

Szabolcs J. Illyés

University of Szeged, Faculty of Pedagogy, SZTEPOL Research Centre for Political and Genocide Studies

THE GENOCIDE PROCESS, AND THE CONTEMPORARY RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

Acts of violence based on religious grounds – by their nature – affect Muslim and Christian communities living in countries considered targets for operational and terrorist actions, virtually all Christians worldwide, just as the Jewish communities, which became symbols of the mass, religious-based violence of the previous „century of wars”, the 20th century. A sad summary of the bloody first decade of the 21st century points to the complete failure of Western international policy’s strategic thinking, initially misinterpreted as „democratization” steps during the „Arab Spring”. This led to the tragic consequence of re-ignited bloody religious-based violence campaigns among various Muslim factions.

The Renaissance of Religion and Violence

An analytical mind examining the entirety of facts constituting the history of culture and politics can rightfully dedicate it to the Judeo-Christian civilization, despite the reluctance of those who often label themselves as progressive. Hence, it’s not unjustified to focus on the sufferings of Christians and Jews in crisis areas, as several significant, well-resourced organizations are already doing (see: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/>). The assessment of violent acts committed against individuals and groups on a religious basis, primarily due to the damage to life, health, and safety, and secondarily due to the impact on the entire fabric of society, justifies the existence of a scientific methodological basis. Given the number, severity, premeditation, and political dimensions of these mass acts of violence, which can now be said to be a part of everyday life, arises the question: is it possible to analyze this area using the methods of the scientific field studying genocide processes?

Genocide Studies and the Persecution of Christians Today

Methodologically, Genocide Studies (GS) fit into the realm of comparative social sciences as a relatively new discipline shaped by an extensive, international body of literature. The methodological foundation of prevention science forms an integral part of the field's knowledge base. Through prevention science, operational questions have been brought to the horizon of GS's investigation and output systems, such as well-informed, scientifically grounded information management of genocides and the processes of handling tragedies, including the monitoring and training of professionals involved. The framework for understanding GS could meaningfully include the term „Christian persecution” in a methodological context. Since GS essentially examines processes, it's important to understand the persecution of Christians and Jews as the totality of pressures and attacks primarily due to their openly embraced religious faith and culture, experienced either overtly or covertly. The perpetrators' methods are characterized by physical, moral, and administrative abuse. Analytical thoughts on various manifestations of persecution indicate that every form of persecution can be interpreted as a process: from mild cultural isolation, through hindrances or restrictions on religious practice, organized legal discrimination, to intimidation, with the ultimate outcome in most documented cases being the commission of violent acts. The basis for physical aggression in crisis areas often stems from religious conflicts but does not exclude political-economic motives. The processual nature of persecutions is underscored by their severity, ranging from symbolic attacks to the complete annihilation of individuals or communities (KALÓ, 2020, 103). The processual nature and current reality of the persecution of Christian and Jewish individuals and communities presuppose the importance of defining „further actions”, recommendations, and active professional outputs. In this case, the output signifies the applicability of the methodological system of prevention science. Following the ideological trail of the leading analyst, Gallagher (GALLAGHER, 2013, 123-125), it is necessary to raise professional questions with a process-oriented perspective, recognizing the methodological independence that half a century of research into genocides has adequately proven with professional validity. The evaluative applicability of this to the topic of Christian persecution necessitates considering the scalability of persecution processes. If the existing, widely accepted (though not without flaws in some exceptions) scaling methods of GS are applicable to the examination of the persecution of Christians and Jews, it confirms the methodological applicability of the subject area in related aspects of prevention science.

The Ten Stages of Genocide as a Framework for Understanding Christian Persecution

The ten-stage scale by Gregory Stanton (expanded from an earlier eight-stage model two decades ago) has become a standard tool in Genocide Studies (GS) over several decades. Despite active criticisms, it is recognized as a framework that accurately describes the reality within the context of describing genocide processes. The identifiability of the scale's items significantly depends on the specific civilizational, cultural, social, economic, political, etc., circumstances. The scale's logic begins with the intention of genocide evident from the first step, aiming to demonstrate the inevitability of the escalating process of violence, the foundations of which were summarized by the author based on the studies of the Cambodian and Rwandan genocides (STANTON, 2012, 401-407).

