

# The range of religious freedom in 2008: Results of a global survey

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## Abstract

Religious freedom and religious persecution affect all religious groups and are not confined to any one area. There are large regional variations. North Africa and Asia generally tend to score poorly. Comparing countries according to religious background, historically Christian countries tend to score best, Buddhist countries either well or poorly, Hindu-majority countries don't score well, and Muslim-majority countries make up the areas with the largest current restrictions on religious freedom. Freedom of religion generally corresponds with civil liberties. The US Department of State reports on religious freedom are found to be exemplary, with some weaknesses and problems, which call for standardised criteria. [CS]

**Keywords** Religious freedom, global survey, classification, geography, religion, human rights, US Department of State Reports on religious freedom.

## Editorial preface

This essay gives an overall analysis of the 101 country and territorial profiles in Marshall's *Religious Freedom in the World* (2008). The survey covers more than 95 percent of the world's population. We quote parts of the preface to the book: "The countries have been selected so that the survey represents each continent, major religion, and geographic area; covers countries with large populations; describes particularly egregious violators of religious freedom; and

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adequately illustrates variations within regions. It should be emphasized that the numbers are ratings of the situation in countries, not of the conduct of governments. In some cases, such as in situations of civil war, there may be little religious freedom, but a government may be able to do little about it.

The survey is not a catalogue of the rights of 'religious people.' The persecution of all people of any or no religion should be equally as offensive in our eyes as that of believers in any particular religion. Furthermore, since most people in the world profess to be believers of one kind or another, then such a survey would necessarily include most of the world's human rights violations of whatever kind. Rather, the focus here is on the denial to anyone of rights of a particular kind, those connected with practicing one's religion, and the denial of rights for a particular reason, because of the religious beliefs of those who are persecuted and/or those who persecute.

Finally, in line with most human rights treaties, this survey covers freedom of 'religion or belief.' There are beliefs that, functionally, take the place of explicitly religious beliefs, and these, too, should be protected. Atheists and agnostics may also suffer loss of freedom of 'religion or belief' and, in turn, may deny such freedom to others." (Marshall 2008:xiii)

## **The Spread of Religious Freedom**

Religious freedom and religious persecution affect all religious groups. Some – Baha'is in Iran<sup>1</sup>, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Buddhists in Tibet, Falun Gong in China, Christians in Saudi Arabia – are now among the most intensely persecuted, but there is no group in the world that does not suffer to some degree because of its beliefs. Atheists and agnostics can also suffer from religious persecution. In Indonesia it is in principle illegal to be an atheist, though this provision is not enforced; but any Saudi Arabian, all of whom must, by law, be Muslim, who pronounced himself an atheist faces a real risk of being executed for apostasy. Religions, whether large, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism, or small, such as Baha'i, Jehovah's Witness, or Judaism, all suffer to some degree. The most

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<sup>1</sup> As the material is a reflection on the survey data itself no further references are given in this article. The respective country profiles can be found in Marshall 2008.

**Figure 1: Religious Freedom by Area**

Religious Freedom Rating	Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe	North Africa and West Asia	Western Europe and North Atlantic	Asia	Africa	Latin America
1	Estonia Hungary		Ireland United States			
2	Latvia Lithuania Ukraine		Austria Canada Denmark Italy Norway Portugal Spain Sweden	Japan	Botswana Mali Namibia Senegal South Africa	Brazil Chile Ecuador Guatemala
3	Bulgaria Romania	Israel	Belgium France Germany Greece	Mongolia Philippines Thailand	Kenya	Argentina Nicaragua Peru Venezuela
4	Armenia Georgia Kosovo Kyrgyzstan Macedonia Moldova Russia Serbia Slovakia	Jordan Lebanon Morocco Oman		Malaysia	Cameroon Tanzania	Mexico
5	Azerbaijan Kazakhstan Tajikistan	Algeria Kuwait Libya Syria Tunisia Turkey Yemen		India Indonesia Laos Nepal Sri Lanka	Chad Comoros Ethiopia Nigeria Zimbabwe	Columbia
6	Belarus	Afghanistan Bahrain Egypt Pakistan Palestinian Areas		Bangladesh China Vietnam	Mauritania	Cuba
7	Turkmenistan Uzbekistan	Iran Iraq Saudi Arabia		Burma China-Tibet Maldives North Korea	Eritrea Sudan	

