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## Thriving Under the Sword How the Somali Church Overcomes the Challenges of Persecution

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### Abstract

Open Doors describes the church in Somalia as the 3<sup>rd</sup> most persecuted church in the world after North Korea and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> While the persecution against the Somali church has been on the rise since 1991, the church has proven its resilience by thriving during intense persecutions including dispossessions, shootings, beatings, poisonings, and beheadings.<sup>2</sup> Christians being targeted for their faith is as old as the faith itself. Christians in Somalia meet in house-churches and keep a low profile because of the hostile environment in which they live. While these Christians are wise, diligent, and resilient, they sometimes lose lives and properties because of their faith. Somali Islamists have in the past confiscated Christian farms.<sup>3</sup> Al-Shabab Islamist group discovered and destroyed an underground Christian library which the church also used as a Bible school.<sup>4</sup> In a homily he preached in 2014, Pope Francis reiterated that “[t]he Church grows thanks to the blood of the martyrs. This is the beauty of martyrdom. It begins with witness, day after day, and it can end like Jesus, the first martyr, the first witness, the faithful witness: with blood.”<sup>5</sup> There is ever-increasing evidence that the Somali Church is growing despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges of persecution it regularly faces. The oppression Somali Christians endure necessitates theological, missional and ecclesiastical reflection. Disciples of Christ suffering because of righteousness is ingrained in the Scriptures (Matthew 5:10). Biblically speaking, persecution is the rule and not the exception in the lives of Christ-like Christians (2 Timothy 3:12). The Bible considers a blessing when the Disciples of Christ are persecuted for their faith (Luke 6:22). Early Christians praised and thanked God for considering them worthy to be persecuted because of Christ (Acts 5:41). Peter calls commendable when Christians suffer unjustly because they are mindful of God (1 Peter 2:19). God enables Christians to endure and sometimes thrive in the persecution because of His grace. The intimate relationship between the martyr and God is best illustrated by St. Ignatius when he wrote, “[y]et he that is near to the sword is nearer to God.”<sup>6</sup> A proper theology of persecution, therefore, helps the targeted Somali Christians, not only survive but, flourish during severe persecutions. This may explain why the Church often grows in world areas, like Iran, Afghanistan and China, where persecution against Christians is the norm.

**Keywords:** Somali church, persecution, resilience, challenges, Islam

## Introduction

This work intends to examine how the persecuted church in Islamic Somalia overcomes the challenges of persecution and thrives in the face of unspeakable atrocities perpetrated by Muslims, both radicals and moderates. Radical Islam is the driving force behind the killings of Christians in Somalia. The most potent Islamist group in Somalia is the al-Qaeda affiliated al Shabab militant group which claimed the killings of so many Christians in Somalia. While al Shabab is a force for evil all the time, when it comes to their treatment of the Somali Christians, the Somali clan system is often beneficial to the church. Somali Christians who hail from major clans often receive the traditional clan protection bestowed upon all members in their home turf whether they are saints or sinners.

Radical Islamists in Somalia often target the leaders of the church with the assumption that once the leadership is eliminated, the church would collapse. Despite the enhanced persecution risks Somali Church leaders face, they continue serving the church with divine diligence. In John 10:11, Jesus is described as the good Shepherd because a shepherd never abandons his sheep. In Psalm 23, God is portrayed as a Shepherd who protects His people. The persecuted Somali Church leaders have consistently proven they are reliable shepherds for the community of faith. While shepherds are often the first ones to be targeted when persecution breaks out, the sheep are not spared either. Despite the calculated tactics radical Islamists employ, the Somali Church continues growing. While exegeting Acts 8:1–8, John Piper states, “that God rules over the sufferings of the church and causes them to spread spiritual power and the joy of faith in a lost world.”<sup>7</sup> The violence persecutors assume would eradicate the church is often its lifeline.

Islam, a monotheistic 7<sup>th</sup>-century religion, adapted much of its sacred scriptures from the Judeo-Christian faith. However, radical Muslims shed the blood of so many innocent Christians in the name of Allah. The Sharia law is derived from multiple Islamic sources, including the Qur'an, Hadith, *ijma* (consensus), *qiyas* (analogy based on legal reasoning). Islamic law directly derived from the Qur'an and the Hadith are considered the most reliable. Sharia laws are divided into five categories: *Fard* (something *required*), *Mandub* (something *recommended*), *Mubah* (something *permissible*), *Makruh* (something *despised*), and *Haram* (something *forbidden*)<sup>8</sup> Sharia covers worship, dietary laws, slaughtering of animals, family life, crime and punishment. The Sharia law, in its totality, inflicts so much harm on Christians whether they were born to Christian or Muslim parents. The *murtad*, an apostate who left Islam, is seen to have committed treason and the Sharia law prescribes severe punishment for such a person.