Given that the Islamic civilization, which currently forms the active environment for ongoing intended genocides against Christians, differs in numerous essential aspects from the characteristics of Western civilization, the typology of phenomena originally established by analyzing the Holocaust and other European genocides can be adapted with some modifications. This discussion attempts to model the fit of the elements related to genocides specifically targeting Christians to the respective items of the scale, in light of analyses and evaluations published in the active Budapest reports since 2017.

The consecutive elements of the scale assume a buildup:

- I. Classification**
- II. Symbolization**
- III. Discrimination**
- IV. Dehumanization**
- V. Organization**
- VI. Polarization**
- VII. Preparation**
- VIII. Persecution**
- IX. Extermination**
- X. Denial**

I. Classification

The first step on Stanton's scale is a system of false categories, based primarily on the researcher's experience that every culture has certain categories that distinguish people on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or other chosen or inherent affiliations into „us” and „them.” In societies where there is no trace of what might be called a „mixed

category” in this context, genocide is most likely. The main preventive measure at this early stage is the establishment of universal institutions capable of transcending often culturally encoded ethnic or racial divisions, emphasizing tolerance and understanding, and promoting classifications that overcome risky divisions. Focusing on common language, shared cultural values, and national traumas and catharses can significantly aid in the early prevention of genocides.

Regarding Christian persecution, the distinction between Christians and non-Christians in Islamic countries is quite obvious, making it even more shocking when an egregious example of the first step of the genocide process appears in Catholic Italy, a legal showcase at the European Court of Human Rights. In 2009, the court ruled that crucifixes displayed in Italian public school classrooms violate the rights of parents to educate their children according to their conscience, as well as the children’s right to religious freedom (SZÁNTÓ, 2020, 237-238).

II. Symbolization

The second stage of the scale involves the stigmatizing power of certain symbols combined with hatred. In the context of discriminated groups, the presence of any abstract, symbolic element of communication is a validated item, and this also includes any publicized appearance of hate speech. Discrimination is simultaneously a necessary and dangerous cultural process—necessary for the self-identity of the „other” groups and dangerous in terms of the majority groups’ abuse of it.

Various social groups—after the classification process—must regard the negatively charged, often attached names and symbols related to their groups or communities (e.g., the negatively connoted term „Gypsy” or the star of David for those of Jewish faith) as facts. This does not necessarily lead to genocidal processes, but the intentional use of negative discrimination is the next step towards „dehumanization,” where the symbol itself marks the group of „pariahs” for the majority. Particularly significant at this level is the interpretation of the Star of David as a negative symbol in international hate speech.

Simultaneously, the symbols of various violence groups also represent a symbolic level in the genocide process, and symbols of hatred can be legally banned in the Western civilizational context (e.g., swastika), as can hate speech. Group labeling can also be prohibited if its negative interpretive effect is broader than its identifying power. The problem is that legal limits fail if the intent of the state’s executive or dominant cultural influence does not support them. However, if they gain broad support, the denial of symbolization can be potent.

Religious prejudice characterizes groups of countries in the Muslim civilization, both socio-economically advanced and less developed, states Marshall (MARSHALL, 2018, 210-211). The citizens of European countries, the author claims, often remain

„blind and deaf” to the hate behavior of the masses living in the Middle East, primarily against Christians—especially those considered culturally their own, living in those regions. There certainly exists a predominantly Western-educated, liberal-identity elite that acts and publicly behaves contrary to this, yet their voice is scarcely heard in the region’s active mass media. In contrast, the Christian, as a symbol, often becomes an active target of mass hatred.

III. Discrimination

Discrimination represents the first level of hate actions, an active behavior that decisively shapes further activities related to groups identified and targeted with symbols. This makes it a fundamental component of genocide processes. The majority group in a society may use any means of power, including legal instruments, to deny the rights of the selected, subjugated group. At this stage, the subjugated community can be deprived of its citizenship—and its right to life.

