

## “The religious other as a threat:”

### Religious persecution expressing xenophobia - a global survey of Christian-Muslim convivence

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#### Abstract

This article examines xenophobia as a significant factor in religious persecution in contexts where Christians and Muslims live together, because “the religious other” is often perceived as a threat, resulting in restriction of religious freedom and social discrimination. The article explores a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion, xenophobia and religious persecution by examining the relevant data in the most extensive scholarly surveys on religious freedom/ persecution in the world and draws on a new hermeneutical model of understanding the stranger.

**Keywords** Religious other, religious persecution, xenophobia, Christian-Muslim convivence, social regulation of religion, government regulation of religion, religious freedom index, country profiles, hermeneutics, stranger, tribalism.

#### Introduction

As the director of the Cape Town Bureau of the International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance – which is academically researching persecution – and as a foreigner in South Africa, I propose to provide a global perspective and to highlight the role xenophobia plays in religious persecution. This could broaden the discourse on the relationship between religion and xenophobia. I am doing this as a Christian theologian, or more specifically, as an evangelical Lutheran with conciliatory inclinations.

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I hail from Germany, a country where more than 60 years ago dictatorial authorities murdered six million Jews – this can well be described as xenophobia. I also hail from a church which made the following confession in the *Stuttgart Confession of Guilt*:

By us infinite wrong was brought over many peoples and countries. That which we often testified to in our communities, we express now in the name of the whole Church: We did fight for long years in the name of Jesus Christ against the mentality that found its awful expression in the National Socialist regime of violence; we accuse ourselves for not abiding by our beliefs more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, and for not loving more ardently.<sup>1</sup>

Church leaders in Germany today are still reminding the public of the atrocities that happened in their own country not so long ago, such as recently mentioned in a common word from the Chairs of both, the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and the Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference, who remembered the November Pogroms in 1938 against the Jewish population and their synagogues.<sup>2</sup> They also raised their voices against anti-semitism, racism, and xenophobia of today.

Thus, when countries are identified by name in this article, I do not mean to attack their governments, to insult their citizens or to defame their religious beliefs. But I hold that the realities of religious persecution today should be included in an open and frank dialogue between Muslims and Christians when examining religion and xenophobia.

I define religious persecution sociologically in line with Tieszen (2008:44) as “an unjust action of varying levels of hostility directed at a believer or believers of a particular religion or belief-system through systematic oppression or genocide, or through harassment or discrimination which may not necessarily limit these believers’ ability to practice their faith, resulting in varying levels of harm as it is considered from the victim’s perspective, each action having religion as its primary motivator.”

My understanding of “the religious other” is based on the work of Theo Sundermeier (2006), who pleads for a healthy “convivence”

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/stutt-guilt>. Translation edited.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ekd.de/presse/pm292\\_2008\\_ekd\\_dbk\\_pogromnacht.html](http://www.ekd.de/presse/pm292_2008_ekd_dbk_pogromnacht.html).

(living together) across religious, racial, ethnic and national divides. I understand xenophobia to broadly mean a fear of what is unfamiliar, particularly the other who is religiously different and therefore perceived as a threat.

Religious persecution, restriction of religious freedom, and religiously motivated social discrimination are widespread phenomena which are severely under-reported and under-researched. The large majority of its victims are Christians. The main perpetrators are adherents of other world religions and worldviews, whose ideological inclinations are often combined with a form of nationalism. In view of this disproportionate picture, I propose, for the purposes of this paper, simply to examine the role of xenophobia in religious persecution in the contexts where Muslims and Christians encounter each other.

I shall try to demonstrate that xenophobia is a significant factor in religious persecution in contexts where Christians and Muslims live together, because “the religious other” is often perceived as a threat, resulting in restrictions of religious freedom and social discrimination. The aim of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay between religion, xenophobia and religious persecution, by examining the relevant data of the most extensive scholarly surveys on religious freedom/ persecution in the world and drawing on a new hermeneutical model of understanding the stranger.

## **1. Social regulation of religion and religious persecution - a quantitative assessment**

How can the relationship between xenophobia and religious persecution be measured? Only recently a model which explains religious persecution, and includes sophisticated statistical instruments for measuring it, has been developed in the field of sociology of religion. The pioneers, Brian J Grim and his colleague professor Roger Finke have supplied the first cross-national datasets, which start to remedy the lack of data on the role of religion in social conflict.

### **1.1 Theoretical framework**

While xenophobia is not a specific focus of their research, Grim has indicated to me in private communication: “It may be possible to consider that ‘social regulation of religion’ [their field of research] is

actually a proxy measure for xenophobia since it represents the degree to which religious groups hold negative and exclusionary attitudes toward other or non-traditional religions.” A recent paper by Grim and Finke (2007) on “Religious persecution in cross-national context” shows a clear connection between social regulation and religious persecution.

So, what can we learn from Grim and Finke's paper about the connection between religious persecution and xenophobia, using social regulation of religion as a proxy measure for xenophobia?

Grim and Finke find that “social religious regulation is associated with religious persecution indirectly through its effect on government regulation,” while government regulation of religion is most directly associated with religious persecution (2007:647). The only additional factor leading to persecution – among those tested – is armed conflict.

What is their theoretical framework? Grim and Finke hold that religion itself (and not only corrupted versions of religion) must be seen as an independent cause in social conflict besides political and economic causes. Furthermore, religion and ethnicity must not be conflated in explaining social conflict. While they do overlap they are not identical, and the degree of overlap will vary greatly from country to country. The Huntington “clash of civilisations model” is also considered unsatisfactory, as it tries to explain social conflict based on *general* differences between religious traditions. Grim and Finke examine specific actions and behaviours, regardless of the religious tradition involved.

