

CHRISTIAN MARTYRDOM: A GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHIC ASSESSMENT

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An opening scene from the trial of Joan of Arc

The Passion of Joan of Arc

The Passion of Joan of Arc is a [silent film](#) produced in France in 1928 based on the [record of the trial of Joan of Arc](#). The film was directed by [Carl Theodor Dreyer](#) and stars [Renée Jeanne Falconetti](#). Her portrayal is widely considered one of the most astonishing performances ever committed to film, and it would remain her final cinematic role. Dreyer's method of directing his actors pushed Falconetti to emotional collapse. The original version of the film was lost for decades after a fire destroyed the master negative and only variations of Dreyer's second version were available. In 1981 an employee of the Kikemark Sykehus mental institution in [Oslo](#) found several film canisters in a janitor's closet that were labeled as being The Passion of Joan of Arc. Composer Richard Einhorn produced a soundtrack with Anonymous 4 as the voice of Joan.

David B. Barrett (1927-2011)

David Barrett pioneered the quantitative study of martyrdom. He died last year at age 83. Barrett told me the story of when he was invited to speak to a group of wealthy industrialists. They asked him what the most effective means of evangelism was so that they could invest their money to hurry up the evangelization of the world. He responded, "We have been engaged in in-depth research on this subject, and we think the most effective means might be Christian martyrdom." There was an awkward silence until one industrialist screwed up the courage and asked, "Dr. Barrett, could you tell us the second most effective means of evangelism?"

World Christian Trends by David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson (William Carey Library)

World Christian Encyclopedia, 2nd edition, by David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson (Oxford University Press)

Atlas of Global Christianity edited by Todd M. Johnson and Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh University Press)

A quick tour of global Christian demographics 2,000 years, 100 years

This table appears in the Atlas showing our estimates for the number of Christians in each UN region from the time of Christ to 2100. Barrett first produced these for the World Christian Encyclopedia in 1982 and I have updated and revised these since.

The statistical center of gravity of global Christianity over the past 2,000 years is mapped. One can readily see that in the modern period there has been a decisive southern shift. At the dawn of the 20th century the statistical center of global Christianity was near Madrid, Spain. In fact, at that time, over 80% of all Christians were European or North American. By 2010 the statistical center had shifted well south of Timbuktu in Mali. This 100-year shift is the most dramatic in Christian history.

The southern shift can also be put in the context of the entire history of Christianity. The graph reveals that Christians of the Global South were in the majority for the first 900 years of Christian history. European domination of global Christianity can be seen as a recent phase of world Christianity that has now passed. Since 1981, Southern Christians are, once again, in the majority.

Summary statement

Throughout Christian history, across all traditions of Christianity, and in every part of the world, some 70 million Christians have been murdered for their faith and hence are called martyrs.

Origin of the word 'martyr'

The English word 'martyr' is derived from the Greek *martyhs*, which carries the meaning 'witness' in English. In New Testament usage, it meant 'a witness to the resurrection of Christ'. This witness resulted so frequently in death that by the end of the first century *martyhs* had come to mean a Christian who witnessed to Christ *by his or her death*. This enlarged meaning has become the accepted norm throughout church history.

Definition of terms

For a quantitative analysis of martyrdom, Christian martyrs are defined as 'believers in Christ who have lost their lives prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility'. This definition has 5 essential elements that can be stated as follows:

1. '*Believers in Christ*'. These individuals come from the entire Christian community of Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, Marginal Christians, and Independents. In AD 2010, over 2.2 billion individuals can be deemed Christians, and since the time of Christ over 8.5 billion have believed in Christ.
2. '*Lost their lives*'. The definition is restricted to Christians actually put to death, for whatever reason.
3. '*Prematurely*'. Martyrdom is sudden, abrupt, unexpected, unwanted.
4. '*In situations of witness*'. 'Witness' in this definition does not mean only public testimony or proclamation concerning the Risen Christ. It refers to the entire lifestyle and way of life of the Christian believer, whether or not he or she is actively proclaiming at the time of being killed.
5. '*As a result of human hostility*'. This excludes deaths through accidents, crashes, earthquakes and other 'acts of God', illnesses, or other causes of death, however tragic.