Active prevention against discrimination must ensure that all groups within society with legitimate identities are provided with civil rights and legal protections. Accordingly, every state that wants to enjoy the benefits of international community membership must prohibit all forms of discrimination based on nationality, ethnic background, and regulated religious affiliation. This includes allowing individuals to sue the state that discriminates against them, not to mention the legal and private persons who commit the violations.

Organized, structural state institutions or regular and semi-regular violent organizations acting against Christians are clearly marked as hate crimes by Fantini (FANTINI, 2020, 173-174). Of course, this is supplemented by the fact that violent activity against Christian groups and communities varies widely across crisis areas and the Western zone alike: from everyday experiences of vandalism and symbolic desecration to desecration of Christian religious institutions, threats against believers, and actual acts of violence. It is particularly worrying that attacks against churches and sacred sites in Europe’s once-flourishing Christian centers are increasing. The nature of hate action is of course supplemented by activities that clearly define the moral level of the perpetrators: not infrequently, the ransacked churches are also robbed, sexual violence appears in aggressions against believers, and as facts show, even priests are not spared: the scale of aggression ranges from beating to beheading.

IV. Dehumanization

Dehumanization as part of the genocide process is a closely related activity following discrimination: dehumanization is considered to have occurred when the perpetrator group simply denies the humanity of the group it has designated as other. It is common for members of the discriminated group to be equated with animals, parasites, or pathogens. Its essence in influencing masses is to nullify the natural revulsion one feels toward violence and eventually murder against another human. The hate speech characteristic of discrimination turns into hate propaganda as a direct precursor to dehumanization, always encouraging and organizing active action against the targeted, subjugated group, signaling an organized, systematic communication process (VALENTINO, 2004, 30-44). This escalating element of the genocide process already belongs to the realm of political interpretation, though not always in the sense of party politics (it can be religious politics or a specifically distorted cultural politics as well).

Distinguishing societies that do not practice preventing hate propaganda is important in light of the commitments made by states belonging to the international community (legal action against hate speech). Since the former societies do not have constitutional protection for the victim-target groups of propaganda, it is the duty of capable, allied states to act using the appropriate application of international law concerning emerging hate actions: whether through the widest range of protests, formal actions, or operational actions. Leaders inciting genocide (political, religious, etc.) must be separated from connecting to the international network of relationships, possibly involving the freezing of their foreign assets and accounts, active action on international communication platforms to thwart their hate propaganda. If necessary, operational interventions can also be employed to protect the victims in cases of hate crimes and atrocities.

One prominent example of militant action against Christians in the Islamic context, interpreted by RESPERGER (RESPERGER, 2019, 67), is the frequent marking of houses where Christians live with an „N” (Nassara) by extremist Sunnis in areas affected by Islamist power pushes (e.g., DAESH), while houses of Shia Muslims are marked with the pejorative „RAID” (R-letter), targeting them for potential non-local violent organizations. As part of dehumanization, those marked must pay a tax in exchange for their mere lives. The result of protests is invariably violence: highlighted murders instill the greatest fear. Targeted killings and public executions aim both to deter the enemy and, through arbitrary executions that activate fear among the locals, allow their basic intention: to make the population regarded as pariahs flee.

V. Organization

A distinct turning point in the fulfillment of the genocide process is the organizational activity that operationalizes acts of violence, as genocides are organized by special military units or trained and armed militias. The essence of the „task” outsourced to militias is that the given state administration can deny its direct influence on the bloody events (see: the Janjaweed in Darfur). In many cases, planned killings are carried out through informal groups, but GS still seeks forms of organization in analyses, even if the units are officially (seemingly) outside the law.

In terms of prevention, this point also emphasizes the importance of highlighting real, responsible leaders internationally, blocking their movements and financial transactions, and in escalating cases, armed operational intervention. UN practice often advocates for the imposition of arms embargoes on crisis regions and, to remedy already occurred violations, the establishment of appropriate commissions at the level of international legal forums, or, if necessary, the operation of central or local courts (good example: the Gacaca courts operating in rural districts of Rwanda).

