Christian mission and FoRB

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
VOLUME 18, ISSUE 1, 2025

Cover Art

This poster art was created by artist Ewald Krijnen, with assistance from the AI image generator Midjorney. The image is inspired by Deuteronomy 32:11 ("like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft"). It evokes interesting feelings such as resilience.

Contents

Editorial

Christian missions and FoRB

The genesis for this special issue on Christian missions and Freedom of Religion or Belief was a symposium at Fjellhaug International University College in Oslo, Norway, in September 2023. Many of the students at Fjellhaug are training to be missionaries, so the topic was of great interest to both faculty and students. A rich variety of papers was presented, and only a small sample have made it into this issue.

We start with two opinion articles. The first comes from Anna Hampton, a pseudonym for a former missionary to Afghanistan who now develops training resources for a theology of risk. Hampton distinguishes between a theology of suffering and a theology of risk, arguing that missionaries in sensitive regions need both of these. The second opinion article, by Amy West, addresses a theology of suffering, complementing Hampton's contribution.

The first peer-reviewed article is my overview of international human rights law and advocacy on freedom of religion or belief. It urges organizations and training facilities to ensure that missionaries are properly trained in all aspects of religious persecution, including legal matters.

Carsten Polanz examines the 2019 Catholic-Sunni Document on Human Fraternity. He has provocatively titled his article "Is the glass half full or half empty?" because he addresses both the positive aspects of this document for inter-religious dialogue between Christians and Muslims and also the possible restrictions it might impose on Christian missionary activities.

Wolfgang Häde, a noted expert on Turkey, looks at negative perceptions of Christians as portrayed in Turkish newspapers. He notes that suspicion of Christians is exacerbated for political gain. His article is a valuable case study because many of the roots of religious discrimination and persecution in Turkey are similar to those in other countries.

In a similar vein, Torbjörn Johansson analyzes theological responses to totalitarianism, starting with German and Norwegian Christian leaders' statements on Nazi Germany. He then considers ways in which modern welfare states are adopting totalitarian tendencies to control thought and speech. This development has negative implications for mission as the state limits certain types of religious speech that it finds offensive.

Christof Sauer explores the feasibility of establishing a Mission Hostility Index, which would be useful in preparing missionaries for work in sensitive and hostile areas.

Finally, Anja Hoffman analyses the chill on religious expression in secular Europe. Her data shows that religious views are not acceptable in many settings, including universities. Christian students self-censor so are less likely to share their Christian faith with others.

I commend to you the usual Noteworthy section. Many annual surveys of FoRB have been published in the first months of 2025, as well as country and regional updates. There is also an excellent selection of book reviews.

This issue has some important contributions for addressing challenges to religious freedom and Christian missionary activities. I hope it will encourage missionaries to be well-prepared for work in sensitive regions.

Yours for religious freedom,
Prof Dr Janet Epp Buckingham
Executive Editor

Guidance for Graduate Students
International Institute for Religious Freedom

The International Institute for Religious Freedom can provide guidance for students who are writing a thesis or dissertation on a topic related to religious freedom. The IIRF can also assist with publication opportunities.

Please send a letter of interest to info@iirf.global.

Tribute to Donald LeRoy Stults (1946-2024)

Dr. Donald LeRoy Stults (Roy) was a member of the Editorial Board of the International Journal for Religious Freedom longtime as well as a member of the Academic Board of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. He was a missiologist who later focused on persecution issues. His most recent article in the IJRF was a theology of persecution (14(1/2):25-37).

Thomas Schirrmacher comments: "Roy helped us very early on to bridge the general commitment to human rights from a philosophy of religion perspective with the emphasis that the global South, e.g. Korea, was way ahead in developing a scholarly theology of martyrdom, both in line with Scripture and with modern human rights ideas. This was an important contribution to the distinctive identity of the IIRF." Christof Sauer adds: "Roy diligently edited the PhD dissertation of Young Kee Lee, *God's mission in suffering and martyrdom*. The publication in a series of IIRF is still pending." Protracted illness kept him from engaging more with IIRF in later years.

Stults earned a B.A. in Religion and an M.A. in Theology from Olivet Nazarene University, followed by an M.Div. from Nazarene Theological Seminary. He continued his academic journey earning a Doctor of Missiology degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Manchester, England.

Stults worked as an elementary school teacher, psychiatric social worker, and U.S. Army soldier before dedicating his life to pastoral and missionary work. He served congregations in Floyd, VA; Jacksonville, FL; Columbus, MO; and Arlington, VA. His passion for education led him to teach as a missionary professor in South Korea, the Philippines, and Germany, as well as at Southern Nazarene University, Nazarene Theological Seminary, Oklahoma Wesleyan University, and Olathe College Church of the Nazarene as a Sunday School teacher. Stults also served as the editor of World Mission Magazine and coordinated theological education for the Church of the Nazarene's Global Ministry Center. In his later years, he created curriculum for The Voice of the Martyrs and traveled domestically and internationally on behalf of persecuted Christians.

Stults' life was a testament to his faith, his love for his family, and his unwavering curiosity about the world. He will be deeply missed by all who knew him.

Christine Schirrmacher

"Let there be no Compulsion in Religion" (Sura 2:256)

Apostasy from Islam as judged by
contemporary Islamic Theologians

Discourses on
Apostasy,
Religious Freedom,
and Human Rights

VKW

Facing risk, danger and fear in mission
Combining Christian theology, science, and wise best practices

Anna E. Hampton[1]

Abstract

A theology of risk is different from a theology of suffering. Developing a holistic and comprehensive approach to risking for gospel advancement requires developing risk literacy, leading to shrewdness when ministering in circumstances hostile to the gospel.

Keywords

Theology of risk, risk literacy, shrewdness, risk assessment and management, fear management.

1.   Introduction

Living in Afghanistan for a decade under the first Taliban government revealed to us that while we had a robust theology of suffering, we had no concept of a theology of risk. Our problem of how to think and live out our faith intensified when my husband became the country director of one of the largest humanitarian organizations based in Kabul in early 2006. He was responsible for stewarding the lives of 100 foreign staff, 100 Afghan staff, and millions of dollars of resources.

Developing a theology of risk has been a significant field-driven question among North American mission organizations. The visibility of this issue was heightened by several 20th-century kidnapping and killings, including the Ethnos 360 (formerly New Tribes Mission) martyrs of the 1970s and 1980s. Since then,

---

1   Anna Hampton (*1970) is a pseudonym for a global risk consultant and specialist on a theology of risk. She has over 30 years of ministry experience, raised her family in Afghanistan and Turkey, and serves with Barnabas International, providing pastoral support to Christ followers ministering in dangerous areas. This article is a reworked version of a paper presented at Fjellhaug, Oslo symposium on Religious Persecution and Theological/Missiological Education, 2023. This article uses American English. The article is based on her books, *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk*, 2nd.ed. (William Carey Publications, 2024) and *Facing Fear: The Journey to Mature Courage in Risk and Persecution* (William Carey Publications, 2023). Hampton holds a doctorate in religious studies from Trinity Theological Seminary. Contact the author at https://theologyofrisk.com; Instagram: Theology.of.Risk. email: anna.hampton@barnabas.org.

awareness of the need for a theology of risk has expanded further to become a global challenge for Christ's family.

Part of risk management is seeing reality with a clear focus. Globally, the places where terrorism is more frequent and those where it is most dangerous to follow Christ tend to be the same places.[2] The physical world reveals the spiritual world.

