

Defending religious freedom of Christians benefits all

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Abstract

At least 75% of all religious liberty violations worldwide are committed against Christians. There are many reasons: Christianity is by far the largest religion and phenomenally growing. Countries with a colonial history use traditional religions for identity building and many countries increasingly connect nationalism and religion. Christians often are major advocates for human rights and democracy and endanger well-established connections between religion and industry. The peacefulness of Christian churches invites the use of force against them since no resistance is feared. They are often equated with the hated West and the international nature of Christianity is regarded as a danger. Religious conversion, peaceful missionary work and the public expression of religious convictions must be safeguarded as integral components of religious freedom. By defending religious freedom of Christians, the plight of other persecuted minorities is also brought to attention. Let us promote religious liberty for all people around the world, regardless of religious or ideological affiliation. [CS]

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At least three-quarters of all religious liberty violations worldwide are committed against Christians. When it comes to the killing of people for their religious beliefs, the rate is probably in excess of 90 percent¹ and the problem is growing.

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¹ In 1999, when, in an *aktuelle Stunde* (a public debate in German parliamentary procedure used to address issues within a limited time frame), the Bundestag was discussing an inquiry by the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social

The persecution of Christians is not only an issue for Christians, who, according to a central statement of their faith, show solidarity with their suffering fellow believers (“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” 1 Cor 12,26). Rather, the issue is relevant for everyone who wants to support the cause of religious liberty. Wherever increased religious liberty is achieved for Christians, there is a benefit for all religions and all people.

Being involved in the support of persecuted Christians in Iran and for converts who seek asylum in foreign countries means at the same time to help the Bahá’í, who are also brutally persecuted in Iran. Their cause for religious liberty is far less known around the world, and they have practically no lobby. Whoever helps India and Indonesia remain secular states and not give in to the pressure of religious nationalists is at the same time supporting adherents of all religions. As far as India and Indonesia are concerned, only Christians have at their disposal the infrastructure to publicise the human rights situation in these countries for the benefit of those living there and internationally.

Involvement in the struggle for human rights for Christians often directly helps a country’s adherents of dominating religious majorities. Involvement for the sake of converts to Christianity from Islam in Afghanistan, for example, draws worldwide attention to the fate of many Buddhists and Muslims in that country. Only by involvement in the cause against the difficult situation of Philippine Roman Catholics in Saudi Arabia is attention also drawn to the suffering of Philippine Muslims in Saudi Arabia. For instance, the religious police in Saudi Arabia persecute adherents of other schools of Islamic law because they pray at the wrong times. Those who were to try to pray in Saudi Arabia at the wrong time would find themselves in jail as fast as if they had displayed a cross somewhere. Sunni Islam has four different

Union faction into the question of persecution of Christians, the German Federal Government officially replied that it was incorrect to say that the persecution of Christians was on the rise. Rather, the government claimed, it had remained the same, except for the cases of India and Indonesia. This is basically correct. However, it is to be noted that India and Indonesia together account for one-quarter of the world’s population, and, in contrast to twenty years ago when Christians were never killed for religious reasons in these countries, such occurrences nowadays are the order of the day. If the persecution of Christians remains the same on three-quarters of the globe and in one-quarter of the world it is increasing, then there is an overall increase in the persecution of Christians.

schools of law and four different understandings of prayer times. Prayer in Saudi Arabia is allowed only at those times prescribed by the Hanbalitic School of Law as accepted by the Wahabis. Adherents of the other three Sunni Schools of Law, as well as those adhering to the Shi'ite School of Law, are persecuted.

The worldwide Christian legal association, Advocates International, is associated with the World Evangelical Alliance. Advocates International works for the cause of persecuted adherents of different religions. For example, it is involved at the forefront in various parliaments in the quest for introducing effective laws that advance religious liberty for everyone. The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church that takes place at the beginning of November every year brings the ideas of religious liberty and peaceful coexistence among all religions to tens of thousands of local church communities and into the hearts of millions of people worldwide. The motto of the Roman Catholic Day of Martyrdom on December 26 (also known as the Feast of St. Stephen) confirms the same thing: "Active involvement for the realisation of global religious liberty is a duty of faith."

The World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission has on numerous occasions become involved in peace discussions among other religions. It also reports regularly on violence against adherents of all religions via its global network aimed at the media and parliamentarians. Various confessions have similar global organisations. Such international commissions usually consist of affected members who have a very strong interest in seeing that their own countries – and not only Christians but *all* inhabitants – live in peace, freedom, and security. These indigenous Christians remind us that one should not see religious persecution and persecution of Christians only within the context of one's popular enemies.

