Iraqi evangelist Mathias Hassan (not his real name) was confident his eternal reward would eventually include a heavenly mansion. What he did not expect was a place prepared for him in one of Saddam Hussein’s most infamous prisons.

Most Iraqis called the Baghdad security prison the “White Ship” because of the way its light-colored concrete exterior often glistened in the sun, and its massive, boxy shape reminded them of a freighter. Those who experienced the horrors of the torture chambers called it the “red house.” They say that to drive inmates mad, the former dictator ordered interior walls painted blood red.

Last February, Mathias and seven other Christian leaders were arrested at their house meeting by Saddam’s secret police. One hundred believers had secretly crammed into a small, dimly lit room where they had just finished singing the praise song, “We Give You All the Glory,” when 15 plain-clothed agents, armed with pistols and walkie-talkies, burst through the door.

Mathias recently told Voice of the Martyrs (VOM) workers that the police ordered an abrupt end to the service and demanded to know why he had been arrested. One prison guard restrained Mathias in a chair while the other slapped his face. “We will put you underground and torture you, and then you will know why you are here!” one of the torturers told Mathias. “No inmate entering here has ever left alive. If you do not tell us the truth, you will die today.”

Another prison guard entered the room and used his fists to beat Mathias’ face and body. He demanded information about Mathias’ religious beliefs and the organizational structure of the house church. Nearly one hour later, a bruised and battered Mathias was given prison clothes, assigned number 41, and taken to prison cell number 17.

Mathias shared the six-by-eight-foot room with five Muslims – two Sunnis and three Shiites. He prayed and asked God to use him to introduce them to Christ. He clutched a tiny piece of concrete in his hand and carved the name of Jesus onto the cell wall. He drew a cross beside it. One of the Shiites – a sheik named Sayed – demanded that Mathias explain why he made the drawing on the wall. “You must pray to Allah or Mohammed,” said Sayed. “Why do you pray to Jesus to help you?”

Mathias explained that he had a personal relationship with the Lord, and Jesus had done many miracles for him. He was confident Jesus would do another miracle and free him from prison.

“I asked Sayed to explain why I should pray to a dead prophet, Mathias told VOM. “I told him I preferred to pray to the one, true living God. Jesus is alive, while all the prophets are dead in the ground.”

Sayed despised Mathias. He told him that he was not a good man, because he did not believe in Mohammed. Mathias continued to pray for Sayed and his cellmates.

Several mornings later, Mathias was awakened as Sayed kissed him on his hands and cheeks. Mathias and his cellmates were astonished to see Sayed’s change of heart, so they asked him to explain. Sayed said

“I could not see His face, because it shone brighter than the sun”
Jesus appeared to him and told him that Mathias would be released from prison. “He appeared in front of me while we were sleeping,” explained Sayed. “He was dressed in white; and I could not see His face, because it shone brighter than the sun and blinded me.”

Sayed asked the man who He was, and He responded saying, “Jesus Christ.”

Jesus pointed to Mathias and told Sayed not to be concerned about Mathias. “I am responsible for Mathias, and I will release him from this place,” said Jesus.

“What about me?” asked Sayed. Jesus vanished before answering.

Mathias explained to his cellmates that Jesus had appeared to verify that Mathias belonged to Him and was speaking the truth. The Muslims immediately fell to their knees and began praying, asking Jesus to free them as well. Sayed’s dream came true one week later, as Mathias and most of the Christians who were arrested with him were released. (In April 2003, every prisoner was freed when U.S. troops liberated Baghdad.)

Several months later, one of the freed evangelists named Joseph (not his real name) took VOM workers to the prison office where they had been released. He described standing in front of the large, wooden desk of the prison’s top intelligence officer. “He told me Saddam was giving me a gift: he was setting me free,” said Joseph. “I didn’t say anything. I just smiled, because I knew the gift of my freedom had come from the Lord, not the president.”

Joseph believes he survived the “red house,” because even though he was physically restrained in a dark, cramped prison cell, he was already spiritually free in Jesus Christ. His Lord and Savior had set him free long before Saddam Hussein released him from his physical imprisonment.