A primary challenge has been to build a comprehensive theology of risk and identify its necessary components. A related secondary challenge is to synthesize a theology of risk with science and best practices to guide Christians who seek to advance the gospel in the face of threats of suffering, persecution, and even martyrdom.

My husband, Neal, wrote a two-day risk assessment and management (RAM) training program based on my book *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk.* The material was field-tested in Turkey with Iranian believers who had already been jailed and beaten for following Christ. Ensuing training was facilitated all over the world in person and via Zoom during the pandemic years, equipping people in over 100 different countries and as many mission organizations.

2. Misconceptions about risk

As critical questions continually emerged from the experience of living under severe threats and constant uncertainty, a pattern of unhelpful responses from the global church emerged.

2.1. *Answering a risk question with a suffering answer*

One roadblock to identifying a theology of risk was that a suffering answer was given in response to risk questions. Suffering poses different questions from risk and therefore requires a different answer. Risk is specific, urgent, and situational in volatile, uncertain, often complex and ambiguous (VUCA)[3] circumstances. In risk, little to no suffering has been experienced yet. Risk is the *threat* of persecution, suffering, or death. Living under constant uncertainty and knowing one can lose everything, though without having lost it yet, is one of the most challenging situations to endure day in and day out, month after month, year after year. It requires developing skills of endurance, resilience, and shrewdness amid one's calling and faithfulness to Christ under severe pressure.

All Christ-followers suffer and are called to suffer, and it is wise to develop a personal theology of suffering. However, a theology of risk is different from a

---

2   See the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database which has tracked and categorized all terrorist events for the past 54 years, and the Joshua Project's graph on unreached people groups. Forty-six of the 50 countries on the World Watch List show up in both data sources. This does not imply that unreached people groups are terrorists. It is a correlation, not a statement of causation.
3   The term VUCA was coined in the mid-1980s in business applications, but it has been used in other fields and applies to Christ-followers in hostile situations.

theology of suffering. Risk is confusing – how do I know what to do? The threats are pouring in; am I supposed to stay with my family? Am I called to move toward risk or away from the danger of risk?

A common risk question involves what to do in a specific situation. Often the response is "Whatever happens, we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom 8:28). But that promise does not address the practical outworking of how to know what to do, or how to make a particular decision under stressful circumstances.

We experienced cognitive, emotional, and faith dissonance because this verse was used so often in counseling settings during our service in Afghanistan, especially as twenty of our colleagues were martyred in the span of six years. How could we think rationally and coherently about our faith, acknowledging our emotions and the sacred questions that emerged when we were under threat and persecution?

3.   Risk myths

Another roadblock to developing a robust theology of risk arises when situationally specific risk questions are answered with a general and often conceptual "risk myth." A myth is a statement that is mostly true, yet how it is used, when it is used, or how the words are defined makes it a myth. From years of listening to Christ-followers from all over the world, we have found that sixteen common risk myths are repeatedly used to deal with the destabilizing impact of risk and the high probability of persecution.

One of the most damaging risk myths is "You are never safer than when you are in the center of God's will." This presupposes that there is a "center" to God's will, and that we must find it. It also presumes that "safety" is defined as nothing bad happening. People serving Christ in dangerous places experience plenty of suffering and persecution. This risk myth reveals a misunderstanding of both a theology of evil and the character and ways of God. Often a faith crisis ensues, which has led to far too many marriage and family implosions, impeding translation projects, church planting efforts, and the stability of the surrounding community.

4.   The anecdotal approach

A third unhelpful response to risk questions is what we call the "anecdotal" biblical answer, often overlaid with a Western safety perspective. People's risk bias is revealed in whichever Bible story they use in trying to persuade us what to do. If they thought we should flee, they might say, "Look at what Paul did when he fled over the wall." If they were instead committed to bold faithfulness, they would say, "Be like Esther … you are there for such a time as this." The focus of the anecdotal

biblical answer was always on the people in the Bible, not on how they heard from God what *he* wanted. This type of answer never pointed to God's desire in the present situation; it only revealed the speaker's theological and risk bias.

The continual experience of receiving suffering-related, anecdotally biased, and dogmatic answers to our risk questions was discouraging. "In the process of thinking, an answer without a question is devoid of life. It may enter the mind; it will not penetrate the soul."[4] We continued to explore how to discern God's voice as we faced hostility and many threats, including threats of kidnapping.

5. Outline of a theology of risk in mission

In this section, I outline key elements of a theology of risk, which are more thoroughly discussed in *Facing Danger: A Guide Through Risk*, 2nd ed. The concept of risk is defined differently in different contexts. Followers of Jesus face all types of risks. The term "witness risk" delineates the type of risk faced in gospel advancement. A witness is someone whose identity is in Christ, and they witness to their relationship with Jesus, the Son of God. This is what anyone, from any denomination, faces when living and proclaiming the gospel in adverse, dangerous circumstances. Witness risk is the potential for loss and gain when following Christ.

5.1. New Testament thought

In the early church experience of facing threats, there are three places where three different Greek words are translated with "risk" in over 20 English translations. These are found in Romans 16:3-4, Philippians 2:30, and Acts 15:25-26.

In Romans 16:3-4, Paul describes what Priscilla and Aquila did, risking their own necks for him. "They willingly and purposely [exposed themselves] to extreme danger and risk."[5] They put their necks in harm's way and kept them there. What are they putting their necks on? In only one other place in the New Testament, in 1 Timothy 4:6, does Paul use the same Greek word in the context of pointing out sound faith and doctrine (the solid foundation of Christ's death and resurrection). Surprisingly, the authors of the Septuagint chose the same word to describe "holy placing" in several key situations, one of those being the rock placed under Moses in the battle with the Amalekites in Exodus 17. Although Aaron and Hur really did place a rock for Moses to sit upon as they held up his hands, this is just one of several intertextual connections seen in Exodus 17. The placing of the stone under Moses was symbolic of God as the foundation stone for life, in

---

4   Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, 1st eBook edition. (Farrar Straus and Giroux:1955), 3.
5   Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains (United Bible Societies: 1996), 238.

this case a life-or-death battle. What we are resting our lives on when everything is at stake must be firm, reliable, trustworthy, and certain.

Paul states that Priscilla and Aquila risked their lives repeatedly for him and for Christ. What kind of courage was needed for them to lay their necks down and keep them there for an indeterminate length of time on behalf of Paul? What kind of loyalty, stamina, shrewdness, and discernment was needed as they went about the task of hospitality, leading a church, teaching, baptizing, probably raising their family, and changing countries at least twice? In risk, while it is best practice to include risk and crisis management strategies, this must not be done without acknowledging God as our solid and primary foundation.

The second word Paul used for risk is used only once in the New Testament and is a word for gambling. It appears to be a word that Paul coined to refer to Epaphroditus risking his life for him. Paul was saying that Epaphroditus gambled his life! Epaphroditus faced at least two major risks when going to visit Paul. The first involved his health, as he became extremely sick and almost died. In the ancient world, sickness and disease, often a death sentence, were greatly feared. Many Christ-followers also risk health by remaining in dangerous circumstances where the government and community are hostile to Christ.

The second risk Epaphroditus took was in the act of visiting Paul. He identified himself with a prisoner of the mighty Roman Empire. This required courage and a willingness to embrace the short-term and long-term consequences of being seen with him.