Based on the “religious economies model” Grim and Finke describe a “regulation of religion mechanism” which has the benefit of accounting for differences between religious traditions and offering empirically-supported conceptual clarity as to the sources of religious persecution.

The “religious economies model” (Finke and Stark), postulates the flourishing of religions when they are unregulated and competitive. “Less regulation prevents persecution by ensuring fair competition for religions within a society. Deregulating religious markets results in a rich pluralism where no single religion can monopolise religious activity, and all religions can compete on a level playing field” (:636).

Grim and Finke distinguish two agents of religious regulation: government and social bodies. Government's regulation of religion is defined as "the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by the official laws, policies, or administrative actions of the state." What we are interested in as a proxy measure for xenophobia is the other form, namely the social regulation of religion, which is defined as "the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or the culture at large" (:645).

This form of regulation might not be completely disconnected from state regulation. It might be tolerated or even encouraged, but it is not formally sanctioned or implemented by government action. The nature of social regulation can be extremely subtle, arising from the pervasive norms and culture of the larger society, but its extremes would be blatant acts of controlling religion. Its origin is often religion: religions, or cartels and alliances of religions that are regulating other religions in order to gain a competitive advantage.

The elements used for measuring the social regulation of religion index are societal attitudes toward non-traditional religions, conversion, and proselytism, as well as negative attitudes of social movements and religious institutions toward other religious groups, especially new, foreign and minority religions (:646).

It is important to note that Grim and Finke use a narrower definition of religious persecution than is used in this paper. They limit it to the more violent forms, namely "physical abuse or displacement due to one's religious practices, profession, or affiliation", and define it as a form of social conflict that involves more than religious opposition or a denial of personal rights, where the targeted group is identified by religion (:643).

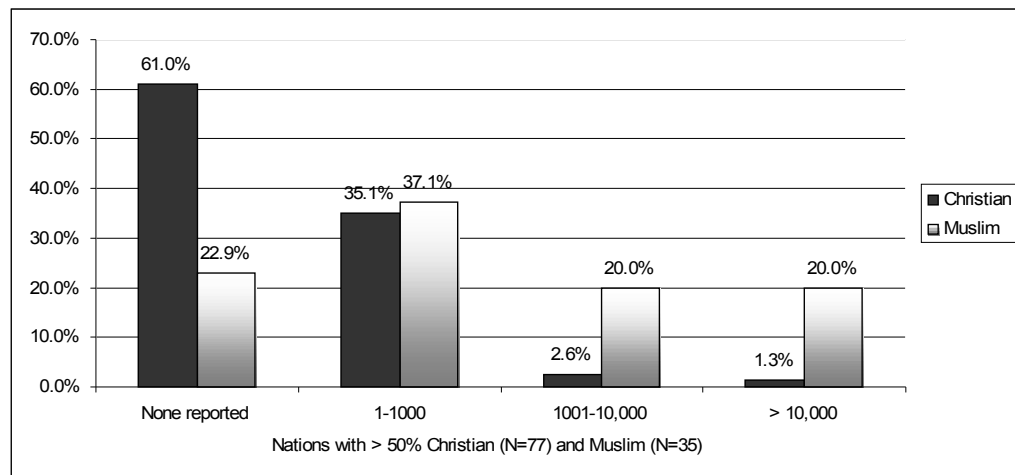
The main source of the data used by Grim and Finke is the 2003 International Religious Freedom Report of the United States of America's State Department. The advantage of this source compared to other cross-national data sources is discussed, establishing its credibility and limited bias. The data was reliably coded according to sociological standards. The analysis was limited to 143 countries with populations of 2 million or more, of the 195 countries listed in the report. The United States of America is not included in the report (:640-643).

The coders of the country reports estimated the number of people who were physically abused or displaced due to their religion, using six categories, starting with 0 for none, 1-10 people, etc., up to 1,001-10,000, and more than 10,000 people.

## 1.2 Findings

The following global profile of religious persecution emerges:

- Of the 143 countries included in the study, 77 have documented cases of religious persecution according to the above definition.
- Religious persecution is evident in every region of the globe, but is far greater in the Middle East and South Asia, where only 3 out of 24 countries have no record of religious persecution. Over half of the countries in Africa and East Asia reported at least some form of persecution, while in Europe and the Western Hemisphere it was still 40%.
- The global intensity of persecution is high, considering that 25 countries had more than 1,000 people abused or displaced, while in 14 of those countries the level of persecution exceeded 10,000 persons.
- Religious persecution is present regardless of a country's predominant religion.
- Of specific interest for our topic is a comparison of countries (*see Figure 1*) in which the majority of the population is Christian (77) or Muslim (35). There is no big difference in low- to mid-level persecution (between 1-1,000 persons affected) in both sets of countries: 35.1% of Christian-majority countries and 37.1% of Muslim-majority countries. However there was a stark difference in high-level persecution. Persecution of more than 1,000 persons is present in 40% of Muslim-majority countries compared to 3.9% of Christian-majority countries. But there are also Muslim-majority countries with no persecution (22.9% compared to 61% of Christian-majority countries) (:645).

*Figure 1: Level of persecution in countries with Christian or Muslim majorities*

(Grim & Finke 2007:645)

The examination of the various variables and their associations leads to some relevant observations:

- The percentage shares of Christians and Muslims in a population have effects working in opposite directions (:649-650). The adoption of religious law (mostly Shari'a law) and the percentage of Muslims in a country can be positively associated with the social regulation of religion. The percentage of Christians, however, is negatively associated with a government regulation of religion.
- The regulation of religion results in higher levels of persecution (abuse and displacement of people based on their religious affiliation), regardless of a country's majority religion (:652).

