

## RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

### The Test of Religious Freedom

More Christians have died this century simply for being Christians than in the first nineteen centuries after the birth of Christ,” writes Nina Shea, director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Religious Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

This comment about the 20<sup>th</sup> century would seem paradoxical, considering the many countries of the world that have adopted some form of democratic rule and have constitutions guaranteeing freedom of religion. Nearly all countries are members of the United Nations, which has many provisions and internationally ratified documents espousing religious tolerance and the freedom to worship according to individual beliefs. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>2</sup>

However, many scholars of religion agree that there is a rising trend toward religious intolerance in many areas of the world—including the most “enlightened” democracies. An example of this trend is the European Parliament having initiated ongoing investigations into religious movements. Another example is that several European countries have listed religious groups, including several mainstream denominations or branches of them, as “dangerous sects.” Russia, many Eastern European countries, and some Latin American governments have taken similar steps by setting

stringent and unreasonable requirements for religious groups to be registered and therefore legally recognized, placing serious limitations on the free practice of religion within their countries.

### The Rising Tide of Religious Intolerance

Dr. Massimo Introvigne of the Center for Studies on New Religions in Turin, Italy, and Dr. J. Gordon Melton of the Institute for the Study of American Religion in Santa Barbara, California, warned of a disturbing trend toward government-sanctioned intolerance of minority religions in Western and Eastern Europe in reports released at a meeting of the American Academy of Religion in San Francisco (November 1997).

In his report, Dr. Introvigne stated, “There are literally hundreds of religious minorities discriminated against or persecuted in Western Europe. They belong to all possible religious and spiritual persuasions.”

### New Religious Movements and Minority Religions

New religions, popularly labeled as “sects” or demonized as “cults,” are particularly vulnerable to religious intolerance, since their beliefs are often unconventional. Most do not wield any political or economic clout, and therefore are easily vilified by the media and the anti-religious sector, commonly referred to as the “Anti-‘Cult’ Movement” (ACM). This sector, diverse and often divided among itself, ranges from mainstream denominations determined to eradicate other groups viewed as competition in the religious market; to disgruntled apostates; to those with relatives or loved ones in a group who

<sup>1</sup> Nina Shea, *In the Lion's Den* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1997), p.1. Shea is the director of the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Religious Freedom.

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948. Article 18.

want to “rescue” them from the “dangerous cult”; to those who make campaigning against religious groups their profession, having vested interests in attacking unpopular religions.

The Family International [the Family], formerly known as the Children of God, an unconventional Christian group founded in 1968, has been no exception to attacks by anti-cultists, often with the cooperation of sensation-seeking media. Time and again, incessant lobbying by apostates, the ACM, and the media has pressured civil authorities to carry out raids on our home-based communities, brutally mistreating our members and their children. We believe that such assaults on our peace-loving homes are a somber foreshadowing of growing religious intolerance that threatens to overcome religious freedom.

### Highly Publicized Pre-Dawn Raids

In the period from 1989 to 1993, massive pre-dawn police raids in Spain, Australia, France, and Argentina were launched against dozens of our communities. Though the specific details of the raids differ, the pattern was very similar. At each of the communities, scores of police barged in (often violently breaking down doors), accompanied by child protection agency representatives and the media. Shocked and bewildered mothers and fathers were ordered not to interfere as authorities cold-heartedly awoke and rounded up their children, in some cases at gunpoint, snatching them from their beds and out of their mothers’ arms and hauling the children away to undisclosed locations.

In a few of these incidents, adults were hauled off to prison without being notified of the charges against them, and were denied contact with their lawyers for days on end. Traumatized children, who had been aggressively whisked away to detention centers by child “protection” agencies, were not allowed to contact their parents, being told their parents had no desire to contact them.

In each of these incidents the media had been given advance notice of the raids, and TV cameras were rolling as soon as the action began, thus guaranteeing maximum coverage of the spectacle, accompanied by interviews with anti-cult representatives and disgruntled ex-members proclaiming our members guilty of horrific crimes. All of the national newspapers’ front-page headlines and every local TV and radio station’s prime-time news broadcasts immediately focused their attention on this unprecedented seizure of so many children. During the incarceration of our Family members in Argentina, the largest of the raids, the headlines were international.