## Persecution of Christians in the Muslim World

The survival of an Islamic state and its application of Sharia law depends on its subjects remaining Muslims; otherwise, such a state is never viable. Islam divides apostates into two categories: *Murtad fitri*: an apostate who was born to Muslim parents and *Murtad milli*: an apostate who was born to non-Muslim parents but later embraced Islam. In Shia Islam, the first is not given a chance to return to Islam but is executed on the spot.<sup>9</sup> However, the second is offered only one opportunity to re-

embrace Islam; if he accepts, he lives, if he rejects, he dies by the sword.<sup>10</sup> Generally speaking, in Sunni Islam, *murtad fitri* and *murtad milli* are not distinguished; they are both executed if their apostasy is confirmed. None of these would be given a chance to return to the fold of Islam. Female apostates, whether *fitri* or *milli*, face the same judgment, dying by the sword and without an invitation to return to Islam. Abu Hanifah, however, rejects the killing of a female apostate (whether *fitri* or *milli*) opting for imprisonment until she re-embraces Islam.<sup>11</sup>

When Prophet Muhammad conquered Mecca in the 8<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, he extended general amnesty to all the non-Muslims in the city except 7-11 persons whom the prophet named and shamed by saying all “should be killed even if they are found holding on to the cover of the Ka’bah!”<sup>12</sup> One of the people marked by the prophet to be executed is a *murtad milli* (former convert to Islam who later abandoned it) named Abdullah bin Sa’d bin Abi Sarah. Abdullah was the prophet’s Qur’an scribe and a foster brother of Uthman bin Affan, the son-in-law of the prophet and the third Caliph of the Muslim community.<sup>13</sup> Abdullah visited the prophet in Medina, embraced Islam and then returned to Mecca and deserted the young fledgling religion. However, Uthman defied the prophet’s order and sheltered his foster brother. Uthman later took Abdullah to the prophet and interceded for him. The prophet kept silent expecting one of his companions would strike Abdullah dead; when no one carried out his previous execution order, the prophet pardoned Abdullah and scolded the companions with him:

Was there not among you any intelligent man who, when he saw me not accepting his pledge, would get up and kill him? They said: “O Messenger of Allah, we do not know what is in your mind; why did you not hint to us with (a movement of) your eyes?” He said: “It is not appropriate for a Prophet to have treacherous eyes.”<sup>14</sup>

This hadith describes the fate of a *murtad milli*. One would be hard-pressed to find an example of an adult *murtad fitri* during the prophet’s lifetime. Almost all adult Muslims during the prophet’s lifetime were from a non-Muslim background. Therefore, the vast majority of those born to Muslim parents would be minors at the conquest of Mecca or very young adults around the prophet’s death. If Islam treats the *murtad milli* in such a violent fashion, imagine the fate of the *murtad fitri*. Almost all adult Somali Christians are from a Muslim background and fall under the despised Islamic category of the *murtad fitri*.

### **Tertullian Was Right**

The most well-known of Tertullian’s works is the *Apologeticus* containing apologetic and polemic oratory to defend Christians from the religious persecution they were facing. This treatise was written in AD 197 and contained the most famous quote of Tertullian “The more we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed” or its poetic adaptation, “the blood of Christians is the seed of the Church.”<sup>15</sup>

Some of the most publicised martyrdoms of the Somali Christians include the gruesome decapitation of Mansur Mohamed in 2008, a local church evangelist and humanitarian worker.<sup>16</sup> Mansur was paraded before militants' cameras, his hands tied behind his back. One of the militants read from the Qur'an to justify the impending repugnant murder. After a lengthy Islamic sermon, the innocent Christian was slowly beheaded with a small blunt knife, perhaps to make the pain last a little bit longer. One of the militants mockingly sharpens the knife on Mansur's head. The martyrdom video clip of this young man is still online.<sup>17</sup>

The Islamists distributed Mansur's martyrdom video clip in much of southern Somalia for propaganda purposes. The cruelty of the martyrdom shook the community of faith. There is no evidence that many believers or seekers wavered in their resolve, contrary to what the Islamists anticipated. Scrutinising the real impact this graphic martyrdom had on the Church is difficult now for security reasons. However, initial reports indicate that the community of faith experienced significant numerical growth in the first two years after the martyrdom.<sup>18</sup> This growth reportedly took place within 5 square kilometres radius of the martyr's house-church in southern Somalia. The church in that area has never before experienced this kind of reported growth.