In Philippians 4, Paul used language to describe the actions of Epaphroditus and the sending church as sacrifices or fragrant offerings. Paul associated risk with the voluntary sacrifice in the Levitical system as an act of worship. Risk is an act of worship when done out of obedience and calling by God.

The third New Testament reference to risk is in Acts 15:25-26. Here, a selection process occurs, similar to Joshua selecting men for the battle with the Amalekites in Exodus 17. Specific men were chosen to take a letter from the leaders of the church in Jerusalem to the Gentile church in Antioch, carrying the message about practices of eating and circumcision.

One of the selection criteria was whether people had risked their lives. The word used for risk means "to give over to," and the tense used implies that the men had actively chosen to deliver their whole being over to danger for an indeterminate time. They decisively chose to live in a difficult place where persecution was a high probability. Whom has God selected to embrace risk for a specific task?

What decreases endurance and firmness of faith in persecution is when people experience one or both of the following: the sense of isolation (feeling all alone) or the temptation to resignation (an overwhelming sense of powerlessness

that nothing can be done to change the situation). In contrast, having a comprehensive theology of risk will increase resiliency in the face of danger and persecution, because one has reoriented one's inner self on God as the firm and certain rock (foundation), and because of the confirmation of one's calling to that risk situation (selection) and the gentle invitation to risk as worship.

These three elements of a theology of risk – foundation, selection, and worship – may be seen in many stories of risk in the Bible. The challenge is to pay attention to which story or verse the Holy Spirit is pointing to for each person in the specific risk situation. The goal of theology is not to know about God but to know God, and if we do not engage in what he is doing and wanting to do in the moment of risk, a sacred moment of transformation into his likeness may be missed. Hearing his voice and responding with obedience out of a heart of love for him results in fruitful gospel advancement.

5.2. Theological relationships, science, and emotions when facing risk and persecution

Figure 1 shows theologies related to a theology of risk. None of these are in isolation from each other. When we provide pastoral care to persecuted believers, it is critical to listen to the person and to the ways the Holy Spirit brings guidance to specific Scriptures to that person. Additionally, equipping discipleship includes focus in three specific theological areas: evil, failure, and uncertainty.

In terms of a theology of evil, we need the inner strength to affirm the reality of personally targeted malevolence, trust in the goodness of God, and the battle for hope in Christ at the same time. What does it mean to battle for hope when immersed in situations where evil seemingly prevails? These simple questions become crucial in contexts where brutal violence is the norm and one's senses are constantly assaulted. Simplistic, pithy answers to complex problems must be rejected. Often, silence and lament must be embraced first.

Kenneth Bailey discusses how Jesus taught a theology of failure in Mark 6:6-13 (see also Matt 10:1-16; Luke 9:1-6) before ever sending his disciples out.[6] Jesus sent his disciples out in a position of need, not a position of power. In any place and occasion where they were not welcomed, accepted, and listened to, he instructed his disciples to "shake the dust off their feet" as a testimony against them. Jesus gave both a kinesthetic lesson on how to deal with rejection and a clear framing of how to view rejection. Defining success and failure in mission is a critical aspect of faithful endurance when facing persecution. However, the tendency to-

---

6   Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Good Shepherd: A Thousand-Year Journey from Psalm 23 to the New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 157.

Interrelationships of Witness-Risk
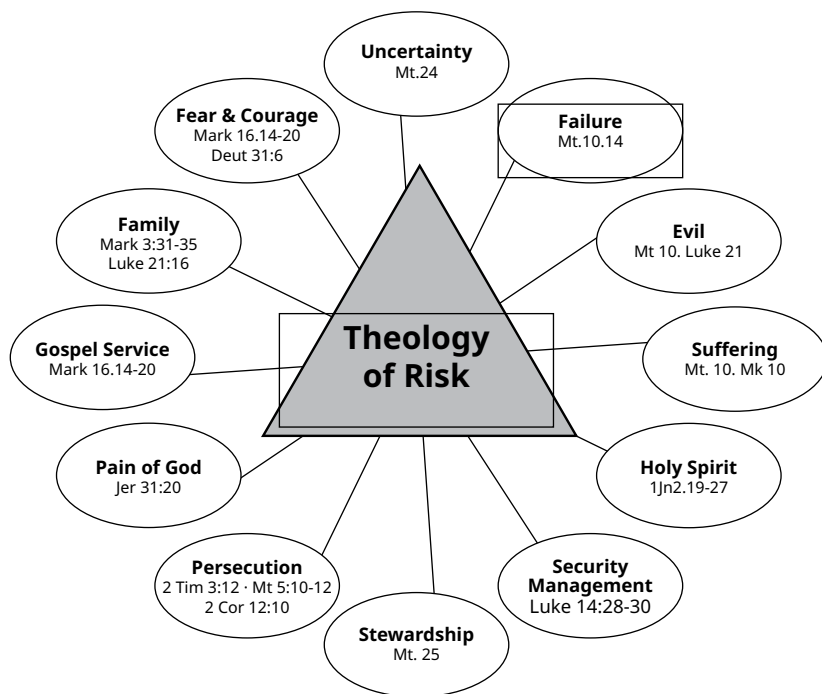
Figure 1. Theological relationships to witness risk

ward a theology of victory and the lack of a meaningful theology of failure leave no sacred space to reflect on the physical and spiritual realities encountered.

How humans respond to uncertainty and risk has been well researched in secular literature. There are well over a thousand academic studies on the psychology of risk, decision making in risk, and how fear influences risk taking, among many other related subtopics. However, there are few references to this body of research within theological and specifically missiological writings. Knowing the normal human response provides pointers to effective discipleship and training for those sharing the gospel in hostile and dangerous circumstances.

5.3. Theology of risk and fear management

Even when a disciple develops a robust theology of risk and theology of suffering, fear still often creeps in when one is facing a violent reality for the sake of Christ.

Church teaching seems to vacillate between three positions: (1) ignore your fear, (2) fear is from the devil, and (3) feeling fear means lacking faith. In contrast, fear management is the process in which one acknowledges feeling fear and names the object of fear so that courageous action may be recognized and chosen. Ignoring fear increases its power over us. While I believe demons of fear do exist, this is not typically a daily experience for most disciples. Finally, one can feel fear and have faith at the same time, but reorientation is required in that moment so that one can make a better decision. A critical aspect of endurance training for persecuted believers and those choosing to enter hostile circumstances for the purposes of gospel advancement is to learn how to recognize and respond to fear in a way that acknowledges our humanity and glorifies God.

To understand the Hebrew and Greek of Bible verses often translated with "do not fear" (or similar words), we must examine several aspects of the original texts: (1) type of speech (noun, verb, or adjective), (2) which Hebrew or Greek negative form is used,[7] (3) who is speaking, and (4) who is being addressed. In the verses where fear is a verb in the Greek or Hebrew, the text says, "do not do the action of fear." In the Hebrew Bible, Moses and Joshua are commanded not to fear, using the strongest possible terms, but the people are requested not to let fear paralyze them. In the New Testament, the imperative command not to fear is found on the lips of Jesus. In the entire Bible, it is assumed that humans will feel fear, but they are not condemned for this. On the other hand, disciples sin when they allow fear to paralyze them and keep them from obeying God.

