

# Moroccan Christians

## Lost Opportunities

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### Abstract

Thirty-two Moroccan Christians were surveyed about their lives in this Muslim kingdom, including their current lifestyle, church involvement, family life and aspirations for the future. Government restrictions on their freedom of speech and association as well as societal pressure to conform to Islam keep them from growing in numbers but also hold them back from volunteerism, educational and employment opportunities, planning for their own and their children's future, and participation in building civil society. The resulting limitations on their commercial activities and social networks impede Morocco's overall development.

**Keywords** Religious freedom, economic development, persecution, Morocco.

## 1. Methodology

In this study, 32 Moroccan Christian adult citizens were interviewed using a protocol of open-ended questions about their life under Moroccan rule. Legal prohibitions, combined with Moroccan Christians' experience of social ostracism, workplace discrimination, and government suspicion and punishment, made these interviews difficult to conduct and somewhat risky for the participants. Therefore, surnames were not required of participants, and the surveyor is remaining anonymous to ensure future freedom of movement within Morocco.

The first nine and the last three interviews were conducted orally in person by the main surveyor, from a written script, with simultaneous translation by a church member who is also a professional translator. The others were conducted orally by the translator, and the translations were sent by email to the surveyor, who occasionally asked a clarifying follow-up question where needed. The respondents included primary and secondary school teachers, a university professor, an engineer, a physician, homemakers, labourers and small business owners. Except for the last

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group, these livelihoods are not strongly oriented to entrepreneurship, so they may perhaps not fully portray the extent of missed opportunities for economic development by and among Moroccan Christians nationwide. According to the US Department of State, other religious minorities experience many of the same problems as do Christians,<sup>2</sup> but those are beyond the scope of this article.

I will show how the opportunities desired by Moroccan Christians relate to the “pathways” identified by Anthony Gill and Timothy Shah.<sup>3</sup> According to Gill and Shah, these pathways, or models, are elements of religious freedom that benefit secular societies as well as the religious adherents themselves. Six of these elements will be explained and applied to the survey answers gleaned: religious activity as economic activity, growth-promoting religious ideas, charitable giving, migratory magnet, networks and voluntary associations, and civic skills.

## 2. Demographic and legal background

Recent estimates of the number of Christians in Morocco vary between 16,000 and 40,000.<sup>4</sup> One Moroccan pastor estimated that 80 percent of Moroccan Christians are Berber (or Amazigh, “free people”), who originally lived in the mountains of Morocco but are now scattered throughout the kingdom, and who were predominantly Jewish or Christian for centuries until Islam was imposed.

The religious practices of foreign residents – probably upwards of 30,000 foreigners are living in Morocco – are accommodated. They are given more latitude, although a large deportation and property seizure of foreign nationals accused of proselytizing was carried out in March 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Moroccan law forbids offering “enticements” to conversion,<sup>6</sup> or even “shaking the faith of a Muslim.”<sup>7</sup> “Causing harm” to Islam can lead to imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> Vol-

<sup>2</sup> US Department of State, “2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Morocco,” <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/morocco/>.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Gill and Timothy Shah, “Religious Freedom, Democratization, and Economic Development: A Survey of the Causal Pathways Linking Religious Freedom to Economic Freedom and Prosperity and Political Freedom and Democracy,” presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Religion, Economics, and Culture, Washington, D.C., 13 April 2013, <http://www.asrec.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Gill-Shah-Religious-freedom-democratization-and-economic-development.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> The estimate of 16,000 comes from the page on Morocco at the Pew-Templeton’s Global Religious Futures Project website, [http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/morocco/religious\\_demography#/?affiliations\\_religion\\_id=0&affiliations\\_year=2010](http://www.globalreligiousfutures.org/countries/morocco/religious_demography#/?affiliations_religion_id=0&affiliations_year=2010). The U.S. State Department has given the higher figure.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert and Nina Shea, “Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians” (digital, Thomas Nelson, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> US Department of State, “2018 Report.”

<sup>7</sup> Marshall, Gilbert and Shea, “Persecuted.”

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Morocco/Western Sahara – Events of 2017,” <https://www.hrw.org/world->

untary change of religious affiliation is purportedly allowed, but in practice many converts to Christianity undergo government interrogation and surveillance, and ostracism by friends and co-workers, usually without recourse to assistance from law enforcement.<sup>9</sup> Although the constitution guarantees everyone the freedom to “practice his religious affairs,” usually those affairs do not include – at least for Christians – proselytizing, obtaining a marriage license, avoiding Islamic indoctrination in public school, starting Christian schools, colleges or orphanages, conducting public baptisms, naming children with Christian names,<sup>10</sup> or obtaining visas to leave the country.

