

Pence & Persecution Politics: An Analysis of Vice President Pence’s Speeches Before Two Groups of Persecuted Church Activists

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I. Introduction: Pence’s Performance

For three days in May of 2017, more than six-hundred Christian leaders hailing from one-hundred thirty different countries gathered at the Mayflower and Trump International hotels in Washington, D.C., as guests of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s inaugural World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians. On the second day of the summit, Vice President of the United States Mike Pence stepped to the podium to offer a few remarks. After thanking the organizers and greeting the saints in attendance, Pence declared “[T]he Christian Faith is under siege. Throughout the world, no people of faith today face greater hostility or hatred than the followers of Christ” (Pence 2017a). Yet, as Pence reminded the audience, this persecution should have come as no surprise to Christians: “[T]he Bible tells us; ‘All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’” (Pence 2017a, quoting 2 Timothy 3:12; see also Pence 2017b). For Christians, Pence proclaimed, persecution is to be expected.

Unlike early Patristic discourses sparked by Roman persecution, however, Pence did not advise the persecuted Christians to embrace suffering as an opportunity to imitate Christ. Ignatius of Antioch’s plea forbidding Christians in Rome from intervening during his impending martyrdom—“Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, through whom I can attain to God”—found no parallel in Pence’s proposals (quoted in Pagels 1989: 82). Instead, Pence promised today’s Christians protection: “I’m here on behalf of the President as a tangible sign of his commitment to defending Christians and, frankly, all who suffer for their beliefs across the wider world” (2017a). The tables had turned since the days of Diocletian. No longer were Christians members of a vulnerable upstart sect negotiating its relation to its Jewish roots on one hand and its ambivalent legal status in the Roman Empire on the other. Now, as Pence himself proved, Christians stood at the helm of the mightiest state ever constructed, a state whose power could be wielded to protect persecuted Christians across the globe: the United States of America. “I believe that all God’s children, no matter their country or creed,” Pence declared, “can know with confidence that God will continue to guide this nation, to play our unique role on behalf of freedom in the world” (Pence 2017a). Speaking at the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, Pence proclaimed good news to the persecuted: the U.S.A. was the savior for which they had been waiting.

Framing constitutional religious freedom as a uniquely American sacred value, Pence positioned America as the protector of “people of faith” all over the world: “Since the founding of our nation, America has stood for the proposition that the right to believe and

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the right to act on one's beliefs is the right of all peoples at all times." Therefore, "[p]rotecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Trump administration" (Pence 2017a). Vouching for a president whose past and present behavior showed an utter indifference toward "traditional" Christian values, Pence positioned President Trump as a fierce ally of entrenched Christians fighting against their persecutors:

The suffering of Christians in the Middle East has stirred America to act, and it brings me here today. President Trump rightly said not long ago that—of the Christian church, 'nobody has been treated worse in the Middle East.' He's made it clear that America will stand by followers of Christ in this hour of need. (Pence 2017a).

Persecuted peoples did not need a saint, Pence suggested. Rather, they needed a soldier, which Pence promised in Trump.

The persecutors from whom the persecuted needed deliverance took only one form in Pence's speech, that of "the embodiment of evil in our time . . . radical Islamic terrorists" (Pence 2017a). Playing on perceptions that Trump's presidential predecessor invoked complexity and nuance as mere pretext for indifference and inaction, Pence reassured his audience of Trump's resolve: "Know today with assurance that President Trump sees these crimes for what they are: vile acts of persecution animated by hatred—hatred for the Gospel of Christ" (Pence 2017a). In contrast to the Obama administration, according to Pence, the Trump administration need not waste its time with complex, historical, geopolitical analysis in search of reasons behind the genesis and persistence of terroristic activities conducted by Islamist militants and effecting Christian communities. Trump and Pence already knew the reasons: "The practitioners of terror harbor a special hatred for the followers of Christ" (Pence 2017a).

While Pence notes that many Muslims, Yazidi, Druze, and members other religious groups had suffered from the terrorist activities of groups like ISIS, al Qaeda, al Shabaab, Boko Haram, or the Taliban, he dismissed their suffering as largely incomparable to that of Christians: for "no people of faith face greater hostility or hatred than the followers of Christ." Claiming "the limitations placed on people [of faith] have become too numerous to count," Pence noted:

Across the wider world, Christians face this and more. But to be clear, adherents of other religions across the world have not been spared. And we will speak for them and pray for them as well. For as history attests, persecution of one faith is ultimately the persecution of all faiths. (Pence 2017a)

While Pence's America promised to seek religious freedom for all, Pence made little effort to dispel the notion that America sought religious freedom for Christians first. For according to Pence, persecution of Christians was akin to the persecution of all faiths. Whether Pence thought the reverse was also true is left unstated.

By the end of Pence's speech, the summit audience had been assured of five things: 1) Christians were the most persecuted people in the world; 2) the greatest persecutors of Christians were radical Islamic terrorists; 3) radical Islamic terrorism also hurt other religious groups, but not as much as it hurt Christians; 4) that America was and is a Christian nation that would use its might to protect Christians all over the world; and importantly, 5) in Mike Pence and Donald Trump persecuted Christians had reliable allies who "will stand by followers of Christ in this hour of need." Yet, in all likelihood (with the possible exception of point five), Pence's audience already knew all of this. Activists working on behalf of the "persecuted church" have been telling a version of this story since the early 1990s. In fact, Pence's speech was more performative than informative. At the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians, Mike Pence displayed his mastery of what Melani McAlister has called the persecuted church movement's "politics of persecution" (McAlister 2008).