In the discussion of their findings Grim and Finke focus on the cycle of regulation and persecution (*see Figure 2*) and on interpreting the differences between Christian and Muslim dominated countries.

- The economies of religion model illustrates an ongoing cycle: social pressures from competing religions, social movements, and institutions can prompt increased regulation; increased regulation holds the potential for unleashing persecution from or condoned by the state, and this persecution can stimulate greater social regulation in response (:652).

*Figure 2: The cycle of persecution*



- In their effort to explain why predominantly Muslim countries have far higher levels of religious persecution and why social regulation increases as the percentage of Muslims in a country rises and government regulation declines as the percentage of Christians increases, Grim and Finke point to the need to understand differing views on how religion should be regulated – or not regulated. They propose that one of the key differences is that Christian tradition looks to the state as the legitimate authority, while Islamic tradition looks to the community of Muslims and its religious leaders. Once religious leaders have the authority to regulate other religions, the chance of religious persecution greatly increases. Grim and Finke propose to particularly explore two issues in future work. As previous research has shown, religious intolerance tends to increase in times of religious conflict, and firstly they pose the question: “Is the increased regulation a response to perceived cultural and religious threats?” And secondly, “do the teachings, unique history, and organisational structure of the Muslim faith provide a foundation for greater regulation outside of the state?” (:653)
- Finally Grim and Finke call for a continued sorting out of the cultural and religious influences on social conflict: “We need to recognize that religion and ethnicity are separate concepts, with distinct effects, that require separate measures” (:653).



### 1.3 Evaluation

In closing this section let us ask: has the research by Grim and Finke been helpful in understanding the relationship between xenophobia and religious persecution?

It has provided us with a proxy measure for xenophobia in its expression as social regulation of religion, which are the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or the culture at large. There are three definite benefits to this approach: This measure is (i) independent of religious tradition, (ii) empirically supported and (iii) is based on a clear concept. The social regulation of religion can be measured in the societal attitudes towards non-traditional religions, conversion, and proselytism, as well as negative attitudes of social movements and religious institutions towards other religious groups, especially new, foreign and minority religions.

The main finding of Grim and Finke in view of our topic is that social regulation of religion is not the foremost factor directly associated with religious persecution. However it is an important one, as pressures created by the social forces seeking to regulate religion often lead to a state's regulation of religion. These regulatory actions contribute to religious persecution and can set up a vicious cycle of persecution once unleashed.

Another relevant finding of Grim and Finke is that predominantly Muslim countries have far higher levels of religious persecution than predominantly Christian countries.

The nature and strength of Grim and Finke's approach is that of a cross-national comparison of data on religious persecution. This is useful for gaining a global picture, drawing comparisons between nations and for establishing statistical probabilities of the association of regulation of religion and persecution.

By way of critique one might find Grim and Finke's definition of persecution too narrowly focused on physical harm and displacement, compared to the much broader definition by Tieszen used in this article. The statements of Grim and Finke on the spread of persecution must not be quoted as absolute statements, but can only be used within the confines of their parameters. With a broader definition of persecution the global pervasiveness of persecution would have been

found to be much larger. However it would have been more difficult to measure.

The finding that social regulation of religion only indirectly contributes to persecution by triggering governmental regulation of religion needs to be treated as a statement of global statistical probability and not as an absolute statement. In reality there are contexts where governmental regulation of religion is very low and social regulation of religion is very high. In some of these contexts this results in various degrees of direct religious persecution by social entities without a tightening of governmental restrictions.

Another critique might be the lack of a definition of religion in Grim and Finke's paper, which certainly exists in Grim's PhD dissertation. Religion would need to be understood broadly as a technical term, including any worldview – even no religion – in order to cover secularist regulation of religion in the guise of tolerance.

The description and perception of religion in market terminology by the religious economies model, while providing useful insights within its parameters, lacks the deeper understanding of religions which can only be attained by examining them inside out, from their own meta-centres. For example, Islam does not see itself as merely a religion in the sense of modern Western definitions, but rather as an integral and holistic system of society.

So while Grim and Finke have provided a ground breaking new model for understanding religious persecution which leads to useful insights, there are obvious limitations, which call for supplementary explanation and differentiation.

These insights will now be tested by some case studies using a different data source.

## **2. Assessing the role of xenophobia in religious persecution - case studies from contexts of Christian-Muslim convivence**

Probably the most representative, comparative and current data set available on religious freedom and persecution has been produced over several years by the survey conducted under the direction of Paul Marshall by the Center for Religious Freedom of the Hudson Institute.

The 500-page report contains 101 country profiles covering 95% of the world's population.

## 2.1 Sources and methodology

I intend to scrutinise a selection of the reports, in order to establish the role of xenophobia in discriminatory legislation, infringement of religious rights, and immoral actions of society which in some cases lead to the murder of fellow human beings for reasons including religious factors.

For the compilation of the country profiles Marshall adapted and expanded a checklist of criteria originally developed by Willy Fautré of Human Rights without Frontiers. The checklist attempts to summarise the various possible dimensions of religious freedom and broadly follows the criteria set by international human rights standards.

The country profiles were written by a whole team of authors and further processed in a co-operative manner. They follow clear definitions of the issues, and the authors operated with a published set of criteria for a coherent narrative and a quite comprehensive set of questions on the infringements of religious freedom rights. The checklist of elements of religious freedom (Marshall 2008:451-476) contains between 4 and 29 different questions on each of the following ten categories, making a total of 122 questions on the right of individuals to freedom of conscience, freedom of worship, freedom of clergy, right of self-government by religious bodies, freedom of religious education and instruction, right to social participation, equality/non-discrimination of individuals, equality/non-discrimination of communities and institutions, religious and economic freedom, and incitement against religious groups. The last category seems of the highest relevance for our study.