Brother Joseph is active in his house church and spends much of his time ministering to others. He distributes gospel tracts and often witnesses to Iraqi Muslims.

VOM is working with Iraqi believers like Joseph and Mathias, equipping them so they are grounded in God’s Word and effective in His work of spreading the gospel.

Some of these church workers are distributing Bibles, gospel materials and children’s storybooks printed in Arabic and Farsi. Believers expect to suffer again as they step up evangelistic efforts. They expect this window of opportunity to last no more than two years.

Reader Responds to Secular Supremacy in Presuppositions

1. Religious toleration is a virtue.
2. Secularism is not a virtue; it is a religion.
3. Secularism and toleration are not mutually inclusive qualities.
4. Secularism has canons of faith that are antithetical to Christianity and Islam.
5. Religions identify themselves as true and absolute and others as false and relative.
6. Secularism tactically strives to paint other religions in shades of good or bad. Secularism judges the quality of Christian and Islamic faith sects. This is condescending.
7. Secularism is the historical descendant of Alexander’s religion.
8. The agenda to impose secular states in the Middle East is a tacit object of Hellenistic conquest.
9. Secularism suppresses the open public discussion of religious propositions. (“Moderate” Islamic regimes do the same now, and Christianity has done so historically.) The recent persecution of LTG Boykin is an example of Secularist intolerance and suppression.
10. Constantine was right. Westphalia was a prophylaxis. The whole Church is culpable.
BOOK REVIEW

Song of Saigon: One Woman’s Journey to Freedom
by Anh Vu Sawyer
reviewed by T. Lynn Sidebotham

I took awhile to read Song of Saigon. Not to finish it, but to start it. Anh and Philip Sawyer are friends; brilliant, fantastically creative and blazing with warmth and love. Frankly, I was afraid Anh’s story might not live up to her, and I didn’t want to have to say so or avoid saying so.

I need not have worried. I finished the book in about a day and a half.

It’s well written, as readable as a good novel and well above the average Christian publication.

Anh makes twentieth century Vietnam come alive by weaving her family history with the story of their escape from Vietnam. The love stories of her grandparents and parents are narrated against the background of the French, Japanese, and Communist tyrannies in Vietnam.

I understood the political situation in Vietnam better than ever before, and I think this book would help make sense of the situation for Americans who are still recovering from Vietnam.

The people in Anh’s family are real, and their flaws, passions, and spiritual searching show the grace of God.

Perhaps most touching is Anh’s personal story, and her love story with her husband, Philip. She is so open and vulnerable about their spiritual journey that anyone who needs to know that God can bring healing out of pain needs to read it. Their personalities as I have seen them are on the page, as well as the process of growth that brought them there.

For genuineness, spiritual depth, and a story that grips you, Song of Saigon is hard to beat. I won’t wait around to read Anh’s next book.

NEWS

Meteor Foils Persecution Attack in India
Reprinted from the Missions Insider of Christian Aid Mission, www.christianaid.org

Severe persecution against church planting ministry in India’s Orissa State was interrupted with a sign from heaven when a meteor crashed to earth near the Bay of Bengal.

Missionaries with an indigenous church-planting ministry had won to Christ and discipled fifteen families in a certain village. So in early September the ministry sent builders to construct a church building on a piece of land donated by one of the local believers.

Suddenly, on the third day of construction, about fifty Hindus gathered about fifty yards away, placed a stone there, and said that someone had dreamed they should construct a Hindu temple there.

The next morning about 300 people gathered at the site and attacked the laborers working on the church building. They snatched $220 from the builder’s pocket, beat him mercilessly, and ordered him to stop construction.

At that time the pastor and the president of the church arrived to see what the trouble was. The angry crowd dragged them off and ordered them to turn over fifty bags of cement and iron rods.

The next day, two missionaries with the church planting ministry arrived at the site and they, too, were beaten, but managed to escape by motorbike. Then the tide began to turn.

That very same night, one of the villagers who had forcibly taken four bags of cement died.

