Imagine if correspondents in late 1944 had reported the Battle of the Bulge, but without explaining that it was a turning point in the second world war. Or what if finance reporters had told the story of the AIG meltdown in 2008 without adding that it raised questions about derivatives and sub-prime mortgages that could augur a vast financial implosion?

Most people would say that journalists had failed to provide the proper context to understand the news. Yet that’s routinely what media outlets do when it comes to outbreaks of anti-Christian persecution around the world, which is why the global war on Christians remains the greatest story never told of the early 21st century.

In recent days, people around the world have been appalled by images of attacks on churches in Pakistan, where 85 people died when two suicide bombers rushed the Anglican All Saints Church in Peshawar, and in Kenya, where an assault on a Catholic church in Wajir left one dead and two injured.

Those atrocities are indeed appalling, but they cannot truly be understood without being seen as small pieces of a much larger narrative. Consider three points about the landscape of anti-Christian persecution today, as shocking as they are generally unknown. According to the International Society for Human Rights, a secular observatory based in Frankfurt, Germany, 80 per cent of all acts of religious discrimination in the world today are directed at Christians. Statistically speaking, that makes Christians by far the most persecuted religious body on the planet.

According to the Pew Forum, between 2006 and 2010 Christians faced some form of discrimination, either de jure or de facto, in a staggering total of 139 nations, which is almost three-quarters of all the countries on earth. According to the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, an average of 100,000 Christians have been killed in what the centre calls a ‘situation of witness’ each year for the past decade. That works out to 11 Christians killed somewhere in the world every hour, seven days a week and 365 days a year, for reasons related to their faith.

In effect, the world is witnessing the rise of an entire new generation of Christian martyrs. The carnage is occurring on such a vast scale that it represents not only the most dramatic Christian story of our time, but arguably the premier human rights challenge of this era as well.

To put flesh and blood on those statistics, all one has to do is look around. In Baghdad, Islamic militants stormed the Syriac Catholic cathedral of Our Lady of Salvation on 31 October 2010, killing the two priests celebrating Mass and leaving a total of 58 people dead. Though shocking, the assault was far from unprecedented; of the 65 Christian churches in Baghdad, 40 have been bombed at least once since the beginning of the 2003 US-led invasion.

The effect of this campaign of violence and intimidation has been devastating for Christianity in the country. At the time of the first Gulf War in 1991, Iraq boasted a flourishing Christian population of at least 1.5 million. Today the high-end estimate for the number of Christians left is around 500,000, and realistically many believe it could be as low as 150,000. Most of these Iraqi Christians have gone into exile, but a staggering number have been killed.

India’s northeastern state of Orissa was the scene of the most violent anti-Christian pogrom of the early 21st century. In 2008, a series of riots ended with as many as 500 Christians killed, many hacked to death.
by machete-wielding Hindu radicals; thousands more were injured and at least 50,000 left homeless. Many Christians fled to hastily prepared displacement camps, where some languished for two years or more.

An estimated 5,000 Christian homes, along with 350 churches and schools, were destroyed. A Catholic nun, Sister Meena Barwa, was raped during the mayhem, then marched naked and beaten. Police sympathetic to the radicals discouraged the nun from filing a report, and declined to arrest her attackers.

In Burma, members of the Chin and Karen ethnic groups, who are strongly Christian, are considered dissidents by the regime and routinely subjected to imprisonment, torture, forced labour, and murder. In October 2010, the Burmese military launched helicopter strikes in territories where the country’s Christians are concentrated.

A Burmese Air Force source told reporters that the junta had declared these areas ‘black zones’, where military personnel were authorised to attack and kill Christian targets on sight. Though there are no precise counts, thousands of Burmese Christians are believed to have been killed in the offensive.

In Nigeria, the militant Islamic movement ‘Boko Haram’ is held responsible for almost 3,000 deaths since 2009, including 800 fatalities last year alone. The movement has made a specialty out of targeting Christians and their churches, and in some cases they seem determined to drive Christians out altogether from parts of the country.

