CHAPTER 7

The Persecuted Body

EVANGELICAL INTERNATIONALISM, ISLAM, AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR

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At the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a church of martyrs. ... The witness of Christ borne even to the shedding of blood has become a common inheritance of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants.
—Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, 1994

And photographs of the victims of war are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They agitate. They create the illusion of consensus.
—Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others

The video opens with images of a young Sudanese boy, interviewed in front of a hut. “They wanted me to become a Muslim,” he says through a translator. “But I told them I wouldn’t. I am a Christian.” He looks away as he lifts his shirt and shows his scars for the camera—horrific burns over one side of his thin body. “It was then,” a deep male voice-over intones, “that he was thrown on a burning fire.” Later, the video explains that in Sudan “a government set on jihad” is persecuting Christians. There is news footage of soldiers, then images of women lying on the ground, their mutilated limbs and open wounds viscerally on view. Bodies are displayed—violated, damaged.

Other scenes in the video tell similar stories of threats, punishment, and stalwart behavior: a Chinese pastor tells of being imprisoned, and he almost—but does not—lift up his shirt to show a scar. A young Indonesian girl, shown close up and weeping, tells of having a knife held to her throat. The narrator translates: “They tried to get me to deny Christ.” Then he pronounces: “But she refused to deny her savior.”
Each tale is told as a melodrama of steadfastness: "All around the world," the video explains, "Christians are dying for their faith. They could save themselves by denying Christ. But they didn’t—and they won’t." A graphic of a revolving globe spins out the names of nations that persecute Christians: Sudan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and several others. "These people are not heroes or statistics; they are ‘family.’"

The video was made by the US-based Christian evangelical group Voice of the Martyrs (VOM). It is simultaneously a “documentary” and a fund-raising document, circulated in churches and at conferences and available for purchase on the VOM website, where one can also read the latest news about the persecution of Christians or sign up for a monthly newsletter or a weekly e-mail update. In the 1990s, VOM also developed a somewhat surprising élan through its partnership with the Christian hip-hop group “DC Talk.” The band, best known for its anthem "Jesus Freaks," joined up with VOM to produce a series of books for teenagers about martyrdom, Jesus Freaks: Stories of those Who Stood for Jesus, and Jesus Freaks: Martyrs.4 Not infrequently, the VOM materials quote the church father Tertullian (155–230): "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."4

By the turn of the twenty-first century, a passionate concern with the persecution of Christians united not only conservatives but liberal and moderate evangelicals as well. Christians were being martyred all over the world, they argued, prevented from spreading the Gospel and targeted for their faith. Chronicled in magazines ranging from conservative venues like World magazine to the moderately conservative Christianity Today or the left-leaning Sojourners; described in books and on websites; pictured in fund-raising newsletters and DVDs sold in church basements, “the persecuted body”—the body or church of Christ, and the literal bodies of believers—became an icon of faith and a map for politics.3

In this chapter, I make four interrelated arguments. First, I argue that antipersecution discourse, while not a new phenomenon, took on new forms and an enhanced social-emotional power for evangelicals starting in the early 1990s. The reasons for this emergence are complex, as I discuss below, but its impact is profound. Most obviously, it led American evangelicals to join with others in pushing for the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which institutionalized attention to religious freedom in the US foreign policy apparatus.

Second, I find that spectacles of the violated body are central to the discourse of persecution. The antipersecution movement, like any social movement, links disparate individuals through practices and performances that establish coherence and meaning. The display of images and/or the vivid description of violence is not simply informational; it engages both the history of human rights activism and a deeply rooted Christian imagery about the body. The circulation of these images is part of the impetus
for evangelical activism, but the power of the visual is also activated by a policymaking process that incites cultural performance.

Third, I examine the ways in which attention to persecution creates a tension for evangelicals between the universalizing language of human rights and a specific commitment to the "persecuted body" of Christ. The sense of particular solidarity with a transnational community of believers enables—and sometimes undermines—an energetic embrace of "human rights" as a political value.

Finally, I argue that the impact of evangelicals' intense attention to Christian persecution is not easy to categorize as either liberal or conservative: it is both, in ways that often intertwine. At one level, it is deeply conservative, in that it engages an ongoing hostility toward non-Christian religions, particularly Islam. Islam is presented as the cause of a great deal of concrete persecution and as a danger to Christians everywhere. This image of Islam plays out particularly clearly in the context of evangelicals' stance on US policy toward Sudan.

The discourse of persecution is also liberalizing, however, in that it has helped make American evangelicals far more cognizant of the world beyond their borders. Evangelicals from Africa, Asia, and elsewhere are deeply concerned about religious persecution, but they are also raising the awareness of their more privileged fellow believers about the economic realities, medical crises, and political instability that frame their daily lives. The response of American evangelicals has been paradoxical. On the one hand, US believers have produced elements of the old missionary condescension that posited non-Westerners as abject, in need of "saving" by American Christians. On the other, persecution discourse posits Christians in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere as exemplary, embodying an idealized form of Christian practice. Both elements are apparent in the emerging evangelical involvement in human rights activism, HIV-AIDS work, and struggles for global economic justice.

Fear is part of this story, albeit in complex ways. Many theorists have described how fear of the "other" can bring a group together in spite of internal divisions like race or class, and certainly fear of persecution and fear of Islam work together to construct evangelicals as a global community of embattled believers. This fear is genuine. Evangelicals in the United States are connected to their global community—through media, international institutions, travel, and friendship—and news of wars or arrests abroad is reason for fear and prayers at home. At the same time, the fear is mixed with confidence, even aggression, in the face of the dangers evangelicals believe their community to be facing. Persecution is a danger but also an opportunity to speak about faith and the bravery it inspires.

As Bauman points out, however, fear is liquid; it does not stay in its containers. Fear can produce new kinds of identification and solidarity...
that may cross the very boundaries it originally fortified. In the case of US evangelicals, fear, and the determination it engenders, have produced bounded communities and universal human rights commitments simultaneously. Thus, this study of the politics of fear is an analysis of the historical transformation of a religious community; the demands of a transnational identity (Christianity) upon the US state; the construction of moral geographies that center a conflict with Islam; and the possibility, perhaps, of human solidarities that transcend all of these.

The International Religious Freedom Act

In 1998, the US Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), a signature bill that was the result of several years of intense political activism. The coalition that fought for the bill had been led by evangelicals, but it included Jews, Catholics, and Tibetan Buddhists. The bill requires that the United States produce every year a list of "countries of concern" that are guilty of violating religious freedoms. The president is then required to choose from a set of graduated sanctions to impose on each of those countries (ranging from expressions of concern to cutting off trade). If s/he chooses, the president can waive the sanctions for reasons of national security.

The IRFA also created the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department and established the post of ambassador for religious freedom. It also created a separate, semi-official body, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, which, as we will see, had the task of monitoring the State Department and the White House to make sure that "political necessity" did not trump the moral necessity of fighting religious persecution.

The not-so-quiet backdrop to this legislation, as everyone understood, was the US relationship with three countries in particular. First was Sudan, which for many antipersecution activists was the primary concern. As I discuss below, the twenty-year-long civil war in southern Sudan had pitted the Islamist government in Khartoum against the non-Muslim populations of the south, a significant number of whom were Christian. To what degree Sudan's civil war could be described as a religious war was a matter of great debate, but for at least some of the activists Sudan's government was the greatest example of the Islamist threat to Christians everywhere. Second was China. There, the official Christian church was large and growing, but many Chinese believers worshipped at illegal "underground" churches. They were vulnerable to harassment and arrest. In addition, China occupied Tibet and was systematically oppressing Tibetan Buddhists. Both conservative evangelicals and some Hollywood liberals
were interested in China, but, in very different ways, so was American business. The conflicts between these various forms of interest have played our repeatedly in US China policy. The third country was Saudi Arabia, which was surely guilty of religious persecution and which, just as surely, was not about to be placed under US sanctions. The antipersecution movement was strong, but it was not going to trump the politics of oil or the US Central Command.