egregious persecuting states tend to be either communist, such as North Korea and China, nationalist, such as Burma and Eritrea, or radical Islamist, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In many cases, restrictions on religion come from people who are members of the same general religious group but who are part of a different subgroup. Thus non-Orthodox Christians in Russia, Greece, and Armenia suffer discrimination from the Orthodox, while Shiite Muslims in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia suffer persecution and even death at the hands of some of the dominant Sunni groups.

Religious freedom is also not confined to any one area or continent (see Figure 1). There are relatively free countries in every continent. Japan, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Botswana, Mali, Namibia, Senegal, and South Africa score better in this survey than do Belgium, France, Germany, and Greece. Estonia and Hungary are among the freest countries in the world. Most Latin American countries also score well. There are absolutely no grounds for thinking that religious freedom is an exclusively Western concern or achievement.

Some Westerners and Third World tyrants have elevated “economic rights” or purported “Asian” and “Islamic” values as the most important features of rights, and have denigrated or downgraded civil rights, such as religious freedom, as quasi-luxuries that would need to be advanced, if at all, only after more basic needs such as food and shelter have been achieved. Proponents of these views should be asked why several Asian countries, such as Mongolia and Thailand, which have a background of poverty and underdevelopment, and “Asian” traditions at least as strong as China and Vietnam, both value and successfully defend religious freedom, and why desperately poor African countries, including poor Muslim-majority African countries such as Mali and Senegal, can do the same. Religious freedom is desired throughout the world and has been achieved in places on all continents. It is a moral travesty of the highest order to maintain that because people are hungry or cold it is legitimate to repress their beliefs as well.

While high levels of religious freedom occur in many areas throughout the world, there are still large regional variations. The countries of the North Atlantic area covered in this survey all score between one and three, and thus all show a high level of religious

freedom (following the practice of Freedom House, this survey classifies countries with a score of one to three as “free,” four to five as “partly free,” and six to seven as “not free”). The countries of Latin America also score highly, with only Colombia, Mexico, and Cuba scoring worse than three.

The countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union cover a wide spread, from Estonia and Hungary, rated a one, the most free, to Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, rated a seven, the least free. There are countries at each level, with those bordering the Baltic (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) as well as Hungary and Ukraine scoring better. Among Asian countries, the self-professed communist powers (China, China-Tibet, North Korea and Vietnam) comprise much of the most repressive categories.

The areas of North Africa and West Asia tend to score poorly. Israel (excluding the occupied territories) scores a three, and Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Oman, a four. Algeria, Kuwait, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Yemen score a five, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Pakistan, and the Palestinian area six, and others seven (Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia). These findings, as well as those for other areas, are broadly consistent with other reports’ findings regarding human rights and freedom generally in these countries.

## **Religious Freedom and Religion**

There is similar variation in the religious background of countries with high levels of religious freedom. This is obviously a complex matter, since current regimes may reflect comparatively little of a country’s religious background. China, Tibet, and Vietnam all have a largely Buddhist background, but current religious repression comes at the hand of communist party regimes whose members profess to be atheistic materialists. Turkey has a Muslim background, but its constitutional order is highly secularist, while Muslim-background Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan suffer under repression by Soviet political holdovers (on religious freedom in secular settings, see my essay “Secular and Religious, Church and State” Marshall 2008:12-16). Nevertheless, since the survey usually covers several countries of each religious background, the overall patterns can be revealing (see Figure 2).