Because both the Hebrew and Greek reveal awareness of the scale of human fear from mild anxiety to terror,[8] this seems to be a normal human emotion that must be responded to and dealt with, not ignored. Fear is a natural reaction ranging from mild anxiety to great dread of the unknown, the uncertain, and the uncontrollable danger that threatens to overwhelm us. Those who engage in fear mongering both within the church and in the world know how to distort reality and elicit fear. Human perception of reality is distorted by fear and the things that are linked to fear. Fear, like hope, always has an object. Here are three key observations: fear is a prerequisite for courage; fear is contagious, but so is courage; and courage is harder in isolation. Fear can overwhelm the person who is all alone or feels alone. Courage is easier in community with others.

A simple fear management process that is effective when facing danger or persecution can be taught with the acrostic NAME.[9]

---

7 For example, there is a Hebrew form of "no" meaning "never," such as is found in the Ten Commandments, and a different "no" form for a request not to do something, i.e., "do not fear."
8 There are too many different Hebrew and Greek words for fear to list here. The table in my book *Facing Fear* lists many of the Hebrew and Greek words but is not comprehensive.
9 Kitty Crenshaw and Catherine Snapp, *The Hidden Life Awakened*, (Cairns, 2016), 36-37.

1) Name your fears:
   - Fear has an object. "I'm fearful of," or "I fear" … what comes to mind? Write them down.
   - Order your fears from least to greatest.
2) Ask yourself:
   - If the thing you fear happened, what's the worst thing about it?
   - What does that cause you to feel?
   - When you start to feel ____, where does that take you? (List your emotions and physical responses.)
3) Meaning and imagination:
   - Meaning: If it happened, imagine where God would be in the situation. How could he work? What purpose would he assign to your pain and fear?
   - Imagine: We trust the person we know, so what is he like? Imagine Jesus telling his Father about your fear. What would his countenance be like? What would he be saying? Imagine him interceding with the Father about your fear.
4) Entrust:
   - Entrust the fear to God and ask him to help you with it and give you the courage to obey him.

Look to God by telling him about the fear being experienced and ask for his help to respond with courage, recognizing that no matter what, he loves his children and is a compassionate, faithful, merciful, sovereign God. He always provides a responsive, sufficient light to know what to do next, even if it's just a household task. This moves the disciple step by step to mature hope and mature courage.

6. Theology of risk and practical shrewdness

Once a holistic and comprehensive theology of risk has been developed, the next step is to develop risk literacy and mature risk decision making. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus taught, "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves." The Greek word used for "shrewd" in Matthew 10:16 is the same word used in the Septuagint for "cunning" to describe the serpent in Genesis 3:1.

However, English commentaries and English Bibles often treat shrewdness and cunning as negative characteristics and replace "cunning" with "prudent." The modern meaning of "prudent" diminishes the force of the original Hebrew and Greek text. One definition of "prudent" is "careful and avoiding risks."[10] This is definitely *not* what our Lord meant when he said to be shrewd. While "cun-

---

10 Cambridge Dictionary. Available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/prudent.
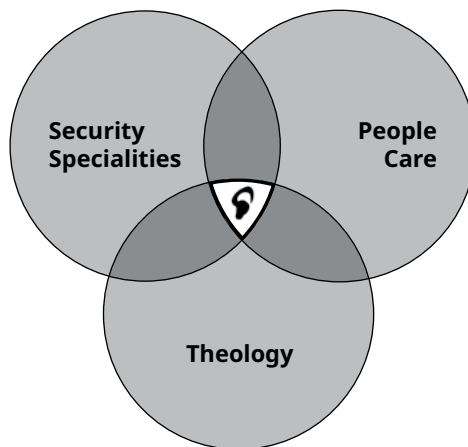
Figure 2. Core Specialities

ning" and "shrewd" often do have negative connotations in modern English, this is what our Lord said his disciples should be when facing hostility because of his name. Therefore, how does a Christ-follower develop a Christo-centric shrewd-ness (cunning) that is as innocent as a dove?

There are at least twelve elements of practical shrewdness when engaging in gospel advancement in hostile circumstances that are likely aspects of what our Lord envisioned. These aspects are critical in saving lives and enduring well under severe threats and persecution. In the following section, I will briefly address three of these twelve elements of shrewdness (cunning) that would bring him glory and contribute to effectiveness in bringing his Kingdom to dark places.

6.1. Duty of care

The duty of care includes developing care in three primary areas: security specialties, theology of risk, and people care (see Figure 2). These are three core areas of a practically applied theology of risk.

The concept of security specialties refers to all the security training topics relevant to Christ-followers who are ministering in dangerous situations. It includes learning such things as detecting and mitigating hostile surveillance, avoiding and surviving kidnapping, handling government questioning and interrogation, and technology and communication management.

People care includes counseling, critical incident stress debriefing, trauma resolution counseling, and pastoral counseling. Organizational policies, stan-

dards of care, pre-field preparation, and training are also significant parts of people care and of how well people are prepared for risk and persecution. Engaging in trauma counseling has been shown to reduce the potential for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and increase the potential for PTSG (post-traumatic stress growth).

The theology circle includes all aspects of a theology of risk that were shown above in Figure 1. It includes books, courses at the university and seminary level, and online resources addressing theological aspects related to risk. Those who have developed a comprehensive and concise statement on the theology of risk and theology of suffering are likely to demonstrate more effective risk decision-making skills under severe stress.

Because one size does not fit all, risk assessment and management (RAM) training equips Christ-followers with skills and knowledge from each of these areas, so that they can recognize which of the three areas they need more training and resourcing in to prepare for their calling more effectively. These three areas of care will dramatically increase resiliency and endurance.

The Global Risk Resource document[11] provides information in each of these three areas, reflecting resources available to the global church in many different languages. Globally, God has been raising up Christ-followers in numerous countries with experience as former military or police and the ability to train Christ-followers in how to deal practically with danger, as well as those able to provide the trauma counseling necessary to assist those recovering from persecution. Additionally, the Risk Management Network in North America and parallel networks in Asia and Europe provide networking, information sharing, training resources, and often assistance in crisis related to persecution of missionaries and local Christ-followers.

6.2. Witness risk literacy

A second critical element of practical shrewdness is cultivating risk literacy. The opposite is risk illiteracy: "For the simple are killed by their turning away, and the complacency of fools destroys them" (Prov 1:32). In contrast, risk literacy involves the basic attitudes, knowledge, and skills required to assess various witness risks and mitigate them based on a mature discernment of Holy Spirit-led stewardship.[12]

Risk literacy includes developing skills in risk assessment (what could happen?), risk mitigation (how can I decrease the impact if it happens?), how to engage in threat assessment (including evaluating the veracity of a death threat),

---

11 Available at https://theologyofrisk.com/risk-resources.
12 Hampton, *Facing Fear*, 228.

information analysis, hearing the Holy Spirit's leading under severe threat of persecution, and how to do all this while stewarding the numerous opportunities arising in risk to share Christ's love.

6.3.   Systems thinking

A third element of shrewdness is to develop systems thinking instead of staying stuck in linear thinking. Most people have been taught to see things linearly and to solve problems through analysis only – cause and effect, problem and solution – without considering the interrelationships and interconnections of the whole. Often, problems are simplified to fit into this model of thinking with only two variables. Linear thinking is too narrow. It ignores the complex system and instead focuses on just one element of a system. However, each element is connected to other elements of the system. Adjusting one element means change throughout the system. In contrast, "Systems thinking involves an enhanced ability to hold the one and the many in one's mind at the same time and to perceive the interrelatedness." [13]

Often risk and danger are approached as problems to solve, rather than as a tension to manage.[14] Most of the time, there are competing values in risk, and these values are in tension. These include values such as one's calling, the need for safety, and the invitation from the Holy Spirit to risk one's life.