In recent years, McAlister, Elizabeth Castelli, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, and Saba Mahmood each have investigated the impact advocacy on behalf of the persecuted church has had on U.S. foreign policy (see Mahmood 2016; McAlister 2008; Castelli 2005; Sullivan 1999a; Sullivan 1999b). Gleaning insights from their work, this article analyzes Mike Pence's performance of persecuted church rhetoric at two major 2017 gatherings of persecuted church activists: the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association's World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians in May, 2017, and the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner in October, 2017.¹ Setting aside questions about the sincerity or cynicism of the Trump administration's concerns about global religious persecution, we will examine the ways that Pence's use of the politics of persecution furthers the interests of the persecuted church movement by perpetuating four pervasive American political discourses: 1) America as Christian nation with a divine call to cultivate and spread religious freedom; 2) "protecting religious freedom" as justification for a strong state to violate the sovereignty of a weaker state; 3) the greatest threat to American national security shifting in the 1990s from communism to Islamist terrorism ; and 4) Christian persecution as the emerging position through which to vie for recognition as "true victims" during the rise of what Alyson Cole has called the "cult of true victimhood" in the American "culture wars" of the 1990s (see Cole 2007; see also Hunter 1991). This article explores how all four of these

¹ Brian Eason writes, "Pence has gone further than Vice Presidents past in courting Evangelicals while in office" (2017). Reflecting his belief and belonging in the politics and institutions of the Religious Right—long before he was a national political figure, Pence was prominently featured in a video tribute to the political architect of the Religious Right, Paul Weyrich—Pence often describes himself as "a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican, in that order." Thus, it was no surprise that throughout his first year and a half in office, Pence has set records for being the highest-ranking government official ever to speak at a number of large Religious Right gatherings, such as meetings for Focus on the Family, March for Life, and Christians United for Israel, as well as the two events discussed in this paper. (In the tribute to Paul Weyrich, Mike Pence can be found alongside many leading lights of the Religious Right, from Jerry Falwell Jr. to Phyllis Schlafly and Richard Land; see "21 Gun Salute.")

discourses weave through the rhetorical tapestry of Pence's speeches to persecuted church activists, and demonstrates the continued influence of the persecuted church movement on American foreign policy and religious freedom law. To begin, however, it is necessary to investigate briefly the genesis and development of the persecuted church movement.

II. Background: The Persecuted Church Movement

The institutional origins and political activity of the contemporary persecuted church movement can be traced back to the early 1990s.² This contemporary movement was bolstered by an influx of American Evangelical interest and activism. The most tangible accomplishments of this movement include the 1996 National Association of Evangelicals *Statement of Conscience* establishing worldwide religious persecution as an area of paramount concern for millions of American Evangelicals, the successful inauguration of an annual International Day of Prayer on Behalf of the Persecuted Church,³ and a host of congressional legislation. By far the most important legislative accomplishment was the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which made promoting and monitoring religious freedom abroad a permanent U.S. foreign policy mandate.⁴ While this movement may have achieved its most important institutional and legislative accomplishments in the 1990s, Castelli traces the roots of the contemporary movement back to Cold War era discourses: the idea of "the 'persecuted church' that had animated anti-Communist Christian organizing internationally during the Cold War," and "the growing international commitment post-World War II to the promotion of human rights around the world" (Castelli 2005: 321). "During the Cold War," McAlister notes, "Evangelicals had considered 'human rights' the domain of the political left, but in the post-Soviet era, they too had to adapt to the concept's increasing hegemony" (McAlister 2008:

² Castelli cites dozens of organizations that made advocacy on behalf of the persecuted church part of their core mission in the 1990s, including the National Association of Evangelicals, World Evangelical Alliance, Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors International, Barnabas Fund, Bible League, Christians in Crisis, International Christian Concern, Jubilee Campaign, and others. While some of these organizations had been founded long before the 1990s, Castelli argues that they were significantly reinvigorated by the flurry of activity at that time. She includes brief descriptions of all these organizations and more at the end of her article (see 2005: 337-344).

³ Begun in response to an incendiary 1995 *Wall Street Journal* editorial by Michael Horowitz blasting predominantly Islamic nations for their treatment of Christian minorities, the International Day of Prayer for Persecuted Christians claimed to have 70,000 participating churches by 1997. Horowitz also drafted the 1996 NEA *Statement of Conscience* (see McAlister 2008: 20; Castelli 2005: 345n4).

⁴ McAlister notes: "The anti-persecution movement can boast of concrete political achievements. In 1998, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), the result of years of intense lobbying led by evangelicals, with the participation of Jews, Catholics and Tibetan Buddhists" (McAlister 2008: 19).

20). Late adapters they may have been, but by the early 1990s Evangelical advocacy groups were deftly translating Evangelical concerns into the language of universal human rights. While politically expedient, articulating concern for the persecuted church in terms of human rights often produced tensions between the exclusively Christian concerns of persecuted church activists and the more expansive concerns of universal human rights advocates.

Simmering beneath the surface of religious persecution discourse since the 1960s and 1970s, these tensions erupted into public view during congressional debates in the legislative run up to the passage of IRFA. Castelli points to one influential 1997 set of hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs under the heading “Religious Persecution in the Middle East” (Castelli 2005: 330). Representative Frank Wolf (R-VA)—cosponsor of the Wolf-Specter bill that was originally critiqued for being too narrowly focused on Christian persecution but later amended and folded into IRFA—spoke as a special witness at the hearing. As Castelli points out, both Wolf’s testimony and his answers to questions posed by Senate Subcommittee members demonstrate the tension between the singularly Christian focus of persecuted church discourse and the plural perspectives of human rights discourse.

Seeking to justify religious persecution as a distinct phenomenon against which the U.S. should marshal its foreign policy resources, Wolf appealed to an idealized American past of religious toleration and a speculative interpretation of an unidentified biblical passage as axiomatic sources of authority. Wolf concluded his prepared remarks saying:

Today, in closing, Mr. Chairman [Sen. Sam Brownback (R-KS)], is the National Day of Prayer. Many people of all faiths have gathered here in Washington to pray for our country and its freedom. It is our obligation as a country which has been blessed so abundantly. It says in the Bible, “To whom much is given, much is expected.” There is even a version, I think, which says, “To whom much is given, much is required.” Maybe it is not just “expected,” but it is “required.” (Quoted in Castelli 2005: 332; compare Luke 12:48, Evangelical Heritage Version and KJV.)

Later, during questioning, Wolf invoked Jesus’s parable of the “least of these” from Matthew 25, ostensibly as an argument for why protecting one persecuted faith advances the interests of all religious groups:

It’s like for Jesus in Matthew 25. When you go to the least of these, you do it unto me. Well, it’s the same way that we say if you go after the least of these groups, even if it is a little denomination that maybe nobody has heard about, we still stand with them.⁵ (Castelli 2005: 333)

⁵ It is revealing that Wolf uses the peculiarly Protestant category of “denomination” as a generic term for a variety of religious groups.