Black African believers seem to be given more freedom than Berber or Arab converts, possibly (and ironically) due to an anti-black prejudice<sup>11</sup> that tends to treat sub-Saharan Africans as somewhat irrelevant to the rest of society.

As a claimed descendant from the Prophet Muhammad, Morocco’s popular King Mohammed VI is a staunch defender of the Muslim faith. Exceptions to freedom of speech guarantees include any criticism of the king or of state institutions.<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Survey responses

#### 3.1 Religious activity as economic activity

Survey participants were asked, “In what ways would your church or ministry be different without state restrictions?” Nine said they would have a building for their church,<sup>13</sup> and six said they would like to have a place to hold large gatherings or “to welcome Muslim friends” such as a café or recreation center. Some didn’t indicate a desire for a church building specifically, but just for a place to go and “pray any time.”

Interestingly, six respondents said that their church would start a business to help support itself – an idea that Western churches rarely entertain. Several participants aspired to offer “job training” to others, and nine said that they would open a school.

Another question asked, “Would you feel more confident in developing business contacts, expanding your own business, investing in business projects, and/or being a leader in your workplace if you felt your religious views were protected?” Of

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report/2018/country-chapters/morocco/western-sahara.

<sup>9</sup> US Department of State, “2018 Report,” Section III.

<sup>10</sup> US Department of State, “2018 Report,” Executive Summary.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Abulhawa, “Confronting Anti-Black Racism in the Arab World,” *Al-Jazeera*, 7 July 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/06/201362472519107286.html>; Mona Eltahawy, “The Arab World’s Dirty Secret,” *New York Times*, 10 November 2008, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/10/opinion/10iht-edeltahawy.1.18556273.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/10/opinion/10iht-edeltahawy.1.18556273.html?_r=0).

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Morocco/Western Sahara,” 8.

<sup>13</sup> Sadly, one said that a building would only become a target, and that Moroccan society was “not ready” for people to “be different.”

the 32 respondents, 21 said yes, many of them enthusiastically. Negative responses included “I don’t do business”; “No – I feel scared to do such business”; and “When people find I am a Christian, they won’t do business with me.” One of the affirmative respondents clarified that at this time, she does business only with Christians. One said he wanted to own a small sports center for children. Such centres are fairly common in the cities of Morocco; some are nonprofit and some are for-profit businesses. These instances reveal what Gill and Shah call “religious liberty not just as a good in its own right but as a wider economic . . . force.”<sup>14</sup>

Christians don’t feel confident that they or their workplaces are fully protected by law,<sup>15</sup> and this perception may be an obstacle to commercial activity. When asked if they would feel comfortable contacting law enforcement if they or fellow church members were victims of violent or discriminatory acts, 14 said no and two were not sure. One said she would obtain justice if she had been physically injured but would have no recourse if the injury were “just words.” One said she would not contact law enforcement, because “Maybe it would cause more problems.” Another person said she can’t “talk to her co-workers” and that if she “sees injustice, it’s hard to ignore.”

Like everyone else, Christians love to express themselves. One woman said she would like to start a newsletter, stating confidently that she is “a good writer.” Nine other respondents said they would start literacy classes, a school, a counseling center, parenting classes or other expressive activity. One said that a new believer had told some friends he wanted to start a café where people could obtain Bibles and discuss ideas, but other Christians told him, “You can’t do that!”

When asked what they would do if they had religious freedom, some respondents said, “I would sing loudly.”<sup>16</sup> Other answers included “Maybe some of us would get involved in politics,” that they would start a school and “put a cross up in the school” or that they would “get on television.”

Saving money for and providing for children is among the most compelling reasons for most people to accumulate wealth. Interviewees who had children were not optimistic that their Christian kids would be able to obtain a good education or jobs. They were torn between wanting their children to leave for a more welcoming environment or to stay and impact the next generation of Moroccans. One parent

<sup>14</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 4.

<sup>15</sup> Although workplace discrimination against religion is illegal, interviewees said that co-workers and employers sometimes violate this principle with impunity or under circumstances where the violation would be hard to prove.