Thus there were serious questions about the International Religious Freedom Act. Of course, no one in Washington or elsewhere was interested in declaring themselves to be in favor of religious persecution, of Christians or anyone else. And there was a fairly broad consensus that the issue itself was quite real. “To suggest that the persecution of Christians is not a serious problem is nonsense,” William F. Schulz, the executive director of Amnesty International USA told a reporter. But whatever the realities of religious persecution, the remedies were hotly debated. As the bill made its way through Congress, traditional human rights groups, liberal Protestants, and Muslim organizations all had concerns. The Clinton administration opposed it, and the free-trade lobby fought it hard. With all that opposition, it was more than a little surprising that the IRFA made it into law. It did so in large part because of the on-the-ground power of the antipersecution movement. Although the signing of this legislation was neither the beginning nor the end of the story of US activism on religious persecution, it was a high point for evangelical activists who wanted to make global issues central to their community. Their success was due in part to good organizing, but it was also the product of a new kind of “common sense” emerging in the evangelical public sphere, where for more than thirty years religious persecution had been the stuff of novels, memoirs, movies, and magazine articles.

**Martyrs and Memory in the Cold War**

The memory of persecution and suffering is part of the DNA of Christian culture-making. In her remarkable book *Martyrdom and Memory*, Elizabeth Castelli has traced the history of the veneration of martyrs in early Christianity. For centuries after Christ, and in ways that varied in different historical moments, believers consumed stories and images of martyrs. For Castelli, the actual historical reality of martyrs’ lives is far less important than the images, statues, relics, and sermons that served as sources of identification and rhetorics of self. Martyrdom, Castelli insists, is “rhetorically constituted and discursively sustained.”

Simultaneously engaging fear and bravery, suffering and faith, spectacle and catechism, early persecution stories were Christian education. Saint
Augustine told his readers that when they went to church and heard those stories, they were to engage them not in terms of their awfulness (which would, nonetheless, be recounted in great detail) but in terms of the “completeness of faith” they represented.

A splendid spectacle offered to the eyes of the mind is a spirit whole and unbroken while the body is torn to pieces. That is what you people gaze on with pleasure when the accounts of such things are read in church. After all, if you didn’t form some sort of picture of what happened, it would mean you weren’t listening at all.¹⁰

Through much of the twentieth century, the concept of Christian martyrdom per se had little purchase for evangelicals, who saw in the veneration of martyrs a suspect Catholic practice tainted by excesses of emotion and even idolatry. Even so, accounts of martyrdom did have a traditional place in Protestant culture. The first English edition of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs was in 1563. The woodcut images and (in the second edition) nearly two thousand pages of text primarily recounted the suffering of Protestants at the hands of Catholics. After Foxe’s death, the book was reprinted many times, trimmed and updated, eventually traveling with the Puritans to the New World. The iconography of martyrdom was evoked, too, in the spectacles of suffering that were such an important part of antislavery politics in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States and Britain, where the bodies of slaves were displayed as abolitionist rhetoric.

The “classic evangelical missionary martyr narrative,” as Kathryn Long calls it, included the stories of missionaries who had gone to Africa or India or elsewhere and died in the service of the cause.¹¹ One universal of US martyr stories was the determinedly optimistic logic of evangelical triumphalism. The deaths were admirable, but the stories required a victorious ending. This emotionally rich and physically vivid pattern of description did not disappear from US martyr stories, but by the early twentieth century, accounts were moving toward more circumspect formulations. As Catholic immigration to the United States increased in the later part of the nineteenth century, Protestants begin to separate themselves more fully from what they saw as Catholic practices of saint worship, tainted by excesses of emotion and even idolatry. Certainly the vividly excruciating tales so beloved by earlier generations became less common, even as missionary bravery and sacrifice remained central to evangelical narratives.

In 1956, however, the death of five American missionaries in Ecuador galvanized evangelicals and transformed their investments in the rhetoric of martyrdom. The group of young men had traveled, two of them with their wives, to a remote jungle area to witness to the Waoroni tribe (then known as the Auca Indians). Shortly after their arrival, having made only tentative contact with the Waoroni—who, in these accounts, were
always described as “warlike”—the five men of the group were speared and hacked to death. In 1957, Elizabeth Elliott, the wife of one of the men who died, published Through Gates of Splendor, which recounted in hagiographic terms the young men’s commitment to reaching the unreached, and their expressed willingness to die, if necessary, in the process. The book was excerpted in Reader’s Digest, and the “Auca martyrs” and their wives were chronicled multiple times in Life. (Elizabeth Elliott went on to become a well-known author of evangelical books on sexual morality, including the (in)famous 1984 advice manual Passion and Purity: Bringing your Love Life under God’s Control.) Looking back decades later at the Auca events, Christianity Today recalled: “The martyrs’ names—Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, and Roger Youderian—and their sacrifice galvanized a whole generation,” inspiring future missionaries and average churchgoers alike. In 2006, the story would become the basis of a book and feature film, End of the Spear, narrated from the perspective of Nate Saint’s son. The inspiration offered by such stories was emotionally complex. Believers were invited to be fearful but also determined, angry but also forgiving, admiring of the martyrs but appalled by their suffering.

In the postwar period, American Christians were also called to attend to a different kind of persecution—not the exceptional dramas of missionaries abroad, but the quotidian dramas of the “suffering church” under communism. Starting in the 1940s, with the communist takeover of China, and into the 1960s, as tensions with the Soviet Union continued, news accounts in the popular press, individual memoirs, and the occasional congressional hearing all combined to create a consistent drumbeat about “persecution” as a problem. The House Un-American Activities Committee, for example, held a “consultation” with ministers from China and Korea in 1959. Their testimony was printed—and then reprinted—as a document for public distribution.

In the late 1960s, the most famous “living martyr” in the United States was a Romanian Jewish convert and minister, Richard Wurmbrand. Wurmbrand had been imprisoned twice by the Romanian government for his activities as an “underground” minister before he finally escaped to the West in 1964. In 1966, Wurmbrand offered remarkable testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee’s hearing. Standing before the senators and the cameras, Wurmbrand stripped to the waist and turned to display his deeply scarred back. “My body represents Romania, my country, which has been tortured to a point that it can no longer weep,” Wurmbrand said. “These marks on my body are my credentials.”

Wurmbrand’s dramatic speech and his subsequent writing—he went on to publish more than a dozen books on his experiences in Romania and the threat posed by communism—exemplified the complex dialectic of visibility and invisibility in the discourse of persecution. His best-known
book, *Tortured for Christ*, was first printed in 1967 and eventually became a
global Christian best seller. In that short autobiographical account, Wurmbrand
characterizes in detail how he and his fellow prisoners in Romania were
beaten, forced to stand in one position, and placed in refrigerator cells. The
images are vivid; their bodies are wracked, fractured, and perforated. Yet
Wurmbrand also insists: “Other things simply cannot be told. My heart
would fail if I should tell them again and again. They are too terrible and
obscene to be put into writing.”

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that it is inherently difficult to
describe bodily pain or injury. Pain is interior, elusive to measurement, hard
to index to any kind of visibility. The “sentient fact of physical pain is...so
nearly impossible to express, so flatly invisible,” she says, that it becomes
very easy to ignore, over and over, the suffering of others. The dilemma
of antipersecution discourse is that, in order to become politically relevant,
suffering must be made visible. The persecution must be described, the
body inscribed. Pain may be silent and silencing, as Scarry argues—and
Wurmbrand agrees: there are things I cannot describe, he says; there are
things too obscene to be put into writing. And yet, as Augustine said, the
audience must form a picture of the terrible things that happened. Representing
the body in pain is a necessary condition of the politics of suffering.