The approach of Marshall's reference work has set a standard for country profiles which should be taken as a benchmark.

Marshall provides a Religious Freedom Score for each country on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being the most free and 7 the least free. These are estimates of the team of authors of the respective country profile.

In addition Marshall has used Grim and Finke's set of questions, asked the authors of country profiles to respond to them in 2007, and independently calculated indexes on government regulation, government favouritism, and social regulation for each country. These are expressed on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 meaning none and 10 a strong degree on one of those indexes.

In order to identify the countries with the least religious freedom and the highest social regulation of religion, I pool the 20 countries scoring 6 or 7 on Marshall's religious freedom scale and the additional 7 countries scoring higher than 9 for at least a region of that country on Grim and Finke's Social Regulation of Religion Index.<sup>3</sup> There is a very high degree of convergence.

For the purpose of understanding religious persecution in a context where Christians and Muslims live together, we can ignore a number of countries on the resulting list. Where Christians or Muslims form a part of the populations of these countries and suffer persecution, they usually do so from a third religion or ideology dominant in that country. But those country profiles usually do not provide us with any relevant information on xenophobia between Christians and Muslims. So we can safely exclude Sri Lanka, China, Burma/Myanmar, North Korea, Vietnam, and Tibet.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Grim and Finke indexes particular states or provinces with a more extreme restriction of religious freedom are listed separately in addition to nations. In this paper they are only counted as a separate entity if the larger entity to which they belong is not contained in the sample. Otherwise they are counted as one entity.

**Figure 3:** Muslim- or Christian-majority entities with highest SRI or lowest religious freedom

Country or region	Grim indexes			Marshall	Christian	Muslim
	SRI	GRI	GFI	Score	%	%
Saudi Arabia	10.0	10.0	10.0	7	0.0%	100%
Sudan (Southern & Darfur)	10.0	9.1	10.0	7	23.0%	65%
Pakistan (Punjab)	10.0	8.6	9.6			
Malaysia (Panang)	10.0	8.6	9.0	4	10.0%	60%
Iran	10.0	8.3	9.3	7	0.5%	98%
Palestinian areas	10.0	7.8	8.3	6	~2.0%	~93%
Iraq	10.0	7.8	8.2	7	*3.2%	95%
Afghanistan (Southern)	10.0	6.9	9.2	6	< 1.0%	99%
Pakistan (whole country)	9.5	8.6	9.6	6	2.0%	92%
Nigeria (Sharia states)	9.3	9.4	8.3	5	45-50%	45-50%
Bangladesh (Dhaka)	9.3	7.7	7.6	6	< 1.0%	83%
Uzbekistan	9.3	7.5	8.0	7	4.0%	70%
Indonesia (Aceh)	9.3	7.5	3.5	5	13.0%	83%
Comoros	9.3	6.9	7.8	5	2.0%	98%
Greece	9.3	2.2	10.0	3	95.5%	4%
Romania	9.3	2.2	10.0	3	81.0%	1%
Thailand (Pattani province)	9.3	0	7.3	3	0.7%	4.6%
Mauritania	8.8	9.4	10.0	6	1.0%	99%
Turkmenistan	6.8	9.2	8.8	7	5.0%	90%
Maldives	6.8	8.3	10.0	7	< 0.5%	99%
Eritrea	5.8	9.4	6.8	7	+47.0%	48%
Belarus	2.6	9.4	1.5	6	71.0%	0.3%

\* taken from World Christian Encyclopedia 2000  
SRI = Social Regulation of Religion Index  
GRI = Government Regulation of Religion Index  
GFI = Government Favoritism of Religion Index  
Marshall Score = Religious Freedom Rating

## 2.2 Analysis of country profiles

If one compares how the entries of the Social Regulation of Religion Index (SRI) and the Government Regulation of Religion Index (GRI) relate to each other in the remaining list of countries, we find that in most instances the SRI is higher than the GRI. Besides the case of Saudi Arabia where both scores are at 10, there is a large group of 15 countries where the SRI is higher than the GRI and a small group of 5 where the SRI is smaller than the GRI. The SRI is higher in all but one case of the 15 cases that have a SRI between 9 and 10. The exceptions are the Shari'a states of Nigeria, where the GRI of 9.4 is just slightly higher than the SRI of 9.3. But in 3 cases, the GRI ranges at a high 6.9-9.4. The exceptions are the Muslim dominated Pattani province in Thailand, where the GRI is 0, and two countries with a majority Christian population, Greece and Romania that both have a low GRI of 2.2. The second group of 5 cases in this sample, where the GRI is higher than the SRI, all have an SRI below 9. This means they have been included in this sample because of a Marshall Religious Freedom Rating of 6-7. This is reflected in their correspondingly high GRI scores of 8.3-9.4.

17 of the 21 countries or areas in this sample have clear and often overwhelming Muslim majorities, three have overwhelming Christian majorities of the Orthodox variety, and in only one country, namely Eritrea, neither has a majority.

The three Christian majority population nations Greece, Romania and Belarus are considered first.