Castelli describes the overall impression left by the arguments employed in Wolf's testimony, saying: "Why should the United States or Americans be concerned about religious persecution and religious freedom? Because Jesus and the Bible told them so." The evidence and arguments offered throughout Wolf's testimony made clear that when he spoke of "religious persecution" what he meant was "Christian persecution."

Yet, even Wolf seemed to sense the tension between the supposedly universal goals of his proposed legislation addressing freedom from religious persecution as a human right, and the particularly Christocentric nature of his testimony. While broaching the subject of persecuted Christians in China, Wolf ventured a brief ecumenical aside:

[In China] There is also, though, in fairness, persecution of Buddhists ... Last they are persecuting the Muslim faith ... So they are trying to eradicate the Catholic Church, they are hurting the Protestant Church, they are bulldozing monasteries with regard to Buddhism, and the poor Muslims have nobody to speak up for them. (Quoted in Castelli 2005: 333-334)

As Castelli rightly points out, "the locution 'in fairness' is the cue here that the focus really is on Christians (2005: 334). Thus, when the suffering of non-Christians does appear in the record of these congressional hearings, it is often coated in a patronizing gloss.

Even when they are not undercutting their efforts to appear non-sectarian with such locutions as "in fairness," lawmakers' and persecuted church activists' consistent conflation of "religion" with "faith" or "belief" betrays an essentially Protestant understanding of what counts as religion at play in these proceedings. The fact that the structuring logics of secular religious freedom legislation emerged within the developmental history of Protestantism (public/private; sacred/secular; faith/works; practice/belief; ritual/sincerity) has presented major challenges for the contemporary practice of religious freedom legislation in religiously diverse societies, a problem which Winnifred Fallers Sullivan has explored at length (see 2005; see also Mahmood 2016). Unrecognized Protestant assumptions about the nature of religion place significant limits on the legislative imaginations of lawmakers. Such legislation, even when well intended, often unwittingly reproduces Christian ideals and standards. As Mahmood notes, if religion is all about internal faith in the private realm—as religious freedom laws often assume it is—then rather than limiting the secular state's power, legislation that involves the state in promoting religious freedom actually grants it pervasive regulatory power over external religious performances for the sake of public order; power which is easily misused and abused.⁶

Running parallel to the Protestant assumptions underlying congressional discourse about religion, and similarly structuring conversation along essentially Christian lines, is the ubiquitous presence of the Christian martyr narrative as a lens through which to read religious persecution. As Castelli explains, "'persecution' carries an especially amplified

⁶ As a political imagination "secularism," Mahmood explains, "reduces religious equality to the politics of rights and recognition, strengthening the prerogative of the state to intervene in and reorder religious life—which ... often results in the exacerbation of religious polarization and inequality" (2016: 211-212).

charge for many Christians because persecution plays a defining role in the generation and sustenance of Christian identity itself.” She cites numerous New Testament passages in which Jesus or Paul assures the Christian community that they will indeed be persecuted, and in which this persecution is figured as constitutive of communal identity.⁷ “According to these influential biblical passages and countless later formulations by the church fathers,” Castelli notes, “to be a Christian is to suffer persecution” (2005: 329). Unlike many other religious groups, recognition as “the persecuted” carries an intrinsic, identity-confirming value within many Christian traditions; for to the persecuted belongs the Kingdom of Heaven (see Matt. 5:10-11 [NRSV]). For this reason, Christians may be more likely to claim a persecuted identity than other groups. Thus, like discussions of religious freedom that define religion in terms of private belief, any discussion conducted in terms of “religious persecution” is likely to focus disproportionately on Christian concerns and operate according to Christian logics.

Some persecuted church activists, however, have insisted that the focus should indeed be on Christians; Christians, these activists claim, are truly the most persecuted religious group in the world. In 1997, Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, two influential persecuted church activists based at the time at the Washington, D.C., think tank Freedom House, produced what McAlister calls the movement’s “activist manifestos” (2008: 20). Looking back from the threshold of a new millennium, Shea’s *In the Lion’s Den: A Shocking Account of Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians Today and How We Should Respond* identifies the 20th century as the worst century for Christian persecution in the history of the world. Shea locates two primary sources of contemporary Christian persecution: post-Soviet communist states and majority Islamic countries. Marshall’s book, *Their Blood Cries Out*, presents itself as a more scholarly treatise on the problem of Christian persecution, but in substance it differs little from Shea’s. *Their Blood Cries Out*, McAlister notes:

was also the original source of what would become the all-but-official numbers used by activists: 200 million Christians live in countries where Christians are persecuted; another 400 million live in situations of ‘non-trivial’ limits on their religious freedom. (2008: 21).

Shortly after their publication, Shea’s and Marshall’s works became widely-cited proofs of the fact that Christians faced a level of persecution incomparable to that faced by any other religious group.⁸

⁷ For example, Matt. 5:10-11 (“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”); John 15:20 (“Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also”); 2 Cor. 12:10 (“Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong”). All verses have been taken from the Oxford Annotated Bible, with Apocrypha, 4th edn.

⁸ As Castelli points out, the blurbs on both these books constitute a *Who’s Who* of Religious Right and Conservative movement politics: Don Argue, Gary Bauer, William J. Bennet,

Yet, the statistics offered by Marshall and Shea rest on two questionable foundations: First (discounting the related facts that, due to global population growth and aggressive proselytizing), there are more Christians living today than at any point in history, and Christianity boasts the most numerous and wide-spread constituency of any religious tradition; and second, the authors employ a vague, maximalist definition of what counts as "religious persecution" (Castelli 2005: 330).⁹ Nina Shea's testimony at the "Religious Persecution in the Middle East" congressional hearing (mentioned above) presents an apt example of this maximalist approach. Responding to Sen. Brownback's request for a numerical estimate of those "persecuted by death, or slavery, or torture" during the 20th century, Shea answered:

The century opened up with the massacre of the Armenians in Turkey. We then moved to Stalinism, Maoism, and Nazism took its toll on Christians as well as Jews and some others. There is also Pol Potism. This has been a terrible century. (Quoted in Castelli 2005: 329)

William Bright, Charles Colson, Baroness Cox, Steve Forbes, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Richard Land, Josh McDowell, Richard Mouw, Richard John Neuhaus, Peggy Noonan, Michael Novak, Luis Palau, Nina Shea, Ronald Sider, Joseph Stowell, and Ravi Zacharias (2005: 345n7).