<b>Figure 2: Religious Freedom by Religious Background</b>									
<b>Freedom Rating Religious</b>	<b>Catholic</b>	<b>Protestant</b>	<b>Orthodox</b>	<b>Mixed Christian</b>	<b>Hindu</b>	<b>Religions Related Buddhism and</b>	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Christian Mixed Muslim/ Muslim</b>
1	Hungary Ireland	Estonia USA							
2	Austria Brazil Chile Ecuador Guatemala Italy Lithuania Portugal Spain	Botswana Denmark Norway South Africa Sweden	Ukraine	Australia Canada Latvia Namibia		Japan	Mali Senegal		
3	Argentina Belgium France Nicaragua Peru Philippines Venezuela	Kenya	Bulgaria Greece Romania	Germany		Mongolia Thailand		Israel	
4	Mexico Slovakia	Tanzania	Armenia Georgia Macedonia Moldova Russia Serbia				Jordan Kosovo Kyrgyzstan Malaysia Morocco Oman		Cameroon Lebanon
5	Columbia	Zimbabwe			India Nepal	Laos Sri Lanka	Algeria Azerbaijan Bahrain Comoros Egypt Indonesia Kazakhstan Kuwait Libya, Syria Tajikistan Tunisia, Turkey Yemen		Chad Ethiopia Nigeria
6	Cuba		Belarus			China Vietnam	Afghanistan Bangladesh Mauritania Pakistan Palestinian Areas		
7						Burma China- Tibet North Korea	Iran Iraq Maldives Saudi Arabia Sudan Turkmenistan Uzbekistan		Eritrea

Historically, Christian countries tend to have the best scores in religious freedom, as they do in political rights and civil liberties. Of the forty-one countries surveyed that can be rated as religiously “free” (i.e., scoring three or above), thirty-five are traditionally Christian. Conversely, only two of the forty-two traditionally Christian countries surveyed (Belarus and Cuba) are “not free” (i.e., scoring six or seven). It should also be noted that these scores reflect not only religious background but also levels of wealth and economic development.

The other religiously “free” countries are Israel and three countries of largely Buddhist background – Japan, Mongolia, and Thailand. The Buddhist countries with poor scores largely reflect the presence of communist regimes in China, Tibet, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. If these are excluded, the remaining countries, except Burma, score relatively well. There are few Hindu-majority countries in the world and, of those surveyed, Nepal scores poorly on political rights and civil liberties generally, as well as on religious freedom. India is unusual in that its score for religious freedom, five, is markedly lower than its otherwise good record on democracy and on civil liberties generally. This difference reflects the upsurge within recent years of a militant Hinduism in India, coupled with attacks including large-scale massacres against religious minorities, especially Muslims and Christians, the growth of anti-conversion laws, and an increase in religiously based terrorism tied to Kashmir, which has in turn provoked repressive state measures.

The Muslim majority countries comprise the religious areas with the largest current restrictions on religious freedom. This pattern parallels problems with democracy, civil liberties, and economic freedom, but the negative trend with respect to religious freedom is even stronger. Of the twenty “unfree” countries and territories surveyed, twelve are Muslim majority. Of the seven countries receiving the lowest possible score, four are Muslim majority. This is a phenomenon that goes beyond the Arab world or the Middle East. In measures of, for example, electoral democracy, the Muslim world outside of the greater Middle East scores better than the Middle Eastern countries, and over half of the world’s Muslims live in electoral democracies: the problems with democracy are concentrated in the Middle East. However, in terms of religious freedom, the large Muslim democracies of Indonesia and Bangladesh score a five and a six respectively. In these cases, the problems of religious freedom are

due not to government repression but to widespread societal religious violence, including religiously based terrorism, aimed at minorities and at undercutting the government. It should also be added that there are religiously free Muslim majority countries, including some of the poorest, Mali and Senegal, which are religiously freer than many European countries.

## **Religious Freedom and Other Human Rights**

A comparison of ratings for religious freedom with Freedom House's ratings for political rights and civil liberties allows us to see how the degree of religious freedom in a country correlates with its record of human rights in general and vice versa (Marshall 2008:486-489). In eighty-seven out of the hundred and one countries covered, the score for religious freedom is identical to or within one point of the score for civil liberties in general. Consequently, freedom of religion generally correlates with civil liberties.