<sup>16</sup> Christ-followers must close their windows even on hot days if they don’t wish to hear the ubiquitous calls to prayer. House church members sing softly to avoid reprimands or inquiries from neighbors and police. They love to take car trips and sing at the top of their lungs because no one can hear them there.

said, “For sure they grow in fear and are careful not to reveal their faith to others.” But other parents said their children were openly identifying as Christians. One respondent with adult children said her son had been found with Christian materials in his car, and that the police said it was acceptable to possess them but not to sell or give them to anyone; he does so anyway. Another said that the younger generation of Christians “is less afraid but also less forgiving,”<sup>17</sup> holding the view that freedom is their inherent right. Two reported that teenagers had taken lunch to a park and eaten openly during the Ramadan fast (although it is technically illegal to do so), without reprisals.

Marriage, especially in the Islamic context, is intended to produce children and stimulate economic activity, also stabilizing the lives of young people. (Spend an evening watching Moroccan television and you will rarely see a young couple portrayed in commercials or music videos unless one or two children are playing at their knees.) One young man, who said he had been “a Muslim extremist” before his conversion, confided that he wanted to marry but could never do so because the marriage certificate begins, “In the name of Allah, in the name of Muhammad” and he refused “to sign anything in the name of Muhammad.”

Another man had been waiting for over a year for his marriage license to be granted so that he could marry a Christian woman. He stated that he was not attending church while his application was under scrutiny. Other young adults said it is hard to find marriage prospects within the Christian community, due to restrictions on meetings and the danger of openly identifying with Jesus. Marriage does not guarantee economic stimulus, but it fosters economic stability for a couple and is predictive of productivity for their children. Marriage contributes to economic development by letting couples share fixed costs and allocate obligations efficiently, and by encouraging saving and other responsible behaviors.

### 3.2 Growth-promoting ideas

Gill and Shah suggest that to the extent that religious ideas are growth-promoting ideas, religious freedom will encourage healthy economies.<sup>18</sup> Honesty, as it is valuable for success in business and for escaping poverty, is doubtless a growth-promoting virtue. Morocco rated 39th of 40 countries in honesty in a study measuring that trait on the basis of how many planted “lost” wallets were returned to research

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<sup>17</sup> One family insisted on giving their child a name not on the government-approved list of Muslim names; they held out for a name that appears only in the New Testament. After several months, the name was finally allowed, with no explanation.

<sup>18</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 8–11. Anthony Gill, in “Religious Liberty and Economic Development: Exploring the Causal Connections,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 11(4), Winter 2013, 12, is more tentative, but he is not addressing a particular religious idea there.

investigators.<sup>19</sup> Christianity enjoins truth telling and personal integrity (and nations historically steeped in Reformed Christianity topped the list of wallet returners in the aforementioned experiment, as well as consistently heading lists of economic prosperity).<sup>20</sup> Without implying any comment on what Islam teaches on this subject, not only is Morocco missing the added influence of Christianity's emphasis on honest dealings, but the suppression of religious freedom tempts persecuted people to engage in duplicity, bribery and crime. It also exposes the majority group to temptations of false accusation, nepotism and rigid thinking, all of which tend to be impediments to economic development.

Related to this problem, lack of interpersonal trust obstructs innovation, engagement in business, and involvement in complex, ambitious projects of all kinds.<sup>21</sup> Of the 32 people surveyed, 23 said it was hard to make long-term plans or that they had no "clear vision" of the future. One man said, "We are very few and fear to enter into business relations with other people." Another said of church members, "Many suffer silently," and "The street is for Muslims," indicating lack of access for Christians. Two parents said their children did not want to play with Muslim children because the Muslims tell them they are going to hell and ridicule or otherwise bully them; this divisive dynamic estranges Christian parents from their Muslim peers. Eight people indicated that they moved frequently to avoid detection or to escape the consequences of practicing their faith. Twelve said they were looking for chances to get out of Morocco. Although this question was not asked in the survey, two persons volunteered that they had no savings and no insurance; it appears that many followers of Jesus are in that situation.

A 10-year-old from a Christian family was recently asked whether he wanted to stay in Morocco or leave. He said, "I want to go out." He explained that he didn't want to be surrounded by Muslims because they are unkind to him; his school-mates and teachers know he is a Christian and the teachers say he is condemned by Allah and make him memorize the Koran. Most parents of Christians would want their children to avoid being subjected to the Islamic education mandated by government schools. This attitude is in contrast to that of other Moroccan families,

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<sup>19</sup> Kawtar Ennaji, "Global Honesty Index: Morocco at Bottom of the List," *Morocco World News*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2019/06/276456/global-honesty-index-moroccans/amp/>; Stephanie DeMarco, "Experiment with Lost Wallets," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 June 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/science/la-sci-people-are-honest-lost-wallets-experiment-20190620-story.html>, Figure 1.