It is important to note that this definition omits a criterion considered essential by many churches in their martyrologies—'heroic sanctity', by which is meant saintly life and fearless stance. Those are certainly essential for a martyrology if it is to have compelling educational and inspirational value for church members under persecution, and in particular for new converts. Heroic sanctity is, however, not essential to the demographic definition because many Christians have been killed shortly after their conversions and before they had any chance to develop Christian character, holiness, or courage.

Martyrs in other religions

Jewish martyrs

Rabbi Kaplan states, "One who is killed because he is Jewish, even though he is not given any choice, is considered a martyr." Kaplan goes on to state, "Martyrdom thus establishes the veracity of our faith more dynamically than anything else, since one must accept the Torah as absolute Truth to be martyred for it. This commandment applies to all Jews, even children."

On the question of whether or not Jewish victims of the Holocaust are considered martyrs there seems to be consensus that they are. In many memorials, this language is specifically used without differentiation between the victims.

Muslim martyrs

According to A. Ezzati, "The word *shahada* means to 'see', to 'witness', to 'testify', to 'become a model and paradigm'. *Shahada* therefore literally means to 'see', to 'witness', and to 'become a model'. A *shahid* is the person who sees and witnesses, and he is therefore the witness, as if the martyr witnesses and sees the truth and fight and give up his life for the truth, and thus to become a martyr. In this way, and by his struggle and sacrifice for the sake of the truth, he becomes a model, a paradigm, and an example for others, worthy of being copied, and worthy of being followed."

Some observations from David Cook's *Martyrdom in Islam* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

"Another type of martyr is one who is tortured or killed because of his or her identification with the Muslim community, but not specifically because of his or her beliefs." (21)

"Yet another type of martyrdom is the fighting martyr. This type of martyr is almost unique to Islam, for the most part. Although both Christianity and Buddhism allow for martyrs to be aggressive in certain ways, such as in actively attempting to persuade people to join the faith or undertaking dangerous missions from which there is the possibility that the missionary might not survive, the element of a fighting martyr is missing in both of these other missionary religions." (23)

At the beginning of the Battle of Badr, Muhammad reportedly stated, "By the one who holds the soul of Muhammad in His hand, every man who fights today and is killed, demonstrating patience, seeking a reward from God, going forward without going backward God will take him into paradise." (23)

"Another group of martyrs, those who died by plague, is entirely new to the Islamic period...For the victims of plague or those exposed to it there arose the need to decide whether to stay in the afflicted region or to leave it...therefore plague victims have achieved martyrdom status." (28)

"Compared to either Judaism or Christianity, the number of Muslim martyrs forced to choose between conversion and death are few, and it is significant that even the writers of formal martyrologies cannot find more than a few examples." (30)

"The classical Muslim framework of martyrology is different from that of other faiths...The Muslim ideal for a martyr became that person—usually a man—who through his active choice sought out a violent situation (battle,

siege, guarding an unstable frontier, etc.) with pure intentions and was killed as a result of that choice.” (30)

In the hadith, especially later, there is a strong emphasis on achieving martyrdom outside the battlefield. One such tradition states, “There are seven categories of martyr other than being killed in the path of Allah [battle]. The one who dies of a stomach complaint is a martyr, the one who drowns is a martyr, the one who dies of plague is a martyr, the one who dies in a structural collapse is a martyr, the one who dies in a fire is a martyr, the one who dies of pleurisy, and the woman who dies in childbirth is a martyr.” (34)

On Sectarian martyrs

The “earlier group of martyrs are held in esteem by all Muslims, and for the most part died as a result of actions taken against them by non-Muslims or in battle against non-Muslims. But the sectarian martyrs—whether Sunni, Shi’ite or other—are those martyrs who are not accepted as martyrs by the entire Muslim community and for the most part were killed by those calling themselves Muslims.” (45)

This is complicated by the fact that “quite a number of traditions detail the idea that when a Muslim kills another Muslim, both are said to be in hell.” (46)