To some degree this trend reflects methodology, since the criteria for religious freedom in this survey and the criteria for civil liberties overlap considerably. However, this overlap is not simply a methodological artifact but rather reflects the simple reality that religious freedom is necessarily a component of civil rights in general. In practical terms, this means that restrictions on the press necessarily involve restrictions on the religious press, that restrictions on freedom of association necessarily imply restrictions on religious association, that restrictions on speech necessarily imply restriction on religious speech. Consequently, it is only to be expected that freedom of religion and other freedoms will usually go together. Religion exists not (only) in a transcendent realm but is a fundamental and integral part of all human freedom.

Given the fact that these various dimensions of human freedom usually go together, it can be useful to consider situations where differences between scores for religious freedom and for human rights in general are systematic, though small. In general these differences are idiosyncratic, but one trend emerges in Europe. Of the eleven western European countries surveyed, ten had lower scores for religious freedom than they did for civil liberties in general, and one, Ireland, had the same score. None had higher scores for religious freedom.



The differences should not be exaggerated: all these countries still score well in religious freedom and rank among the freest countries in the world. Nevertheless, there is a pattern. Many of these countries have both a history and a current practice wherein their reaction to religious nonconformity is more repressive than their response to nonconformity in general (on this matter, see Willy Fautre's essay "European Trends" in Marshall 2008:28-32). These trends reflect a combination of an attachment to and discrimination in favor of a traditionally dominant religion or religions, and a secularist mindset that produces an antipathy toward, and sometimes fear of, new, unorthodox religions, which are often castigated as "sects." To this problem may be added the growth of violence by extremist Muslim groups combined with state restrictions on Islamic expression, such as head coverings. Despite these countries' continuing openness, much of Europe seems to be becoming less religiously free.

## **U.S. State Department Reports on Religious Freedom**

In September 1999, as required by law under the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act, the U. S. State Department released its first annual Report on religious freedom worldwide. The Reports are impressive pieces of work and, by and large, give detailed and comprehensive overviews of the state of religious freedom in each country. However, the compilation of this current survey allows us to point out some weaknesses in the State Department's work.

First, the fact that the Report's material is simply an ordered compilation of information about each country, and is not comparative, makes it difficult to compare one country to another. This has the effect of blurring distinctions so that many countries appear to be equally repressive. The very breadth of the material tends to obscure important differences. Indeed, in the 2006 report, released September 15, 2006, there is an unjustifiably longer discussion on the restriction of Scientologists in Germany than there is on the restriction of Bahai's in Iran, the restrictions of all non-Muslims in Saudi Arabia, and the restrictions on all religious groups in Zimbabwe.

In other instances the Report downplays the severity or significance of restrictions on religious freedom, perhaps in deference to the governments concerned. For example, the 2007 State

Department report on religious freedom in Egypt has its strengths and is stronger than the reports published before 2005: unlike these earlier documents, it does not say the situation is improving. In keeping with the 2005 report, it no longer claims, as it had in earlier reports, that the “practice of Christianity or Judaism does not conflict with Shari’a (Islamic law),” nor does it make the weaker claim, used in 2004, that “the Government does not consider the practice of Christianity or Judaism to conflict with Shari’a.” Instead it simply says that “religious practices that conflict with the Government’s interpretation of Shari’a are prohibited” and gives no opinion as to whether this interpretation conflicts with Christianity and Judaism. This change suggests that the State Department may accept that there are such conflicts.

However, the report continues to suffer from defects, particularly concerning its use of excessively mild and, in some cases, misleading language. It says that “members of the non-Muslim minority generally worship without harassment...,” which underplays the fact that freedom of worship is only one component of religious freedom. It is also unclear what “generally” means – it might only mean that most worship services do not suffer harassment most of the time, which would be a very weak claim. It says that “there were occasional reports that police harassed converts from Islam to Christianity.” “Harassment” is much too weak a word to describe the fact that such converts have been arrested, imprisoned, interrogated, and tortured, and that in November 2003, one such convert died in police custody. Converts also fear attack and even murder by Muslim radicals. The report itself gives the example (omitted in the 2005 report) of Baha al-Aqqad, a recent convert to Christianity from Islam, who on April 6, 2005, was arrested on the grounds that he had ‘defamed Islam’ and held in Doqqi prison. He was transferred to various prisons and detained until April 2007. “Harassment” is an inadequate term to describe torture, or a two-year detention without trial or charges.