In 1967, Wurmbrand founded Jesus to the Communist World, which
would later become Voice of the Martyrs. In the 1980s and 90s, VOM,
working out of its home base in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, would become a
key player in the larger movement against the persecution of Christians. Its
video on “the persecuted family” was produced in the context of its role in
this emergent phenomenon. Another, similar organization, Open Doors,
was founded by “Brother Andrew” Van der Bijl, a Dutch pastor who made
his name smuggling Bibles into the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He
published his best-selling memoir, *God’s Smuggler*, also in 1967 and was,
as I describe at the end of this essay, an inspiration to a new generation of
activists in the 1990s and beyond. Both organizations, and a host of oth-
ers, took up the task of representing suffering Christians. Starting in the
late 1980s, they married the iconography of Christian martyrdom to the
language of universal rights.

**Rights Talk**

In the 1960s and 70s, “human rights” gained a new kind of currency. In
1961, with the founding of Amnesty International, the 1948 UN Universal
Declaration of Human Rights gained activist legs. At first, the language
of “human rights” per se had its greatest appeal on the political left: in
1967, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had redesignated itself from a “civil rights” to a “human rights” organization, while feminist activists began talking about the rights of women in the context of global human rights more generally. Then, in 1974, Alexander Solzhenitsyn published the extraordinary Gulag Archipelago, which used the language of “human rights” to frame oppression in the Soviet Union as an international issue—one that was quickly taken up by conservatives and anticommunist moderates in the United States. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975, which asserted both individual rights to freedom of belief and the collective right of peoples to self-determination, was widely cited by Eastern European liberation movements. In the U.S. presidential elections of 1976, Jimmy Carter made the promotion of human rights globally one of his stated policy goals.

For Americans, one of the most important human rights issues of the 1970s was the struggle on behalf of Soviet Jews for the right to emigrate. Jews in the Soviet Union were facing extreme discrimination, and activists who spoke out received harsh prison sentences. U.S. Jews led a campaign, working in coalition with Catholics, evangelicals, and Cold Warriors, for congressional action. In 1974 Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik amendment to the Trade Act of that year, which instituted trade sanctions against “non-market countries” that restricted emigration (that is, the Soviet Union). The Nixon White House had opposed the amendment; Kissinger in particular thought Jackson-Vanik was the kind of public posturing that made it far more difficult to exert pressure via “quiet diplomacy.”

The interest of evangelicals in the issue of Soviet Jewry derived from a combination of their traditional conservatism in the Cold War and their own increasing attention to religious persecution. (Four years after Jackson-Vanik, a group of Pentecostals—the Siberian Seven—pushed their way into the US embassy in Moscow, seeking the chance to emigrate to the United States. Their dramatic protests, eventually including a hunger strike by two of the women, elicited a great deal of public concern in the United States. The group lived in the embassy for five years before eventually being allowed to emigrate to Israel. From there, they eventually moved to the United States.) In the 1990s, Christian activists would repeatedly cite Jackson-Vanik as their model for legislative success with the International Religious Freedom bill. This second generation of antipersecution activists would also point to Jackson-Vanik as proof that they were justified in focusing on the persecution of Christians, since Jackson-Vanik, although it was framed in general terms, was designed specifically to protect Jews. Thus the Jackson-Vanik amendment set the stage for two debates that would engage evangelical activists off and on for the next thirty years. First was the question of whether they should focus on championing “Christian
rights” specifically or “human rights” more generally. Second, evangelicals debated whether the compromises of “quiet diplomacy” could provide a better route to change than visible, morally sanctified public action.

**Praying Locally**

In the 1970s and ‘80s, evangelical media were shot through with stories of Christians living under “atheistic communism” in the Soviet bloc and China. This did not mean that other parts of the world were invisible—*Christianity Today* had, from its founding, used its World Scene section to update readers on events in Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia. Islam was not a particular focus in this period, even after the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. In the 1980s, *Christianity Today* gave more attention to Latin America than to the Middle East. It was communism that mattered most, and it was local Christians living under communism (rather than, say, Western missionaries among the natives) who provided the dramatic personae of late Cold War evangelical internationalism.

One remarkable 1982 essay in *Christianity Today*, by a pastor’s wife in Richmond, Virginia, gave a sense of how those stories of persecution were integrated into one local church community. Sara Killian Cooke wrote that she was part of a women’s prayer group that gathered each week to pray for “Christ’s suffering church.” They pooled information about the world, she said, from evangelical periodicals, news releases, and letters from missionaries and pastors. Cooke went on to list specific prayers her group offered, and her list was a perfectly calibrated testament to the impact of the evangelical focus on communism: prayer for pastors in registered churches and those in unregistered churches, for those declared unstable and placed in psychiatric wards, for those who are brainwashed, and for those who had “children taken from believing parents and placed in communes.”

Cooke gave her readers an example of the kind of prayer her group might offer:

Father, for your servants about to be martyred, we ask a Christ-glorifying witness like Stephen’s. For those undergoing torture, we ask power not to deny your name...Knowing our weakness, we pray for those who are fallen, those who mourn false confessions.... For those alone in prison, we ask you to send the Holy Comforter....Savior, send to your suffering body divine intervention.

This rather extraordinary prayer goes on, quivering with sentimental calling: “may holy angels minister”; may God “heal their broken hearts.”

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Cooke’s prayer is remarkable, not only for its vivid imagery and its near-perfect indexing of Cold War antipersecution literature, but also as a marker of a subtle change in the public representations of persecution. Throughout the 1960s and ’70s, persecution was most often represented as something that specific reprehensible regimes did, for their own (atheistic) reasons, to followers of Jesus. Beginning in the 1980s, there began to emerge a sense of persecution as something that was; it existed all over the world, wherever there were believers, because suffering was a significant part of what being Christian meant. In the Bible, followers of Jesus are repeatedly assured that they must suffer for his sake. If that was less true for Americans than for others, such might not always be the case: Americans have been insulated from the suffering experienced by persecuted Christians, Cooke wrote, but “someday we might also be forced to share their trial.”

Of course, it is impossible to say that Sara Killian Cooke’s essay is real proof of what “average” believers took away from the persecution literature that swirled through the evangelical public sphere during the Cold War. We do know, however, that the concerns reached beyond the rhetoric of evangelical elites, in that they formed the basis of grassroots activism (in Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors) and reached, in some cases, into church prayer meetings. And we know, too, that the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China were the emotional and political focus of the literature on persecuted Christians. At least, that was the case until 1989, when evangelicals, like most Americans, had their previous moral geographies torn asunder.

The Emergence of a Movement: 1989 and the 10/40 Window

The year 1989 ushered in several slowly evolving and interrelated changes. The first was, of course, the beginning of the end of the Cold War, which would over time bring a marked change for Christians in Eastern Europe and the soon-to-be-former Soviet Union. Religious freedom did not come immediately and never came completely in the former Soviet bloc, but with the destruction of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and then the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the situation changed quickly. Christians from all around the world began pouring into Eastern Europe as missionaries; the narratives were of liberation and victory.

The geopolitical changes that put an end to the bipolar world also demanded new ways of thinking about US global power—for evangelicals no less than for other Americans. With the intensification of globalization in the post–Cold War era (or, rather, with the intensification of that conglomeration of intersecting changes that has variously been engaged through
terms like postmodernity, globalization, and neoliberalism), evangelical Christians began to take advantage of new opportunities for connection and community building across national boundaries.