Politicians and the states that they represent should be involved in the cause of persecuted Christians, for Christians, apart from a few exceptions, consistently support the separation of church and state and thereby support the notion of a state monopoly on the use of force. In doing so, Christians simultaneously give up the possibility of protecting themselves against violence and persecution. Such a situation can only work as long as the state uses its monopoly on the use of force to protect Christians against others who do not accept this monopoly, but rather view private force as a legitimate means in religious strife.

Why are Christians persecuted so much?

It is important to realise that reasons for the persecution of Christians are complex, and most often not purely religious. Political, cultural, nationalistic, economic, and personal motives can play an important role. This is evident in the Old Testament already. In the case of Queen Jezebel, hatred for God and His prophets was mixed with a desire for power as well as with unmitigated attempts at personal enrichment (1 Kgs 16-19). In the New Testament, in the book of Revelation, we find that in addition to hatred for the church, there are political and economic reasons involved as well. A further good example is provided by the artisans, goldsmiths and silversmiths of Ephesus (Acts 19:23-29), who perceived a “danger” to their welfare (v. 27) in Paul’s successful proclamation of the gospel, and therefore instigated a riot. The irritation of a slave owner because of lost revenues when a fortune-telling spirit was driven out of a slave led the slave owner to have Paul and Silas taken into custody (Acts 16:16-24). We should always be aware of the fact that there is often no pure motive for the persecution of Christians or for the restriction of religious liberty, but rather that persecution is caused through an entanglement with existing problems of the respective culture and society.

It is important to note that if an adherent of a hated religion or if an individual with a hated skin colour is tortured, one should neither play down the racism involved by claiming that in reality there is a religious component at work, nor vice versa. Racism and religious hatred are both detestable, and if they occur simultaneously, they have to be fought on both fronts.

In spite of this qualification, let us return to the question of why Christians are so often affected, and far above the average, by restrictions of religious liberty.

1. *Christianity is far and away the largest religion in the world.* For that reason, human rights violations relating to religious affiliation are most common among Christians.
2. *Christianity is experiencing phenomenal growth around the world, in particular in its evangelical form.* This increasingly threatens the position of leading religions in numerous countries.

There is increasing competition between the two largest world religions, Christianity and Islam, and this is occurring at the expense

of other religions.² However, regarding the content of its message, Islam has historically been opposed to Christianity. This is a confrontation that never occurred between Islam and Buddhism. Christianity has adapted to this challenge over the past 1400 years, and in this respect, the confrontation carries a considerable amount of unnecessary baggage.

	Adherents 2006	Growth in %	Estimate for 2025
World Population	6,529,426,000	1.22	7,851,455,000
Christians	2,156,350,000	1.25	2,630,559,000
Muslims	1,339,392,000	1.9	1,861,360,000
Hindus	877,552,000	1.38	1,031,168,000
Non-Religious	772,497,000	0.23	817,091,000
Chinese Universalists	406,233,000	0.65	431,956,000
Buddhists	382,482,000	0.9	459,448,000
Tribal Religions	257,009,000	1.21	270,210,000
Atheists	151,628,000	0.49	151,742,000
New Religions	108,794,000	0.78	122,188,000
Sikhs	25,673,000	1.48	31,985,000
Jews	15,351,000	0.92	16,895,000

Only the three largest world religions are presently growing faster than the world population. The world population is expanding at a rate of 1.22%. Hinduism is growing at a rate of 1.38%, primarily because births are exceeding deaths. Islam is growing at 1.9% for the same reason, as well as because of economic and political measures and missionary activities. Christianity is growing at a rate of 1.25%, whereas highly missionally active evangelical Christianity is growing

² All the following figures are from David Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*. 2 Volumes. Oxford University Press: New York, Oxford, 2001, and from updates in the ecumenical International Bulletin of Missionary Research, available at www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/global_christianity/IBMR2006.pdf. Numbers from other researchers are similar. Numbers referring solely to Evangelicals are the most conservative, as most estimates reflect significantly higher numbers.

at an enormous rate of 2.11%. This development, which is occurring mainly in the majority world is making up for the shrinking of Christianity in the Western hemisphere. A net increase of 5.4 million evangelicals is being added yearly to the currently estimated total of 255 million evangelicals. This translates to a daily increase of 14,800.

