

Christian Martyrs to Islam, Past and Present

On May 12 Pope Francis officially canonized more than 800 male Catholic residents of the southern Italian port of Otranto, who in 1480 were beheaded en masse for refusing to convert to Islam after their city was invaded and captured by a Turkish Muslim fleet. The making of the new saints was a vivid reminder of something that many people, including historians, prefer to gloss over: the pattern over the centuries of Islamic persecution of Christians that continues to this day in many Muslim-majority lands.

In a 2006 lecture at the University of Regensburg, Pope Benedict XVI quoted a remark about Islam made by the 14th-century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos: "There you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as [the Prophet Muhammad's] command to spread by the sword the faith he preached." Benedict's medieval quotation about forced conversions (the same issue at stake in the Otranto beheadings) reportedly provoked a fatwa against Benedict in Pakistan, church burnings and bombings in the West Bank and Gaza, threats of jihad from al Qaeda, and the murder of a nun in Somalia.

Benedict's quotation also provoked tut-tuts from Catholic intellectuals: The liberal Catholic magazine *Commonweal* pronounced the pope's remarks "ill-conceived." Benedict eventually apologized, saying the text did not "in any way" express his "personal thought."

Meanwhile, secular historians have argued that the Otranto victims weren't really martyrs in the sense of dying for their faith. They were political prisoners executed for rebelling against their new masters. The same academic fate has befallen the ninth-century martyrs of Cordoba, 48 men and women publicly decapitated when most of Spain was under Muslim rule.

The Cordoban emirate of that era, called Al-Andalus, has been lavishly praised by modern historians as a model of tolerant coexistence, in which Muslims, Christians and Jews lived peacefully while the arts and letters flourished. This even though the Christians, the vast majority of the population, had seen their churches destroyed, were required to pay an annual poll tax as infidels, and as non-Muslim *djimmis* were treated (along with Jews) as second-class citizens under Shariah law.



A tapestry featuring the portrait of the Ontranto martyrs is draped from the balcony overlooking St. Peter Square in Vatican City, Vatican, on May 12th.

In Cordoba, Christians were under relentless social pressure to change religions, or at the very least to accommodate quietly to reality. So most historians these days describe the Cordoban martyrs either as secular nationalist revolutionaries or as suicide-seekers who deliberately insulted the Prophet Muhammad in their personal quests for heavenly glory or expiation for their sins.

In truth, the crimes for which the Cordoban martyrs were executed—typically they were accused of blasphemy and apostasy for converting to Christianity—bear a striking resemblance to the "crimes" against Shariah for which Christians are becoming martyrs or near-martyrs today in Muslim lands.

In the new book "Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians," Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea chronicle the brutal treatment of Christians by communist governments, as in China and North Korea. But the book's overwhelming focus is on Islamic regimes, which either officially or unofficially through government-sanctioned mob violence campaigns to exterminate or drive into exile those who regard Jesus Christ as their savior.

The stories are hair-raising. The book recounts how the Arab Spring in Egypt has generated a wave of Coptic-Christian church-burnings and (among other violent deaths) the gang-murder of a 17-year-old boy in 2011 because he had a cross tattooed on his wrist.

One of the authors, Ms. Shea, meets with a convert to Christianity in Saudi Arabia, Hamoud Bin Saleh al-Amri, who describes being arrested repeatedly for his beliefs over the past decade and put in prison,

where for months at a time he was "severely mistreated and threatened with harm to his family."

Many of the book's stories come from Iran. In 2007 the Iranian government arrested and tortured Mohsen Namvar for baptizing a Muslim who wanted to become a Christian. The following year, Mr. Namvar was arrested again "and so severely tortured that he continued to suffer fever, severe back pain, high blood pressure, uncontrollable shaking of his limbs, and short-term memory loss," the authors report. Mr. Namvar and his family fled to Turkey, where Christianity is severely restricted but Christian converts aren't punished.

In a recent article for National Review Online, Ms. Shea, who directs the Hudson Institute's Center for Religious Freedom, wrote about a May 5 church-bombing that killed 10 people in Nigeria, where Christianity has recently edged out Islam as that country's majority religion.

So perhaps the pope making saints out of the hundreds of brave men who six centuries ago gave up their lives rather than experience forced conversion to Islam will remind cynical secular historians that the religious fanatics aren't always the people who die for their faith. Sometimes the fanatics are the people who kill them.

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