7.   Conclusion

Men, women, and young people are risking their lives for Christ, and pastoral care and training must develop keen awareness that any pastoral word given may be the last word heard before someone faces death the next day. The answers given to persecuted believers must not be fossilized religious dogma, or verses taken out of context. The world does not need more Christians with adolescent faith, but rather believers with mature, sound faith that works in the fires of persecution.

---

[13] "Systems Thinking Marin." Available at: https://www.systemsthinkingmarin.org/about/what-is-systems-thinking/.
[14] See also Tim Arnold, *The Power of Healthy Tension: Overcoming Chronic Issues and Conflicting Values* (HRD Press, 2017).

The persecuted

Keeping missional focus in adverse circumstances

Amy C. West[1]

Abstract

Throughout history, believers have faced ostracism, imprisonment, and other persecution when their only punishable activity was to give their allegiance to God priority over other gods or earthly powers. Present-day believers face similar injustices when the powers of their context force them to adhere to systems that violate their allegiance to God. This paper considers a current dilemma in Southeast Asia, looks at three examples from Scripture where believers similarly faced trials of faith, highlights three encounters that test a believer's missional focus, and closes by suggesting a theological framework that is foundational for responding to adversity in ways that honor God.

1. Introduction

Persecution tests a believer's allegiance to God. Those tests are the most unrelenting and powerful when extended over time or when a person encounters a crisis. Believers in all cultures face critical decisions under extreme pressure to compromise their primary allegiance in order to solve a problem. Those who refuse to acquiesce are mocked, ostracized, imprisoned, and even severely persecuted.[2] How do people respond when they are the object of such persecution? What would help them maintain a missional focus and retain their primary allegiance to God when encountering adverse circumstances?[3]

---

1   Amy C. West is a Senior Scripture Engagement Consultant for SIL Global. This opinion article uses American English. Email: 85westam@gmail.com.
2   Numerous examples are detailed in Sauer and Häde 2017:290-408.
3   For the purposes of this paper, I define "missional focus" as having a singular focus on honoring God and thereby pointing a watching world to Him.

In this paper, I explore a complex problem with accompanying pressures that plagues a group of pastors in Southeast Asia, along with the believers in their congregations. Then I look at examples from Scripture where followers of God faced similarly threatening situations and yet kept their missional focus. Like those followers of God, present-day believers face tests in the three strategic areas of allegiance, power and truth. A solid theological framework is necessary to equip them to retain a missional focus, especially in adversity.

2. Allegiance to God will be tested

The group of pastors explained their dilemma: when a member of their congregation encountered a sickness that neither doctors nor intense prayer cured, the family often felt compelled to seek out their last known power for healing – the shaman. The shaman, however, would refuse to treat them unless they would first obtain a letter from their pastor releasing them from being a Christian for two weeks. Out of desperation, the congregant would ask the pastor for such a letter.[4]

2.1. The role of assumptions in decision making

Desperate situations such as a sickness that is not healed bring to the surface one's often-unrecognized assumptions. Those assumptions spring from the context in which the person has been socialized and are foundational to that person's decision making. Consequently, if they are not identified and brought to the surface, they lead to decisions that undermine the person's faith. In the situation of those asking for the letter, the pastors identified and verbalized the following assumptions:

- that all illnesses can be cured if one treats them properly;
- that the shaman must be the one who has the ultimate power to heal this particular illness;
- that the pastor holds the seal to their membership in the family of God and therefore is the one who can release them. (One member of the group described allegiance to God as being like a revolving door where one can simply go in and out when they feel it is necessary.)

2.2. Pressures that accompany desperate situations

In addition to the assumptions that influence decision making, families are also influenced by the pressures of desperation to find a solution for their dilemma. Families deeply desire that their loved one be healed. When neither natural-world

---

4 This present-day problem was faced by a group of pastors in a table group at a "Culture meets Scripture" course, Sabah Theological Seminary, April 2016.

medicine nor the prayers of the pastor have produced healing power, families become desperate and feel they must turn to the only other option they know – the shaman. The family's desperation and the added pressures from non-believers, and sometimes even from other believers, to try the shaman's rituals, can result in a complicated predicament for believers. If they refuse to participate in the shaman's ritual and the sick one dies, blame will be focused on them. Alternatively, if they do participate, other believers will accuse them of being "loose in their faith." And the powerhouse pressure of gossip will abound.

Meanwhile, the pastors also face extreme pressure. The families who come to them for that letter of "temporary release" from the faith are distressed. They tell the pastors that if they refuse to provide the necessary letter and the sick one dies, they will accuse the pastor of causing the death. And additionally, they will threaten the pastor with "Remember who pays your salary." Thus, the pastors feel that if they refuse to acquiesce and give the letter, their well-being is at risk as well as their ministry.

Believers in every culture face similar situations. How does a believer resist when pressured to make a decision that fundamentally contradicts their allegiance to the one true God? Believers have dealt with these kinds of predicaments through the ages and in every generation.

3. Three examples in Scripture where missional focus was tested

Keeping a missional focus is not easy when one is confronted with vicious threats, unjust imprisonment, and unmerciful persecution. Scripture gives examples of believers who refused, in similar situations, to obey the commands of those holding power. The following three examples provide models to follow when one's allegiance to God is challenged.

3.1. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Daniel 1-3)

Taken to Babylon when Judah fell, these young men were subjected to reprogramming intended to "disconnect them from their ancestors, their covenant relationship with Jehovah and their collective destiny as a people" (Adeyemo 2010:1017). They negotiated each aspect of that process with their allegiance to God still intact. Their ultimate challenge came when the king commanded all his subjects to worship a golden image he had erected. Any who refused would be thrown immediately into a fiercely burning furnace. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, even knowing the consequences, did not bow down. They resolutely adhered to their allegiance to the one true God. The king even gave them a second chance, but they remained steadfast; they would not compromise. Consequently, they were bound and cast into the super-heated furnace.

3.2.   Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 6)

Daniel's allegiance to God was also challenged in Babylon. He too had been taken captive in his youth and trained extensively in Babylonian culture and values. Early on, King Darius had noted his remarkable abilities, his grasp of the knowledge of Babylon, and his record of integrity. Before long, the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. By this time, he was 84 years old and had amassed 60 years of public service (Adeyemo 2010:1025).

Jealous political enemies concluded that the only way to ensnare Daniel was to attack his commitment to God. They convinced King Darius to establish a royal decree that for 30 days no one was to petition any god or man for anything, only the king. Any decree the king signed according to the law of the Medes and Persians could never be changed. And the consequence of not obeying that decree was to be thrown into a den of lions.

As his enemies had presumed, Daniel remained steadfast in his devotion to God and continued his daily practice of prayer three times a day. His enemies pointed out Daniel's behavior to King Darius, reminding him of his signed decree. Though the king desperately looked for a way to rescue his loyal servant Daniel, he found none. Reluctantly, he gave the command and Daniel was thrown into the lions' den.

3.3.   Peter and John (Acts 3-4)

Generations later, the apostles Peter and John were on their way to the temple at the time of prayer. As they approached, a man known to be lame from birth started begging them for money. Peter told him he had no money, "but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:1-6). Immediately, the man jumped up, shouting praises to God! People rushed to where they were, astounded that the lame man was now walking. Peter sought to turn their attention to the true healer, Jesus. When the religious leaders arrived and heard Peter talking about Jesus, they immediately had both him and John arrested (Acts 4:1-3).