Two days later a meteor streaked across the sky, spreading flaming fragments as it went. Witnesses said the meteor lit up the night sky and others reported hearing a deafening roar. It crashed into a house and news reports said at least twenty people were injured. Local citizens were terrified.

After this, the leaders of the militant Hindus apologized and said they wanted to return the materials.

“The police authorities were not helpful at all, but the situation is under control,” the leader told Christian Aid.
Militants Attack Christian Villages in Nigeria

by Obed Minchakpu, Compass Direct

Over 100 well-armed Muslim militants swarmed into three Christian villages in northern Nigeria on August 25th. Seven people were reportedly killed, 30 homes burned and 140 families displaced when the attackers invaded at about 8 p.m., setting houses ablaze and destroying food in storage facilities.

The attack on the villages of Pamadu, Kwale and Janye in the Pero-Shenge local government area of Gombe state marks the second violent clash in the area.

Dr. Ishaku Iliya, chairman of the local government council, told journalists that seven others were seriously wounded. They are received treatment at a hospital in Filiya. “This is the most cruel attack on a community I have ever seen in my life,” he said. According to Iliya, the militants also carted away the villagers’ personal property and about a hundred head of cattle worth thousands of dollars.

He told journalists that militants carried out a similar attack in the area last year. One person was killed and several others were wounded.

Mr. Lazarus Yoriyo, deputy governor of Gombe state, described the attack on the Christian villages as “most unfortunate.” He told journalists that the state government would ensure that this threat to peace is checked through adequate protection of lives and property. Since the introduction of the Islamic legal code in northern Nigeria, Muslim militants have often attacked areas where Christians are living when Christians resist the enforcement of Islamic law.

Gombe is one of twelve states implementing Islamic law in northern Nigeria. A number of persons, including Christians, have been jailed for flouting Islamic law.

Nigerian Local Council Bans Christian Worship

by Obed Minchakpu, Compass Direct

Authorities of Kumbotso local government council in the state of Kano, Nigeria, have banned Christians from holding worship services.

“This directive by the Kumbotso local government area for Christians not to conduct Sunday worship services anywhere within the state which belongs to the federal government has raised a lot of concern,” Rev. A.U. Uba, secretary of the Kano chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), told Compass on September 14th.

He added that the decision has increased tensions between Muslims and Christians in the area.

The government of Kano state has reportedly seized lands belonging to Christian schools for business use.

“You can’t believe that a government, which claims it is working to promote religious tolerance, is the same government that has been seizing landed properties from Christian schools and allocating them to rich Muslims for the building of shops,” Uba said.

In another development, Kano officials appointed a Muslim to lead a Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

In reacting to the accusations, Kano governor Malam Ibrahim Shekarau said he was prepared to step on toes in his bid to implement the Islamic legal system in the state.

Shekarau told journalists at a September 17th press conference in Kano city that his priority is “to work judiciously in accordance with the Islamic provisions of governance under the sharia.” He revealed plans to enact a law banning women from commuting in the same vehicles with men and stressed that the law would apply to all people of the state, irrespective of their religion.

Shekarau outlined a plan to establish mobile courts to try offenders of sharia and said that, if necessary, his administration would support the implementation of the Islamic legal system by strengthening vigilante groups.

Meanwhile, religious conflict between Muslims and Christians continues to simmer as residents of Plateau state marked the two-year anniversary of bloody riots that engulfed Jos city in September 2001.

According to statistics compiled by CAN officials, the violence has led to the destruction of 175 Protestant and Catholic churches, the deaths of an estimated 10,000 Christians and millions of dollars in property damage for Christian businessmen and homeowners in Plateau state.

The areas that have experienced the most recurring skirmishes between followers of the two religions are Wase, Kanam, and Langtang districts.
**Tears of the Sun** Reflects True Conditions

reviewed by Peter Hammond, reprinted from Christian Action, Vol. 3, 2003, P.O. Box 7735, Cape Town, South Africa

Having just returned from a mission to Nigeria, I watched this new film with great interest.

