Both left wing and right wing political groups persecute Christians. Mafia dons, politicians, business owners, gang members and even fellow Christians will attack Christians who, by virtue of their faith, have stood up to some injustice, crime or inequality in society.

Allen explains how persecution may be at a comparatively low level—with the Christian experiencing bullying from family and friends, prejudice in the workplace, punitive taxes and fines or exclusion from employment. Legal discrimination might mean Christians are barred from certain professions, refused building permits for their schools, churches and bookstores or be silenced from having a voice in the public square. While Christians do suffer imprisonment, kidnapping, torture and death, the sufferings of Christians are constant and pervasive in these lower level deprivations.

A Christian might be persecuted simply for the fact that he is a Christian, but it is more likely that he will be persecuted because of another social issue which has caused him to take a stand. A Christian who opposes same sex marriage might be jailed for "hate speech." A believer who campaigns against injustice may be jailed ostensibly for political crimes. A Christian who campaigns on behalf of indigenous peoples against big business or who works against the crime of human trafficking will be attacked by those who are threatened. Allen explains the complexities with clarity and compassion while constantly uploading dramatic real life stories from around the world of Christians under persecution.

The only fault I sensed in Allen's book was a lack of acknowledgement toward the underlying causes of persecution. He outlines the various sources of persecution and explains the political, ethnic, religious and economic pressures that drive individuals and groups to perceive Christians as the threat, but there was very little about the spiritual dimension of persecution. To put it bluntly, there is also an unseen battle going on. Satan and the powers of this world hate the followers of Jesus Christ.

In virtually every age since the resurrection of Christ, his followers in one place or another have been persecuted, tortured, imprisoned and martyred. While there are recognizable human and historical factors that contribute to the persecution, it is also true that visible worldly powers are driven by the invisible Lord of the World. The antichrist—wherever he appears—hates the followers of Christ the Lord and will do everything possible to destroy them.

Allen's last section on "Consequences and Responses" includes a good rundown on what needs to be done, but at the risk of sounding like a paranoid conspiracy theorist, we should also remember two warnings from Pope John Paul II. In 1976 he said to a group of American bishops, "We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has ever experienced. I do not think the wide circle of the American Society, or the wide circle of the Christian community realizes this fully. We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-church, between the Gospel and the anti-gospel, between Christ and the antichrist." Then in 1981 he warned, "We must prepare ourselves to suffer great trials before long, such as will demand of us a disposition to give up even life, and a total dedication to Christ and for Christ…. How many times has the renewal of the Church sprung from blood! This time, too, it will not be otherwise. We must be strong and prepared, and trust in Christ and His Mother, and be very, very assiduous in praying the Rosary."

Editor's note: The photo above depicts a protest against Hindu persecution of Christians in India. (Photo credit: Spero News.)