In spite of profound pressure to obey decrees that violated their fidelity to God, these examples in Scripture chose life-threatening consequences over rejecting their primary allegiance. Their missional focus made the difference during their time of adversity. The strength of their convictions lay in the beliefs and assumptions they held. With an overriding mindset to honor God, they chose to trust Him with the dire consequences of standing firm.

4.   Three ways in which missional focus is tested

Since the strength of people's convictions resides in the beliefs and assumptions they hold, that is precisely where believers can expect to incur the greatest temp-

tations and meet the strongest trials. Kraft (1996:452-454) asserts that these challenges can often come in the form of three encounters: the encounter of allegiance, the encounter of power and the encounter of truth.

4.1. Allegiance encounter

Kraft points out that when one switches their primary allegiance to the Creator God, they must of necessity allow it to replace their former primary relationships with "other gods, spirits, people, material objects, organizations" (1996:453). Consequently, making God one's main allegiance necessarily affects their core identity. This faith makes them a part of the family of God, belonging to Him. As Lorein states, "Faith is not a loose facet of our being that we can put aside, but is identity-defining" (2020:15). There remains a certain kind of continuing identity with the family and community into which they were born. However, their new allegiance to God creates a discontinuity with those who are not believers. Processing that change of primary commitment and all the implications of being "in Christ" often forces believers to navigate very challenging situations, especially in a crisis or in culturally required ceremonies where identities are highlighted (Greenlee 2013:9).

4.2. Power encounter

Much of the world is aware of and lives in fear of spiritual powers. Innately, they assume that those spiritual beings have great power and are often considered the source of their hardships, although some understand that the spiritual beings also have power to help them. Mature believers reject turning to those powers in lieu of God's greater power. However, should God not perform in the way the believer assumes He should, desperation can easily arise. In that distress, they either align even more strongly with God, trusting His power, or are tempted to revert to their default sources of power, resorting to traditional priests, shamans, diviners, or medicine men for help (Kraft 1996:453). Experiencing the efficacy of spiritual power has a strong impact on people's choices. Whole people groups have encountered dramatic shifts of allegiance when God's power is displayed in their contexts.[5]

4.3. Truth encounter

Believers who are minimally grounded in the Scriptures are highly susceptible to deception and often tempted to relapse back into their culture's valued default

---

5   The Balangao in the Philippines are one such group. Their testimony is told by Shetler and Purvis in *And the Word Came With Power* (1992).

assumptions. Switching allegiance to God begins the process of learning how to live out that commitment in their sociocultural context. That will mean overtly committing to God's truth, which will inevitably cause conflict between their long-held cultural "truths" (actually assumptions) and the absolute truths found in Scripture.

Believers invariably find themselves in complex circumstances where one or more of these three encounters can arise. God often uses power encounters to demonstrate His greater power. Such an encounter raises the question of the source of that greater power. It is crucial to verbalize the true source of this greater power, so as to accentuate the contrast between God as power source and their core assumptions. This in turn creates a truth encounter with the culture's belief system. The Gospel will be most powerfully clear when it directly speaks into that belief system. People will then need to consider with whom they want to identify, which will result in an allegiance encounter.[6] And since allegiance is about relationship, one's choices, as Kraft points out, will confirm and deepen their primary relationship (1996:453).

5. Necessary theological framework

For believers to keep a missional mindset and remain steadfast in adverse circumstances, their thinking must align with Scripture. One needs a solid theological understanding of how Scripture addresses their default beliefs and assumptions, including their immediate problems. In the Southeast Asia situation, where believers were asking the pastors for letters releasing them from being a Christian, their assumption was that their physical well-being was more valuable and important than their allegiance to God and His truth. Without clear theologies of allegiance, of power and of truth, they default to their better-known cultural framework. When those frameworks are verbalized and overtly compared to Scripture, the believer has solid ground to form a new scriptural theology. Shetler models this with her template of *We always thought that* (verbalize specific assumption and its cultural requirement). *But what we did not know is* (verbalize specific Scripture passages speaking to the assumption and the cultural requirement).[7] Believers are equipped to make decisions that honor God when they have a theological framework that helps navigate their context, especially in times of personal crisis.

Foundational to a theological framework, believers need to know the meta-narrative of who God is, who they are "in Christ," who the angels are, who the evil

---

6   The supernatural healing in Lystra of the man known to be crippled from birth and Paul's subsequent attempt to focus the people's attention on the true healer, the living God, represent one example of this need. See Acts 14:6-18.

7   Shetler presented this paper at the Evangelical Missiological Society Southeast Regional Meeting, March 2011.

spirits are, and their origin and ultimate goal. Warner provides helpful guidance toward developing a holistic approach by focusing on the realm of the Creator and the realms He created, i.e. the realm of the unseen supernatural and the realm of humans (1991:9-32).[8]

In the Southeast Asia case, the families' situations and misguided theology of power hindered them from honoring God. They lacked a foundational theology of allegiance, which left them without an underpinning for God-honoring decision making. As believers, they needed a theology of truth to counter the deceptions that provoked their request for the letter.

6. Keeping a missional focus in adversity

Adverse circumstances challenge a believer's well-being, as noted in the three scriptural examples. Those followers of God kept their missional focus and stood firm in their allegiance, irrespective of the threat and danger. They had decided to totally trust God with their lives and well-being. Their steadfastness brought honor to God and provided a powerful witness to those watching.

When Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar's golden image, the king arrogantly demanded, "Who is the god who will deliver you from my hands?" (Daniel 3:15). Though facing certain death, they were unmoved and answered:

> If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up (Daniel 3:17-18).

The result was a power encounter in which God's power nullified the powers of the fire and the three remained unsinged. The awed king acknowledged their fidelity to God alone: "Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him. They defied the king's command and were willing to die rather than serve or worship any god except their own God" (Daniel 3:28 NLT). He conceded that "there is no other God who can deliver like this" (Daniel 3:29).

When Daniel's enemies triumphed and Daniel was thrown into the lions' den, King Darius told him, "Your God, whom you serve continually, He will deliver

---

8 Warner also discusses this in his book with Neil Anderson, *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Warfare* (2000:57-75).

you" (Daniel 6:16). And early the next morning, the king found Daniel alive and unhurt (Daniel 6:21-22). Daniel kept a missional focus in the face of certain death and God was honored, even by the king, who made a new decree, "that in every dominion of my kingdom men must tremble and fear before the God of Daniel" (Daniel 6:26).

The authorities who arrested Peter and John put them on trial, demanding, "By what power or by what name have you done this?" (Acts 4:7). Peter responded clearly and with courage that the power originated totally from Jesus Christ. The authorities, unable to refute what had happened, finally released the two after severely threatening them, leaving them with the command "not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus" (Acts 4:18). Peter and John went back to their companions, turning to God for help and asking Him in prayer to "consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness" (Acts 4:29 NIV).

When believers in any generation choose to honor God, there is no guarantee that they will escape all difficulties or, in some cases, even death. While Scripture contains many examples of God rescuing His people, it also relates how others endured mistreatment, torture, and death for refusing to waver in their allegiance to God (Hebrews 11:35-38). Preserving life at any price has temporary gain, but physical death eventually comes to all. However, giving up that life while honoring God has eternal consequences and is of infinite value.