⁹ In his speeches before the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians and the In Defense of Christian Solidarity Dinner, Mike Pence cited a 2017 Pew Research Center study on the status of global restrictions on religion during 2015 to make the same point that Marshall and Shea have been arguing for the past 20 years: Christians are the most persecuted religious group (for a summary of the report, see "Global Restrictions" 2017; for the full report, see Kishi et al, 2017). However, shortly after Pence referenced this study, Pew published an article refuting the misleading and manipulative way in which Pence had used their data (see Kishi 2017.)

Katayoun Kishi from Pew points out that Pence was correct to state that Christians faced religious harassment of some type in more countries than any other religious group. However, Kishi notes that this fact should not be surprising because Christians are the most numerous religious group and there are Christians in more countries than any other religious group. Further, Kishi points out that Pew's measure did not seek to account for the severity of the harassment measured. Thus, whether all these instances of harassment could rightly be considered persecution is questionable. Furthermore, Kishi argues that, while the severity of persecution facing Christians in the Middle East is serious and real, this persecution has resulted from terrorist groups who have also wreaked havoc on Yazidi, Druze, Shia, and other religious groups. Finally, Kishi notes, in contrast to the perception created by Pence, Christians mostly faced harassment in majority-Christian countries. The overall thrust of Kishi's arguments makes it clear that Pence's use of the Pew study results either from sloppy misreading or simple bad-faith.

In order to count all these historical atrocities as instances of religious persecution, Shea has to decontextualize them. She strips away any historical factors that might suggest these conflicts had to do with concerns other than religion.

Shea's maximalist framework uses "persecution" as what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the "structure of a general that necessarily occludes our view of the singular" (2000: 82). The unique, factorial formula involved in each instance is dissolved into the acidic category of persecution. Regardless of the local circumstances animating any particular case, for Shea the only factors that matter are whether a population was Christian and whether they suffered: if Christians suffered, they must have been persecuted. Christians, in the hands of persecuted church activists like Shea and Marshall, are constructed as categorical innocents repeatedly victimized by totalitarian governments, barbaric dictators, and terrorists. Never are they responsible agents involved in conflict. Application of this maximalist framework for religious persecution, however, is restricted to instances where Christians are the victims. The possibility that such a maximalist framework might render American military interventions in the Middle East or European colonial projects in North and West Africa as sites of religious persecution against Muslims is left studiously unconsidered (Castelli 2005: 330).

When Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, the persecuted church movement gained a permanent institutional foothold in the U.S. government, a remarkable show of political strength. McAlister describes the contentious nature of IRFA, saying:

IRFA was signed into law in the teeth of strong opposition from big business and the Clinton administration, and in the face of concern from traditional human rights groups who saw it as too narrowly focused on the victimization of Christians. Its passage was, in large part, a testament to the clout of the anti-persecution grassroots and a highpoint for evangelical activists who wanted to make global issues central to their community. (2008: 19)

The culmination of a conversation that began in Evangelical communities during the Cold War, IRFA proved that persecuted church activists were capable of restructuring America foreign policy in significant ways.

The passage of IRFA ensured the persecuted church movement's survival and created conditions to maintain its vibrancy indefinitely. As part of IRFA, Congress created the bipartisan United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The USCIRF's mandate includes monitoring global religious freedom and advising Congress and the State Department according to its findings. In no small measure, the USCIRF shapes the U.S. government's perception of the current state of religious freedom and religious persecution. Since its inauguration in 1999, many prominent persecuted church activists have secured appointments to this commission.¹⁰ Nina Shea was a USCIRF commissioner from 1999-2012, making her the longest serving member of the

¹⁰ The USCIRF website contains a list of all former commissioners, complete with short bios (see "Former Commissioners" n.d.).

commission. Richard Land, another prominent persecuted church activist and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, served on the commission from 2001-2012. Recently, the Trump administration appointed former Sen. Sam Brownback—who left the Senate in 2011 to become the Governor of Kansas, a position he held until January 2018—to head the U.S. State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. While a member of Congress, Brownback promoted the persecuted church movement and was a central figure in getting religious persecution on the State Department's docket during the mid-1990s. Since its reinvigoration in the early 1990s, the persecuted church movement has not only succeeded in changing public opinion about the state of persecuted Christians across the globe, it has managed to reshape the U.S. government in significant ways.

In 2017, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA) inaugurated the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians. While the Summit itself may have been a new endeavor, its founder and BGEA director, Franklin Graham, has long supported persecuted church activism through his organization, Samaritan's Purse. The purpose of the summit, according to the BGEA's website, was:

To bring together church leaders, victims of persecution and advocates to help raise global awareness about the plight of persecuted Christians, show solidarity with those who suffer because of their faith and look for solutions to the unprecedented persecution of Christians happening today around the world [because] Christians are now one of the most victimized groups in the world." ("Fact Sheet" 2017)

In Defense of Christians was founded in 2014 by Andrew Doran, a longtime D.C. operative with a history of foreign policy work in the U.S. State Department; while all the members of the In Defense of Christians staff, board of directors, and trustees have been on the political right, they have not all been American Evangelicals. As a result, In Defense of Christians seems to have had a wider representation of Christian denominations built into its institutional structure than does the BGEA—from Maronite Catholic and Armenian Orthodox to United Methodist and Roman Catholic. Furthermore, many of In Defense of Christian's staff, directors, and trustees have extensive experience in U.S. foreign policy or direct connections to business in the Middle East (or both). The In Defense of Christians website describes the organization as "advocating for the protection and preservation of Christians and Christianity in the Middle East, where it all began" (*In Defense of Christians*, n.d.). Despite their religious differences, the BGEA's World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians and In Defense of Christians are clearly two branches sprouted from the same trunk: the 1990's persecuted church movement.

In many ways, the impact on the federal government of these various elements of the movement culminated in Pence's speeches to the World Summit in Defense of Christians and the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner.

III. Four Discourses

Four discourses evoked by Vice President Pence in his 2017 speeches before the World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians and the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner demonstrate the continued influence of the persecuted church movement on U.S. foreign policy. The following is a brief overview of these discourses as discussed by Mahmood, Castelli, McAllister, or Sullivan, followed by examples of Pence's evocations of each.