Evangelicals in the global South were rapidly increasing in number—conversions and demographic increase in Latin America and Africa, in particular, were creating millions of new believers. And new technologies and the increasing ease of travel made it possible for those Christians to link more easily with Christians in the United States and Europe. The first Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization, held in 1974, had brought together several thousand delegates from around the world. There, speakers from Latin America and Asia and the Middle East had spoken forcefully from the platform, taking their place as equals, not as missionary objects. In 1989, the Second International Conference on World Evangelization met in Manila, and 4,300 evangelicals from 173 countries once again constructed for each other a model of border-crossing Christian community. As in 1974, missionary work was a shared, animating concern for delegates, wherever they hailed from. There was a “millennium bug” in the air, one participant said, as evangelicals began to map their own global dreams of reaching “all the world” for Christ by the year 2000.28

Argentine evangelist Luis Bush shared that missionary mind-set, but he also saw a need for evangelicals at the end of the century to center their attention on Islam. At Manila, Bush gave a rousing speech that called for evangelicals to focus their missionary work on the “10/40 Window.” The “window,” he said, is that area between 10 degrees and 40 degrees north of the equator, which encompasses the Middle East and much of Asia—an area where most of the world’s “unreached people groups” lived. It is true, Bush said, that Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism “enslave” the majority of their inhabitants—“billions of spiritually impoverished souls.” Of these, Islam was clearly the biggest threat. From its center in the 10/40 Window, Islam was “reaching out energetically to all parts of the globe.” In similar strategy, Bush said, “we must penetrate the heart of Islam with the liberating truth of the gospel.”29 Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, “political Islam” had been a subject of increasing discussion, in the United States and elsewhere, as a rising political force. Now it was also a target for evangelicals, who resolved to reach into its heart.

The 10/40 Window was appealing not only as a concept but also as a marketing tool. One could buy 10/40 Window calendars (featuring a different “people group” each month) or maps, movies, and newsletters. Officially, the 10/40 Window was a map of (missionary) opportunity; in practice, it often became a signifier of the “enslaved,” unreached nations of the world, many of which would also be marked as persecutors of Christians.

The 10/40 Window mapped the passions of an evangelizing church, reaching outward from Latin America and Africa as well as Europe and the
United States. But it also exemplified how mission outreach meshed with defensive solidarities. There were other areas where Christians might be under threat, but the window marked both the greatest opportunity and the zone of crisis, the most visible scars on the body. The Christians there were the synecdoche of modern, suffering faith.

Does Human Rights Need God? Do the Godly Need Human Rights?

In 1992, Christianity Today produced a special issue on the “persecuted Church,” implicitly integrating the diverse Christian experiences in Latin America, the former Soviet Union, the Middle East, and China. The issue included many Amnesty International–style images: a prisoner, clearly beaten, recovering in a hospital; a woman and child, standing alone in front of a house where the murdered husband no longer lives. The headlines are visceral: “They Tortured my Friend”; “The Bloody Seed of Chinese Persecution”; and “They Shoot Christians Don’t They?” Two things were particularly striking in this issue: first, the productive power of fear; and second, the determined yet wary embrace of “human rights” as a universalizing commitment that was at once empowering and deeply problematic for evangelicals.

One personal account exemplified the multilayered way that fear functioned in these essays. In “They Tortured my Friend,” Tim Stafford, a Christian worker in Kenya, described his relationship with several Kenyan fellow believers, all of whom were in danger as a result of their faith. One of the men, Kimani wa Nyoike, was a member of parliament who was in prison for a year, during which time he lost seventy pounds. Another was an editor of a Christian youth magazine until he was imprisoned briefly and then fired. The third, whom Stafford knew more distantly, was an Anglican bishop who spoke out against political corruption and was ultimately killed under suspicious circumstances.

Stafford’s meditation on the fact that “they tortured my friend” was honest about his own distance from the dangers that his friends experienced: “The fear of reprisal is just not easy for an American, born and raised in freedom, to understand.” But Stafford recounted that after his time in Kenya he returned to the United States sobered—knowing someone personally who had suffered in prison, he was now better able to understand fear. “I found that the term ‘human rights’ took on new meaning. It had acquired a human face.”

With that comment, Stafford entered into a larger set of questions that structured Christianity Today’s special issue: how and when should evangelicals embrace the language of “human rights”? The impetus was obviously there, but evangelicals also harbored doubts. Some evangelicals
saw the action of claiming “rights” as “an unlovely modern habit” that placed the self, rather than God, at the center of moral discourse. In 1992 that largely secular moral discourse was for many Americans playing a liberalizing function, opening up their thinking on gay rights, multiculturalism, and so on. Evangelical conservatives understood this, and not infrequently observed that “rights talk” had emerged exactly as the “culture wars” heated up. Wasn’t that liberal framework the one that “rights” belonged to?

But evangelicals also recognized that, however one defined them, “rights” were a political issue. The process of either claiming one’s own or protecting the rights of others would inevitably involve some kind of activism. Evangelicals worried—particularly as the early 1990s backlash against the Moral Majority was fracturing an earlier political certainty—that, whether or not it was a good idea in theory to support human rights, maybe it was time to step back from politics, to consider a renewed focus on evangelism and personal salvation. Thus, while evangelicals generally agreed that in principle it was fine to fight for the right of Christians to religious freedom, they were uncertain about what it would mean, ultimately, for evangelicals to (1) get overly involved in this kind of political agenda; or (2) start talking of “human rights” tout court. In a July 1992 article titled, aptly, “Who’s Afraid of Human Rights?” one author acknowledged such worries but quickly dismissed them: “Christians miss the point if they see human rights as a concern only of the political Left.”

In fact, Christianity Today clearly considered its 1992 special issue, in which this question was posed, a clarion call, pushing evangelicals to go beyond their Cold War focus on religious persecution under communism. Carl Henry, an evangelical intellectual and the magazine’s former editor, insisted that Christians had been too narrowly focused on their own rights, leading others outside the community to conclude “that evangelicals are interested only in defending their issues, not in a broad-based commitment to liberties for all.” But that broader commitment, Christianity Today said, is exactly what evangelicals should have. Reflecting on his experience in Kenya, Stafford argued that, in the face of oppression and evil, “the strongest weapon most people have is this thin tissue of language—‘rights’ language, which asserts a moral consensus.” That consensus might not stop evil, but it is the first and best defense. And it will not be enough for evangelicals to focus only on the rights of fellow believers; they must care about human rights beyond the merely religious context, Stafford argued, since “evil operates in a much broader context” as well.

Several years later, writing in the anthology Does Human Rights Need God? Max Stackhouse, the internationally regarded, theologically conservative professor at Princeton Theological Seminar, would argue that, for Christians, human rights and God must be inseparable. Belief in
God—specifically a Christian view of God—requires a commitment to human rights. But this also works in the reverse, Stackhouse claimed; a commitment to human rights cannot survive without a religious foundation: “without the impetus of theological insight, human rights concepts would not have come to their current widespread recognition, and...they are likely to fade over time if they are not anchored in a universal, context-transcending, metaphysical reality.” However, Stackhouse insisted that religions were not all equal on this point. He argued—as antipersecution activists would also argue—that history showed that Christianity was more likely than other forms of belief to encourage religious freedom. Those parts of the world where Christianity had been most influential were “the safest havens for non-established and non-majoritarian religions.”

Here, Stackhouse was making an argument that other conservative Christians had made, most notably Frances Schaeffer, the evangelical thinker who had become something of a hero of the “new” evangelical movements of the late 1990s and onward. Their position was that the Enlightenment thinkers only thought they had moved away from the necessity of a belief in God; in practice, no coherent vision of human equality could be truly secular; you could only believe people were inherently equal if you believed that they were made that way in God’s plan.

This intellectual argument about the dangers of “other religions” to human rights was, in various forms, crucial to the increased fear of Islam among evangelicals. In the same 1992 issue of Christianity Today, Diane Knippers, executive vice president of the Institute for Religion and Democracy, a deeply conservative Washington think tank, insisted that Christians should not let down their guard against religious persecution. Yes, Marxism, “the twentieth century’s scourge on religion,” was being rooted out of Europe (although communist countries like China, Vietnam, and North Korea were still engaged in “virulent prejudice”). But the emerging threat “looming on the religious-freedom horizon” was Islam.