<sup>20</sup> Peter L. Berger, "Max Weber Is Alive and Well," *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 8 (25 November 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2010.528964>.

<sup>21</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 29–30; Gill and Shah, "Religious Freedom," 26.

who may tend to think that the schooling is fine even if they believe that Europe may offer more possibilities for their grown children.

With regard to their attitude towards their surrounding society, one of the most common comments from the Christians surveyed was “We just want to be friends.” This observation came from both new converts and more seasoned believers. This attitude reduces violence,<sup>22</sup> promotes social cohesion and aids the stability of institutions;<sup>23</sup> all these factors in turn support productive business activity. Several persons said their churches were trying to instill forgiving attitudes of “blessing your enemies” in their youngsters.

One recent convert said that when he told his wife he had become a Christian, she replied, “I will have to divorce you, then, because I’m a Muslim.” He answered, “I told her, ‘No, I don’t want a divorce! I *love* you!’” Within a few weeks, she and other family members, seeing the positive changes in the man, had converted as well.

The Protestant work ethic, which comprises hard work and self-discipline, has been recognized as contributing to societal flourishing.<sup>24</sup> Two respondents said that whether they have religious freedom or not, they will “work hard.” One man said he works every Friday so that his co-workers can go to the mosque. A few of those surveyed reported working on Sundays even when co-workers didn’t, so that their families or colleagues would not suspect them of being at church. Unfortunately, working hard isn’t always possible because some church members are unemployed or underemployed.

### 3.3 Charitable giving

Shah and Gill note that sometimes religious groups “mobilize their donations and volunteers to organize social services in a way that is more efficient than other entities, such as the state, or they provide services other institutions are unable or unwilling to provide.”<sup>25</sup> In Morocco, the people interviewed were engaging in some of this activity, primarily by giving financial help to other believers who had been fired for converting to Christianity or who had had to leave home due to rejection by their families. Two other people, not part of the survey, are assisting various women who became pregnant out of wedlock.<sup>26</sup> According to these two helpers,

<sup>22</sup> Chris Seiple, “From Paradox to Possibility,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 12(3), July 2014, 55–62, doi:10.1080/15570274.2014.943611.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Philpott, “Religious Freedom and Peacebuilding: May I Introduce You Two?” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 11(1), 2013, 31–37, <https://doi-org.oralroberts.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/15570274.2012.760977>.

<sup>24</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 8–9; Berger, “Max Weber.”

<sup>25</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> One of these two was not included in the survey because she still identifies as a Muslim, but she stated

such women supposedly don't exist in Muslim society. In extreme situations, they are either killed or forced to have abortions; sometimes they are sent "to the mountains" and usually live in obscurity thereafter.

In the survey, 11 respondents said that if they were free to do so, they would "help the poor" or do "social work" of some kind, and nine stated that they would offer classes in an existing setting or open a school or adult educational center. One said, "I could go back to my village and teach about health." Most said their church gives financial aid to members in need, but none said there was an organized program among Christians for that purpose.

### 3.4 Migratory magnet

Since the survey was initiated, two participating families have sent their children to European countries to begin college or career training. None have entered college in Morocco. As Shah and Gill observe, "To the extent that intelligent, entrepreneurial, and hard-working individuals are drawn to a society and expand its productivity by making more efficient use of its resources, they will enhance economic development and growth. . . . This is true not only in terms of attracting migrants to settle in a territory but also in attracting merchants with whom to trade."<sup>27</sup> While in the United States, I spoke with an American Christian businessman, encouraging him to expand his franchise to Morocco; he expressed hesitancy, saying he did not want to do business where people of his religion might not succeed as franchisees. One skilled Moroccan Christian translator, newly married and a speaker of four languages, was hoping to leave the country because he wanted his children to be born in the United States. Although these are only anecdotal reports, they offer disheartening echoes of Gill and Shah's broad predictions.

### 3.5 Networks and voluntary associations

In Gill and Shah's paradigm, "The freedom of religious association contributes to social capital in terms of social networks and social trust, which can facilitate economic exchange and reduce corruption, and, in turn, promote economic growth."<sup>28</sup> As A. J. Conyers said, a healthy society is made of "myriad interlocking and overlapping groups . . . of families, friendships, voluntary associations . . . passing on obligations, intervening in disputes, distributing knowledge . . . and providing a culture for the mutual expression of love and loyalty."<sup>29</sup> Churches and religious associa-

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that she had a vision of the Virgin Mary, who urged her to do this kind of work. The other was living in another Muslim country at the time of the survey.

