

**No Substitute for Fieldwork: Research Perspectives in the Study of Persecuted Christian  
Communities**

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*One of the most pressing, but least documented, humanitarian crises in the world is the persecution of Christian communities. It is a global phenomenon, and the cast of characters is ever expanding and ever changing. Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia with an epicenter in China come most readily to mind, but these are but the best known cases. This article, however, may be thought of as a kind of precursor to the wider topic of the persecution of Christians in that it focuses on a particular methodological approach to the study of persecuted and endangered Christian communities. Field work, particularly in its participant/observer format, is our focus today. To illustrate the importance of fieldwork on the studies which will be made of the global persecution of Christians, I offer a case study from my own experience; the small, deeply Christian pro-life rescue movement, and the second is the Euro-American extreme right. The rescue movement offers an ideal microcosm of what can be gained, and what are the risks, of intensive participant/observer fieldwork.*

**The State and the Watchdogs**

Some of the best documented work on the religious persecution of Christians, and indeed of all religions, is done by states, with the United States and Hungary which has appointed Tristan Azbej as State Secretary for the Aid of Persecuted Christians and the Hungary Helps Program among the leaders in the field. But government data is invariably met with cynicism as simply an exercise in political self-interest. This is sometimes justified as illustrated by a cautionary tale from the Sudan.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1980s, significant deposits of oil were discovered in southern Sudan. Sudan had yet to be divided and at the time Sudan, the largest and one of the most diverse countries in Africa, was destitute. I had been in Sudan several times, wrote my first MA thesis on language planning policy there, and was enraptured by the place which, even by African standards, was best known for its hospitality and kindness. My experience there began in the dying days of the bloody Anyanya wars (1955-1972) between the Arab tribes of the north allied with the Sudanese government, and the Nilotic tribes of the south spearheaded by the Dinka, the largest and most developed of the southern tribes. I was there too in the peace that was brought by the signing of the Addis Ababa accords in 1972 and my last trip to the Sudan coincided with the resumption of the civil war in 1983.

The Arabs were entirely Muslim, while the south was Christian and animist. So undeveloped was the southern bush country at the time that men wore nothing and women only a loin cloth. Christianity in the south of those days was widespread, but had yet to displace traditional faiths. No matter. Within months of the discovery in the 1980s the US Congress,

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Deng, a Christian Dinka scholar, offers the best and most thoughtful histories of the conflict. See Francis Mading Deng, *New Sudan in the Making? : Essays on a Nation in Painful Search of Itself* (Trenton, NJ: Red Sea Press, 2010). *Africans of Two Worlds : The Dinka in Afro-Arab Sudan* (Khartoum: Institute of Asian and African Studies, University of Khartoum, 1978). Francis Mading Deng, Prosser Gifford, and Woodrow Wilson, *The Search for Peace and Unity in the Sudan* (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center Press, 1987).

which evinced only indifference to the slaughter of the 17 year civil war, was suddenly so moved by the suffering of the south that no less than 30 pieces of legislation was introduced that focused on religious freedom and the persecution of Sudanese Christians.

The irony was that at that stage, religion was actually *not* a significant part of the conflict. It would become so in the 1990s, but not yet. Resources were of course a key factor, as was the obvious imbalance of power between north and south. But at the roots of the conflict, there was something deeper.

It was I believe in the late 1970s that I decided to take a boat up the Nile from Juba in the south to Khartoum in the north. As it turned out, it was one of the last such excursions as war and draught later closed the channel to most navigation. On the boat in a class below steerage were Dinka and Nuer tribesmen, and on the top decks were Arabs; among others a member of Parliament. No longer believing that the conflict was between Muslims and Christians, I struck up a conversation with the MP and when we had become friendly, I asked him what the conflict was *really* about. His response was telling.

“Look at them,”

So I looked. They looked like Dinka primarily, but the Nuer who lived in the Sudd Swamp were also distinctive with their tribal facial markings. I looked back at the MP blankly. He sighed at the opacity of foreigners.

“Can’t you see man? They’re black!”

To paraphrase Orwell, I looked from Arab to Nilot and Nilot to Arab and my white eyes could discern only the slightest of difference in hues. But to both sides, the difference was a clear as the nose on your face.

I later posed the same question to a Dinka Christian pastor, also on the boat. He shook his head sadly and said:

“They are slave catchers!”