Unlike communism, which had attempted to dispel all religion, Knippers said, Islam feeds on “religious zealotry.” For Knippers, the fact that “Islam” was neither a place nor a form of government was not apparently a problem; her point was to create a sense that Islam per se was a danger. Reciting the Orientalist logic of scholars like Bernard Lewis, she commented that Islam was “inextricably bound with the political realm” and that the heart of Islam was shari’a law. Under shari’a, state-sponsored religious persecution was likely, and this not infrequently led to terrorism and talk of jihad (a term that, in 1992, still needed italics and a definition). Knippers was careful to note that there were “exceptions” to her generalizations about Islam, but her intervention worked primarily to highlight a certain emergent moral geography. Without mentioning the 10/40 Window (which would have been very well known to Christianity Today...
Prayer and Politics

In 1995, Michael Horowitz galvanized the attention of evangelical elites with an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* that took aim at Islamic countries for persecuting their Christian minorities. He listed atrocities committed by Muslims against Christians in Ethiopia, Pakistan, Sudan, Egypt, and Iran. Certainly, the stories were horrific. Some were widely known incidents: three Iranian pastors killed in 1994; the routine abduction of children in South Sudan. Other examples seemed pulled from the lesser-documented folklore of the emerging movement: a pastor in Ethiopia whose eyes were put out by local Muslim officials; Christian students in Egypt “routinely” beaten and called “devils” by their classmates. But the overall argument was that Christians had too long stood by, while “in a growing number of other countries, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism has effectively criminalized the practice of Christianity.”  

Horowitz is not Christian; he is Jewish. But this only strengthened his position; this was not, presumably, self-interest talking. Both Christians and Jews were morally obligated to respond, Horowitz said, by challenging immigration and asylum policies within the United States and calling for changes in US foreign policy toward guilty governments. Over the course of the late 1990s, Horowitz was celebrated by leading evangelicals like Charles Colson and Michael Cromartie and profiled in several national papers for his role in galvanizing a “sleeping church” to its own issues.

Horowitz felt, and others agreed, that the time had come to push for some kind of legislation that would force the United States to take specific actions to respond to the persecution of Christians. Over the next two years, several key events, both cultural and political, signaled the emergence of an evangelical constituency ready to make persecution a priority. First, the National Association of Evangelicals held a conference on the persecution of Christians on January 23, 1996. There the group produced a “Statement of Conscience on Worldwide Religious Persecution.” The statement was unremarkable—it simply repeated much of what activists and Christian publications had been saying for several years—but it did highlight evangelicals’ dual focus on communism and Islam. It also made clear that the antipersecution concerns were creating an unusual link between Catholics and evangelicals, who had generally tended to view each other with wariness, despite shared activism against abortion.
in the 1980s.⁴⁰ “In many countries…[e]vangelical Protestants and Catholics have become special targets of terror initiated by authorities who feel threatened by Christian faith and worship,” the statement said. No longer (only) competing for adherents, the two groups were united through their common status as victims.

The second major marker of the movement was the creation of the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. Started in 1996, with the support of activists like Horowitz, it became an extraordinarily successful annual event. The first year, five thousand churches participated. In 1997, organizers claimed that seventy thousand churches had received materials (including all forty thousand member churches of the Southern Baptist Convention). The International Day of Prayer was not harnessed specifically to the legislative activism for IRFA (despite the hopes of some activists), but it did a great deal to raise awareness and to help create a “common sense” about the ubiquity of persecution.⁴¹

The third indicator of the movement’s strength was simply its ability to get itself heard, and heard loudly, on Capitol Hill. Although the specifics of the religious freedom bill would be hotly debated, as I discuss below, the run-up to the legislative action included a flood of information about persecution, much of it aimed specifically at the policy world. In 1997 Nina Shea, director of the Puebla Program at Freedom House, published an activist manifesto, In the Lion’s Den: Persecuted Christians and What the Western Church Can Do About It. And Paul Marshall, also at Freedom House, produced the more detailed and scholarly study with an equally sensationalist title Their Blood Cries Out. These two books became for the persecution movement what Fanon’s Wretched of the Earth had been to a rather different group of activists in the 1960s—angry, righteous documents of suffering that were carried around from meeting to meeting. Shea’s and Marshall’s books were quoted and quoted; they became the source of numbers, stories, examples, and, most crucially, frameworks.

The two books served slightly different audiences: Shea’s contribution was short, lurid, and lightly documented, essentially a compilation of photos and prisoner stories from groups like Voice of the Martyrs and Christian Solidarity International. Timed specifically to push for the IRFA, it repeated the script that was now standard: for Christians, there were two zones of global concern, Islamic countries and the still extant communist world (the frequently repeated phrase was “the communist remnant”). Marshall’s book was more expansive; he focused quite extensively on the dangers of Islam but also discussed everything from the status of evangelicals in Russia to the “forgotten outcasts” in India, Burma, and other countries. (Marshall’s book was also the original source of what would become the all-but-official numbers used by activists: 200 million Christians live in countries where Christians are persecuted; another 400 million live in...
situations of “non-trivial” limits on their religious freedom.) But Marshall did not focus just on persecutors; he also took aim at American Christians. He attacked Protestant liberals for tiptoeing around the issues, especially regarding China and Islam; liberals were so interested in “global peace,” he said, that they failed to speak the truth about events on the ground. But Marshall strongly criticized evangelicals as well—for their complicity, relative ignorance about the rest of the world, excessive nationalism, and over-investment in end-time prophecy. “Concern with American families, American values, and American morality—eclipses a sense of worldwide Christian presence.” It was time, he argued, for American Christians to look beyond their picket fences and start doing something. Of course, what Marshall well knew was that something, namely, the fight over the International Religious Freedom Act, was already well underway.

Activism and Debate on the IRFA

Evangelicals were far from unified in their views on IRFA. As we’ve seen, work on “human rights” was increasing, but what that meant for defending persecuted Christians was still far from clear. In fact, Alan Hertzke, who has written a useful but excessively hagiographic account of the Washington lobbying of the antipersecution movement, recounts that some evangelical leaders who attended a 1996 strategy meeting convened by Freedom House said they weren’t particularly interested in political involvement. What evangelicals did best, they said, was praying for the persecuted and feeling inspired by them—and that was the limit of what they should do. For these nonactivists, the concerns were twofold. The first was pragmatic: drafts of the legislation included proposals to ease asylum provisions for people facing religious persecution. That left some leaders worried about the effect on churches in the global South. In Middle Eastern countries, in particular, churches might be “emptied out,” thus undoing the labor of Christian missionaries and martyrs over centuries. A related issue was more directly theological: if “the blood of the Christians is the seed of the church,” then the suffering of believers can lead to conversions and greater faith. Persecution might be part of God’s plan. The Voice of the Martyrs fund-raising video discussed earlier had implicitly made a similar point: standing with our brothers and sisters who are persecuted, the video said, “we can be confident that their suffering is prelude to coming revival.”

Starting in 1996, in anticipation of the International Religious Freedom bill (there were different versions in the House and Senate), Congress held multiple and sometimes competing hearings on religious persecution. The series began when Republican congressmen Chris Smith of New Jersey, chair of the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human
Rights of the House International Relations Committee, called witnesses to discuss “religious freedom and the persecution of Christians.” Like many congressional hearings, these were designed as a performance—to display the suffering of Christians, to justify the focus of that suffering, and to bring the persecution stories of Christians from the global South into the Capitol. The hearings were criticized by liberal Protestant and other human rights groups who were concerned about “a questionable selectivity of participants,” almost all of whom represented conservative Christian organizations. Over the next two years, the House and Senate together would hold five more hearings on the issue of persecution and the legislation associated with it.

Two competing versions of the bill, Wolf-Specter in the House and Nickels-Lieberman in the Senate, wound their way through Congress. Both were controversial, but Wolf-Specter was generally understood to be the more aggressive of the two. It defined religious persecution more narrowly, but it insisted on strong, automatic sanctions for countries found to be engaged in such persecution.