A. "America as a Christian Nation with a Divine Calling"

Discussing a speech given by Sen. Brownback to open the 1997 National Day of Prayer congressional hearings mentioned above, Castelli draws attention to his framing of American-ness as an essentially religious identity: "We are a people grounded in faith, yet tolerant of different manifestations of belief. To fail to protect those who suffer persecution would be to repudiate our convictions before the world" (quoted in 2005: 332). Citing a particularly rosy view of American religious history—one that elides the violent intolerance of early New England Puritans, ignores the U.S. government's aggressive suppression of Mormons during the 19th century, fails to mention the important role of Christianity in maintaining and justifying the uniquely cruel American system of chattel slavery, and disregards the decimation of 'savage, pagan' Native American communities—Brownback figures protection and promotion of religious liberty as a sacred American value. As Castelli notes, "in Brownback's rhetoric ... American-ness is itself figured as a religious stance, requiring the same kind of robust and stalwart defense of 'our convictions' that is also demanded of the Christian martyr" (2005: 332). Brownback's rhetoric is representative of a guiding sentiment present amongst persecuted church activists, one that sees America as a providentially chosen nation with a divine call to proselytize the world in the name of religious liberty.

At the 2017 In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner twenty-years after Brownback spoke those opening remarks, and roughly twenty-seconds before declaring Brownback to be "a great leader and a great man of faith," Pence echoed Brownback's sentiment that American-ness is an essentially religious identity: "The right to worship according to the dictates of our conscience is at the very heart of who we are as Americans, as men and women created in the image and likeness of God" (Pence 2017b). Likewise, in his speech before the World Summit in Defense of Christians, Pence defines the entire American project in terms of the pursuit of religious freedom:

In a very real sense, America was founded by people who had the courage to cross the Atlantic, motivated in so many cases to come here to that they might have freedom of religion ... Since the founding of our nation, America has stood for the proposition that the right to act on one's beliefs is the right of all peoples of at all times. (Pence 2017a)

Even at the beginning of Pence's speech, ostensibly trying to justify why a "world summit" on Christian persecution should be held in the United States, Pence explains to the audience:

You are here from across this land and from distant others because America was and is and ever will be that shining city on a hill where men and women of faith throughout our history have been able to walk and openly worship their faith in God to the glory of God, and it will ever be true in these United States of America. (Pence 2017a)

Pence does not let the long historical record of U.S. government interventions restricting religiously motivated practices distort his depiction of the United States as a utopia of religious libertarianism (see Sullivan 2002). Near the end of his speech, Pence's providential tale of American history crescendos into an altar call, an invitation to faith in America's divine calling:

I believe that all God's children, no matter their country or creed, can know with confidence that God will continue to guide this nation to play our unique role on behalf of freedom in the world. So have confidence. (Pence 2017a)

As the second most powerful official of the United States—and speaking on behalf of the most powerful official—Pence uses both of his speeches before persecuted church activists to mirror and endorse their vision of the United States as possessing a divine mandate to marshal its vast resources to protect and promote religious freedom across the world.

B. "Protecting Religious Freedom as Justification to Violate State Sovereignty"

In *Religious Difference in a Secular Age*, Saba Mahmood demonstrates how efforts to protect and promote religious liberty are inextricably tied up with the development of concepts of secular governance, state sovereignty, and minority rights. While state sovereignty, religious liberty, and minority rights may be signature concepts of political secularism, these three ideas have more often existed in dissonant tension than blended into harmonic resolve. Documenting the ways that European governments marshaled concern for the religious liberty of Christian minorities living in the Ottoman Empire as justification for violating the sovereignty of Ottoman rule, Mahmood argues that religious liberty cannot be responsibly considered simply as an abstract political virtue. Instead, she insists one must trace the history of the secular concept of religious liberty in relation to the power struggles between strong and weak states—especially the struggles between strong Christian states and weak non-Christian ones. Despite noble European rhetoric, "the introduction of the principle of religious freedom to non-Western lands," Mahmood explains, "often violated the principle of state sovereignty, instead of consolidating it" (2016: 34).

Mahmood points to the history of "capitulations"—special privileges granted by Ottoman rulers to certain subjects of Western European states operating in Ottoman

lands—as an example of this fact. As she explains, “capitulations were legal instruments that a range of empires employed at the time to give extraterritorial jurisdiction to subjects of another state in order to bolster trade and strategic relations.”¹¹ Beginning as an economic measure, over time capitulations became ways through which European powers could ensure their missionaries’ religious rights and territorial access to Ottoman lands. Later, Western European states sought even more expansive capitulations and claimed protective rights over indigenous Ottoman Christian communities. Mahmood quotes from Malcolm Evans’s work on the history of the concept of religious liberty to explain how shifting power relations between Western European states and the Ottoman Empire led to a transformation in the way capitulations functioned:

[Capitulations] were originally bestowed at a time when the Western States were economically and politically inferior to the Ottomans but, as the balance of power shifted in their favor, they became a potent means of furthering their strength and the enfeebled Empire was unable to resist. Within this framework, the role of Western European States as protectors of the religious freedom of their subjects within the Ottoman domains easily elided into a claim entitling them to champion the liberties, religious and otherwise, of all Christians in the Empire. (Evans 1997: 61-62; quoted in Mahmood 2016: 34)

While the system of capitulations began as a strategic measure used by the Ottomans to bolster trade with Western European states, eventually as power dynamics evolved they became a means by which Western European states could justify extensive violations of Ottoman sovereignty.

Construing themselves as the rightful defenders of all Christians, even those indigenous to Ottoman-controlled lands, Western European states were able to use Christian minorities within the Ottoman Empire as bargaining chips with which to extract increasingly extensive and lucrative capitulations. Western European powers used Ottoman capitulations to structure “Christian” as a transnational identity rightfully owing patronage to the sovereign states emerging from the vestiges of the Holy Roman Empire. However, “notably,” Mahmood says, “no parallel privileges existed for Ottomans in relation to non-Christian subjects of European empires” (2016: 35). As Mahmood explains, the power differential at play here can be seen in the fact that Western European states granted no comparable capitulations to Ottoman subjects operating in Western European lands. Strong as they were by the 19th century, no European state would entertain the notion that another entity might claim to represent the non-Christian subjects of their empires.