In December 2011, local Boko Haram spokesmen announced that all Christians in the northern Yobe and Borno states had three days to get out, and followed up with a spate of church bombings on 5 and 6 January 2012, which left at least 26 Christians dead, as well as two separate shooting sprees in which eight more Christians died. In the aftermath, hundreds of Christians fled the area, and many are still displaced. Over Christmas last year, at least 15 Christians are believed to have had their throats cut by Boko Haram assailants.

North Korea is widely considered the most dangerous place in the world to be a Christian, where roughly a quarter of the country’s 200,000 to 400,000 Christians are believed to be living in forced labour camps for their refusal to join the national cult around founder Kim Il Sung. The anti-Christian animus is so strong that people with Christian grandparents are frozen out of the most important jobs — even though Kim Il Sung’s mother was a Presbyterian deaconess. Since the armistice in 1953 that stabilised the division of the peninsula, some 300,000 Christians in North Korea have disappeared and are presumed dead.

As these examples illustrate, anti-Christian violence is hardly limited to a ‘clash of civilisations’ between Christianity and Islam. In truth, Christians face a bewildering variety of threats, with no single enemy and no single strategy best adapted to curb the violence.

Though fellow believers in the West may have special reason for feeling concern, the reality is that no confessional convictions at all are required to justify alarm over this rising tide of anti-Christian animus.

Because the bulk of the globe’s 2.3 billion Christians today are impoverished and live in the developing world, and because they are often members of ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities, experts regard their treatment as a reliable indicator of a society’s broader record on human rights and dignity. Just as one didn’t have to be Jewish in the 1970s to care about dissident Jews in the Soviet Union, nor black in the 1980s to be outraged by the Apartheid regime in South Africa, one doesn’t have to be Christian today to see the defence of persecuted Christians as a towering priority.

Why are the dimensions of this global war so often overlooked? Aside from the root fact that the victims are largely non-white and poor, and thus not considered ‘newsmakers’ in the classic sense, and that they tend
to live and die well off the radar screen of western attention, the global war also runs up against the
outdated stereotype of Christianity as the oppressor rather than the oppressed.

Say ‘religious persecution’ to most makers of cultured secular opinion, and they will think of the Crusades,
the Inquisition, Bruno and Galileo, the Wars of Religion and the Salem witch trials. Today, however, we do
not live on the pages of a Dan Brown potboiler, in which Christians are dispatching mad assassins to settle
historical scores. Instead, they’re the ones fleeing assassins others have dispatched.

Moreover, public discussion of religious freedom issues often suffers from two sets of blinders. First, it’s
generally phrased in terms of western church/state tensions, such as the recent tug-of-war between
religious leaders in the United States and the Obama White House over contraception mandates as part of
health care reform, or tensions in the United Kingdom over the 2010 Equality Act and its implications for
church-affiliated adoption agencies vis-à-vis same-sex couples. The truth is that in the West, a threat to
religious freedom means someone might get sued; in many other parts of the world, it means someone
might get shot, and surely the latter is the more dramatic scenario.

Secondly, discussion is sometimes limited by an overly narrow conception of what constitutes ‘religious
violence’. If a female catechist is killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, because she’s
persuading young people to stay out of militias and criminal gangs, one might say that’s a tragedy but not
martyrdom, because her assailants weren’t driven by hatred of the Christian faith. Yet the crucial point isn’t
just what was in the mind of her killers, but what was in the heart of that catechist, who knowingly put her
life on the line to serve the gospel. To make her attackers’ motives the only test, rather than her own, is to
distort reality.

Whatever the motives for the silence, it’s well past time for it to end. Pope Francis recognised this in
remarks during a General Audience last month.

‘When I hear that so many Christians in the world are suffering, am I indifferent, or is it as if a member of
my own family is suffering?’ the Pope asked his following. ‘Am I open to that brother or that sister in my
family who’s giving his or her life for Jesus Christ?’

In 2011, the Catholic Patriarch of Jerusalem, Fouad Twal, who leads a church with more than its fair share
of new martyrs, phrased the same questions more plaintively during a conference in London. He bluntly
asked: ‘Does anybody hear our cry? How many atrocities must we endure before somebody, somewhere,
comes to our aid?’

There may be no question about the destiny of Christianity in the early 21st century more deserving of a
compelling answer.

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Christian Persecution.

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