Regarding the modern phenomenon of Christian persecution – paradoxically – it is precisely the lack of organization that is considered its basis. According to what was published by Pongrácz in the 2018 Budapest report (PONGRÁCZ, 2018, 183), the term „Failed State” is appropriate for those countries formerly led by authoritarian governments, which provide opportunities in Sub-Saharan, Middle Eastern, and many Asian areas for primarily Muslim-based terrorist formations to which genocide processes are linked. The historical shift was accelerated by the chain of events known as the Arab Spring, plunging many of the region’s formerly stable states into civil war (McLOUGHLIN, 2014, 34-36). Afghanistan, Somalia, and Sierra Leone are typically listed among the failed states, along with Angola, Burundi, Congo, Liberia, Sudan, but also Rwanda, Haiti, El Salvador, and even Bosnia Herzegovina are often included in this discredited community.

VI. Polarization

The next level of organized steps in the genocide process is characterized by polarization: its most cynical realization can be outlined in the case of groups planning genocide, typically for political purposes, which also use the perpetrator groups merely as tools. Through violence propaganda, these hate groups themselves often shed their humanity, forming some kind of false elite-consciousness (based on differences in skin color, possession of new weapons, etc.), and they themselves spread the polarized propaganda. Legislators may prohibit marriages or any social interaction between members of different groups to segregate the groups. From this point, polarized propaganda in the hands of extremist operators targets the moderates, intimidating and

silencing any potential stance they might take in support of the segregated, pariah groups. Often, the first murders are suffered by the vocal leaders and spokespersons of the „traitorous” moderates.

Prevention in this case should provide active protection for moderate leaders, where the support of individual human rights defenders and humanitarian groups plays a crucial role, as long as possible, in maintaining them in the crisis area. International alliance systems must act against the violent takeover by the hate-inciting polarized group. If possible, the extremists’ resources should be seized, and international travel visas denied to them. Concurrently, in this phase, a large-scale refugee flow begins from the danger zone.

The polarized activity associated with the advance of Daesh is always the domain of a centralized organization, operated through various civil organizations and other foundations (for a long time Raqqa was such a center, but active communication centers operated/work in Aleppo, Hama, Homs. There is also an official spokesperson responsible for the realization of polarization: the Syrian Abu Mohamed al-Adnani al-Shami (originally Taha Subhi Falaha). In terms of the Daesh media network, 38 media centers are commonly noted, continuously realizing the communication goals of the background operating organizing group – the particularly brutal executions, public tortures, etc., shown in fear-inducing videos, make up a negligibly small percentage of the daily, influential news flow (RESPERGER, 2019, 70).

VII. Preparation

In the fulfillment of the genocide process, the next step is planning itself: the victims, now clearly separated and recognizable even to the active hate groups and potential neutrals, are distinguished based on their ethnic origin, religion, skin color, etc. Often, the leaders of the perpetrator groups, who usually label themselves as „national,” „patriotic,” or simply superior, plan the „final solution” (proven in cases involving Jews, Armenians, Tutsis, etc.). They often use euphemisms to mask their intentions, such as promoting the plan to eliminate Bosnian Muslims as „ethnic cleansing,” „purification,” and in cases of politically based genocides, it is common to present the perpetrators as „anti-terrorists” (LIEBERMANN, 2010, 57-60).

This phase involves building up the military, acquiring weapons, and constructing necessary „facilities” (extermination camps, centers), and the specific training of militias (preparation of Hutu militias in killing techniques, „anatomical” training of Khmer Rouge child soldiers, etc.). In this phase, propaganda employs tools of fear-mongering: the pariahs become threats to the freedom, property, and lives of others; communication is dominated by declarative statements and slogans, with „explanations” being considered „too much” („if we don’t destroy them, they will kill You”).

Prevention at this stage clearly involves preparing legal proceedings, starting procedures against captured perpetrators, and gathering evidence. This phase can already be classified as a crime under Article 3 of the Genocide Convention.

According to Ochab (OCHAB, 2020, 307-308), the violence committed by Daesh in Syria and Iraq represents a primarily observable phase of the status discussed above: in such cases, it is reasonable to raise charges of genocide and/or crimes against humanity, specifically directed against Christians as religious minorities. In Myanmar, in the Rakhine state, this phase was also perceptible with high media visibility against the Rohingya community. Regrettably, in many obvious cases, the international community's response at this level can be criticized.