Mahmood argues that IRFA, the persecuted church movement’s signature accomplishment, represents the latest evolution in this multi-century pattern of using religious liberty as a justification for a strong state to violate the sovereignty of a weaker

¹¹ European Christians living and working in areas under Ottoman control, for example, might be exempted from the *dhimmi* tax as the result of a capitulation offered by the Ottomans to those Christians’ patron states (see Mahmood 2016: 34).

state (see 2016: 92-99). While the IRFA does not require the United States to act in every case where a group's religious freedom is being violated, it does provide Congress with a legal basis to justify acting in any case where religious persecution is said to exist: the Act does not demand action in every case of religious persecution, but it does allow for it.

Thus, protecting the religious liberty of Christian minorities in the Middle East has been used as one justification for the United States' continuous military operations in the Middle East since they began nearly two decades ago. In a speech only a few days removed from the 9/11 attacks, President Bush, explaining his understanding of why terrorists in the Middle East hate Americans, claimed that terrorists "want to drive Christians and Jews out of vast regions of Asia and Africa," but that as Americans "we stand in their way" (Bush 2001). Why did terrorists attack America? According to Bush, the answer, in part at least, is because we stand for the religious liberty of religious minorities in the Middle East. Thus, a primary justification for the "War on Terror," which Bush announced later in that same speech, was the continued protection and promotion of the religious freedom of these minorities.

Mike Pence's 2017 speeches before the BGEA's World Summit in Defense of Christians and the In Defense of Christians Solidarity dinner continue this longstanding tradition of using the protection of religious freedom as a justification for the sovereignty-violating activities of a strong state against a weaker one, of which waging war is a paramount example. In one section of his speech to the World Summit, Pence posits the presence of religious persecution as a de facto justification for American intervention:

[R]est assured, in the Middle East and North Africa, anywhere terror strikes, America stands with those who are targeted and tormented for their belief, whether they're Christian, Yazidi, Druze, Shia, Sunni, or any other creed. The President's commitment to protecting people of faith also will not end with the elimination of ISIS or the eradication of terror. Under President Donald Trump, America will continue to condemn persecution of any kind, of any faith, any place, any time. We will stand against it with all our ideals and with all our might. (Pence 2017a)

According to Pence, wherever religious persecution is found, America has the right and responsibility to assert its values, regardless of the circumstances.

Likewise, before the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner, Pence proclaimed America's commitment to seek out religious persecution wherever it may be found. He, promised that America would use its military might to bring deliverance to the persecuted. Pence proclaims:

[T]o stop the fight, to end the suffering, we must first confront the enemy that's driving believers away. That's why, under President Donald Trump, we are taking the fight to the terrorists on our terms, on their soil. The truth is radical Islamic terrorism is a hydra with many heads, but no matter what name they go by, or where they try to hide, our administration is fully resolved to destroy them root and branch. (Pence 2017b)

Framing the activities of Islamist terrorist groups as the primary source of religious persecution in the Middle East, Pence takes the presence of these groups in any region as rationale enough for the United States to deploy its military strength, regardless of whether such deployments violate the supposedly sovereign boundaries of another state.

Pence does not limit America's sovereignty-defying activities to those intended to pursue terrorist groups and other non-state actors that persecute Christians in the Middle East. Pence also promises that America will exercise oversight over governments throughout the region to ensure that they abide by practices of religious liberty amenable to American law:

As countries and governments throughout the region begin to restore order, I promise you that the United States of America will strive to ensure that they protect the religious freedom of all their citizens. The right to worship according to the dictates of our conscience is at the very heart of who we are as Americans, men and women created in the image and likeness of God. And protecting and promoting religious freedom is a foreign policy priority of the Trump administration. (Pence 2017b)

Here Pence again explicitly connects the idea that religious freedom is central to American identity with a peculiarly American responsibility to export our values across the world, by military force if necessary.

Finally, it is worth paying attention to Pence's comments about the United Nations in his *In Defense of Christians* speech. One of the basic ideas underlying the U.N. is that it can be used as a deliberative body to balance concerns for state sovereignty with the overall interests and safety of the international community. In theory, the U.N. serves as a mechanism for reigning in the actions of more powerful states that may seek to impose their will on less powerful ones. By marshaling international consensus and gathering strength in numbers, the interests of a coalition of weaker states can guard against the ambitions of a stronger one. Yet the limitations the U.N.'s deliberative processes place on American ambition have long been a source of frustration for persecuted church activists like Nina Shea.¹² Many persecuted church activists have instead argued that the U.S. should act unilaterally to protect religious freedom, not waiting on the slow-moving mechanisms of international consensus. Pence embraced these arguments when he announced that the U.S. would direct all aid intended for persecuted religious groups away from the U.N. and

¹² In the months leading up to Pence's speech before *In Defense of Christians*, Shea had repeatedly argued that "the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), marginalizes Christians and others targeted by ISIS for eradication in two critical programs: refugee housing in the region and Syrian refugee-resettlement abroad" (Shea 2016). She had personally been pushing for the U.S. to defund UNHCR and instead conduct refugee aid strictly through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for months before Pence announced that the U.S. would do just that.

administer it unilaterally through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Rejecting the U.N.'s claims to be helping Christian communities at similar rates as Muslim, Yazidi, and Druze as cynical statements made in bad faith, Pence declares:

Our fellow Christians and all who are persecuted in the Middle East should not have to rely on multinational institutions when America can help them directly. And tonight, it is my privilege to announce that President Trump has ordered the State Department to stop funding ineffective relief efforts at the United Nations. And from this day forward, America will provide support directly to persecuted communities through USAID. (Pence 2017b)

Here Pence frames religious persecution as a justification for disregarding not only the sovereignty of weaker states in the Middle East but also for sidestepping the checks upon strong states implemented by the international community through the U.N. In Pence's rhetoric, the United States, as protector and promoter of religious liberty across the globe, is justified in its unilateral actions by the righteousness of its cause: ending religious persecution.

C. "Islam as Communism's Replacement"

As the concrete threat of Communist domination was crumbling in the early 1990s, Francis Fukuyama confidently declared liberal democracy and free market capitalism had brought an end to history (1992). Yet, despite Fukuyama's Hegelian optimism, a new common sense about the "greatest threat to democracy and freedom" soon emerged. In 1993, sociologist Samuel P. Huntington penned "The Clash of Civilizations?" which directly challenged Fukuyama's thesis; he later expanded his article into *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World* (1996). According to Huntington, while the clash of ideologies between capitalism and communism was indeed resolving, a new, far more dangerous clash was emerging: a clash of civilizations.