**Belarus**, with a highly authoritarian regime, was chosen for this list only because of its score of 6 in Marshall's Religious Freedom Rating. This corresponds with a high score of 9.4 in government regulation, while social regulation scores at a comparatively low 2.7.<sup>4</sup>

In **Greece**, the Greek Orthodox Church is represented by 87% of the population and is being favoured as well as the small minority of the Turcophone Muslim Community in Western Thrace, where Shari'a

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<sup>4</sup> The information on the individual countries represents a summary including verbatim quotes of the original text of Marshall 2008, particularly in view of the elements used as criteria of the Social Restriction of Religion Index, at times followed by a clearly distinguished brief evaluation of the results. Therefore no references are given for material from Marshall as it can be easily found in the respective country profiles which are seldom longer than four pages.

law regulates family and civic issues. However all other religious groups, from divergent Orthodox, or Protestant to other Muslim groups had to fight at the European Court of Human Rights to gain their rights according to European standards.

In **Romania** the Romanian Orthodox Church with 65% adherents “uses its dominant role to influence the majority of the population, policy makers and low-level government officials.” This domination leads to a “reluctance to tolerate other religions ..., contributing to a culture of intolerance, including sporadic violence.” However no cases of persecution against the 1% Muslim minority are reported in this country profile.

While in Greece and Romania the social regulation of religion is quite high, government regulation remains in fact rather low. Thus, high social regulation does not necessarily have to lead to high government regulation of religion.

Next we turn to the one nation in which the inhabitants are evenly split between Christianity and Islam. The small country of **Eritrea**, whose government is influenced by Marxist ideology, is given a Religious Freedom Rating of 7 by Marshall, because of its extremely high GRI (9.4). Religion is repressed because the government is afraid that people might give a higher allegiance to God than to the state's instructions. The country profile does not give any evidence of xenophobia in this society, while the SRI of 5.8 indicates that it is present. Xenophobia seems to be completely overshadowed in this report by the government's anxiety against and treatment of adherents of religions which could be classified as ideological xenophobia.

In our sample of countries scoring worst regarding religious freedom, we now consider some of the 17 Muslim majority countries or sub-regions, while skipping those where the country profiles provided no or very little evidence of xenophobia.

In the Kingdom of **Saudi Arabia** religious freedom does not exist. Social regulation, government regulation and government favouritism score a full 10 on Grim's indexes. All 24 million citizens must be Muslim, and the Wahhabi brand of Sunni Islam is the state ideology which is vigorously propagated at home and abroad. Other forms of Islam face discrimination, and all public practice of any religion other than Islam is strictly forbidden. Saudi government

school textbooks still contain hate language directed at members of other religious brands after so far inadequate attempts to purge these textbooks in response to pressure from abroad. In 2006 instances were documented where students were instructed “to 'hate' Christians, Jews, and non-Wahhabi Muslims and to treat them as 'enemies'.” The reader of this profile cannot escape the impression created of an institutionalised fear of any deviation from the state proclaimed brand, a fear of the “religious other”, which expresses itself in the most rigid and harsh measures.

The Punjab province in **Pakistan** with an SRI of 10 exceeds the national SRI of 9.5. Pakistan is ruled by the military and has a police force that seems to be a law unto itself. Islam is the state religion and 95% of the population are Muslims. The relations between many of Pakistan's religious communities remain tense and dangerous. Christians and Ahmadis are frequently the victims of religious vandalism and violence organised by Islamist extremists. As Christians are concentrated in the Punjab, this explains the higher SRI score for this region. The penal code against blasphemy is seriously abused by false accusations against non-Muslims. Since 1980 at least 23 people involved in cases of blasphemy have been murdered. Pakistan's Muslim majority is split into more than 70 Islamic sects which are doctrinally and politically opposed to one another, with spiralling violence evident between Sunni and Shiite factions. The details that emerge about the social regulation of religion bear many xenophobic traits, particularly in view of the “religious other”, so that the SRI score is well substantiated.

**Iran** has an overwhelmingly Muslim population of about 70 million, with 89% Shiite and 9% Sunni. Shiite Islam can be said to be the state religion. The narrative of the country profile provides evidence of Shiite xenophobic violence against the large Sunni minority. Otherwise the high degree of xenophobia suggested by a SRI of 10 is overshadowed by the details of government regulation of religion – particularly regarding Baha'i, Christians and Jews – even though that has the slightly lower score of 8.3.<sup>5</sup>

The **Palestinian areas** with a small population of 4 million also score 10 on the SRI, while government regulation is at 7.8. Muslims constitute about 93% of the population. While all Palestinians suffer

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<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed report on religious freedom in Iran see Schirrmacher 2009.



from repressive and anarchic conditions, the growth of more extreme forms of Islam has led to increased threats, intimidation, and harassment by radical Islamic groups. Land seizures of Christian-owned properties, bomb threats, torching and bombing of houses, churches and vehicles, and the murder of a Christian leader were reported between 2005 and 2007. The country profile gives clear evidence of unchecked social violence mainly against Christians, much of which clearly seems to be religiously motivated xenophobia and hatred in the context of anarchy.

In **Iraq** with an SRI of 10 and GRI of 7.8, the composition of the total population of about 28 million has been in flux due to wars and 10% or more emigration. The definitive majority are the Shiite Muslims numbering about 65%, who form the current government; Sunni Muslims constitute about 30%. 'Religious cleansing' of neighbourhoods, disproportionate suffering of the non-Muslim minorities, kidnappings, forcing of Christians under threat of death to either pay the Islamic *jizya* tax to the local mosque, to convert to Islam, or to leave, frequent attacks on apparently religious grounds against churches and individual Christians, are among the incidents reported. Individual and co-ordinated bombings of churches and targeted murders have intensified in frequency and brutality since 2006.<sup>6</sup> The narrative clearly witnesses large-scale religiously motivated xenophobic violence of Shia and Sunnis against each other, and both against Christians and adherents of other minority religions.