It begins with real street violence footage with a voice-over report about civil war in Nigeria. Muslim Fulanis have overthrown the Christian Igbo government, assassinated the president and his family, and are an ethnic cleansing campaign against Christian Igbos.

The news footage actually comes from Sierra Leone.

With this background, we meet Lieutenant A.K. Waters, a veteran officer of a navy SEAL unit aboard the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman off the coast. Lt. Waters is ordered to lead his team to evacuate an American medical doctor and some missionaries from a mission station in Nigeria.

Dr. Lena Kendricks is the only physician available to the war-mutilated people of her Christian village. She refuses to leave the mission hospital unless the seventy or so of her patients can go too. With Muslim forces only hours away, the team begins the evacuation. At first, Waters obeys his orders not to get involved in what his captain describes as “not our war.” However, when the missionaries who refused to leave with the evacuation team, and the patients who could not move, are slaughtered, Waters determines to take the village survivors on the perilous trek through dense jungles to neighboring Cameroon.

As they move through the jungle on foot, the SEAL team and refugees are relentlessly pursued. Passing by a village where Muslim soldiers are torturing and slaughtering Christian residents, Lt. Waters has to choose between following his orders and obeying his conscience.

*Tears of the Sun* is an intense action film with graphic scenes of excruciating cruelty. However, *Tears of the Sun* is no mindless Hollywood fiction. It accurately depicts the kind of brutality perpetrated against Christian minorities. Atrocities shown, like burning churches, massacring villagers, beheading ministers, chopping off the breasts of nursing mothers, and burning people alive are happening routinely in some parts of Africa.

When Waters sees the slaughter he turns back to save as many as he can.

Poster and trailer slogans for this movie declare: “He was trained to follow orders. He became a hero by defying them.” Hollywood glorifies rebellion. A realist might wonder, “Why should a SEAL commander expect loyalty from his men if he won’t obey his own orders?”

In this context, the officer on the ground takes expected initiative and acts on information he alone has in order to save lives. This film clearly depicts that we are answerable to a “higher law.”

As the SEAL team witnesses the carnage waged in the name of Allah, they willingly follow their team leader in engaging the enemy and saving lives.

In addition to graphic violence, the film features abundant profanity. However, these sights and sounds are nowhere near as offensive as the real world events they mimic.

The film begins with the suggestion that God has left Africa. One of the missionaries tells Waters, “Go with God,” and Waters replies, “God already left Africa!” White doves symbolically fly away when one of the missionaries gets beheaded off screen. In Africa, missionaries get murdered, women and children suffer, and people are tortured.

Has God left for real?

The film communicates that God is indeed working through those who care enough to risk their lives for the sake of others. Some viewers comment that the perilous jungle trek reminds them of Moses leading his people out of Egypt with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit. Others think that the title should have been “Tears of the Son?”

Major themes include sacrifice, courage, compassion (especially for widows and orphans), passion for freedom, trust, and teamwork. The film depicts missionaries favorably as true good Samaritan-like neighbors, caring for those in desperate need. American soldiers who give their lives epitomize the principle, “Greater love has no one than this than that He lay down his life for another” (John 15:13).

The heroes begin reluctantly but end valiantly. Their faces reflect mission rigors, inner struggles, and torment from witnessing vicious brutality. They trust their commander in combat and maneuvers. Their Lieutenant leads by example and solicits input before committing to dangerous courses of action.

This film has a look of military authenticity and it is accurate concerning atrocities perpetrated by Muslim militants in Africa. Tens of thousands of Christians have been killed by Muslims in Nigeria in recent years. May the people of America not forget Africa, and may Africans not forget God.

Note: Peter Hammond is a former British SAS officer. He currently directs Frontline Fellowship, a mission agency based in South Africa, and he travels widely throughout the war torn “front line” parts of Africa.

See: www.frontline.org.za
Declaration by the Christian Converts of Egypt  
October 26, 2003  
Cairo, Egypt

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT:

For many years, we have been struggling for the simplest of our human rights, the freedom of belief and the freedom of worship.