The same Islamist group beheaded four Somali Christian orphanage workers in 2009 after they refused to return to Islam.<sup>19</sup> Another beheading martyr of the Islamist group is Guled Jama Muktar who was decapitated in 2011 because of his Christian faith.<sup>20</sup> These are merely a few of the many Christians the Somali church lost in the hands of Islamists and their sympathisers. Giulio Albanese, Director at Catholic News Agency, reiterates, "[b]ut there is no doubt that the land where Christians have experienced the greatest suffering is Somalia."<sup>21</sup> However, the Somali Church has shown consistent numerical growth in all areas in Somalia where the martyrdoms took place since 1994.

### **Overcoming the Challenges of Persecution**

The adage, necessity is the mother of invention, holds true here. The persecuted Somali community of faith often forsakes traditional church buildings for residential houses where Christians meet discreetly, thus the concept of house-churches. These house-churches are sometimes labelled as "underground" because they are hard to be found by the enemy. The number of Christians meeting in any house-church is also small as not to attract unnecessary attention. In the Somali church, for example, leadership development is taken very seriously. Despite radical Islamists killing so many Somali church leaders, there was never a shortage of church leaders in Somalia. Many of these persecuted Christians also go all digital when it comes to Bible study materials and other church resources. Owning a physical Bible is both illegal and dangerous in Somalia, but many Somali Christians carry around passcode-protected smartphones loaded with Christian materials, including Bibles. Many of the phones have a security feature that deletes all the contents if the wrong passcode is put in one too many times.

Somali Christians are often denied employment opportunities because of their faith. In response to this discrimination, some Somali Christians own their businesses and employ fellow Christians. Some Somali Christians have access to safe houses within

Somalia. Somali Christians are also known for their locally developed theology of persecution often expressed in hymns. These hymns nourish the souls of the persecuted Christians.

### Using the Challenges to Grow the Church

The relationship between persecution and church growth is codified in church history, starting with the early church to the present day. Pope Francis' declaration in 2014 that "Church grows from the blood of the martyrs" has historical precedence.<sup>22</sup> "The more Christians are persecuted, the more they increase in number" was a theme well known as early as the second century. The martyrdom of Stephen and the ten apostles did not dent the church growth but propelled it to a spectacular growth by the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Tertullian believed that a martyr's willingness to die for Christ leads others to become disciples of Christ. The courage of martyrs and the pens of apologists have both given the Church historical and theological perspective that persecution helps with church growth.

The 1994 martyrdom of Pastor Liibaan Ibrahim Hassan set the stage for the bloodiest chapter the Somali Church has ever known. The Mogadishu-based legendary Somali church leader co-pastored a house-church of 14 members when 12 of them were martyred. When the dust settled, only two members survived the Islamist assassinations bankrolled by al-Itihaad al-Islamiya (AIAI) Arabic: الاتحاد الإسلامي, literally, 'The Islamic Union'). Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, a former army colonel and avowed Islamist, was at the time the AIAI leader. The two surviving members of the targeted house-church overcame the persecution challenges and, by 1999, started a new house-church in the same general neighborhood where the old one had been meeting. This new house-church led the effort to plant more house-churches within five years in Mogadishu and its environs.

Tertullian's conviction that the persecution of Christians contributes to the numerical growth of the church has been confirmed true in the Somali capital and beyond. It is noteworthy that no record exists of a Somali Christian ever killed for their faith in northern Somalia (present-day Somaliland). All the killings of Somali Christians took place in southern Somalia. Tertullian's belief again holds true here. More Somali Muslims come to the Lord in the south than in the north of Somalia.