The **Shari'a states of Nigeria**, hold an SRI of 9.3 and a GRI of 9.4, far above the national figures of 2 and 3.9 respectively. Christians and Muslims each add up to 45-50% of the national population. While societal discrimination is widespread, and clashes frequently erupt among the country's many ethnic groups, the concern here is with the twelve states in the north and central region which have introduced Shari'a and impose Islam as the de facto official state religion in contravention of the federation's constitution. These activities have led to the death of 60,000 people, mainly Christians and traditionalists, as ethnic, political and economic conflicts are increasingly tied to religion. The authorities have been ineffectual in preventing attacks. Religious persecution emanates both from government regulation,

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<sup>6</sup> Reports in 2008 suggest the cleansing of Mossul of Christians indicating a further worsening of the situation.

such as punishing apostasy by death, as well as from social hostility towards Christians such as are manifested in the many child abductions, combined with forced marriages and conversion to Islam.

The capital of Bangladesh, **Dhaka**, has a higher SRI (9.3) than the rest of the country of 144 million inhabitants (6.2). Islam is the state religion. Despite the formal declaration of religious freedom for minority religions, there is an increasing anti-minority sentiment in the country. People belonging to minority groups have suffered hundreds of cases and various kinds of social discrimination and persecution. These include destruction of property, kidnapping, the murder of leadership, rape of young girls, and discrimination in education, employment, property rights, and forced conversion to Islam. Different Islamic groups arouse anti-minority and specifically anti-Christian sentiment. The narrative gives clear evidence of the social exploitation of religious and ethnic minorities, and of high level and highly visibly xenophobic hostility.

**Uzbekistan** (26 million inhabitants of which 70% are Muslims) is one of the most repressive of the former Soviet republics with an SRI of 9.3. Government strictly controls all religious activity of the Muslim majority as well as of Christian and other minorities. Muslim converts to Christianity have sometimes been the victims of unofficial kangaroo courts that were convened with the connivance of state officials. Religious freedom monitoring is effectively banned.

### 2.3 Evaluation of findings

The delimitations of the samples according to the two scales did not fully match. Probably countries with an SRI from 8 upward should have been included to match the group of countries with a Marshall Religious Freedom Rating of 6-7. The addition of nations or parts thereof with an SRI between 8 and 9 would have raised the size of our sample by 12 entities. The additional entities are listed in alphabetical order: Afghanistan, Kabylie in Algeria, Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, the metropolises Assiut, al-Minyan and Alexandria in Egypt, Georgia, India and particularly its state of Gujarat, Azraq in Jordan, the Beirut suburbs in Lebanon, Macedonia, Mauritania, and Turkey.

Not all narratives in our sample group gave evidence of the high degree of social regulation of religion indicated in the index, but most

did so with very explicit descriptions of religious persecution motivated by various forms of xenophobia, but mostly religious xenophobia. In cases where the narrative gave little or no evidence of social regulation of religion/xenophobia, the explanation for this lack could be twofold: either the attention of the country profilers was so absorbed by the high degree of government regulation of religion resulting in massive persecution that they largely or completely failed to describe the social regulation of religion which exists there as well. Or the government regulation of religion is of such a nature and so strong, that it by itself overshadows the existing social regulation of religion, and the latter can no longer be fully distinguished and isolated from it.

Among the entities examined, four major scenarios emerged. The first is that of the authoritarian state which turns against all religions, such as Belarus, or domesticates recognized majority and minority religions for nationalist interests and more fully turns against unrecognised religions, such as in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

The second scenario is that of an Orthodox Christianity being (quasi) the state religion trying to secure its monopoly in society by regulating all other religions, such as in Greece and Romania. While this results in low scale persecution, social regulation of religion/xenophobia is not documented in the narratives.

The third scenario is one in which government regulation of religion in a Muslim majority country overshadows the social regulation of religion. Three different degrees could be distinguished.

1. The Muslim state that almost fully institutionalises xenophobia by oppressively policing its citizens, such as in Sunni Saudi Arabia, or in Shiite Iran.
2. The Muslim state with very high regulation of religion that overshadows social regulation of religion, but where social regulation of religion is still visible in the form of societal anti-conversion pressure, such as in the Comoros, Mauritania and the Maldives.
3. State sponsored religiously motivated violence, such as in the civil war and genocidal [sic] attacks in Sudan. While the immediate agents are often social forces the overshadowing force still is the government.

The fourth scenario is one where xenophobia and social regulation of religion are clearly more dominant than government regulation. Again there are various degrees to that scenario:

- State tolerated religious vandalism as in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Xenophobia by Muslims against minority religions is clearly evident in these countries.
- A religious veneer over ethnic, political and economic conflict, which is unchecked by government, such as in the north and central regions of Nigeria.
- Post-war instability in which large scale mutual hostility between Shia and Sunnis, as well as attacks against religious minorities go unchecked, such as in Iraq.
- Unchecked religiously motivated violence in a context of anarchy, as in the Palestinian territories.
- Regional insurgencies and extremism turning against other religions in otherwise moderate nations, such as in Aceh (Indonesia) and in Pattani (Thailand).

There are also limitations to our analysis: we omitted the entities with a lesser degree of persecution and social regulation. Further, while the theories of Grim and Finke were largely confirmed, the source used was not always sufficiently geared towards our specific topic. What is needed for a deeper understanding of the relationship between religious persecution and xenophobia is a more detailed documentation of a particular context on the one hand and more fundamental reflection on the other hand. Choosing the latter, I will therefore next venture into some hermeneutical considerations on the religious other as a threat.