“Martyrs esteemed by a certain sect will often be demonized or held in contempt by its opponents, who may try to actively defame the memory of the deceased, destroy the relics of their bodies or act in other ways to diminish the importance of their martyrdom.” (47)

Contemporary martyrdom

In the Iraq-Iran war of 1980-1988, conservative estimates place the number of dead at over one million. The reason for this war probably has to do with oil but this has not stemmed the tide of martyrologies, especially in Farsi. Each side claims war fatalities as martyrs so it is easy to see that even in the modern period, Muslims who die in battle (even at the hand of other Muslims) are considered martyrs. (154)

Counting martyrs

The basic method for counting martyrs in Christian history is to list ‘martyrdom situations’ at particular points in time. A martyrdom situation is defined as ‘mass or multiple martyrdoms at one point in Christian history.’ It is then determined how many of the people killed in that situation fit the definition of martyr outlined above. (This is explained in more detail in *World Christian Trends*). Note that in any situation of mass deaths or killing of Christians, one does not automatically or necessarily define the entire total who have been killed as martyrs, but only that fraction whose deaths resulted from some form of Christian witness, individual or collective. We try to include estimates of the total number of Christians, the percentage that are martyrs and a rationale for each case.

One adjustment to the total is to include ‘background martyrs’ or those very small or isolated or individual situations. They cover cases where a Christian is killed as a result of human hostility but where the circumstances have nothing directly or immediately to do with organized Christianity.

Sectarian martyrs

Note that most Christians killed as alleged ‘heretics’ or ‘schismatics’ down the ages should correctly be included in demographic enumerations of martyrs. Joseph Smith and many other Mormons are Christian martyrs.

From odium fidei to odium ecclesia and beyond

In examining a list of Catholic workers killed in 2011, John Allen, Jr. reports, “Certainly, none of these cases fit the traditional definition of martyrdom, which require that someone be killed *in odium fidei* -- out of hatred for the faith. Even that standard, however, is being stretched these days. Pope John Paul II added martyrs killed *in odium ecclesiae*, out of hatred for the church, and many theologians believe martyrdom should include not only deaths for hatred of the faith, but also hatred of virtues essential to the faith. In any event, today’s risks are hardly limited to classic instances of martyrdom, but a wide variety of circumstances in which Christians are in harm’s way. Even if they’re not attacked for religious motives, their reasons for being in that spot are usually rooted in their faith.”

Children as martyrs

Note also that the definition of demographic martyrdom includes those children and infants who lose their lives along with adult martyrs. In Nagasaki, Japan, on November 24, 2008, 188 martyrs from the early 17th century were beatified. Eighteen were children under five. When asked about this, Cardinal Jose Saraiva Martins replied, “This is not the first time it has happened. Nowadays it is the criterion of the Congregation to accept as martyrs children killed in a context of religious persecution and belonging to a Christian community that includes adults, clearly

aware of the reason for their deaths. Among the new blesseds, then, in addition to the children we have entire Christian families. This underlines the fact that the Christian faith was lived deeply in those homes.” Thus many martyrs throughout Christian history have been children, even infants.

Martyrdom not exclusively an early Christian phenomenon

When most Christians hear the word ‘martyr’ they tend to think of the Roman persecution of early Christians. The *Ecclesia Martyrum* or Church of the Martyrs often is thought to refer only to the earliest period of church history, the 10 imperial Roman persecutions. This is not the case. Martyrdom is a consistent feature of church history and occurs in every Christian tradition and confession. One can see that all of the 10 largest martyrdom situations in Table 1 occurred in the second millennium of the Christian faith. The rate of martyrdom across the world throughout the ages has been a remarkably constant 0.8%. One out of every 120 Christians in the past has been martyred, or in the future is likely to so be.

Martyrdom situations examined

When we examine a list of martyrs down the ages, as comprehensive as is known today, some startling findings emerge. Table 1 provides a list of the 10 largest known martyrdom situations ranked by size. Note that over 20 million were martyred in Soviet prison camps and that well over half of the 70 million Christian martyrs were killed in the twentieth century alone.