The point is neither to welcome this development nor to criticise it, but rather simply to make the observation that growth in non-Western Christianity is at the root of tension worldwide. Christianity has tripled in size in Africa and Asia since 1970. In each of the non-Christian countries of China, India and Indonesia, considerably more people go to church on Sundays than in all of Western Europe combined.

That, of course, leads to all sorts of tensions. In India, for example, Christians have for more than a century made casteless education possible. Millions of casteless people have become Christians, because otherwise no one would look after them. According to the constitution, there is to be a certain percentage of casteless people in all state occupations and state authorities. All of a sudden, people realise there are Christians in influential positions everywhere far in excess of their proportion of the overall population in the country. A host of other such examples could be mentioned.

3. Most non-Christian religions have little success to show in missions, or else they are involved in very little mission activities. Moreover, they often employ political, economic or social pressure instead of, or in addition to, peaceful attempts at conversion. In recent decades, Christianity has undergone a significant development toward renouncing violence and political and social pressure, while at the same time turning towards more content-oriented conversion work and peaceful missionary efforts.

This becomes clear if we consider the following example. The religious conflict in Northern Ireland, which took place until recently, makes us aware of what used to be the norm for Christianity up to 300 years ago. Today this leaves Christians aghast and is completely rejected. In the meantime, peaceful mission work and selfless social involvement have become the trademarks of Christianity. The number of foreign full-time Christian missionaries worldwide is estimated at 420,000, while the number of full-time church workers is estimated at 5.1 million.

4. Countries with a colonial history are looking to regain their own identity by recovering traditional religions. In doing so, they increasingly use legal

means and/or force against “foreign” religions. In India, for example, this conflict occurs in terms of Hinduism versus Islam and Christianity, in Indonesia in terms of Islam versus Christianity and Hindu-Buddhism, and in Sri Lanka and Nepal in terms of Buddhism versus Christianity and Islam.

5. In many countries we observe an increasing connection between nationalism and religion.

When one thinks of India, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Pakistan alone, one-third of the world population is affected by such conflicts. A similar situation exists in Turkey, where Turks are expected to be Muslims. Turks who become Christians fight in courts for years in order to have their religious affiliation changed on their passports. Christianity in Turkey, as well as in other places, stands in the way of nationalism. After a difficult path, the Christian faith itself has hopefully taken final leave of the connection between nationalism and Christianity. There are exceptions, such as Northern Ireland until recently, and quite a few national orthodox churches which have not followed the lead of other confessions, but they confirm the rule.

6. Christians have in many instances become vocal and persistent advocates for human rights and democracy.

The Christian involvement in the cause of the weak and of minorities, which is inherent in its teaching, but which, however, has not always or everywhere been very pronounced, has in many places become the trademark of Christianity. This has resulted in Christians becoming the classical targets of human rights opponents and tyrants in numerous countries of Latin America and in North Korea, mostly because they are seen as organised opponents. Moreover, Christians increasingly have global networks at their disposal, which can often be activated against human rights violations and can produce worldwide reactions in the press.

7. Closely related is the fact that Christianity often endangers well-established connections between religion and industry.

Drug bosses in Latin America who are behind the killing of Catholic priests or Baptist pastors, for instance, surely do not do this because they are furthering the cause of an opposing religion. Rather, it is because the church leaders are often the only ones who stand up for native farmers or indigenous people groups standing in the way of Mafia bosses.

8. The peacefulness of Christian churches, which even often manifests itself as true pacifism, invites the use of force since no resistance is feared.

On a global stage, for example, Muslims fear American retaliation but not the reaction of indigenous Christians.

Christians who believe in the separation of church and state often demonstrate this in the form of pacifism. Since no resistance is anticipated, Christians become fair game. For instance, I have discussed with church leaders in Indonesia whether they should defend their homes and families against marauding, heavily armed gangs of Jihad militia. Individual Christians have, in certain cases, defended their families with the use of force. Who, living in the secure West can criticise them? Yet, Christian churches have, in the end, agreed on a non-violent approach, sometimes at a price. In Indonesia, incidentally, violence is, for the most part, directed not against Christian missionary activities but rather against 'Christian' (in Indonesia, mainly Catholic) islands on which Christians have for centuries lived undisturbed in their own settlements but which are suddenly being raided by heavily armed militia.

