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Review of Imagining Persecution: Why American Christians Believe There is a Global War Against Their Faith

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***Imagining Persecution: Why American Christians Believe There is a Global War Against Their Faith.* Jason Bruner. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2021.**

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“The blood of today’s martyrs may be the seed of American imperialism” (p.143). This startling claim is the summit of Jason Bruner’s argument in his provocative new book *Imagining Persecution: Why American Christians Believe There is a Global War Against Their Faith*. Standing at just 238 pages including endnotes and indices, the book’s slenderness belies its significance. Bruner’s argument demands careful consideration, and his warnings heeded.

The narrative of Christian persecution is loud and clear in the American church today. “Hundreds of thousands of Christians are martyred around the world every year” claims Voice of the Martyrs (quoted on p.117). But is this actually true? Bruner methodically dismantles this claim by examining the statistics, and noting how difficult it is to disentangle causes of death in situations of violence, poverty and political complexity. Not every Christian who dies at the hands of others does so as a martyr for their faith. Many die for poverty-related reasons, or because they are caught up in a war. If a Christian dies in a suicide bombing does that make them a martyr? Even people who die within a church building (as in some of the highly publicised stories from the Rwandan genocide) may do so because they have gathered there for protection or been shepherded there by their murderers rather than because they have taken a religious stance and died for it. Using more conservative estimates, it seems likely that it is around 400 people a year who die as Christian martyrs – clearly a tragic circumstance, but not the “hundreds of thousands” claimed. Further, the users of these inflated statistics frequently fail to take account of Christian complicity in the suffering of others. Christians who suffer are imbued with a purity of faith, and the persecution of peoples of other faiths is not quantified. The collection and propagation of statistics has become highly politicised in an imagined “global war against Christianity”.

How has this come about? Bruner builds a careful historical argument to explain this. First, by studying the concept of martyrdom in the early Church, he shows that very firm definitional limits were placed around it. Martyrdom only counted as such if death was the unavoidable consequence of the confession of faith. “It could not be sought out, nor could it be shied away from” (p.37). Further, martyrdom was generally linked to the defence of a particular theological position, and therefore tended to divide Christians along doctrinal lines – a feature that became more acute during the religious persecutions of the Middle Ages and the Reformation.

But these are not features of today’s “martyrdoms”. To show this, Bruner turns his attention to the development of the idea of a “global war on Christianity” in the contemporary American imagination. The American Civil War taught many Southern Christians that a godly society was in danger from a federal government. Along with other historical developments, this has led American Christians to adopt a sense of constant embattlement. The “communist threat” of the second half of the twentieth century gave way to the “Muslim threat” of the twenty-first century, and the world is conceived in Manichean terms. The ancient concept of martyrdom is applied in a trans-historical way, and imposed upon a very different set of realities. Now, rather than dividing the church, martyrdom is conceived of in ecumenical terms, and becomes a way

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of uniting all Christians against the perceived global threat. This permits American Christians to view themselves as participants in the threat experienced by others in the global church.

Not only is this position factually inaccurate, but it serves a dangerous narrative. The persecuted church is at once the orientalist “other” and simultaneously “us”. Christianity is cast as a state of victimhood, and the violence perpetrated by predominantly Christian nations is overlooked. There is a narrative of a hierarchy of suffering, with “Christian” suffering ennobled and “non-Christian” suffering overlooked. Perhaps most significantly, the spiritual obligation of Western Christians to protect and defend their beleaguered brethren becomes conflated with foreign policy objectives, validating an Islamophobic narrative within the corridors of power.

Bruner closes his book by confronting something of the reality of the USA’s more morally dubious actions upon the international stage, and the suffering it has caused. He concludes with these devastating words. “This is my way of asking you to confront the plain reality of Paul’s assertion that ‘if one part suffers, the rest suffers with it,’ noting that no conditions were placed upon the cause of suffering in order to make it Christ’s own. To be an American Christian of whatever denomination or tradition, therefore, is to confront the reality that we, too, have caused Christ to suffer.” (p.160).