Concerns about the legislation came from different quarters. First were broadly liberal organizations, including traditional human rights groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, as well as some liberal mainline Protestant denominations. They thought Wolf-Specter was too blunt an instrument and too confrontational. The bill, they suspected, was not really designed to protect religious freedom so much as to ensure the performative assertion of US commitment to that freedom. Human Rights Watch and others also worried that the participants in the antipersecution movement were uninterested in the larger human rights agenda, that they in fact cared only about Christians. Nina Shea, who was deeply involved in lobbying for Wolf-Specter, dismissed those concerns with the scorn of someone who was certain she was on the winning team. The liberal human rights groups were elitists who simply didn’t want to work on behalf of religious people, she told a reporter; besides, they were irrelevant. “No one is paying attention to anything they say or do or write anyway….I’ve got the numbers, I’ve got the endorsements in all the Christian communities. I’ve got the power. It’s our side that is setting the agenda now.”

Wolf-Specter was also opposed by the Clinton administration. The administration’s strategic arguments were the same as those of the liberal groups—confrontation with offending countries was not always the best path to effect change. (This was the same argument the Nixon White House had leveled against the Jackson-Vanik amendment.) But there was another reason for opposing Wolf-Specter: the bill was designed, quite consciously, to limit the influence of the State Department and to prevent the president—specifically that president—from sidestepping demands...
for tough action. The bill required that if a country was found guilty of religious persecution, sanctions of some sort must be implemented unless the president actively waived them. The goal was to embarrass a president who tried to sidestep calls for justice. In fact, once the bill was passed, the provision became an issue not just for Clinton; President Bush would also face the ritual of having to “waive” Saudi Arabia every year, and having to eventually struggle with members of his own political base over the issue of sanctions against Sudan.

Finally, the most well-funded opposition to IRFA came from economic conservatives within the Republican Party. The National Foreign Trade Council, the National Association of Manufacturers, and USA Engage, a large coalition of businesses, farmers, and trade unionists, all actively opposed potential limits on trade in general, and worked hard against IRFA in particular. And free-trade senators, particularly Rod Grams of Minnesota, blocked an initial vote on even the more flexible Nickels version of the bill in the Senate. In its snarling commentary on the debate over the bill, Christianity Today remarked that the evangelical forces “felt abandoned by otherwise supportive business leaders who put profits ahead of morality.” Anger over the business elite’s seemingly amoral posture came from the secular left as well; in May 1998, Mother Jones magazine published a long and damning expose of USA Engage and its lobbyists titled “So You Want to Trade with a Dictator.”

In the end, the Wolf-Specter bill and the Nickels-Lieberman bill were folded into IRFA. The combined bill allowed for graduated sanctions and gave more diplomatic flexibility to the administration, very much as the “quiet diplomacy” advocates had pushed for. But it also demanded annual reporting and a list of “countries of concern,” a requirement parallel to the extent requirement for State Department reports on human rights in general. Like those reports, the mandated religious freedom report was designed to be “embarrassing” to diplomacy-as-usual. In this case, the White House and the State Department could expect to be responsible to a constituency that would be watching carefully. The separately constituted US Commission on International Religious Freedom would also play a watchdog role; its members would write their own separate reports, and it provided a space for other kinds of public performances of concern.

The Spectacle of Persecution

So far in this chapter, I have returned several times to the way in which the “persecuted body” becomes a spectacle of evangelical self-fashioning. It is useful to consider, then, this centrality of images of the body, and the
role of popular culture in disseminating those images, in the nearly ten years since the IRFA was passed. At the very end of this chapter, I will turn to examine a concrete case of the impact of the International Religious Freedom Act on US relations with Sudan.

Diplomatic historians often debate the role of culture in shaping policy, but they have far less frequently examined the role of policy in stimulating and shaping popular culture. In the case of the IRFA, however, a policy decision gave renewed impetus to the movement on behalf of persecuted Christians. It was, in Foucault’s terms, an incitement to discourse: after 1998, there was a remarkable expansion of information and materials available, all of which played a role in constructing a particular image of “the persecuted.” In books and magazines, and increasingly on websites as church activism moved online, believers could read stories on the Web and have vivid images of suffering delivered to their in-box. Voice of the Martyrs (Persecution.com), Open Doors (Opendoorsusa.org), Persecution.org, Christian Freedom International, Compass Direct, and a host of other organizations raised money and solicited prayers for Christian sufferers in Africa, the Middle East, China, and elsewhere. All of them trafficked in detailed stories of suffering; many (but not all) made use of equally dramatic photos.

Voice of the Martyrs, which saw its membership increase threefold after the campaign for the 1998 law, today has a sophisticated website, produces educational material, and distributes “persecution maps” that color-code countries according to how much Christians are persecuted there. Starting around 2000, the World Evangelical Alliance began sending out weekly persecution updates to members who signed up for them.53

“Persecution” now so dominates the representation of the global South that even very traditional Christian programs for feeding the hungry or providing jobs have frequently been reframed in those terms. One advertisement on the website of Christian Freedom International, for example, promotes a sponsor-a-child fund-raising program. This type of development program, pioneered by Save the Children but now copied by dozens of similar organizations, has been revamped: you no longer sponsor hungry children; you sponsor “persecuted children.” Your money, however, goes to provide food, clean water, and vocational training.54

The materials on persecution are not all produced by Americans or Europeans. In the evangelical public sphere, there are scores of books, articles, websites, and videos that are written and/or produced by Christians in the global South.55 At dozens of evangelical conferences each year (held in the United States, Europe, Africa, and elsewhere), believers from around the world arrive as speakers and as activists. Those from the global South describe their struggles to practice their faith: imprisonment, social isolation, and rampant discrimination. They tell their stories, but they also
raise money for their projects and make requests for material or political support.

In the spring of 2004, for example, the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) held its international conference in Orlando, Florida. There, representatives from India, Egypt, Jamaica, Great Britain, the United States, and seven other countries presented reports on their activities as they shared notes, strategies, and prayers. The plenary speaker for the conference was Johan Candelin, a Finnish national and head of the WEA Religious Liberty Commission.

Candelin’s topic was the religious persecution of Christians, and he was a riveting performer. He told story after story, showing terrible pictures: a young Sri Lankan woman whose boyfriend had thrown acid on her when she refused to convert to Islam; another girl, tortured by her Muslim employers after the US bombing of Iraq. Another example, then another: Christians attacked by Muslims, Hindus, communists—but mostly, over and over, by Muslims. To an outside observer, many of the stories seemed to be more about personal conflict and psychopathology than systematic persecution, but Candelin’s goal was to do exactly what he did: show damaged people, faces and bodies scarred, and describe the Muslims who had done these things to them.

Candelin was a remarkably effective speaker, who carefully sprinkled his horror stories with other, more encouraging ones. He had great comic timing, a zealot’s energy, and in the end a hopeful vision: the persecuted always win, because their suffering is righteous, and they will live and die with God.

The lecture was not a spectacle presented only for the sake of Europeans or Americans, to incite pity for “others.” It was given to an audience of evangelicals from all over the world—a small group, but a sampling of the global evangelical community that was now rooted as much in the global South as in Europe and the United States. For these attendees, the very fact of sitting together, seeing the images of torture and destruction suffered by fellow believers, offered a form of community building. There was a border-spanning power worked by visions of the body in pain.