7. Application for present-day believers in adverse circumstances

Anyone who chooses to give their allegiance to God priority will invariably experience tests of that commitment. The consequences of holding to that primary loyalty can be costly. Tienou reiterates that the way in which persecuted believers live, suffer and die for holding firmly to their allegiance to God provides a powerful witness (2015:449). He suggests that when believers accept the reality of suffering as normal rather than exceptional, it helps them create a "healthier mindset" (2015:450). I propose that believers would additionally be aided in that endeavor by developing a biblical theology of power, truth, and the war against our souls (Ephesians 6:12), along with a strong allegiance to God. With that foundational theological framework, believers would be equipped to consistently keep a missional focus in their every circumstance. And the manner in which they endure any suffering that results would give a powerful witness of the God they serve to those watching (Tienou 2015:451).

Part of living with a missional focus involves understanding the assumptions and pressures connected to important events in one's context. When one's underlying assumptions and related pressures are verbalized, the believer can more

objectively evaluate them with Scripture. Knowing truths from the Scriptures will in turn provide that person with a strong foundation for inevitable challenges, equipping them to face those encounters with resolute allegiance to God.

As those pastors in Southeast Asia returned home, their prayer request was for courage to refuse to give the requested letters releasing families from their faith and to trust God whatever the outcome. In doing so, like many before them, they would testify to the truth that "though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us."[9]

References

Adeyemo, Tokunboh. 2010. Daniel. *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars.* Updated Version. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1015-1038.

Anderson, Neil T. and Timothy M. Warner. 2000. *The Beginner's Guide to Spiritual Warfare.* Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications.

Greenlee, David. 2013. Living Out an 'In Christ' Identity: Research and Reflections Related to Muslims Who Have Come to Faith in Jesus Christ. *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 30 (1):5-12.

Kraft, Charles H. 1991. What Kind of Encounters Do We Need in Our Christian Witness? *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 27(3): 258-267.

Kraft, Charles H. 1996. *Anthropology for Christian Witness.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

Lorein, Geert W. 2020. "Religion never stands above the law." The relation between the state and the faith groups as illustrated in Belgium. *International Journal of Religious Freedom* 13 (1/2):11-20.

Sauer, Christof and Wolfgang Häde, eds. 2017. Religious Freedom. *Journal of the International Association for Mission Studies* 34 (3):295-408.

Shetler, Joanne J. with Patricia Purvis. 1992. *And the Word Came With Power*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press.

Shetler, Joanne J. 2011. "Communicating the New Information of Scripture When It Clashes with Traditional Assumptions." Paper presented at the Evangelical Missiological Society's Southeast Regional Meeting, Conyers, GA, March 2011.

Tienou, Tite. 2015. The Missionary Witness of the Persecuted and the Martyrs. In Hans Aage Gravaas et al. (eds.), *Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission*. Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Vol. 28. Oxford: Regnum Books International, 444-451.

---

9   First part of the third stanza of the hymn "A Mighty Fortress is Our God" by Martin Luther.

Warner, Timothy M. 1991. *Spiritual Warfare*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway.

West, Amy C. 2007. "*Response to Death: The Powerful Influence of Assumptions, Relationships and Ritual on the Balangao Christians in the Philippines.*" Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Graduate School of Intercultural Studies.

Sensitive, but not impossible, work
Christian missions and persecution

Janet Epp Buckingham[1]

Abstract

A significant focus of Christian missions currently is to share the good news of Christ with non-believers in restricted countries, which often puts both missionaries and new converts at risk of persecution. This article examines the international legal framework for religious freedom and how it is applied or circumvented, especially in restricted countries. It then discusses enforcement mechanisms for religious freedom in the UN system, along with who is currently engaged in advocacy for Christians at the UN. The article also considers what training is available for missionaries to difficult countries and how sending agencies can appropriately prepare missionaries for the realities of persecution.

1. Introduction

This article arises from a 2024 conference on Christian missions and freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). I was invited to speak on international protections for FoRB as well as my own experience as an advocate to the UN, primarily on FoRB issues. There is a sophisticated international legal system designed to protect human rights around the world. Yet time and time again, those of us who engage this system are disappointed that governments can consistently violate the rights of Christians with impunity. So those engaging in missions in these countries need to be well prepared, and be able to teach others to be prepared, for sophisticated police surveillance, threats to themselves, their families and their businesses, and possible criminal charges with all that entails.

1 Janet Epp Buckingham is Professor Emerita, Trinity Western University, and Director, Geneva Office, World Evangelical Alliance. This article was initially a conference presentation at a conference on Missions and FoRB at Fjellhaug International University College in Oslo, Norway. This article uses American English. Article submitted: 12 July 2024; accepted: 6 January 2025. Email: janet.epp-buckingham@twu.ca. ORCID: 0009-0005-5600-6473.

The intention of Christian missions is to share the gospel with people who are not Christians.[2] The Christian impetus for mission is found in Jesus' last reported words before he ascended to heaven: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20a). However, many countries have laws banning proselytism or conversion. Such provisions significantly restrict missionaries' freedom to share the gospel. Despite the obvious risks, Christians continue to share the gospel in these nations. This behavior puts them, and those who become Christians, at risk of persecution, ranging from social marginalization to the death penalty.

International law has recognized freedom of religion or belief at least since the development of international human rights following the Second World War. There is no consensus, however, among the member states of the United Nations as to what constitutes FoRB, despite clear language in international human rights treaties (von Shaik 2023). Unfortunately, many states have adopted their own interpretation of religious freedom that does not grant freedom to share one's faith or to change one's religion. Therefore, missionaries cannot rely on international human rights standards and must be aware of local laws and social conditions and prepare both themselves and their converts for the cost of following Christ.

This article elucidates the international laws protecting religious freedom, focusing on protection of proselytization and conversion. It then illustrates how these guarantees are violated in several countries. Next, it discusses mechanisms to enforce international guarantees and the current state of advocacy for FoRB internationally, particularly by Christian organizations. It concludes by identifying some of the many resources developed for FoRB training that can be used to prepare missionaries to restricted countries. I define this group of people so as to encompass anyone who moves to such a country with the intention to share the gospel, whether that person is a traditional missionary, a temporary foreign worker, a professional or a humanitarian worker. If properly trained and prepared, these missionaries can not only bring nationals to conversion but also prepare them to face persecution themselves and to be effective FoRB advocates.

2. International human rights law

FoRB has a much longer history than the United Nations. Although this history is beyond the scope of the present article, Tore Lindholm (2015) provides a good

---

2   Behind this simplistic statement lies a vigorous debate as to what constitutes "sharing the gospel." This debate is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that "sharing the gospel" includes more than proclaiming the word. In the context of "mission" that I reference, it includes all the work that Christians do among those who are not Christian that is done for the purpose of encouraging these people to follow Jesus. See Stott and Wright 2015: ch. 1.

summary of the development of religious freedom in a chapter titled "Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission." Several UN-sponsored instruments have articulated and clarified FoRB since 1945 at the international level: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The UDHR and the two Covenants are often together called the "International Bill of Rights." Finally, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief sets out FoRB in more detail. The right to convert, meaning to change one's religion, is very clear in international human rights law yet is not recognized in numerous countries.