Slavery ended late in the Sudan, but it had been gone since it was abolished in 1924. In 1983, as part of the war propaganda of the time, slavery was said to have been reintroduced, though northerners described the practice in terms of prisoners of war. Suddenly, western foreigners descended on the Sudan to ‘redeem’ the slaves, which could be accomplished by self-proclaimed ‘priests’ for the modest sum of \$50 a head. In a poor, war ravaged nation, slave redemption was good business and more than a few slaves offered to be redeemed multiple times. The news magazine *60 Minutes* actually ran a piece on the movement, only to have it thoroughly debunked as a scam soon after.<sup>2</sup>

**Why do your own fieldwork? To ask questions and try to discern, to the greatest degree possible, the truth as *understood by those effected by the conflict.***

While states have vastly more resources to conduct research into religious persecution, NGOs and religious organizations do much of the work. Human Rights Watch is the best known and much of their work is excellent, but beyond coverage of China which persecutes all religions, they give little attention to the problem of Christian persecution.<sup>3</sup> Religious groups, of

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<sup>2</sup> "The great slave scam," *The Irish Times*, February 22, 2002, <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Sudan#ref1213478>. For perspective, Jok Madut Jok, *War and Slavery in Sudan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> "China: Religious Persecution Persists," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 7, No. 16 December 1995, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/summaries/s.china9512.html#TOC>. "State Secy: Human Rights Watch ‘Neglects’ Persecuted Christians," *Hungary Today*, June 29, 2020, <https://hungarytoday.hu/official-hrw-neglects-persecuted-christians/>.

which the Jewish organizations such as the American Jewish Congress (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) are best known, are unabashedly sectarian.

Yet in the last analysis, all of the NGOs and religious watchdogs suffer from similar challenges. Each has a founding ideological narrative which, however idealistic, in practice becomes inflexible as the groups grow and their bureaucracies become entrenched. Fund raising is a constant issue, and again, it is both ideologically driven and highly competitive with similar organizations and appeals which must compete for scarce resources. And each is designed not merely to issue factual reports but to influence policy at the state, regional and international levels.

**In the end, there is no substitute for individual fieldwork.**

### **The Pro-Life Rescue Movement**

*Even if you don't agree with us, by doing this research you will bear a cross.* Ron Maxson of the Lambs of Christ in conversation with author, 1992.

In the early 1990s, while still a grad student at the University of Chicago, Prof. David Rapoport called me with a request; could I look into a small group of violent anti-abortion protestors and send him enough information to include them in an article he was preparing. I had never heard of them—I had only recently returned to the US to get my Ph.D.. Moreover, I was one of the few Americans who had no particular view of abortion. My experience with it was in communist Eastern Europe where the need for new generations of little workers far outstripped the willingness of the population to produce them. Thus, birth control pills or devices were illegal. But in the bizarre logic of the Cold War, it was imperative that socialist women could be shown

to have more rights than decadent western females. So while abortion was still largely proscribed in much of the West, it was freely available to women in Eastern Europe. I knew women who had as many as ten such procedures.

I accepted the assignment and learned much. Perhaps too much. The final products of the research were two articles. "America's Last Prophetic Witness: The Literature of the Rescue Movement" was first, appearing in 1993. It covered the internal publications of the movement—books, journals and general *samizdat* that was unheard of by the general public. But the centerpiece was the results of interviews and fieldwork with the Lambs of Christ, a Catholic rescue organization that was led by a *troika* of ex-Vietnam era military officers and so organized along largely military lines. The second, still in my view by far the best article I ever wrote, was titled "Absolute Rescue" which documented in breakneck detail the apocalyptic *zeitgeist* of movement members as understood through intensive participant/observer fieldwork around the American West and Midwest. "Absolute Rescue" was later anthologized, but remains my least referenced article, which with over one hundred articles and anthology chapters, is saying something about the world of academe as much as of its esoteric subject matter.<sup>4</sup>

First, a definition is in order. Rescue differs with the larger prolife movement in its commitment to 'interposition', meaning in their own parlance to place their bodies between the unborn child and the abortion provider (aka 'murderer' in the rescue literature). This in US law constitutes an illegal form of civil disobedience and can take many forms, from simple witness to

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<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Kaplan, "America's Last Prophetic Witness: The Literature of the Rescue Movement," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 2 (1993): 58-77. "Absolute Rescue: Absolutism, Defensive Action and the Resort to Force," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 7, no. 3 (1995): 128-63.

destruction of property and, after the killing of Dr. David Gunn in Pensacola, Florida in 1993, the use of lethal force.