The function of these performances showcasing persecution is often ambiguous. Many, as we have seen, consolidate a vision of Muslims massed against Christians, who are their competitors and their victims. In others, as in the Voice of the Martyrs video, there is an additional element as the bodies of brown and black non-Americans are presented in their “to-be-looked-at-ness”—an indicator of their continuing powerlessness. Sometimes, however, these performances lead to increased commitments to forms of global social justice. Younger evangelicals, in particular, have turned to evangelical popular culture as a site of political education that can, at times, transform Christian-centric visions of persecution
into something larger. In the late 1990s, for example, the Christian rock band Jars of Clay was galvanized by news of Christian persecution. At the time, they were a band with a mainstream following and a few Grammy awards behind them. Their work was typical of much Christian music: apolitical, mildly countercultural, focused on loving Jesus. With their “narrow worldview,” band leader David Haseltine later wrote, they hadn’t realized that “there is a world beyond the safety of our insular church culture.”

Then Haseltine read an article about Christian persecution in the Sudan:

I had seen the pictures of torture victims [before]. I had read the reports of Christian women and children sold into slavery. I have been confronted with the tales of murder, rape, and starvation. But all I knew were stories that seemed to fill that morbid curiosity that draws us to car wrecks and real-life TV shows. These people were not real to me. They were not brothers and sisters.57

In the spring of 2000, having met up with one of the leaders of the antipersecution movement, several members of the group went on a trip to Vietnam and China, where they met with underground Christian groups.58 They came back deeply concerned about the “persecuted Church.” They spoke out in interviews, and they worked with Brother Andrew to revise God’s Smugglers into a gorgeous new volume, The Narrow Road, complete with a CD containing a new Jars of Clay song and a photo gallery. They held a benefit concert for Amnesty International and began taking up a collection at their concerts for persecuted Christians.59 In interviews, the band spoke with what seemed to be deep admiration for the people they visited: “Every experience I had there caused my faith to be shaken and my eyes opened to a big God....These people live in countries where God’s provision is all they have to rely on. As an American, I can’t say I’ve ever been in that position.”60 The writings, interviews, and popular culture productions by Jars of Clay were one indication of what was in fact an impressive expansion in popular culture and intellectual discourse, in which the idea of “persecuted Christians” was linked to a larger understanding of the reality of life for people in the global South. As I discuss in the conclusion, this was not the end of the story; there were even more changes ahead for these young men—and for evangelicals in general.

Additionally, some evangelicals took the antipersecution message of their campaigns very much to heart when it came to other, more controversial political issues. When the atrocities committed by US military personnel at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were revealed in May 2004, the descriptions of the violence done to detainees, and the stunning images of bodies in pain, resonated with the stories and visual culture of the persecuted Christians movement. For almost twenty years, those human rights stories had been deeply integrated into the political discourse of American
evangelicals. It was perhaps no surprise, then—but it was nonetheless
striking—that six months after the Abu Ghraib scandal broke, Christianity
Today ran a cover story: “5 Reasons Why Torture Is Always Wrong; And
Why There Should Be No Exceptions.” The story opened with descriptions
of three people being tortured: one electrocuted, one asphyxiated, a third
man humiliated in a bra and thong. It ended with a denunciation that
brought “rights talk” to bear at home:

[W]e do not want to call torture what it is. We do not want to
expose our policies, our prisons, or our prisoners to public view. We
deny that we are torturing, or we deny that our prisoners are really
prisoners. When pushed against the wall, we remind one another
how evil the enemy is. We give every evidence of the kind of self-
deception that is characteristic of a descent into sin.51

At about this time, a group of evangelical intellectuals and activists be-
gan the two-year process of drafting “An Evangelical Declaration against
Torture,” issued in March 2007. David Gushee was the primary au-
thon; other drafters of the declaration included evangelical liberals Brian
McLaren and Ron Sider. Still others, however, were moderate conserva-
tives like David Neff, editor of Christianity Today, Rebecca Hestenes, the
minister at large for World Vision, and professors at several evangelical
theological seminaries. “We write this declaration to affirm our support
for detainee human rights and our opposition to any resort to torture,”
the group asserted. Basing its argument against torture on a human rights
ethic and a commitment to the “sanctity of life,” the declaration insisted
that “human rights places a shield around people, even when (especially
when) our hearts cry out for vengeance.”52

Complexities: The Sudan Peace Act

The 1998 IRFA provided for an Office of International Religious Freedom
at the State Department, but it also mandated formation of the Commiss-
ion on International Religious Freedom. From the beginning, there were
complaints that the commission was dominated by evangelicals and that it
made the persecution of Christians its primary policy agenda.53 When the

The activism on Sudan was exemplary of the multilayered politics of the
movement after 1998; its complexities make clear how the commitment
to universal human rights, which opened up new worlds for evangelicals in some areas, could also be used—sometimes by evangelicals and sometimes by others—to frame specific political agendas. Human rights politics and anti-Islamic politics were, at times, intimately intertwined. And we see, again, how protecting Christians sometimes pitted an activist base against more “realist” Republican policymakers.

In 2002, the United States passed the Sudan Peace Act, which pressed the Bush administration to pressure Khartoum to come to an agreement with the southern rebels. That pressure was key to bringing about the peace accords with the South, finalized in 2005, which ended a devastating twenty-year civil war and (mostly) stopped ongoing attacks against civilians in the South. For decades, starting in the mid-1980s, a multifaceted and multiparty civil war had wracked Sudan as a series of more or less Islamist governments tried to extend their authority over the South, an area rich in resources, particularly oil. With various degrees of single-mindedness, Khartoum’s leaders also attempted to impose shari’a law on a population that was almost entirely Christian and/or practitioners of traditional African religions. Starting in the 1990s, the Southern People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) became the de facto government of much of southern Sudan, although various factions also engaged in sometimes deadly infighting. The people of the South paid dearly in the course of the war, with estimates as high as two million dead from war, famine, and disease. (The war in the South is separate from the more recent conflict in Darfur. They are related in some ways, but the parties and the stakes are distinct.)

For many evangelicals, the passage of the Sudan Peace Act and the subsequent pressure placed on Khartoum was the key victory of their movement, and indeed the peace there has been mostly successful and, while fragile, has held up remarkably well. In January 2011, Sudan, under pressure from the United States and others in the international community, held a referendum in which South Sudan voted to secede from the rest of Sudan and form an independent country, with that fact accomplished on 9 July 2011.

The problem with the US religious freedom movement’s activism on Sudan was that many evangelical media and political organizations engaged a complicated political situation in a simplistic way, framing it as religious war fought in racial terms. Their task, as they saw it, was to raise awareness that “Arab Muslims” in the North were oppressing “black Christians” from the South—destroying their villages, murdering the men, and taking the women and children as slaves. It is true that, in some areas, Arab-speaking tribes crossed into the South (particularly in the region of Bahr al-Ghazal), destroying villages and abducting women and children into forced labor—slavery—in the North. And there is no question that an increasingly dictatorial government in the North was violently aggressive...
against non-Muslims, southerners, and ultimately the Muslim but agricultural peoples of Darfur.

In a situation where oil, resources, communal identities, and struggles for political representation were fully in play, some evangelicals explicitly and enthusiastically embraced the idea that Sudan was the exemplar of a larger “clash of civilizations” between the West and Islam, as well as an instance of “white” Arabs from the North attacking black “Africans” in the South. Southern Sudan was the staging ground, a zone of conflict between what one activist called the “jihad warriors” and Christian believers.64 The idea of jihad was not foreign to the Khartoum government, but the identities of the antagonists in this conflict could not be accurately mapped using American terms. The framing of this conflict as Arab Muslim versus African Christian was what mobilized many American Christians into the fight on Sudan, but the designations themselves were deeply problematic. The category of “black Christian,” for example, ignored the reality that many of the people in the South were not Christian. And their “blackness” was generally defined by language or region, not by “race” in any Western sense.