9. Christians are often equated with the hated West.

It is evident that the West has for a while no longer been predominantly Christian. MacWorld and pornography, which evoke images of the enemy for many, have actually nothing to do with Christianity. Churches in the Third World nowadays, almost without exception, operate independently of the global North and are under indigenous leadership. Still, indigenous Christians are unable to escape suspicion. Similarly, Turkish Christians are suspected of conducting espionage for the CIA. Chinese Christians are viewed as lackeys of the USA or of the 'Western' Pope, and despite all the Western monetary support, 'Christians' in Palestine are still considered to be agents of Zionism.

10. The international nature of Christianity is regarded as a danger.

As Paul wrote, Christians ultimately see themselves as people who, beyond their national citizenship, are bound to all other citizens of heaven (Phil 3:20). According to Jesus, the church understands itself to be multicultural, extending beyond national borders (Matt 28:18). This can be seen as a threat, just like any other major international personal, ideological or financial interconnection. Christian theology has for a long time been internationally oriented, with Christian theologians pursuing an ongoing dialogue with their peers from around the world. This situation is seen by Christians as an enrichment. However, non-Christians often view it as an unpredictable power factor.

The Chinese government 'cannot' and does not want to believe that no third force is directing the millions of evangelicals in house churches in China. Nor can the Chinese government believe the unfortunate fact that these churches often break away from each other on bad terms and go their separate ways. That the Pope only appoints indigenous bishops and does not seek to interfere in China's political affairs is something that the Chinese government similarly 'cannot' and does not want to believe. This in spite of the fact that, in Poland, the Pope recently prohibited the operation of an overly political Catholic radio station. The Chinese government says: A Chinese Catholic church, yes, but one that is subordinate to the Pope, no.

The Chinese government panics at the idea that an influential organisation inside its borders could be run from a foreign country. China has this in common with a lot of other countries. It would therefore be sensible for international politicians to suggest that Asian church leaders meet with Chinese politicians and party members and let them know that the large Asian churches, for instance in India, are not being run from the West. Rather, these churches are completely under indigenous leadership. Initially this suggestion elicits incredulous astonishment from politicians, which is followed by considerable interest.

As a point of criticism, it should be noted that some American Christian mission work, and occasionally that of other countries, can awaken the false impression that there is a sort of worldwide strategy to conquer, emanating from the USA. Since American Christian television technically, and language-wise, reaches the entire world, this can have a frightening effect. Also, when missionary events continue to be called *crusades*, many take the word literally.

Religious conversion as an expression of religious liberty

The classic definition of religious liberty is found in Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal General Declaration on Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

What does the term religious liberty imply? It is interesting to note that religious liberty, first of all, contains the right to change one's religion and worldview! Religious conversion within Christianity itself, as a result of inner conviction, is the primordial cell or origin of religious liberty. The question is, what do I do, if out of inner conviction, I no longer hold to that which was previously taken for granted or which had been instilled in me?

I have often discussed this with journalists or others who oppose missionary work. They say, for instance, "You can't be surprised if there are problems in Iran when Muslims become Christians. Just leave the Iranians in peace." Then I usually reply, first of all, "In Iran it has been the case for a long time that it is no longer Western missionaries who evangelise but indigenous people. As a result for whatever reasons native Iranians leave Islam for the Bahá'í religion or become Christians. Who wants to go there and prevent that?" And secondly, "Am I to then reinstate in our law books a statement that whoever leaves the church loses his job and has to suffer other civil consequences?" This used to be the case. Religious affiliation and civic life used to be closely related. Anyone who in the past became a Jehovah's Witness, for example, faced a host of civil consequences.

Religious liberty means to uncouple religious affiliation from civil status. Where this is the case someone can stand at a public marketplace and propagate something religious (or political) without their employer, who happens to pass by, being able to fire them for it. This benefits Christians, atheists, Muslims, as well as adherents of anthroposophy. It is the primordial cell of religious liberty.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the question of religious conversion is mentioned first, and therefore the question of whether an Iranian may become a Bahá'í or a Christian is an essential issue of religious liberty. Where religious conversion is not possible, there is no religious liberty.

In the General Declaration of religious liberty, it is further stated that a person may not only change their religion or worldview, but also that a person may practise their religion or worldview alone or in a community with others. Not least of all, mention is made that a person may spread a religion by means of teaching and worship services.

The belief that religious liberty would be technically possible if each person kept the religion he or she grew up with, and did not speak with

adherents of other religions, is a complete illusion. This would in effect be a prescribed form of forced religion that few would accept for themselves.

