

Religious Persecution in Eritrea



Christianity came to present day Eritrea and Ethiopia during the first half of the 4th century through the missionary work of St. Frumentius, who was later ordained a bishop by St. Athanasius of Alexandria - the giant of the early church fathers and defender of the church. St. Frumentius was then sent back to Eritrea and Ethiopia to continue the work he had already begun. In the subsequent couple of centuries, a period known as the second evangelization of the region, Christianity struck deeper root as it spread among the inhabitants. Today, nearly 1700 years later, half the populations of Eritrea and Ethiopia are Christians.

The church in Eritrea, however, is going through one of the most trying periods of its 1700-year existence.

Since May 2002 the government has unleashed the most severe persecution of Christians the likes of which the world has not witnessed since the fall of communism. All evangelical churches were ordered closed. Most of their leaders have since been thrown in secret prisons, never to be heard from or seen by anyone. Over 3200 Christians are languishing in Eritrea's prisons, and the number continues to grow in alarming numbers. Others in the thousands are fleeing into the neighboring countries.

Although the four principal religious groups - the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical (Lutheran) Church and Islam - were not included in the original decree of 2002 that banned all other faiths, they have not been spared either.

The government of Eritrea has, for all intents and purposes, taken over the country's largest and most ancient religious institution, the Eritrean Orthodox Church. Its patriarch, H. H. Abune Antonios, was deposed in 2005 by the government and has been placed under severe house arrest since 2006 for opposing the government's interference in the affairs of the church. The government has also thrown many of the leading clergies and laymen of the EOC in prison without trial.

As a consequence, the US Department of State has repeatedly designated Eritrea as one of the eight *Countries of Particular Concern* (CPC) for its notorious record of religious persecution. (Read the US State Department: International Religious Freedom Report, 2008.

In America we enjoy
our freedom to
exercise our faith.

This is not the case for
millions of Christians
elsewhere.

All across the world
they suffer persecution
for their faith.