The racialized and Christianized moral maps of Americans involved not only a misreading of the identities of the antagonists but also a simplification of the multiple concrete political issues at stake. The southern rebels had often disagreed on a number of issues, including about whether they wanted independence or simply more participation in the national government. They were certainly determined to get a greater share of the profits from oil, as well as a level of autonomy from Islamic law; both provisions were ultimately built into the peace agreement signed in 2005. At that time, John Garang, then head of the Southern People’s Liberation Army, was made vice president of Sudan. He was later killed in a plane crash, but the SPLA retained representation in the government for some time. It was only after years of fruitless attempts at reaching an acceptable power-sharing agreement, and with the increasing aggression of the government of Omar Bashir in Darfur and in the South, that the SPLA leadership moved entirely away from a “one Sudan” policy.65

But the specter of racial slavery galvanized many Americans, including secular observers like Nicholas Kristof, who saw in the modern conflict a stark reminder of US history. They refused to stand silently by in the face of what they understood as a horrific repetition of a historic evil. African American leaders like Joe Madison (a talk show host in DC) and Gloria White-Hammond (a minister in Boston) traveled to South Sudan, usually with the Swiss-based organization Christian Solidarity International, to perform dramatic and often emotionally powerful “slave redemptions.” That is, members of the team arranged with a “trader” to “buy back” slaves who had been taken to the North. This practice was controversial; some observers, including the Washington Office on Africa, argued that it
actually created a market for people who could then be sold back. Others believed that the process was often fraudulent and that the activists were “buying” people who had never left their villages, with the money going into the SPLA’s war chest. But Christian Solidarity International and other organizations insisted that they had a well-developed system to protect against both potential problems.  

More significant, perhaps, was the visceral power of such images; the reports back home helped to frame the politics of Sudan in terms that resonated profoundly with the history of racial slavery in the United States. The conflict in Sudan thus also became, for some white evangelicals, a calling card for a certain kind of racial liberalism. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and one of the country’s best-known evangelists (he led a prayer at both Bush inaugurations), made Sudan one of his key issues. Franklin Graham is far more conservative, theologically and politically, than his father, but writing in the Wall Street Journal in 2000, he took a strong stance on the issue of prejudice, arguing that both anti-Christian bias and racism were the source of the US government’s unwillingness to more fully support the rebels in the South. Graham argued that “the Muslim government is waging a brutal war against Christians.” He went on: “Why is the United States not responding in Sudan when the West did act on behalf of the Muslims in the [former] Yugoslavia?” Perhaps Christians were being ignored. Or maybe the hesitation was due to racism: “are the lives of Europeans more valuable than those of Africans?” Graham asked.  

Whatever the actual complexities of the situation, US evangelicals’ representations of the conflict in Sudan were remarkably potent, combining as they did the discourse of persecution and the politics of race. Paul Marshall, author of Their Blood Cries Out and a Fellow at Freedom House, was an important source of expert testimony on the conflict in the Sudan and elsewhere. He consistently argued that Sudan was just one example of a larger trend: Vietnam was persecuting Christians, and Iraq’s insurgents were engaged in anti-Christian “ethnic cleansing.” As Marshall wrote in an editorial, these were all fronts in a larger war against “Islamofascism.”  

Sudan activists feared that their moral values were always in danger of being compromised by realpolitik. And, indeed, after September 11 the Bush administration tried to suspend discussion of the Sudan Peace Act in order to enlist Khartoum in the war on terror. The administration was unsuccessful in stopping the passage of the law, but the conflict between the activists and the White House over how best to fight “militant Islam” was one indication of the ongoing fissures on foreign policy among conservatives. As with the IRFA debates, some social conservatives were pitted against free-market conservatives and the business community. Republican representative Spencer Bachus of Alabama proposed an amendment that would have forced non-US oil companies that did business in Sudan...
to be taken off the US stock exchange. (US-based companies were already under sanctions.) Bachus and the Christian-based Sudan movement took aim at the presumption that globalizing capital could make its own morality-free zone. “When you have to make a choice between dollars and lives,” Bachus said, “you choose lives.”

The Bachus amendment was not included in the final Sudan Peace Act.

The Sudan movement intensified the evangelical discourse on Islam as a threat and the self-representation of American Christians who saw “themselves” (in the form of Christians in Sudan or elsewhere) as persecuted. At the same time, it engaged white and black evangelicals together in new ways to help push for a peace accord. And it became one venue in which evangelicals began to redefine themselves as multiracial, socially conscious, and “newly” internationalist.

Conclusion: But Where Are the Liberals?

Starting in the 1980s, US evangelicals began to pay a great deal more attention to their role within a global community of believers. As part of that recognition, they embraced and negotiated a commitment to international human rights—a commitment that sometimes challenged, and sometimes enhanced, their simultaneous sense of a specific commitment to protecting other Christians. In its globalized form, particularly, the persecuted Christians movement marked both a fearful sense of embattlement and an expansive dream of freedom.

Elizabeth Castelli argues that religion (a category whose capacious parameters are part of its power) can serve as “a critical theory of suffering.”

The contours of that theory are up for negotiation in different contexts, of course. The cultural work of religion-in-practice, Castelli points out, is not fixed, but “generates a range of responses to suffering—urging its endurance, providing practices for its elimination, creating frameworks for its interpretation.” There are, she says, two different ways in which religion, violence, and suffering interpret each other. We see,

- on the one hand, religion’s capacity to illuminate the suffering, to focus our attention on it, to provide practices for tending to it, and for critiquing the conditions that bring it into being—on the other hand, religion’s capacity to rationalize suffering, to inscribe it with divine sanction, to blunt the impulse to alleviate it.

Beautiful and helpful as this formulation is, its “on the one hand/on the other hand” structure does not do full justice to the complex interplay of narratives, the simultaneous claims of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, and the intersecting gestures of solidarity and universality.
in the messy lived-ness of this particular historical moment. The movement to protect persecuted Christians inscribed suffering with divine sanction and proposed practices for critiquing the conditions that brought that suffering into being. And, in the process, some people, sometimes, constructed a foundation for a kind of humanitarian and social justice activism that ultimately transcended a focus on Christians-first.

Consider what happened to Jars of Clay. The band had made their first trip to Vietnam and China under the auspices of a conservative Bible-distribution group; they returned as advocates for persecuted Christians. Shortly after, bandleader Haseltine was invited on a trip to tour parts of Africa (including Uganda and Malawi); later, the band went to South Africa and elsewhere. At that point, they came back galvanized about the issue of HIV/AIDS, which they also understood immediately as connected to structural economic problems. They also realized that people in Africa suffered from other, water-borne diseases, and that their fundamental needs included (among other things) clean water. The group founded their own charity, the Blood:Water Mission, whose name evoked profound Christian symbolism, and whose work focused on the quotidian tasks of well building and AIDS education. They also got involved with the ONE campaign, Bono’s global antipoverty program, and later joined a larger group of evangelicals who prayed for aid for Africa at the G-8 summit in 2005. Soon, Haseltine started speaking out politically as well. “Over the years, we really got tired of being lumped in with so many things we didn’t believe,” he told a reporter. “As the political process seems to be narrowing in on ‘Republicans are all Christians, Christians are all Republicans,’ we decided we don’t really want to fall into those categories.”75 These days, instead of focusing on persecuted Christians at their concerts, Jars of Clay ask their audiences to contribute to their work for HIV-AIDS programs and clean water projects.

American evangelical Christians are afraid: they believe that Christians around the world are persecuted, that Islam is a global threat, and that their fundamental values are under assault by a secular culture. American evangelicals are fearless: they are assertive and self-confident, energized, and powerful enough to enact legislation that promotes their particular vision of international human rights. These concomitant realities do not form a contradiction so much as a mutually enabling construction: in the last three decades, evangelical fears of persecution have become the impetus for a remarkable surge of activism. The moral geographies of the new evangelical internationalism are in flux. They contain both the seeds of global solidarity and the threat of increasing hostility. Whatever the future holds, however, this history should make one thing clear: we can no longer analyze evangelical politics through the lens of the Moral Majority. A new world has come, and the embodied, border-spanning faith of evangelicals is shaping it for us all.