VIII. Persecution

Persecution is the first active phase of the final implementation of genocide: the groups identified as victims are isolated and polarized, and background operational plans that often determine even the smallest details of implementation are ready. For the fanatized militias, paramilitary groups, or simply criminal gangs, the plan boils down to a death list. These lists often break down the doomed individuals by residence, with identifiers drawn on houses to facilitate navigation, and individuals stigmatized for destruction by symbols or personal documents (often the stigma itself is skin color, dialect, or merely wearing glasses – see: Khmer Rouge terror).

This begins the mass deportation of the discriminated groups, which can mean immediate execution or prolonged suffering in concentration camps, segregated prisons, or torture centers. The victims are robbed; their homes are immediately occupied by the oppressors' armed forces or administrators; their assets become „nothing” within days; their names are erased from administrations – yet it is common to also document the executed and deported (Nazi regime, communist genocides) (ZARTMAN, 2018, 48-50).

The typical procrastination and delay by international organizations at this time can cost hundreds or thousands of lives daily; this phase is when the first „investigative committees” are designated, and various armed peacekeeping forces usually get permission for deployment. These activities often do not even hinder the perpetrators' actions (e.g., Srebrenica), as if they do not perceive a significant negative impact quickly, they realize they can continue the genocide – for now – with impunity. This is the period of declaring an emergency due to genocide – if the international organization is willing to order it.

In some cases, armed intervention occurs, but in this phase, active support of potential resistance groups among the victims is justified. At this stage, massive flows of refugees across state borders are typical, and international organizations and neighboring countries must prepare to receive tens or hundreds of thousands.

Although, as Kaló states (KALÓ, 2020, 103), the concept of Christian persecution encompasses an extremely broad range of negative activities – from the mildest forms of cultural isolation and individual shaming-stigmatization to state-sanctioned discrimination, mass intimidation, violent relocations, the most brutal outcome being mass violence and homicidal acts demanding the lives of individuals and groups. Although violent acts, ranging from mild abuse to deportations to extermination camps, are definable on a wide scale, it cannot be silenced that the perpetrators' goal often is the concrete annihilation of the specifically targeted Christian communities, i.e., the culmination itself is the realized crime of genocide.

IX. Extermination

The killings characteristic of the previous phase become the central element of the perpetrators' operational activity: the execution of mass murder itself, the logistics necessary for implementation, and the handling and disposal of bodies at the site of the killings, including looting the dead (such as extracting gold teeth). In the Hungarian interpretation, „genocide” strictly corresponds to this ninth, extermination phase of the full genocide process.

In the extermination phase, the previously perhaps demonstratively separate state and other perpetrator groups often merge; it is not rare for governmental armed forces and law enforcement to openly cooperate with militias, allowing for integration between organizations. With the escalation of mass killings, revenge killings based on other motives also appear in cases like Rwanda and Burundi (TAYLOR, 2002, 139-140). Civilians and „volunteers” from the majority group often become notorious as the central figures in executions and tortures (e.g., the „Butcher of Buda” during the Holocaust).

In this final stage, only direct armed intervention by external forces can provide relief or a solution. As events progress, the establishment of so-called protected areas and corridors of escape, which can only be truly effective under the supervision of international alliances, becomes necessary.

A decision by the UN Security Council is required in this phase, typically meaning the immediate deployment of regular allied forces. However, delays and procrastination are common, often due to various diplomatic and economic-political considerations; in such cases, the UN General Assembly can authorize direct intervention (UN Charter, Chapter VII). If a coordinated UN action is not feasible for any reason, it is necessary to involve the operational forces of regional states, providing them with resources and support.

The number of Christians killed, although varying year by year, has consistently exceeded the thousands in recent years, according to the World Watch List. In 2019, 4136 Christians were killed and 2625 were detained without trial or arrest; in the

analyzed period of 2020, 2983 Christians lost their lives, and 3711 were detained. In 2019, 1266 churches or buildings were attacked by anti-Christian perpetrators; this number rose to 9488 in 2020. The Open Doors International foundation estimates that in 2019, 245 million, and in 2020, 260 million Christians were living in a constant state of direct violence (see: KALÓ, 2019, 104 and KALÓ, 2020, 104).