### **3. The “religious other” as a threat - hermeneutical considerations**

*Understanding the stranger – a practical hermeneutic*, is a work in German by the Heidelberg professor of theology Theo Sundermeier. It is a pioneering work emanating from a lifetime of research as a scholar of mission studies and years of inter-cultural experience in South Africa and Namibia. His insights helped me to understand why the “religious other” is often considered a threat and how this leads to persecution. His book is not about ethics and how to overcome

xenophobic violence, but on building the foundations for a non-xenophobic society by understanding the stranger and showing why certain societies and religions deal with strangers in a specific way.

The standard definition of the stranger according to Simmel is that of “the one coming from outside, the ex-territorial one, who is now close and seems strange to me” (quoted by Sundermeier 1996:12;139). Sundermeier holds that the attitude towards strangers of tribal societies is today still ingrained in many cultures, even in the West. Whoever comes from outside causes insecurity – to both sides – and is a latent threat. Tribal cultures mark a closed circle. This is the living space of true humans, who know the customs and laws which guarantee the flow of life. Outside the circle is the desert, the jungle, where danger is lurking. Whoever lives there, is often not even accepted as a human being, or only in a limited way. Consider why people are called dogs, pigs, monkeys, snakes or lesser creatures! The stranger afar is an enemy. He is to be killed, sacrificed or caught, in order to be subjugated. Tribal societies also know the stranger who has come close as a guest, and the trader who takes up a middle position between the close and the distant stranger. As long as the trader is useful in maintaining and improving life by his trade he is allowed and tolerated to come and to go. The guest is the stranger who has come to stay, at least for a while. He is taken in and protected as a resident with lesser rights. In order to be considered this guest type of stranger, one does not have to come from abroad. It suffices not to be related to local residents and to have no right to local land. Such people may be granted the right to residence, but no other rights, and they will certainly not be considered part of the inner circle – usually for some generations even if they intermarry.

Much of what has been observed in religious persecution in the above narratives can be understood within this framework of tribalism.

Strangeness has two dimensions, it starts with the subjective impression of “otherness” and leads to the realisation of an objective reality (:140). The spontaneous non-reflected reaction to the encounter with a person from a different religion is subjective. The eye sees religious symbols or ceremonies, the ear hears unfamiliar chants, and the nose might smell unfamiliar odours such as incense. On a deeper level the realisation sets in that “the other” comes from an order

foreign to me to which I have no access. There is a fundamental difference which is only partly or not at all compatible with the culture or religion familiar to me. This is the reason why tribal cultures and religions strictly segregate strangers and are only partly willing to integrate them. This attitude was reflected in some of the narratives on religious persecution.

The reaction to a person who converts from one's own religion to another religion can also be explained against this background as the artificial creation of strangers by labelling them as "the other" (:143). The subjective impression of strangeness can be artificially amplified, or even manipulatively created. In a radical selection particular signs are filtered out, (which could be the colour of skin, origin, or race, but in this case the religious creed) and given symbolic value and negative connotation. There exists no interest in understanding "the other", but rather in creating a distance between oneself and "the other" who once was close and now has become a threat. Such acts of erecting boundaries form and strengthen identities. Within this mindset, it comes as no surprise that a clan member or even a family member is declared as being part of the enemies or even dead, because of a religious conversion.

Sundermeier's survey of historical models of understanding strangers could lead to further insights about religion and xenophobia but would take us too far from the topic of religious persecution.

How does Christianity relate to the tribal concept of the stranger? Sundermeier (:121-124) claims that based on the teaching of Jesus, "what you have done to the stranger (xenos) you have done unto me" (Matt 25:38-43), hospitality was highly respected among the early Christians and practised without discrimination. This universalisation of tribalism is exemplified in the admonition by the Tanzanian mother of the bride to her daughter at a traditional tribal wedding:

You know that it is the custom of our tribe to give food to anyone who will in future enter your hut. Our tribal custom limits that to tribal members. But remember now that you are a Christian! You will give anyone something to eat, where ever he or she might come from (M Wilson quoted by Sundermeier 1996:122).

The only boundary respected by Christians was that between faith and unbelief. And as faith and unbelief are often simultaneously present in one and the same person, that boundary goes right through the

individual. All other boundaries were obsolete for Christians. The danger in the history of the Church, according to Sundermeier has been the tendency to try to clearly define the boundary between unbelief and belief, to say who is in and who is out, and thus making an ecclesiastical tribal religion of Christianity.

Besides a lot of similarities that Islam has with Christianity, the marked difference in the perception of the stranger is, according to Sundermeier (:124-127), that in Islam no institution that could be compared to the Church exists, as religion and state are one and the same in Islam, at least in the original ideal. Therefore religious and state ordinances should be compatible. Where the Shari'a, the law revealed by Allah through the Koran and Sunna, reigns, there is the 'house of peace', outside there is the 'house of war', and in between the 'house of contract'. People are classified into three groups: Muslims, people of the book, and infidels. There the pattern of tribal religion and it's respective actions repeats itself. The people of the book must become dhimmi, the infidels must be converted or killed. Sundermeier sees the essential problem of Islam not in the particular mixture of tolerance and intolerance, which in its time and context has actually been understood as progressive; the problem lies in the immutability of this principle. Here tribal thinking is not overcome from the inside out, but it is accorded ultimate validity on a global scale. As this structure appeals to deep-seated human emotions it is very effective.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Returning to the question posed at the beginning: what is the role of xenophobia in religious persecution in contexts where Christians and Muslims live together? We have been seeking an answer by applying three different methods, examining three different sources, two of which represent leading research on religious persecution.