Huntington maintained that—the internal disagreements of the West having been resolved in favor of capitalism and liberal democracy—the West, as a civilization, now found its greatest threats external to itself in opposing civilizations. Huntington divided the post-1990 world into nine distinct civilizations divided along religious and/or cultural lines: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese (22-27). He argued that, in the post-1990 world, culture trumped ideology because "the major differences in political and economic development among civilizations are clearly rooted in their different cultures" (29). Of these nine civilizations, he singled out the Islamic world as the greatest threat to Western civilizations. While Huntington maintains that he did not mean for Western civilization to be analogous to Christianity, the slippage was too easy to make. Quickly, Huntington's thesis was transformed into an eschatological expectation of a civilizational clash between Christianity and Islam. After the 9/11 attacks, Huntington's already popular thesis gained even more traction. In the post-

9/11 world, talk of a civilization clash between the West and the Islamic world gained axiomatic status in many American foreign policy circles.

Persecuted church activists also took up this language of civilizational clash in explaining the trials and travails of various Christian communities throughout the Middle East and Africa. A clear example of this impulse can be seen in persecuted church activism around the conflict in Sudan during the late 1990s. Persecuted church activists described this conflict in terms of an Arab Islamic civilization in the north attacking a black Christian civilization in the south. Obscuring the fact that southern Sudan is a complex amalgam of Christians and traditional African religious practitioners, ignoring the impact of tribal differences, and eliding the role struggles for control over the region's massive oil reserves played in the rationale for the conflict, McAlister notes that persecuted church activists, "engaged the complex Sudanese civil war in a simplistic way." According to McAlister, the role of the persecuted church activists in relation to the Sudanese was

... to raise awareness that 'Arab Muslims' in the north were oppressing 'black Christians' in the south—murdering the men and taking the women and children as slaves. Evangelical media, and more so, evangelical fundraising embraced a vision of the Sudan conflict as a religious war—or sometimes, a religious-racial war. That view involved not only a misreading of the identities of the antagonists, but also a simplification of the multiple concrete political issues at stake. (2008: 26)

Yet, because of the ubiquitous explanatory status clash of civilization narratives achieved in the late-1990s, this misreading of the Sudanese conflict was too attractive to pass up. It resonated with what persecuted church activists, and many others, had already accepted: that Islamic civilization is the Christian West's greatest threat.

Pence pulls on this same thread in both of his speeches before persecuted church activists at the BGEA's World Summit in Defense of Persecuted Christians and the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner. Despite the fact that widely-cited persecuted church monitoring agencies like Open Doors International list countries like North Korea, India, Laos, and Vietnam among the leading persecutors of Christians, the only perpetrators of persecution Pence mentions are radical Islamic terrorists. Unsurprisingly, no other persecutors make an appearance in either of Pence's speeches.

Discussing the bombing of Coptic churches in Egypt and the beheading of monks in Syria, Pence assures the audience that he and the President see these not simply as acts of terror, but as acts of religiously motivated persecution:

Know today with assurance that President Trump sees these crimes for what they are: vile acts of persecution animated by hatred—hatred for the gospel of Christ. And so too does the President know those who perpetrate these crimes. They are the embodiment of evil in our time. He calls them by name—radical Islamic terrorists. (Pence 2017a)

Framing these radical Islamic terrorists as the sole named sources of Christian persecution, Pence positions the United States' military campaigns against ISIS as acts liberating Christians:

The suffering of Christians in the Middle East has stirred America to act ... I can promise you, the armed forces of the United States of America, working with our allies in the region in Iraq and Afghanistan—we will not rest until we hunt down and destroy ISIS at its source. (Pence 2017a)

Pence frames the campaign against ISIS in terms not unlike those used by persecuted church activists to describe the Sudanese civil war: a civilizational conflict between Christian freedom and Islamic slavery.

As Huntington's monolithic "Islamic civilization"—and its malignant outgrowth, radical Islamic terrorism—came to occupy the threat vacuum created by the dissolving Soviet Union in the early 1990s, persecuted church activists participated in the shaping of the framework in which this threat was understood. While Huntington and his conversation partners spoke about competition between conflicting economic and political systems, persecuted church activists positioned Islamic civilizations as persecutors and Christians as the persecuted. Religious liberty and religious persecution, thus, became shorthand references for the hierarchical ranking of civilizational projects. In the hands of persecuted church activists, the presence or absence of American-style religious liberty was posited as the moral litmus test for any civilization, a test that Islamic nations failed categorically. Regardless of the fact that no nation, not even America, as Jonathan Fox has pointed out, actually practices the type of separation between church and state that religious freedom advocates often deem the precondition of religious liberty, persecuted church activists and clash of civilizations foreign policy experts both point to the fact of Islam's supposed categorical inability to separate religion and politics as evidence of its propensity for persecution (see Fox 2006). Thus, it is no surprise that in Pence's speeches before symposiums of persecuted church activists, the only perpetrators of persecution which he names are "radical Islamic terrorists."

D. "Persecution as Victimization"

In a short but insightful essay titled "Notes on the Sources of Violence," philosopher Charles Taylor outlines a "narrative of the modern world" that emerges in full force during the second half of the 20th century, a narrative which Renée Girard called "*le souci de la victime*" (Taylor 2004: 35). "There is a narrative of the modern world," Taylor argues, "like and parallel to that of the growth of freedom, democracy, which sees us as redressing all the historical wrongs and inequalities. We rescue and recognize all the victims" (2004: 35). This narrative, this concern for the victim, Renée Girard argued, functions as an eschatology of the modern world. "The idea," Taylor explains, "is that we move toward the ultimate order through the unmasking of hidden victimizations, which are covered up, denied, and have to be denounced" (2004: 35). On the one hand, concern for the victim is a natural byproduct of a polity that values and promises equality and mutual respect for all

its members: the presence of the victim gives the lie to these sacred promises and thus demands recompense. On the other hand, both Taylor and Girard see a secularized Christian logic further animating this concern. Taylor suggests:

“The concern is a more direct borrowing from Christianity. The Gospel involves a reversal, showing the victim to be innocent; it points toward the raising up of victims, of the despised and rejected ... Hence comes the powerful cachet of victimhood. (2004: 35)

This cachet of victimhood—rooted as it is in the political ideas of equality and mutual respect and the Christian revelation of the victim as innocent—has indeed been a powerful tool wielded by identity-based liberation movements during the second-half of the 20th century, such as the feminist and civil-rights movements. However, the cachet attached to the status of victim in modern liberal democratic societies has also ushered in a competition over the position of “true victim.”