Table 1. Top ten martyrdom situations in Christian history ranked by size

<i>Situation</i>	<i>Martyrs</i>
1. 1921–50, Christians die in Soviet prison camps	15,000,000
2. 1950–80, Christians die in Soviet prison camps	5,000,000
3. 1214, Genghiz Khan massacres Christians	4,000,000
4. 1358, Tamerlane destroys Nestorian church	4,000,000
5. 1929–37, Orthodox Christians killed by Stalin	2,700,000
6. 1560, Conquistadors kill millions of Amerindians	2,000,000
7. 1925, Soviets attempt to liquidate Roman Catholics	1,200,000
8. 1258, Baghdad captured in massacre by Hulaku Khan	1,100,000
9. 1214, Diocese of Herat sacked by Genghiz Khan	1,000,000
10. 1939, Nazis execute millions in death camps	1,000,000

Table 2 reveals that over half of all martyrs have been Orthodox Christians. One partial explanation for this is the vast anti-Christian empires throughout history centered in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Nonetheless, all Christian traditions have suffered martyrdom.

Table 2. Confessions of martyrs, totals from AD 33–2000

<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Martyrs</i>
Orthodox	43,000,000
Russian Orthodox	25,000,000
East Syrians (Nestorians)	12,800,000
Ukrainian Orthodox	4,000,000
Gregorians (Armenian Apostolic)	1,200,000
Roman Catholic	12,200,000
Catholics (before AD 1000)	900,000
Independents	3,500,000
Protestants	3,200,000
Anglicans	1,100,000
Marginal Christians	7,000
Other and background martyrs	7,000,000
Total all martyrs	70,000,000

As part of our study we identified the Christian vocations most likely to suffer martyrdom. These are, in order, bishops, evangelists, catechists, colporteurs, and foreign missionaries. (Academics is number 6!)

Table 3 reveals that even though state-ruling powers (atheists and others) are responsible for most martyrdom, closer examination of the entire list of martyrdom situations reveals that Christians themselves have been the persecutors responsible for martyring 5.5 million other Christians.

Table 3. Confessions of perpetrators of martyrdom, totals from AD 33-2000

<i>Persecutors responsible</i>	<i>Martyrs</i>
State ruling power	55,871,000
Atheists (overlap with above)	31,689,000
Muslims	9,121,000
Ethnoreligionists (animists)	7,469,000
Roman Catholics	5,171,000
Quasi-religionists	2,712,000
Buddhists (Mahayana)	1,651,000
Hindus	676,000
Zoroastrians (Parsis)	384,000
Eastern Orthodox	222,000
Other non-Christians	115,000
Other Christians	146,000
 SUBTOTALS:	
Non-Christian persecutors	63,882,000
Christian persecutors	5,538,000
Total all martyrs	69,420,000

Counting martyrs today

At the end of the twentieth century, two martyrdom situations stood above all the rest both in intensity and in sheer size: the massacre of Christians in southern Sudan and the genocide in Rwanda. While the Rwandan genocide was short-lived, the persecution of Christians during the civil war in Sudan was spread over two decades. Additional ongoing killings of Christians took place in Indonesia, India, China, Nigeria, and Mexico, to name a few better known situations.

The average number of Christian martyrs is calculated by summing the estimates of martyrs in martyrdom situations over the past ten years and dividing this number by ten. Therefore our estimate of 160,000 martyrs in the year 2000 was based on our formula of adding all the martyrs in martyrdom situations in the past ten years (1990–2000) and dividing this number by ten. Given the major situations in Rwanda and Sudan (as well as dozens of other smaller situations around the world), we estimated that there were approximately 1.6 million martyrs in the final decade of the twentieth century.