Despite the sensational and lurid false accusations against members of our community, so excessive and callous was the manner in which these raids and abduction of children were conducted that a public backlash arose at once to protest the totalitarian methods employed by the authorities. In many cases, top lawyers offered their services on a pro bono basis to protest the clear violation of our rights and the traumatic circumstances in which our children were placed.

A protracted battle was then waged, with child protection agencies fighting to maintain guardianship of the children for as long as possible, while they examined, interrogated, and observed the children they had “rescued,” frantically searching for some shred of evidence of any conceivable form of abuse. In every case, they came up empty-handed.

In the so-called care of many social workers, our children were blatantly and cruelly lied to, in some cases children were repeatedly subjected to painful gynecological examinations as doctors searched in vain for signs of abuse. They were purposely placed with juvenile delinquents who taunted and bullied them. They were neglected and left to themselves in dangerous environments, resulting in several cases of serious accidents and broken bones. They had members of anti-cult groups fraudulently posing as psychologists interviewing them and issuing false reports about them. They were denied their basic needs, including schooling, over protracted periods of time. A handicapped child was denied urgent medical treatment. Almost 700 children of Family members were subjected to such government-sanctioned incarcerations.

Subsequent examinations by a wide range of genuine medical, psychological, educational, and legal professionals appointed by courts in each country where the raids were conducted unanimously concluded that not a single child was found to show any evidence of any kind of abuse, sexual or otherwise.

Judges, educators, and psychologists have repeatedly gone on public record, stating that our children are above average in intellect, behavior, and socialization in comparison to their peers in society at large. Unfortunately, the facts of vindication rarely receive the same coverage in the press as do the initial public presentations of the false accusations. In Sydney, Australia, for example, raids were conducted in May of 1992, but it was not until May of 1999 that the Government of New South Wales was forced to publicly admit that the raids on the Family communities were conducted

illegally. They agreed to provide monetary compensation to the children for their mistreatment.

### The Courts' Rulings

In each of the sensationalized raids that the Family has been subjected to, the courts have clearly vindicated the Family of all wrongdoing, even decrying the horrific treatment of Family members and the violation of their rights. Some have been deeply disturbed by the paramilitary-style action taken against the Family without any evidence to support the allegations of wrongdoing, as is evidenced in their rulings.

On June 29, 1993, the Provincial High Court of Barcelona, Spain, ruling in favor of the Family children who had been kept against their will for nearly 12 months in state custody, questioned the competence and motives of the welfare agencies which had originally seized the children:<sup>3</sup>

They [the children] were put in the hands of a group of psychologists who, in a language the children did not understand [Catalan], psycho-analyzed them twice for a prolonged period and issued reports cast in esoteric language designed rather to justify the operation than to describe any intellectual anomalies, which are completely nonexistent.<sup>4</sup>

The judges also alluded to the government action as reminiscent of, in their own words, the "Spanish Inquisition" and the "concentration camps of those former empires that ceased to be so when human dignity brought down the Berlin Wall."

When the prosecutor appealed our acquittal to the Supreme Court of Spain, the appeal was rejected on October 30. The judges stated:

We find ourselves in the presence of a community of people, made up of adults and children, who have adopted a lifestyle that differs from the generally accepted norms. Not a

single element is found that could allow us to declare the existence of any intention to hurt their children or the other children of the community.

Judges cannot enter into the sanctuary of personal beliefs, except when external behaviors originating from a particular ideology negatively affect legally protected rights.<sup>5</sup>

In Melbourne, Australia, on April 27, 1993, Senior Children's Court Magistrate Gregory Levine warned against using child protection laws as a pretext to harass small religious groups such as the Family:

In my view, it was not envisioned by the legislature that all such groups, organizations or sects should have their children made the subject of protection applications as a form of class action. It must be of concern that this form of inquiry may set a precedent for the bringing of protection applications in relation to other sects whose practices and beliefs do not appear to accord with mainstream thinking.<sup>6</sup>

The Federal Appeals Court of San Martin, Argentina, on December 13, 1993, meted out harsh words for the investigating judge of the lower court over his prejudiced mishandling of the case:

It is evident that an illegal investigation violating the clear rules of public order has been initiated. This manner of proceeding represents an arbitrary use of penal power, by removing the case from the framework of rationality inherent in the fundamental right of the defense to a proper trial. This panorama puts in evidence an anachronistic continuation of the most severe system of inquisition, one in which people were summoned only to confess their sins, being considered "witches" or "heretics."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Copies of the original untranslated documents available on request.