### Conclusion

This study illuminates the fact that the Church in Somalia is indeed growing while it is still facing intense persecution that includes martyrdoms. Persecution does not seem to be abating anytime soon since the Somali Christians belong to the two-thirds of Christians who live in hostile environments where they belong to minority groups.<sup>23</sup> Given this fact, the Somali Church growth will most likely continue peaking despite the antagonistic context in which it finds itself. It is a biblical principle that the persecution suffered by some Christians spurs others to be bolder in their faith and



witness; this divine courage helps the community of faith to make Christ-like disciples in their communities and beyond more than they did before the persecution. Apostle Paul illustrates this fact that chains advance the Gospel in Philippians 1:12-14.

The early Church was birthed in a context of persecution and never ceased growing despite the hostilities it was facing. The persecution and church growth went hand in hand until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore, understanding how the Somali Church thrives under the sword could inspire other persecuted Christians all over the world. The characteristics that persecuted Christians demonstrate include resilience, resourcefulness, and street savvy. Survival tactics these persecuted Christians adopt include churches meeting in residential houses, developing a network of safe houses, and extensive use of technologies for communication, teaching, training, and studying. Persecuted Somali Christians build extensive digital libraries, and teach, and train their members in the safest way possible. Such strategies help the church defy the adverse effects of persecution and continue growing with minimum disruptions.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jayson Casper, "The 50 Countries Where It's Hardest to Follow Jesus," ChristianityToday.Com, last modified January 15, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/january/top-christian-persecution-open-doors-2020-world-watch-list.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Hill, No Redress: Somalia's Forgotten Minorities (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2010), <https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/old-site-downloads/download-912-Click-here-to-download-full-report.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer LeClaire, "Islamic Somali Militants Confiscate Christian Farms," Charisma News, last modified March 2, 2011, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.charismanews.com/world/36348-islamic-somali-militants-confiscate-christian-farms>.

<sup>4</sup> Stefan J. Bos, "Somalia Militants Destroy Largest Christian Library, Bible College," BosNewsLife Africa Service, January 6, 2011, online edition, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.bosnewslife.com/2011/01/06/somalia-militants-destroy-largest-christian-library-bible-college/>.

<sup>5</sup> Elise Harris, "Pope Francis: Church Grows from the Blood of the Martyrs," Catholic News Agency, last modified June 30, 2014, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-church-grows-with-the-blood-of-the-martyrs-45498>.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Kirby, "St. Ignatius of Antioch to the Smyrnaeans," Early Christian Writings, last modified 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-smyrnaeans-longer.html>.

<sup>7</sup> John Piper, "Spreading Power through Persecution," Desiring God, last modified May 5, 1991, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/spreading-power-through-persecution>.

<sup>8</sup> "Islam Question & Answer: Categories of Deeds and Examples Thereof," last modified July 9, 2015, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/180341/categories-of-deeds-and-examples-thereof>.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Sarwar, trans., Al-Kafi, e-book., vol. 7, Fru' al-Kafi (New York: Islamic Seminary Publications, 2014), 257, [http://www.al-murtaza.org/Books/AL-KAFI%20VOLUME%207%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.al-murtaza.org/Books/AL-KAFI%20VOLUME%207%20(English).pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Abdullah Saeed, "Ridda and the Case for Decriminalization of Apostasy," ed. Oliver Learman, The Qur'an: An Encyclopedia (London: Routledge, 2006), 551.

<sup>12</sup> Abu Dawud Sunan, "Book of Battles (Kitab Al-Malahim)," last modified 2008, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/39>.

<sup>13</sup> Maulana-Wahiduddin Khan, Muhammad a Prophet for All Humanity (New Delhi: SOS Free Stock, 2016), 327.

<sup>14</sup> Sunan, "Book of Battles (Kitab Al-Malahim)."

<sup>15</sup> A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., "Tertullian's Apology," in The Ante-Nicene Fathers, American Edition., vol. 3 (Albany, Oregon: Books for the Ages, 1997), 102, [http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-8/LIBRARY/ECF\\_0\\_03.PDF](http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-8/LIBRARY/ECF_0_03.PDF).

<sup>16</sup> CBN News and The Voice of the Martyrs, "Somalia: Terror Group Wants To Rid Country of Christians," Voice of the Martyrs Canada (VOMC), accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.vomcanada.com/malaysia-videos/video/somalia-rid-christians>.

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, "Pope Francis."

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research Centre, "The Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Pew Research Centre's Religion & Public Life Project, December 19, 2011, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

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