Another example of misleading language involves references to “sectarian clashes.” The Report describes as “sectarian clashes” the incidents that took place in January 2006 in Udayssat, near Luxor. Its description also says that “On January 18 several hundred Muslim residents of the area surrounded the building, vandalized the property, and attempted to set it ablaze. In the ensuing melee, approximately a dozen persons, both Christian and Muslim, were injured, along with several policemen. On January 20 assailants killed a forty-seven-year-

old Christian farmer, Kamal Shaker Megalaa, as he returned from his fields. The Luxor district attorney ordered the arrest and investigation of several Muslims from Udayssat on suspicion of involvement in his murder.” This is a description of attacks on Copts, not of a “sectarian clash.”

In describing attacks on three churches in Alexandria in April 2006, it says “Mahmud Salaheddin Abdul Razzak, a Muslim man, carried out sequential knife attacks at three Alexandria churches, which resulted in the death of seventy-eight-year-old Noshi Atta Guirgis and injuries to more than a dozen other Christians. The police quickly arrested the twenty-five-year-old Razzak, who had a history of mental illness, and charged him in the murder and assaults.” It is not clear why the reports say that the man was arrested “quickly” since, if he was the perpetrator, he managed to attack a dozen people in three places, one of which was nine miles from the others. The State Department also seems to have accepted the Egyptian government contention that there was only one attacker, whereas other reports refer to several attackers and suggest that one person could not have conducted nearly contemporaneous attacks in three varied locations. In addition, the Department appears to accept the Egyptian government’s claim that the perpetrator was mentally ill, without alluding to the fact that, as a means of minimizing their importance, that government frequently describes religious attacks as having been carried out by mentally ill people. This claim has been made so often that Egyptians frequently make a joke about it: we are a country of mentally ill people.

Perhaps most importantly, the State Department reports sometimes display a truncated view of religion (see also Thomas F Farr’s essay “Religious Freedom and national security” in Marshall 2008:17-22 which describes a consistent tendency to underestimate the importance of religion). At times it contrasts politics, nationalism, and ethnicity with religion, as though concrete acts, events, and movements were necessarily of only one or another category. In fact, most things human are several of these things at once. A war can be both economic and religious; a conflict can be both political and religious, just as a wall can be both thick and tall. Cultures are usually religious, and religions are usually cultural (see Marshall 2008:441-444 “The nature of religious freedom”).

This is not a mere definitional quibble of interest only to academics: it is central to the proper implementation of the entire 1998 International Religious Freedom Act. The focus of the Act is not human rights violations against “religious” people. After all, since most people in the world claim some form of religious identity, then most human rights violations of any kind are against religious believers. The Act is instead concerned not with all forms of restrictions or persecution of religious people, but with persecution with a focus on the grounds that are themselves in part religious – where a person’s or community’s religion is a component of the persecution or discrimination they suffer. Hence a truncated view of religion would lead to a truncated implementation of the act.

Despite these critical comments, it must be re-emphasised that the State Department reports are generally exemplary pieces of work and the Reports on religious freedom marks a milestone in reporting on religious freedom. These problems do highlight, however, the need for standardized criteria.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from the country profiles in religious freedom in the world, as well as from State Department reports and other surveys, that violations of religious freedom worldwide are massive, widespread, and, in many parts of the world, intensifying. This leads to three other conclusions; first, that attention to and action on religious freedom have been comparatively weak. Second, that the important role of religion in conflicts and in political orders has been comparatively neglected. Third, that both of these situations are now beginning to change, a change that we hope this present survey will accelerate.