We have been imprisoned, tortured, followed by the security police and subjected to all forms of abuse for our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

But in Jesus, our lives and behavior are so much better. Many among us were terrorists, Islamist fundamentalists. We were burning churches, killing, dealing with our whole society as apostates. But after we put our faith in Jesus, we became pacifists, bonded to our nation, living as best we could.

But despite this change for the better, our Islamic government does not accept the changing of our religion from Islam to Christianity.

This right is accepted by the Constitution of Egypt, but rejected by Islamic Law: “And whoso becometh a renegade and dieth in his disbelief, such are rightful owners of the fire they will abide in” (Surah El-Baqarah 217).

Islamic law is the main source for the Egyptian Constitution: Article 2: “Islam is the state religion, Arabic the official language, and the principles of Islamic Law the main source of legislation.”

According to this legislation, we as converts are considered as apostates. We need to repent within three days, or we will be killed.

But Al-Azhar was “merciful” to us, and changed the punishment from repentance to be carried out for the rest of the apostate’s life. So, he will be imprisoned for life, under surveillance, threatened for the rest of his life!

We are between the jaws of the Constitution and the legislation. To solve this dilemma of the freedom of belief guaranteed in the Constitution, and the judgment for apostasy in Islamic Law, they put us between the jaws of an illegal law.

The Penal Code states that whoever blasphemes or disdains a heavenly religion must be brought before the courts. By “heavenly religion” here, they mean Islam! But how, and why? No one knows. Is it logical that the person who chooses a religion other than Islam is accused of blasphemy, and the opposite is not applied?

We as Christian converts therefore declare:

1] We claim our rights, as given by the Egyptian Constitution and by all the international declarations and treaties of human rights worldwide. We ask the Egyptian Government to not act with its citizens in an unequal way. Just as it deals with the Christian embracing Islam, giving him the right to change his faith, his name, his identity and all his official papers in less than 24 hours, we as converts claim the same right—the citizenship right by which we are subject to the same rights and the same duties. Here Christians are not persecuted, because they have the freedom to change their faith; but Muslims are persecuted, because they are not enjoying that same right!

2] We ask that all cases of falsification of documents against the converts to Christianity be dropped, with no conditions. The Egyptian Government is itself responsible for this illegal action, because it has deprived us of one of our basic legal rights, to embrace a new faith and change our name, our identity and our official papers. Give us our rights, and we will not falsify these things.

3] We ask the Egyptian Government and all human rights organizations all over the world to stop the torture, illegal detention, security surveillance and incitement of families against religious converts. It is unbelievable in the 21st century that the tribunals of inquisition are still controlling our consciences, hearts and minds.

4] We declare to the Egyptian Government that it has been playing for time for many years now, while we have had to spend our lives, our dreams and ourselves behind bars, kept in prisons and under detention. In the face of the rising number of converts, the government has no choice but to respect the desire of thousands of Muslims to embrace Christianity. We do not want this to be only an inner, secret faith, but a totally embracing one, so that we will be able to worship freely our Lord and Savior Jesus, and be allowed to raise our children in all the breadth of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

Finally, we believe that: “In the world you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”

“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

THE CHRISTIAN CONVERTS OF EGYPT
Egypt’s state security police have arrested and tortured a Christian couple from Muslim background, along with eleven other Egyptian citizens accused of forging Christian identity papers for former Muslims.

At least ten more Christians have since been detained and subjected to torture in the sweep, said to be headed by two security police officers known for illegal and cruel tactics against converts.

Mohammed Ahmed Imam Kordy and his wife Sahar El-Sayed Abdel Ghany, were arrested in Alexandria on 18 October, apparently after the wife was implicated in a complaint extorted under torture that she had helped another woman secure false identity papers.

Two days after their detention, they were transferred to central Cairo’s El-Mosky police station where they faced interrogation. They were denied food, beaten, hung by their arms, and bloated with painful amounts of air blown into their bodies.

The couple reportedly told the prosecutor that they had changed their own names, with the husband taking the name Yousef Samuel Makari Suliman, and the wife adopting Mariam Girguis Makar.