X. Denial

Denial, that is, the silence or refusal to accept responsibility for the crimes committed, is a phase of perpetrator behavior that follows the „genocidal,” extermination phase of the genocide process, closing its direct interpretative framework. This phase is characterized by the destruction of evidence: perpetrators reopen mass graves to destroy the remains.

Perpetrators, if questioned, systematically deny having committed a crime, and their political and economic allies also publicly assert their partners’ innocence. A notorious state of legal violation develops, and if called to account, the immediate response is to deflect responsibility and deny the facts. In this phase, resolution can only come from the highest international judicial forums or local, national courts acting on their behalf. Regrettably, the practice shows that the sentencing of the most responsible perpetrators (political, religious, military leaders) by courts does not occur within their lifetimes due to the hiding and protection of the main culprits (HUTTENBACH, 1999, 216-217).

It is most tragic when condemnation for clear cases of genocide committed in the Middle East region is omitted due to compromises made by decision-makers in a Western (Judeo-Christian-based) rule-of-law state. This is particularly true concerning a contentious issue debated in the Canadian parliament: on June 14, 2016, the legislative body discussed the issue of genocide committed by Daesh against religious minorities; the plenary vote did not lead to a condemning decision as it was rejected by 166 representatives against 139 supporting votes. The dissenters argued that such decisions should rather be made by independent courts (OCHAB, 2020, 314). (It is noted that, alongside this, the government accepted the condemning qualification based on a related UN report).

In the context of religious genocides, all 10 steps can be relevant. Thus, if killings carried out purely for religious reasons cannot bring justice to the survivors and the rest of the community through international court proceedings due to the „crime of murder,” the Stanton scale and the original „categories” by Lemkin provide a process-oriented examination of these crimes against humanity from a prevention science perspective, offering long-term outcomes. This approach provides an opportunity for creating scientific and humanitarian interpretations in the future.

NOTES

- Fantini, Ellen (2020): Hate Crimes Against Christians in Europe. In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Gallagher, Adrian (2013): Genocide and its Threat to Contemporary International Order. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- Huttenbach, Henry R. (1999): The Psychology and Politics of Genocide Denial: a Comparison of Four Case Studies. In: Chorbajian, Levon and Shrinian, George ed.: Studies in Comparative Genocide. Macmillan Press, London
- Kaló József (2020): Violent Acts Against Christians in the Year 2020. In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Lieberman, Benjamin (2010): „Ethnic Cleansing” versus Genocide. In: Bloxham, Donald and Moses, Dirk A. ed.: The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Marshall, Tim (2018): Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics. Park, Budapest.
- McLoughlin, Stephen (2014): The Structural Prevention of Mass Atrocities. Understanding risk and resilience. Routledge, London.
- Ochab, Ewelina U. (2020): Why the International Definition of Genocide Is Crucial? In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Pongrácz Alex (2018): Failed States and the Persecution of Christian Minorities: Diagnosis and Therapy. In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2018. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Resperger István (2019): Methods of Militant Islam in the Islamic State and Boko Haram Terrorist Organizations. In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2019. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Rubenstein, Richard L. (2010): Jihad and Genocide. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham.
- Stanton, Gregory H. (2002): The Call. In: Totten, Samuel and Jacobs, Leonard Steven ed.: Pioneers of Genocide Studies. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick.
- Stanton, Gregory H. (2012): The Ten Stages of Genocide. (<https://www.genocidewatch.com/tenstages>, accessed: 2021.10.06.)
- Szánthó Miklós (2020): Intellectual Persecution of Christians in Europe. In: Kaló József and Ujházi Lóránd (eds.): Budapest Report on Christian Persecution 2020. Dialóg Campus, Budapest
- Taylor, Christopher C. (2002): The Cultural Face of Terror in the Rwandan Genocide of 1994. In: Hinton, Alexander Laban ed.: Annihilating Difference, The Anthropology of Genocide. University of California Press, Berkeley.