Rescue is an intensely religious, deeply Christian calling. The Lambs of Christ were formed in 1988 to meet the need for a home for Catholic rescuers who were largely not accepted as 'Christian' by the Protestant majority. Protestant rescuers were largely white, working and lower middle-class, and fairly evenly divided in gender terms. Most belong to small fundamentalist and evangelical churches. Thus was the constituency of the first, and most influential rescue group, Operation Rescue, which was formed by Randall Terry and others in 1986-1987.<sup>5</sup> Other groups followed, most notably the Missionaries to the Preborn led by Joseph Foreman in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

The first steps in all productive participant/observer fieldwork is to first find your research subjects and second to gain sufficient trust to allow you observe and participate not only their political actions, but in their private lives. Whether the group you wish to learn from is a small domestic group who have been labeled as terrorists by their government<sup>7</sup> or an endangered Christian community in another part of the world, the risks to both sides may be formidable. Fortunately, my search for the rescue movement came at a fortuitous time; months before the killing of Dr. David Gunn when the rescue movement was seen simply as a pariah rather than a violent threat to the state.

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<sup>5</sup> Randall A. Terry, *Operation Rescue* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Randall A. Terry, 1988). *Accessory to Murder : The Enemies, Allies, and Accomplices to the Death of Our Culture* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Lapsley Foreman, *Shattering the Darkness: The Crisis of the Cross in the Church Today* (Montreat, N.C.: Cooling Spring Press, 1992).

<sup>7</sup> Mark L Rienzi, "Safety Valve Closed: The Removal of Non-Violent Outlets for Dissent and the Onset of Anti-Abortion Violence," (2000): <http://scholarship.law.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1184&context=scholar>.

Getting in contact initially was relatively simple. A series of phone calls elicited the news that a demonstration by Operation Rescue Midwest was to take place at an abortion clinic in upstate Illinois. Like fieldwork with the extreme right and with environmental extremists, you simply introduce yourself and respectfully ask questions. Eventually, you are invited to other events, and then to the churches of activists, before finally getting invitations to visit people in their homes. In all cases, ethics is important. You do not pretend to be sympathetic to the cause, whatever the cause might be. You want to learn, and eventually write an article or a book on their history.

The participant/observer aspect here is the most difficult part of the research. You meet the rescuers at a designated church, usually at 0400 or so. What follows are prayers and a ritual asking God to indicate who would fulfill what role in the coming confrontations. There are no leaders as such, but those who feel inspired will act as 'sidewalk councilors' to confront women going into the clinic in the hope that they can be dissuaded. Others will chant in the background and sometimes act to try to block access to the clinic with their bodies. Occasionally there is a specialist in the fine arts of kryptonite who will lock himself to metal, a bicycle, and in one memorable case a junk car in the entrance of the clinic, forcing the fire brigade to come and meticulously cut him out of the contraption. The Lambs of Christ added a distinctly Marian aspect to both rituals beforehand and at the clinic. But the process was much the same.

In all cases, the confrontations at the clinic are highly emotional on all sides, and violence is always in the air, although it only rarely eventuates. I was able to talk to all sides, although women entering the clinic were obviously at a crisis point in their lives and needed to be approached with care and respect. On several occasions, rescuers, invariably women, would claim to hear the unborn baby crying and all hell would break loose. It is not easy research.



In the end, what I found was completely at variance from what had been written about the rescuers in the press. They took on real lives rather than caricatures, both for good and ill. Each had a story, but there were commonalities. All report an awakening, like a born again experience, where an act, a word or a graphic depiction of abortion would 'awaken' them satori-like to their mission. All report that it was like awakening from a lifelong sleep and all state that they were shocked that the rest of their world, even their families, remain asleep. From that moment on, each decision would be taken with respect to how it reflected on their faith commitment to rescue. Politics were reevaluated and people who had been extremely conservative politically would take on quite liberal views when it came to families and children, as well as on race. Some adopted mixed race or black children, others took in children with severe birth defects, and dedicated themselves and their meagre resources to caring for them.

In other ways though, changes did not happen. Domestic violence, drugs and alcohol abuse and the like that could not be overcome, persisted. Families dissolved under the pressure of having one or more members fully dedicated to an unpopular cause like rescue. In short, what emerged presented a wildly different picture from the media and academic portrayals of the movement. This is little surprise in that they were much talked about but almost never talked to.