However, they declared that they did not know it was illegal for them to change their religious identity. Since it was commonly known that Christians in Egypt could convert to Islam and change their identity papers, they stated, they assumed that Muslims would have access to the same rights.

The couple named two Coptic priests they said helped them change their religious identity, both of whom have died in the past three years.

Although lawyers intervened to get the couple released on bail, the wife went to prison on 23 October for a month while the case is investigated. Her husband was ordered released but remains in custody. The couple has two teenage daughters.

Meanwhile, eleven more arrests were reported, including the arrests of three Coptic women who had converted to Islam several years ago but have since returned to their Christian faith. The three, identified as Soheir Hosni Sedky, Fawzya Azmy Estafanos and Marina Morcos Shenouda, face charges of bribing government employees and obtaining false identity papers.

In addition, eight government employees are known to have been arrested in connection with the case. Two of them, Reda Zaghoul and Amal Wadi’I, are women.

Another, a Christian named Aziz Zakhary Armanios, was employed in security directorate offices in Beni Swef, a governate in southern Egypt. Armanios was arrested in Cairo on accusations of preparing Christian identity papers for 2,800 Egyptian Muslims who had become Christians. The prosecutor has ordered his detention extended for 45 days.

Detainee Samir Sa’ad has been identified as a Coptic Christian who had converted to Islam and then tried to return to Christianity. An employee in the civil records office in Dokki, Cairo, Sa’ad was reportedly tortured to reveal the names of Muslims who had converted to Christianity.

An additional ten Christians have been detained in the widening sweep of arrests said to be organized by Lt. Sayed Zaky, a criminal investigation officer known for following illegal procedures in detaining Christians.

Although Lt. Zaky informed the prosecutor that the newly accused Christians had been arrested off the street, local sources confirmed they were taken forcibly from their homes in the middle of the night. “They were breaking down doors, searching homes, abusing parents in front of their children, all in a very humiliating way,” the sources said.

Those arrested are reportedly being tortured by Lt. Walid El-Dossoky, assigned to the state security police headquarters in Lazogly. Because of El-Dossoky’s reputation for cruelty, particularly against women converts, numerous complaints have been filed to human rights organizations against him.

Although Egypt’s Coptic Christians make up more than ten percent of the national population, the government is accused of blatant “religious apartheid” for its discriminatory laws.

While Christian citizens who want to convert to Islam are free to adopt Muslim names and change their official religious identity, these rights are denied to Muslims who convert to Christianity. Under the law, it is not illegal for an Egyptian to convert from one religion to another, but in practice, Muslims who become Christians face arrest, torture and ongoing threats to their lives.

In the face of such persecution, many such converts have tried to change their religious status without government permission, leaving themselves open to the charge of falsifying official documents.
You Can Help Christians In Iraq

Voice of the Martyrs is working with Iraqi believers who are distributing Bibles, gospel materials, and children’s storybooks in Arabic and Farsi. You can order and fill an “Action Pack” to help these believers. Voice of the Martyrs will provide you with special vacuum bags and a list of items that can be included. Then they will deliver your gift to a Christian family in Iraq. Along with your gift, families will also receive gospel material and children’s storybooks printed in their native language.

To order your Action Pack call 1-800-747-0085 or visit www.persecution.com

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Through this web site you can learn about and get connected to missions work in some very difficult locations. It connects to information on over 500 areas with outreach teams consisting of people who are cooperating from many different churches, development, and missionary agencies.
Do’s and Don’ts for Deployment

Do be professionally excellent.
Don’t compromise national security.

Do everything in the open and above board.
Do obey all laws, guidelines, and directives.
Don’t be secretive.

Do talk about God and your personal faith.
Don’t criticize or compare religions.

Do carry a personal Bible and devotional tools.
Do try to learn the local language.
Don’t distribute Bibles or evangelistic literature.

Do honor local customs and courtesies.
Don’t pretend to be of a different faith than you are.

Do exchange addresses/business cards for future correspondence.
Do use music and video recordings as farewell and housewarming gifts/mementos for special friends.