<sup>4</sup> Judges: Miguel Rodriguez-Piñero Bravo-Ferrer, Fernando Garcia-Mon Gonzalez-Regueral, Carlos de la Vega Benayas, Vicente Gimeno Sendra, Rafael de Mendizabal Allende, and Pedro Cruz Villalon, Appeal numbers: 1561 to 1567/1992, Verdict dated October 3, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Judges: Enrique Ruiz Vadillo, Jose Antonio Martin Pallin, and Justo Carrero Ramos, Appeal number: 3032/93, Verdict number 1669/94, October 30, 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Magistrate Gregory Levine of the Senior Children's Court, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, Ruling on April 27, 1993

<sup>7</sup> San Martin Court of Appeals, Case 81/89 "Cavazza, Juan C. and others, on Inf. Art.125, 139, 140, 142, Par.I, 142 bis, 210, 293 of the Code of Proceedings and art.3 of Law 23,592," Federal Court of San Isidro, 1 Sec.2 Office II, Reg. 443. Federal Judges: Horacio Enrique Prack, Alberto Mansur, Daniel Mario Rudi, Buenos Aires, Argentina, December 13, 1993.

In conclusion, the Argentine magistrates make a resounding statement regarding the importance of preserving religious liberty:

By adopting intolerant attitudes based exclusively on ethical perfectionism, we allow penal punishment to enter the realm of individual privacy and open the door to a subtle form of authoritarianism; especially when freedom of belief and the liberty to express that belief are restricted. By no means can a judge meddle in the evaluation of that which is thought to be correct morally, politically and/or religiously.<sup>8</sup>

### The Aftermath

There has been no regard for the heart-wrenching and traumatizing effects that such violent separations from their parents and loved ones have had on our little ones. Rarely has the press publicized the legal vindications of the Family, despite having had the original allegations and intrusive actions of law enforcement occupy front-page headlines for days during and after the raids. As one candid Argentine journalist lamented:

Those implicated in this judicial operation have been portrayed as fanatical and depraved. However, once they are acquitted, the press often pretends not to notice! This habit of provoking the judgment and condemnation of the public through sensationalist media coverage distorts the judicial principle of the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.

Our children had to live through a nightmare. The psychological damage and emotional scarring that such offensive and traumatizing kidnappings by so-called welfare authorities have caused our children have mended with time, love, prayer, and a lot of reassurance. We know that God greatly loves and cares for each of the precious children He has blessed us with.

### What Is Behind the Charges?

When our tiny group or other minorities become the center of controversy in large-scale hostile media campaigns, or the target of strong-arm police raids and extensive government

investigations, the public can't help but wonder, "If you're not guilty of these heinous allegations being leveled against you, then why are so many people maligning and attacking you?!" Or "Why do you claim that this is 'religious persecution' when the charges against you have nothing to do with religion?"

While it's true that the actual charges leveled against us usually have little to do with religion per se, careful scrutiny of the sources of these accusations reveals distinct anti-religious undercurrents. As a minority religion, we openly recognize that mistakes have been made in our 35-year history, mistakes which we have worked vigorously to correct and rectify. And while we freely acknowledge that some of our beliefs and practices differ from those of the more traditional mainstream religious establishments, the investigations carried out by the courts and their consequent rulings speak for themselves. They are ample evidence of the Family's commitment to continual betterment of our quality of life.

As Dr. Introvigne stated in his report "Religious Liberty in Western Europe:

A primary cause of concern is the public sponsorship of private anti-cult movements. It is abundantly clear that these movements are responsible for spreading misleading and often simply false information about religious minorities and an intolerant worldview.