But what about the current ten-year period (2000–2010)? The Rwandan genocide was over by the mid-1990s, and the persecution of Christians in Sudan subsided after the peace agreement in early 2005. Based on this, one might expect our current estimates for martyrs to be substantially lower. New martyrdom situations, however, have arisen. The largest currently is in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where atrocious acts of violence began in the late 1990s and continue to the present. According to the International Rescue Committee, from 1998 to 2007 there were approximately 5.4 million excess deaths in the DRC. While some deaths are directly related to violence, most victims died from indirect causes, such as disease or starvation. These deaths occurred mainly in five insecure eastern provinces, and the vast majority of those killed in the DRC were Christians. Although not all their circumstances would be considered “situations of witness,” we estimate that a substantial proportion of those who died meet our definition of martyr.

While we are still collecting evidence of other martyrdom situations in the 2000–2010 period, we are confident that the number of martyrs over the ten years was approximately one million. Dividing this by ten, we arrive at our current figure of 100,000 per year.

Limitations of this model of counting martyrs

Defining and enumerating martyrs in the widest possible sense has both limitations and advantages over other methods. First of all, it is limited because it leaves out questions of quality, such as holy lifestyle (mentioned above)

or theological persuasion of Christian martyrs. Second, it reports on martyrdom from a purely demographic lens, leaving out thousands of fascinating stories and anecdotes. Fortunately, these are not in short supply in other publications.

Two advantages can also be highlighted here. First of all, due to extensive coding of martyrdom situations (available in *World Christian Trends*), it allows for a selective approach to the data. Questions such as “How many Roman Catholic martyrs were there in South America in the 19th century?” Second, this approach resists fragmentation by placing all Christian martyrs in the same global phenomenon.

Five factors impacting martyrdom today

1. The world is less religious in 2010 than in 1910 but more religious than in 1970.

In 1910, over 99% of the world’s population was religious. By 2010 this had fallen below 89%. But this analysis hides the fact that the high point for the nonreligious was around 1970, when almost 20% of the world’s population was either agnostic or atheist. The collapse of Communism in the late 20th century means that the world is more religious in 2010 than in 1970. Here I would recommend *God’s Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (Norton, 2011) by Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shaw.

2. Migration is increasing religious and ethnic diversity around the world.

200 million people are on the move today, carrying with them their cultural and religious backgrounds. At least 860 million have now settled permanently outside of their culture’s main country. I recommend Ian Goldin’s book *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped our World and Will Define the Future* (Princeton University Press, 2011). As the authors point out, never have so many people been on the move, and never have they been so unwelcome! *Faith on the Move*, a new study by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, focuses on the religious affiliation of international migrants, examining patterns of migration among seven major groups. “Migration, Religious Diasporas, and Religious Diversity: A Global Survey” by Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Bellofatto (*Mission Studies*, July 2012) focuses on the 859 million settled in diaspora.

3. Christianity is fragmented.

Christians are now found in nearly 43,000 denominations. These range in size from millions of members to fewer than 100 members and are listed for each of the world’s 232 countries in the *World Christian Database*. The individual Christian is located in these on this slide. The next slide shows three huts in which a man stranded on a desert isle has a home, a church, and the church he used to attend! Note that the vast majority of denominations are in the Independent and Protestant traditions. By 2025, there will likely be 55,000 denominations.

4. Christians and Muslims together could soon be 2/3s of the world’s population.

In 1800, 33% of the world’s population was either Christian or Muslim. Today, together they represent about 55% of the world’s population, or four billion people. By 2050 this percentage is expected to rise to 62% and by the end of the century it could be over 66%.

5. Christians are out of contact with Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Recent research reveals that as many as 86% of all Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists do not personally know a Christian. This has to be viewed negatively in light of the strong biblical theme of incarnation that is at the heart of Christian witness.

Note. This presentation was condensed from Part 4, ‘Martyrology’, in Barrett and Johnson, *World Christian Trends (WCT)*. The compilation of data on Christian martyrs in all countries over the 20 centuries of Christian history is found in two large tables in *WCT*: Table 4–10 describing 600 major martyrdom situations in 150 countries, AD 33–2000; and Table 4–11, ‘Alphabetical listing of 2,500 known Christian martyrs, AD 33–2000’. Country-by-country statistics of martyrdom can be found at www.worldchristiandatabase.org.

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