There were costs. The academic ones are of too little concern to note here. The legal ones are much more relevant to the study of persecuted communities around the world. In this case, it was the 1990s and the Clinton Administration was passionately committed to abortion rights. Moreover, the movement had increasingly turned to violence against property and in a string of cases, against abortion providers and bystanders as well. It was a volatile brew.

In my case, it was a matter of proximity and timing. In all the chaos at the clinics, I was careful never to break, or even shade the law. I never entered a clinic. I spoke to both sides and

to police and clinic guards as well. But in my final days in Chicago when I was packing to move to a tribal college in Barrow, Alaska, which is the furthest northern point of human habitation in North America, I got a call from a rescuer from Oregon named Shelly Shannon, whom I had interviewed several times. She asked if I would like her archives of rescue materials, prison diaries, videos and newsletters? What historian wouldn't? Twelve crates (!) of materials arrived and were duly put unopened with our baggage for shipment to Barrow.

No sooner was the long journey to the Arctic accomplished and we were checked into a hotel when I turned on CNN and was greeted by Shelly's smiling face and the news that she had just shot an abortion provider in Kansas. Six times. And my only thought was 'uh oh'. The FBI soon came north with a Grand Jury subpoena and the Justice Department was not far behind. It all came out well in the end, and in fact the Grand Jury did not find evidence of a criminal conspiracy by the rescue movement—an outcome that was in part due to the dramatic readings of draft portions of "Absolute Rescue" that were so taken out of context by Justice Department attorneys that in the end the Grand Jury was reduced to laughter.

**But if these costs were small, governments around the world can be expected to take an equally dim view of research into persecuted Christian communities in their own borders. Experience, openness to the views of all actors, and studied neutrality are important in nations that might react in less mannered ways than the US.**

## **Conclusion**

I teach a course on Intelligence and National Security around the world. Whether in the US, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan or Hungary, it always begins with the same aphorism:

There is what you see.

There is what you don't see.

And there is what God alone knows.

The art of participant/observer fieldwork, like the craft of intelligence, is a process of going from A to B, knowing we will never have the full picture. In this case, government and NGO reports are a starting point. They are what you see, knowing that each may be weighted with the baggage of ideology and self interest. Fieldwork seeks to go the next level, providing readers and sponsors with the vital context and the deeply personal stories that shed light on what is not commonly seen.

These case studies, one in distant southern Sudan, the other in the United States, were chosen to illustrate this process. In Sudan in the 1980s, the conflict was not religious and had little to do with either Christianity or Islam. Rather, it was primordial and irreconcilable. Sudanese President Jaafar Nimeiry in the 1980s tried to bring peace with the Addis Accords. In Dinka terms, he was the man who 'walked between the spears'. In American terms, he was the man sitting on vast reserves of oil and the sudden American interest in religious freedom in the Sudan was rightly seen around the world as more concerned with oil than with Christianity.

By the 1990s however, with Addis in tatters and the war again raging, he underwent a kind of religious conversion experience and fell under the sway of Islamist scholars like the Mahmoud Mohammed Taha and the conflict turned first to religion and then, in Darfur in the West, to outright genocide.

Fieldwork by several scholars illustrated the dynamics of these changes.<sup>8</sup>

The rescue movement too proved through intensive participant/observer fieldwork to be nothing like the media and scholarly portrayals would have us believe. Moreover, as ‘what you don’t see’ became increasingly visible, the violence which shocked the nation was entirely predictable, coming as it did at the end of a long process of media demonization and legal proscription of peaceful means of protest with legislation like FOCA (Freedom of Clinic Access), FACE (Freedom of Clinic Entrances Act) were supplemented by civil suits under the RICO (Racketeer and Corrupt Organizations Act). RICO was the Coup de grâce. It was designed as an anti-Mafia law which mandated triple damages and court costs to be born by the accused and meant in practice that one either abandoned the movement to keep a roof over their family’s head or abandoned the family and go underground to keep fighting.<sup>9</sup>

**There is absolutely no substitute for fieldwork!**

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<sup>8</sup> Abdullahi El-Tom, "Darfur People: Too Black for the Arab-Islamic Project of Sudan, Part I," *Irish Journal of anthropology* 9, no. 1 (2006): 5-11. Millard Burr and Robert O. Collins, *Darfur: The Long Road to Disaster* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, "Absolute Rescue: Absolutism, Defensive Action and the Resort to Force." Jordan Goldberg, "The Commerce Clause and Federal Abortion Law: Why Progressives Might Be Tempted to Embrace Federalism," *Fordham L. Rev.* 75 (2006): 301-54.

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