### Persecution as Prophesied in the Bible

We view these attacks against our communities as a foreshadowing of the global persecution that the Bible predicts will come upon not just Christians, but all people of faith just prior to Jesus' Second Coming.

The Bible explains that a powerful united world government will arise, founded on seemingly good principles to help solve the world's wars and inequality. But this entity will soon be under the rule of a megalomaniac dictator such as the world has never seen. After establishing his rule, he will demand total loyalty and attempt to crush all dissent. The Bible calls him the "Antichrist," as he will oppose those who follow Christ or any other prophet or deity other than himself. He will ultimately demand the entire world's submission, loyalty, and obeisance.

Once this New World Order has control over the nations, the Bible says that its leader will outlaw and abolish all faiths, blasphemously declaring that he himself is God, and that anyone who

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

dares to observe or practice any faith or religion, other than the worship of the Antichrist, must be eradicated.

This will plunge the world into the darkest and most horrendous nightmare of religious persecution it has ever known, a time that Jesus described as “Great Tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be!” (Matthew 24:21). (See also Daniel 11:21–45; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; Revelation 13:1–18.) But God will miraculously protect and provide for those who look to Him—and Jesus’ Second Coming will establish righteousness, truth and love on the earth.

Although the Bible warns that this anti-religion, anti-faith, anti-God power will take over the world for a time before the return of Christ, how soon and how easily such forces come to power will largely be determined by what choices people make today, and how easily they allow themselves to be persuaded to relinquish their freedoms, such as the freedom of religion. If people turn a blind eye and passively ignore or acquiesce when the rights and freedoms of others are trampled upon, whether adherents of a traditional religion or a minority faith, then be sure that the resolve of the aggressors is strengthened. Whereas if people vigorously protest such acts of intolerance and injustice, the aggressors will realize they must give account for their deeds, and their persecution of innocent believers will be more easily halted.

Respect for human rights should be extended to every man, woman, and child, regardless of his or

her choice of faith or religion. Yet some civil authorities, even in democratic countries, are condoning the passage of laws and other measures that contribute to a climate of increased discrimination, particularly of minority religions. International treaties that declare freedom of religion to be a fundamental human right are a reflection of spiritual consciousness. The millions of believers throughout the ages who have refused to denounce their faith in the face of persecution likewise attest to the inherent importance of religion throughout history. Imposition of restrictions regarding freedom of conscience, the promotion of intolerance towards minority religious groups, and even active persecution will not eliminate religion. It will only foster a climate of intolerance and hatred.

When civil authorities in democratic countries can be manipulated and pressured by anti-religious groups to bully and barge their way into the homes of peace-loving, law-abiding members of a tiny religious fellowship, terrorizing the occupants, then rounding up and carting away their children without evidence to justify such an assault, we feel a very dangerous precedent is being set. Every freedom-loving citizen should take notice. If such blatant violations of human rights are permitted today, who will be the victims tomorrow?

We appeal to you, whatever your personal beliefs, to stand up against intolerance. Beware of and speak out against flagrant religious discrimination and persecution.

May God bless you and your loved ones with the precious gift of religious freedom.

(“Religious Persecution” was first published in June 1992 and updated January 2004.)

## What Is the Family International?

The Family International (formerly known as the Children of God) is a fellowship of Christian communities with members in over 100 countries. Our current membership numbers about 8,500 full-time members and 7,000 associates.

The Family has four main objectives:

1. To share with others the life-giving message of love, hope, and salvation found in God’s Word, conveying the joys of knowing Jesus as a personal Savior.
2. To ensure that each of our children receives a godly upbringing in the best possible environment we can provide.
3. To produce and distribute a wide selection of devotional, inspirational, and educational materials.
4. To actively assist the needy through producing and performing inspirational, dramatic, and musical benefits; serving as volunteers in disaster relief; and seeking ways to provide comfort and material assistance for the disadvantaged.

If you have any questions or comments, we invite you to contact us at one of the following addresses:

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