Do direct seekers to locals for help, fellowship, and resources.
Avoid giving Bibles to people who ask you for one.
Avoid leading seekers in prayer to receive Christ.
Don’t compromise the security of local believers and their fellowships.

Do facilitate the work of others with prayer, financial, material, and moral support.
Do not be ignorant of the work that others are doing.
Do educate yourself about work in the area
   (like: Bible translation, gospel broadcasting, community development, and church growth).
Avoid directly participating in local Christian work.

Do behave in an upright and exemplary manner according to the local standards of morality.
Don’t flaunt Western freedoms in dress, entertainment, and girl-guy relationships.

Do pray openly and publicly.
Do pray with/for local people in the name of Jesus.

Do join with other deployed believers in praying for the local people and their social institutions.
Do have prayer support of friends and family back home for your ministry.
Don’t pray or work alone.

Do not be frightened, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience. (1 Peter 3:14-15)
During the crucial period when Afghan experts are preparing a draft constitution, a delegation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom visited Kabul.

The Commission has repeatedly voiced its concern that serious human rights abuses were continuing under the U.S.-supported Transitional Administration. Moreover, troubling signs appear that the reconstructed legal system and the new constitution might be used by extremists to deny universal human rights, including freedom of religion and belief.

Afghan leaders explained they have tried to stay on the timetable set by the December 2001 Bonn Agreement for establishing a representative government, but gains for human rights achieved by victory over the Taliban may be in peril.

Security remains precarious. Terrorists attacked before and after the delegation’s visit. Taliban and al-Qaida remnants have been joined by others hostile to the Transitional Administration led by President Karzai. Regional warlords and local military commanders operate independently of the central government and abuse human rights with impunity.

The Commissioners encountered numerous Muslim moderates, who recognize the compatibility of Islam with internationally recognized human rights. Yet these moderates face grave fear for their physical security in the face of increasingly vocal, well-armed and confident extremists. Even within the Transitional Administration, some displayed open hostility to freedom of religion and belief, freedom of expression, and women’s rights.

Afghanistan’s Chief Justice Shinwari, for instance, told the Commission that he accepts all the international standards protected by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights with three exceptions: freedom of expression, freedom of religion, and equal rights for men and women. When asked about the draft constitution, Shinwari told the Commission that “this is the only law,” pointing to the Koran prominently displayed on his desk.

The Commission emphasized to its Afghan interlocutors that American support cannot be expected if the country’s new constitution does not protect freedom of belief, freedom to manifest one’s beliefs, and freedom from coercion, as fundamental rights for every individual, whether Muslim or non-Muslim.

The Commission found that Afghanistan is at a juncture from which it can either move forward to secure greater protections for the rights of its people or fall back into Taliban-like practices. The latter will leave Afghanistan more unstable exacerbating threats to U.S. security.

Freedom of expression is in peril. Even in Kabul, journalists face prosecution for allegedly “offending Islam” when their speech is political. Outside Kabul, warlords intimidate those who contradict their views. Reformers must be protected from accusations of blasphemy or similar charges for daring to raise questions about the appropriate role of Islam in the political and legal systems or for criticizing specific political figures and parties.

Security must be improved outside Kabul. Without it, the warlords will unduly influence constitutional delegate selection. Delegates will not be able to speak their consciences or for their constituencies if they fear for their safety when they return home.

Moderates and reformers who respect human rights are currently on the defensive—even threatened. They need U.S. support. Otherwise the constitution-making process may well entrench the power of the warlords and those with an Islamist or extremist agenda.

The United States should facilitate visits to Afghanistan of Islamic legal experts who will promote the compatibility of Islam and human rights.

The U.S. government should bring Afghan leaders to America to show how Islam and other faiths may be practiced in a free society.

The U.S. government should support the reconstruction of a judicial sector operating under the rule of law and upholding international standards of human rights. U.S. assistance should work to ensure that all judges and prosecutors are trained in civil law and international human rights standards, that women are recruited into the judiciary at all levels, and all Afghans have equal access to the courts. Afghanistan must not become a judicial theocracy in which activist judges abridge the human rights of reformers, religious minorities, and women.