

The case for higher numbers of Christian martyrs
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The Center for the Study of Global Christianity estimates that more than 70 million Christians have been martyred over the last two millennia. More than half of these were in the 20th century under fascist and communist regimes. For the early 21st century, we estimate that 1 million Christians were killed over the 10-year period from 2000–2010, an average of approximately 100,000 Christians killed each year.

Here are six reasons why the numbers of Christian martyrs are large.

1. We use a broad definition, not a narrow one. 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 five essential elements:
 - a. “Believers in Christ”. These individuals come from the entire Christian community of Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants, Anglicans, and Independents. In 2010, there were over 2.2 billion individuals who were Christians. Cumulatively, since the time of Christ, over 8.5 billion people have been Christians.
 - b. “Lost their lives”. The definition of “martyr” is restricted to Christians who have actually been put to death, for whatever reason.
 - c. “Prematurely”. Martyrdom is typically sudden, abrupt, unexpected, and unwanted.
 - d. “In situations of witness”. “Witness” in this definition does not mean only public testimony or proclamation concerning belief in Jesus. It refers to the entire lifestyle and way of life of the Christian, whether or not he or she is actively proclaiming at the time of death. It is here that some might take exception to our methodology. That is, persons who are acting out of Christian conviction (such as in defying unjust orders from police or soldiers, or trying to restrain mob violence) and are killed as a result might not be making an explicit verbal proclamation of their faith at their time of death. However, they are counted as martyrs to the extent that their actions in such situations are a testimony to their faith.
 - e. “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. Heroic sanctity is not essential to the demographic definition because many Christians have been killed shortly after their conversions and before they have had any chance to develop particular character, holiness, or courage.

2. We focus more on the perspective of the Christians being killed than on the motives of the persecutors. Some would insist that in order for a situation to be considered martyrdom, the persecutor needs to have solely religious motives for killing Christians or that Christians are singled out exclusively because of their faith. John Allen, Jr, in his book *The Global War on Christians*, dedicates a chapter to this, calling it a “myth.” He states that, “to grasp whether there was a religious or Christian component to a given incident, we need to understand not only why someone committed the act but also why the target was in a position where it could happen.” He goes on to illustrate the problem by examining the well-known martyrdom of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was killed for his involvement in a plot to assassinate Hitler. What is important in Bonhoeffer’s case is not the technical reason for his death but his own witness about why he stood up to the Nazi regime. Many famous martyrs in Christian history were killed for reasons other than because they were Christians. Instead, we ask whether or not they were in a “situation of witness.”

3. While paying attention to individual martyrs, we focus on groups of martyrs. Many Christians think that martyrs are solitary individuals put on trial who refuse to recant and are eventually put to death in a public setting. By our definition, the vast majority of martyrs do not endure this kind of public

display; many are killed without warning. Children, even infants, are considered martyrs by most churches, further underlining the often-anonymous nature of martyrdom.

4. Other religions also use broad definitions. Most Jewish scholars consider the victims of the Holocaust as Jewish martyrs. Muslims include millions of people who have lost their lives in battles defending their faith. Even Muslims who die fighting other Muslims (Sunni-Shia conflicts) have been considered martyrs in recent years, at least by their sect or tradition (reminiscent of 16th-century Catholic or Protestant martyrs).

5. Mass killings and genocide are closely related to Christian martyrdom. This is particularly true when ethnicity is tightly interwoven with religious identity. One example is the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the 20th century. A plaque at the Armenian Martyrs Memorial Monument in Montebello, California, reads, "This Monument, erected by Americans of Armenian descent, is dedicated to the 1,500,000 Armenian victims of the Genocide perpetrated by the Turkish Government, 1915–1921, and to men of all nations who have fallen victim to crimes against humanity." One might argue that the Armenians were killed because of their ethnicity, not because of any religious profession, but Orthodox Christianity was an inseparable part of Armenian identity for most of the victims. In that sense, Armenian Christian men, women, and children who were killed as they went about their daily lives died as much due to their faith as to their ethnicity.

6. The basic method for counting martyrs 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 outlined above.

Martyrdom in the DRC

The largest martyrdom situation today is in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where atrocious acts of violence began in the late 1990s and have continued to the present. According to the International Rescue Committee, from 1998 to 2007 approximately 5.4 million excess deaths occurred in the DRC. While some deaths are directly related to violence, most victims died from indirect causes, such as disease or starvation. The vast majority of those killed in the DRC are Christians, and are mainly in five insecure eastern provinces. Although not all their circumstances would be considered "situations of witness," we estimate that a substantial proportion of those who have died meet our definition of martyr. Rather than being easily identifiable anti-Christian government officials, the persecutors include at least twenty different rebel groups and nine government armies that seemed to have no clear cause or objective. Our definition of martyrdom, however, does not focus exclusively on the persecutor's motives, but rather also on the context of the Christian community. Rebels, for example, often single out Christians because they do not cooperate with malicious plans to expand rebel territory. Such Christians, when they are killed as a result of actions springing from their faith, fit our definition of "martyrs", whether or not those actions were accompanied by explicit proclamations of their faith.

Jason Stearns documents killings in his book, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011). Soldiers, rebels, and others have gone indiscriminately through the countryside killing people, most of whom are Christians going about their daily lives. They would often be in churches (itself a form of witness) at the time of a massacre. He concludes early in his narrative, "No thorough investigation has ever been carried out. Most of the victims don't have graves, monuments, or even a simple mention in a document or a report to commemorate them."

More details on counting Christian martyrs are found in Part 4, "Martyrology," in Barrett and Johnson, *World Christian Trends* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001). The compilation of data on Christian martyrs in all countries over the 20 centuries of Christian history is found in two large tables: 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".