In her book *The Cult of True Victimhood*, Alyson Cole analyzes the rise of anti-victimism rhetoric in American politics during the 1990s. This politics, Cole argues, surreptitiously transformed a collective, socio-political claim of unequal access to political and economic rights, of victimization, into an all-consuming, individualized identity which figured one as permanently injured and lacking agency; as a victim. The politics of anti-victimism sought to transform collective claims of victimization demanding reparation into an individualized identity of “the victim” whose salvation comes not from systemic change but through personal liberation. Thus, the meteoric rise of anti-victimism in the early 1990s led to a widespread denouncement of the label “victim.” Instead, talk of “survivors,” “fighters,” and other ostensibly more agential individual identities abounded. Yet, all this anti-victim talk, Cole maintains, was not so much a repudiation of the cachet of victimhood that Taylor described as an inscription of it (2007: 4).

Cole contends that the anti-victimism politics of the 1990s was itself a move within the politics of victimization that sought to depose the “traditional victims” associated with the American left in the decades following WWII in favor of new “true victims” associated with the political right:

It is one of the ironies of American politics today that as the Left desperately struggles to disengage from “victim politics,” the Right jockeys to carve out a place within it. While conservative critics deem victimism to be a pervasive threat and call to restrain victims, they nevertheless become in effect practitioners of victim politics by devising and promoting new groups of victims. (Cole 2007: 4)

As Cole argues, the rise of the Right’s anti-victimism politics during the 1990s was less a renouncement of the cachet of victimhood than an attempt to depose and replace its bearers.

Paul Weyrich, one of the principle architects of the Neo-Conservative and Religious Right movements, often boasted of his ability to reverse engineer and turn the political

Left's weapons back against them on behalf of the Right. "I'm sort of a Japanese mechanic of the New Right," Weyrich quipped, "copying—and hopefully making a little better—the operations of the left" (quoted in Viguerie and Franke 2004: 129). During the 1980s, Weyrich marveled at the strength of the civil rights movement and coveted its power. He spoke of this during a 1992 speech before Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition:

I watched the civil rights movement, which opposed Ronald Reagan with everything that it had, still getting half of its agenda during the height of the Reagan years ... that impressed me a great deal, and there are more of us [politically conservative Christians] than there are of any other group if we simply get our act together, and that's what this is all about. (Weyrich 1992)

The key to usurping the moral and political power of the civil rights movement, Weyrich realized, was developing a politics of victimization on the Right that could both displace the Left's claims to victimhood and establish those on the political Right as "true victims." It is precisely the realization of Weyrich's strategy that Cole traces in *The Cult of True Victimhood*.

Developing in the midst of this "politics of the true victim," the persecuted church movement emerged as a competitor for the hotly contested cachet of victimhood seemingly up for grabs in the 1990s. Analyzing the rhetoric of the "war on Christians" and its use of the Christian persecution frame, Castelli (citing Cole) discusses the way Christian persecution emerged as the foundation upon which a Christian identity politics was being built:

In this latter move, we see some effects of the "war on Christians" movement's pragmatic and strategic efforts to lay claim to the historical legacy of the civil rights movement: the legitimation and routinization of a new, Christian identity politics based on the historical model of struggle against racial discrimination by African Americans but displacing African Americans and their ongoing claims for political and economic justice in the process. As the battle over "true victimhood" continues to be waged, the emergence of Christians as the singular exemplars of innocent victims in the "war on Christians" presents a complicated new chapter in the ongoing debates within American society about identity and rights, injustice and its redress, and the very foundations of democracy and its reach. (Castelli 2007: 173)

Using the reversal at the heart of the Christian Gospel that Taylor discussed, the persecuted church movement portrays Christians as categorical innocents who passively suffer injustice at the hands of aggressive enemies, establishing Christians, therefore, as "true victims."

Pence's speeches figure Christians in just this way. Paraphrasing scripture, Pence proclaims before the audience of the World Summit:

The Bible tells us: ‘All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.’ And those of you gathered here today are emblematic of millions across the world. You’ve persevered through the crucible of persecution. You have refused to be conformed to this world. You have chosen instead to be counted with those outside the city gate for your faith. (Pence 2017a)

Christians, in Pence’s telling, are by definition persecuted. They are outsiders. They are the others, those not conformed to this world. “Throughout the world,” Pence explains, “no people of faith today face greater hostility or hatred than the followers of Christ” (Pence 2017a). Speaking before leaders of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Antiochian Orthodox Church, the Melkite Catholic Church, and the Maronite Catholic Church at the In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner, Pence echoes his rhetoric from the World Summit: “The Bible tells us that: ‘All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,’ and the flocks you shepherd are among the most persecuted in all the world” (Pence 2017b). The operation of that peculiarly Christian assurance, that the presence of persecution is constitutive of a life of following Jesus, can be seen in the paradoxical pride with which Pence proclaims these representatives’ communities to be those suffering most grievously. For Christians, Pence implies, persecution is a badge of honor, a form of imitating Christ.

While other religious communities may suffer, Pence repeatedly insinuates that their suffering does not reach the level of victimization achieved by that of Christians. While it is true that “believers from every background have suffered grievously at their hands,” it is even more true that “the practitioners of terror harbor a special hatred for the followers of Christ” (Pence 2017a). Thus, while Yazidi, Druze, and Shia communities in the Middle East may have been victimized by ISIS, they are not figured as “true victims.” That honor belongs to the followers of Christ alone.

IV. Conclusion

Mike Pence’s 2017 speeches as Vice President of the United States before two audiences of persecuted church activists both demonstrate and perpetuate the continued influence of the persecuted church movement on American foreign policy and religious freedom law. Not only did Pence’s presence at these events further legitimate the persecuted church movement as an important voice in the American political and legal spheres, but Pence’s speeches themselves mirrored and endorsed the internal logic of the persecuted church movement’s four most powerful and pervasive political discourses, suggesting that Pence’s presence in the Trump administration has ensured both the continued relevance and future vitality of the persecuted church movement. The persecuted church, as construed by its American advocates, is sure to remain a fixture of American legal and foreign policy concern for the foreseeable future. Scholars seeking to understand the role of religion in the Trump administration would do well to take seriously the continued influence of the persecuted church movement.

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