Firstly, the development of indexes on religious regulation by Grim and Finke has provided us with comparative measurements. The data was gained by coding the 2003 International Religious Freedom Report of the United States of America's State Department. As a proxy measure for xenophobia we used the social regulation of religion, which are the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or culture

at large. Particular attention was paid to societal attitudes toward non-traditional religions, conversion, and proselytism, as well as negative attitudes of social movements and religious institutions towards other religious groups, especially new, foreign and minority religions. We found that in a global comparison, the one factor that leads, with the highest statistical probability to religious persecution, is government regulation of religion, while social regulation of religion most frequently encourages the increase in government regulation of religion and thus indirectly contributes to religious persecution. As prevalent persecution in turn strengthens the social regulation of religion, a vicious cycle is created. In cross-national comparison it was found that Muslim majority states are disproportionately represented among the countries in which religious persecution is prevalent. Countries with a majority Muslim population have far higher levels of persecution than countries with majority Christian populations. The higher the percentage of Muslims in a country, the higher is usually the social regulation of religion or xenophobia, whereas the higher the percentage of Christians the lower usually the government regulation of religion.

In a second step these findings were crosschecked against the country profiles of the leading current reference work on religious freedom in the world by Marshall. The countries or provinces with the worst SRI scores were pooled as a control measure with those countries which received the worst religious freedom score by Marshall – this is a more general and less differentiated measure. The narratives on these 21 entities were examined for the evidence they provided on social regulation of religion and xenophobia specifically and how these related to the level of persecution. All narratives obviously showed high levels of religious persecution, usually of religious minorities. Most narratives also gave evidence of high levels of social regulation of religion and various forms of xenophobia. However some narratives did not give sufficiently detailed evidence of the high degree of social regulation of religion as was indicated in the index because government regulation of religion overshadowed the description of the situation. Four major scenarios emerged. The first is that of the authoritarian state which turns against all religions. The second scenario is that of Orthodox Christianity, being quasi a state religion, trying to secure its monopoly in society by regulating all other religions, yet xenophobia was not documented in the narratives.



The third scenario is one in which government regulation of religion in a Muslim majority country overshadows the social regulation of religion. Xenophobia expresses itself in different degrees. It is either institutionalised by the state, expressed in societal anti-conversion pressure or in state sponsored religious violence committed by social forces. The fourth scenario is one where xenophobia and social regulation of religion are clearly more dominant than government regulation of religion. This expresses itself in different degrees, from religious vandalism, hostilities, and conflict unchecked by the state in situations of war, post-war instability, and anarchy, to regional insurgencies and extremism, which turns against other religions in otherwise moderate nations.

We found that for a more detailed evaluation of the role of xenophobia in religious persecution in contexts where Christians and Muslims live together, more detailed documentation on specific contexts than that provided, would be needed. Ideally this should focus on the restrictions placed on the practice, profession, or selection of religion by other religious groups, associations, or culture at large. Furthermore, it should include explicitly detailed evidence on xenophobia and all elements used for measuring social regulation of religion such as societal attitudes towards non-traditional religions, conversion, and proselytism, as well as negative attitudes of social movements and religious institutions towards other religious groups, especially new, foreign and minority religions.

Instead of pursuing the route of more detailed information, we have instead chosen to explore whether some more fundamental hermeneutical considerations would provide further insights. Using the hermeneutics of Sundermeier in order to understand the stranger, we asked why the “religious other” is often perceived as a threat. In tribal societies the stranger is at worst an enemy who needs to be killed or at least subjugated, or the trader who is tolerated as long as he is useful, and at best a guest who is protected as a resident with lesser rights. This attitude towards strangers is today still ingrained in many cultures. Keeping these concepts in mind, it can be explained why the “religious other” is seen as a threat, as an enemy who may be the subject of persecution and discrimination. Those who convert to another religion are artificially made strangers by being labelled as “other”, which legitimises their persecution or murder. The distance thus created between oneself and the “other” protects against the

perceived threat and the boundaries erected strengthen identities. Sundermeier maintains that in Christian faith tribalism has been overcome from the inside out by the universalisation of tribalism – though there has historically been the danger of turning the Church into an ecclesiastical tribal religion – while in Islam tribalism is accorded ultimate validity on a global scale.

Thus the question posed at the beginning, whether religious persecution is an expression of xenophobia has been sufficiently substantiated by examining contexts of convivence of Christians and Muslims. There exists a high degree of xenophobia and religious persecution in many contexts where Christians and Muslims live side by side. Unfortunately, this is more often and frequently more violently, the case in Muslim majority countries or areas, with persecution experienced by Christians and other religious minorities, than in Christian majority contexts.

Religious persecution is therefore a matter of concern to be remedied and addressed in dialogue between Christians and Muslims. The elements described in measuring social regulation of religion would need particular attention: how could societal attitudes toward non-traditional religions be positively influenced? What can be done to promote the toleration of genuine religious conversion? The World Evangelical Alliance has asserted in a recent resolution on religious freedom that this must remain protected as a human right. What can be done to protect genuine witness of one's faith or the polite and respectful invitation of others to consider it, while distinguishing it from unethical proselytism? The WEA makes its contribution to a common Christian code of ethics on mission, calling their own to witness “with gentleness and respect” (Schirmacher 2007). What can be done to overcome the negative attitudes of social movements and religious institutions towards other religious groups, especially new, foreign and minority religions? It might be worthwhile to explore whether the three aspects of convivence, of living together, which Sundermeier has suggested, could help on the road ahead: readiness to help, learning together and from each other, and celebrating festivals together.

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