Every religious community uses conviction or some sort of pressure and coercion in order to keep its adherents. Everyone who has children knows that. Either one convinces people to remain freely with their own religion, or one exerts some sort of societal pressure to ensure that they will not want to change or cannot change. You can observe this in traditional religions as well as in highly industrialised, secular societies. An unalterable, stable and unified religious culture is only possible by coercion. If the next generation does not have the possibility to make its own decisions about what it wants to believe, that in itself is a case of a human rights violation.

Peaceful missionary work as an example of religious liberty

Peaceful mission work is doubly anchored as a human right. The human right to conduct missions is derived from the right to freedom of expression. This is embedded in the 1948 United Nations' Declaration on Human Rights. Missionary activity is nothing other than freedom of expression. Just as political parties, environmental groups, and even advertisers and the media in a country publish their view of things, this applies to religions.

The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion and Belief (Resolution 36/55 of the General Assembly of the United Nations, November 25, 1981, article 6, paragraph d) describes religious liberty as embracing the right "to write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas."

The freedom of the expression of religion does not just mean that one can secretly pray in his or her own private chamber. Rather, it means the right to present one's belief to the general public and to try to attract people to it.

Whoever is against Christian missions also has to forbid all Christian worship services – and here one finds that numerous Islamic countries are, for all intents and purposes, consistent – because every worship service is, according to the Christian understanding, an invitation to receive God's grace. They would also have to deny any

Christian childrearing at home and in youth centres, something that Russian Communists understood all too well.

Granted, there have been missionary activities in the past that prepared the ground for violence and oppression. In this regard Christian and Islamic crusades and colonialism come to mind. The problem in these instances is not the public propagation of one's own views. Rather, it is the suppression of human rights. The problem is one of violence, and the term 'mission' is certainly out of place. We should also not forget that, for instance, the majority of encounters between Christianity and Islam have taken place peacefully within a missional setting, as well as one of intellectual and cultural exchange.

I would like, very briefly, to formulate the challenge facing us: The alternative is not whether all countries and religions can be convinced to abstain from trying to win people over to their religion, i.e., whether we can successfully get people to refrain from missionary activities in the sense of a-religious people - as if atheism isn't also globally spread in a missional manner. The alternative would be whether we can rally all countries and religions to allow peaceful mission work amongst one another and to refrain from all violent or societal pressure, or whether the spreading and protection of religions will occur by means of violence instead of missionary efforts.

Public religion as religious liberty

At first glance, when one speaks of human rights, the topic of religious liberty appears to be a very simple issue. This is because we have the idea that religion is a private issue. This is at least true for the Western world. Religious liberty is a good thing, and every person should privately embrace his or her religion. Since most religious beliefs are practised officially in buildings of some sort, religious adherents should do what they want to in churches or mosques. As long as no crimes are committed, what they do within their own four walls is no one else's business.

That is, of course, far from reality. Religion takes place in public. People's religious beliefs influence their public behaviour, and considerable parts of the structure of our society and culture are based on religious convictions and foundations.

Among all human rights, the right to religious liberty is one of those that are the most difficult to substantiate and to cast into law and on which to reach compromise. Why? Because religion cannot be limited to a certain part of life. Rather, via the life of its adherents, religion reaches into all areas of public life, such as family and sexuality, the media, education and art, to name but a few. Even the question of what counts as religion is answered differently by each religion and culture, not to mention the areas of life for which it is responsible.

Conversion to another religion has, for example, its own dynamic in each individual country and culture around the globe. We know from history that religious conversion and worldview change do not just happen in one's living room. Rather, worldviews in people's minds end up shaping society. Whoever wants to privatise religious liberty totally has to somehow succeed in having people keep their most basic convictions completely to themselves so that they have no desire to put them into practice in public or private life. Sexual ethics, family, child rearing, attitudes toward work, toward law, and toward justice are all intertwined with basic religious and worldview ideas.

Even if globally valid principles are found, it becomes really difficult when one considers that religious liberty is connected to the entire question of the relationship between religion and the state. This question has occupied us for thousands of years. World history and church history teach us that this is one of the most complicated questions there is, in principle as well as in its concrete application. How do church and state, religion, and politics conduct themselves? If we separate the two of them too much and place them at opposite ends, religious liberty is just as much lost as if they are too closely aligned. If religion and the state are too closely associated, this results in a certain religious preference ruling the state and being used to oppress others. If religion and the state simply oppose each other, this leads to the oppression of one or all religions.

The world has proceeded on a stony path in its search for answers to these questions. For this reason, we should have the courage to promote the idea of religious liberty for all people around the world, no matter what our religious or ideological affiliation might be.