<sup>27</sup> Gill and Shah, "Religious Freedom," 18.

<sup>28</sup> Gill and Shah, "Religious Freedom," 28.

<sup>29</sup> A. J. Conyers, *The Long Truce* (Dallas, TX: Spence Publishing, 2001), 61, 85, 212, 243.



tions can perform these functions, increasing “social capital and a higher density of groups in civil society,” in Gill and Shah’s words.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, several followers of Christ in Morocco have at least as many professional associations with Westerners as the average Muslim Moroccan has, because Christian Americans and Europeans sometimes seek them out as business contacts. One man works for a Western importer; another performs translation and research for a Spanish media company. One pastor communicates by Skype with an American Bible scholar on a weekly basis; another pastor hosted a youth leader from the Eastern United States to enhance his church’s outreach to teens. If these people could pursue such opportunities openly, more international partnerships would develop.

In 2010, Morocco’s High Council of Ulema, which comprises 7,000 Muslim leaders, declared Christian evangelism to be “moral rape” and “religious terrorism,” backing up this judgement with a crackdown and confiscations of Christians’ property.<sup>31</sup> When a religious minority undergoes discrimination, it tends to scatter for self-protection. Sixteen of our respondents mentioned that Christians were meeting in smaller groups than in the past, and in one city they have stopped meeting entirely. Two mentioned taking longer than previously to include a new person in religious activities, along with changing meeting places from time to time. One woman kept her children away from Bible camp for two years because police had questioned her about their activity. Some parents even leave their children at home while they attend house churches, to avoid making noise in the house church location that might attract attention, or to avoid subjecting their children to suspicion if the children repeat what they hear at worship.

### 3.6 Civil skills

Gill and Shah note that “religious adherents gain skills that are transferable to the secular economy and polity,”<sup>32</sup> such as organizing events, recruiting and serving as volunteers, caring for pooled resources, persuading others of their beliefs, research and resolving conflicts within their group.

I have met three Moroccan believers who have started “associations,” or non-profits that contribute to civil society. One was seeking to impart job skills to poor women in a small town, and another offered academic help to urban teenagers. One of these associations has since been closed by the government, and the founder believes that the closure was due to suspicions that the owner was Christian, though no official reason was given.

<sup>30</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 26.

<sup>31</sup> Marshall, Gilbert, and Shea, *Persecution*.

<sup>32</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 13.

Within the churches themselves, I have observed members planning events, organizing meals and recreation for 40 or more people, translating materials and working with a production studio to create and post materials about Christian character. I have also seen them do smaller things like creating a Facebook page for their church, arranging transportation for children from other towns to attend a Bible camp, and preparing song sheets and visuals for worship, along with grander undertakings such as setting up a meeting of 16 indigenous pastors to plan a national identity and network or even establishing an underground Bible school. Planning all-church events and establishing associations require not just organizational skills, but diplomacy and knowledge of the law, since these events are often interrupted by police asking questions about the event and who is involved. Because of the solidarity among members, they work together to help those who have lost a job, have been kicked out of the house due to conversion, or are facing a health crisis.

Thus, religious organizations can “serve as low-cost schools for individuals to develop economically and politically useful habits and skills.”<sup>33</sup> As Hoover and Farr say of Pentecostalism, religious activity “teaches ordinary people to create and run their own grassroots institutions.”<sup>34</sup>

Although Moroccan Christians are functioning in some of these ways, they are not allowed to participate fully in the cohesive Muslim society that surrounds them. Nor are they able to model for the children important skills needed for business success, such as innovation, proactive personality, generalized self-efficacy and autonomy.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

When people are unable to make long-term plans, form a variety of trusting relationships, count on the rule of law, sense a locus of control within themselves, or escape from constant, menacing scrutiny, they have little opportunity to contribute to their broader society. Morocco will be more prosperous when all of its people – including religious minorities – are free to flourish.

<sup>33</sup> Gill and Shah, “Religious Freedom,” 12–13.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis R. Hoover and Thomas F. Farr, “In Search of the Bottom Line on Religious Freedom: An Introduction to the Winter 2013 Issue,” citing Peter Berger, “Max Weber Is Alive and Well, and Living in Guatemala: The Protestant Ethic Today,” *Review of Faith and International Affairs* 8(4): 3–9, doi: 10.1080/15570274.2010.528964.

<sup>35</sup> Hermann Brandstatter, “Personality Aspects of Entrepreneurship: A Look at Five Meta-Analyses,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 51(3), August 2011, 222–230, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886910003454>.