Heiner Bielefeldt, former UN Special Rapporteur for FoRB, identifies four aspects of the right to convert that are protected: "(a) the right to conversion (in the sense of changing one's own religion or belief); (b) the right not to be forced to convert; (c) the right to try to convert others by means of non-coercive persuasion; and (d) the rights of the child and of his or her parents in this regard" (Bielefeldt 2017:109). He notes that these four aspects or sub-categories have different levels of protection. This article focuses particularly on aspects (a) and (c), the rights to conversion and proselytism.

2.1. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

The UDHR is accepted as the international standard for human rights. It was formulated in the aftermath of the Second World War and accompanied the United Nations Charter as foundational documents for the new world order following the ravages of that war. "Since its adoption in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been a pivotal document, profoundly impacting local and global legal, political, economic, cultural, religious, and social environments" (Bautista and Burcea 2023:v).

The UDHR is not officially a treaty. UN human rights treaties exist as legal documents, but the UDHR is a declaration and at best a document that grounds customary international law. Nevertheless, it is the document most frequently quoted with reference to the human rights it establishes. The drafters were quite an illustrious group, including Eleanor Roosevelt (USA), Charles Malik (Lebanon), Hernan Santa Cruz (Chile), William Hodgson (Australia), René Cassin (France), Alexandre Bogomolov (USSR), Charles Dukes (United Kingdom), Peng-chun Chang (China), and John Humphrey (Canada), geographically representative of various regions and their understandings of human rights.[3]

---

3 I emphasize the geographic diversity of the UDHR drafters because some countries object to international human rights law as a Western construct (Mutua 2002; Pollis and Schwab 2006; Marsh and Payne 2007).

Even though actual practice has fallen far short of the UDHR's ideals,[4] the document remains a high-water mark of human aspiration to be better. Where the Charter focused on peace, and was thus a response to war itself, the UDHR was a response to the horrors of the Holocaust. There was a sense that humanity needed a bulwark against the genocide of a people group based on race and religion. Nevertheless, the world has failed to stop genocides since then, such as in Rwanda and in Cambodia. The UDHR is just aspirational words on a page unless the nations of the world are willing to take action through the institutions of the United Nations. Article 18 of the UDHR focuses on religious freedom:

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

This is a rich text. In relation to missions, it is vital that the right includes the freedom to change one's religion. Some additional notable aspects of this statement are that (1) it includes both individual and communal religious practice; (2) it includes public observance of religion; and (3) it is not limited to worship but includes teaching, practice and observance.

Not surprisingly, there is a limitation clause in the UDHR, as no rights are absolute. Article 29(2) provides:

> In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

Not all countries have democratic societies. In addition, many governments interpret the the limitation broadly but human rights narrowly.

---

4 The UDHR is an aspirational document. Its Preamble begins, "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world." The first substantive article reads, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." In contrast to these aspirations, as of May 2024, the Red Cross International identified 120 armed conflicts around the world. (ICRC 2024). The Pew Research Center's annual report on religious freedom for 2022 identified 192 countries out of 198 where religious groups experienced harassment by governments or social actors (Pew Research Center 2024: ch. 2). Human beings everywhere in the world do not enjoy the same opportunity to live in peace with their rights respected.

The UN General Assembly adopted the UDHR on 10 December 1948. The UDHR does not contain any enforcement mechanism, but it has been the foundation for more than 70 human rights treaties at the global and regional level, and many of these treaties have enforcement mechanisms.

2.2. *The UN Covenants on Human Rights*

Following the UDHR, the United Nations proceeded to negotiate a comprehensive human rights treaty, a challenging task because by the time they were negotiated, the world had plunged into the Cold War. Countries such as China and the Soviet Union did not want to grant broad civil and political rights; countries in the West could not support entrenched economic rights. That is why we have two international conventions on human rights, the ICCPR and ICESCR.

The ICCPR, as its name implies, focuses on traditional Western human rights, including freedom of religion, freedom of expression and freedom of association. Article 18 includes the text from Article 18 of the UDHR. It then expands the right to include a non-coercion clause, a limitation clause and a clause specifically related to religious education. Asma Jahangir, former UN Special Rapporteur on FoRB, stated in an annual report:

> Article 18, paragraph 2, of the Covenant bars coercion that would impair the right to have or adopt a religion or belief, including the use of threat of physical force or penal sanctions to compel believers or non-believers to adhere to their religious beliefs and congregations, to recant their religion or belief or to convert. Policies or practices having the same intention or effect, such as those restricting access to education, medical care, employment or the rights guaranteed by article 25 and other provisions of ICCPR, are similarly inconsistent with this article. (Jahangir 2004: para. 47)

In a later report, Jahangir stated clearly that the right to proselytize is protected under the ICCPR:

> Missionary activity is accepted as a legitimate expression of religion or belief and therefore enjoys the protection afforded by article 18 of ICCPR and other relevant international instruments. Missionary activity cannot be considered a violation of the freedom of religion and belief of others if all involved parties are adults able to reason on their own and if there is no relation of dependency or hierarchy between the missionaries and the objects of the missionary activities. (Jahangir 2005: para. 67)

The limitation clause in Article 18(3) of the ICCPR allows States to impose "such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others" but only to limit manifestations of one's religion or beliefs. Jahangir stated unequivocally, "The right to change religion is absolute and is not subject to any limitation whatsoever" (Jahangir 2005: para. 58). Moreover, freedom of religion is "non-derogable." In the event of a national emergency, Article 4 allows states to "derogate" from the obligation to uphold certain rights, but Article 18 of the ICCPR is specifically excluded.

The only specific right to freedom of religion or belief in the ICESCR appears in Article 13(3), which establishes rights to education and parental rights to choose the education of their children. Article 2 guarantees the rights enunciated in the Covenant without discrimination on the basis of religion, among other grounds.

2.3. The UN Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief

In addition to the treaties, there is also a separate UN document relating to religious freedom. Some countries sought a Convention (treaty) on religious freedom, but conflict over the right to change religion forced them to settle for the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (Declaration) (Walter 2012:591). This Declaration, passed by the General Assembly in 1981, truly elucidates all aspects of religious freedom, including the right to be free from intolerance and discrimination and coercion. Article 6 guarantees the following rights:

   a) To worship or assemble in connection with a religion or belief, and to establish and maintain places for these purposes;

   b) To establish and maintain appropriate charitable or humanitarian institutions;

   c) To make, acquire and use to an adequate extent the necessary articles and materials related to the rites or customs of a religion or belief;

   d) To write, issue and disseminate relevant publications in these areas,

   e) To teach a religion or belief in places suitable for these purposes;

   f) To solicit and receive voluntary financial and other contributions from individuals and institutions;

   g) To train, appoint, elect or designate by succession appropriate leaders called for by the requirements and standards of any religion or belief;

   h) To observe days of rest and to celebrate holidays and ceremonies in accordance with the precepts of one's religion or belief.

Unfortunately, since this document is a Declaration rather than a Convention, it has no enforcement mechanism. The Convention on the Elimination of

All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, for example, has a Commission on the Status of Women that holds annual meetings to assess progress in protecting women's rights. Although the Declaration is referenced by various human rights bodies within the UN system, no specific body addresses progress toward meeting the rights articulated in the Declaration.

3.   National laws that violate international norms

Many countries have laws that give preference to one religion. Such laws do not necessarily constitute discrimination against religious minorities, but that is often the practical result. For example, the Church of England is the national church in England, but religious minorities are respected. In contrast, Pakistan's Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion and religious minorities do face discrimination there. We must recognize that simply having a national religion does not violate international human rights norms.

The most egregious violations of human rights norms occur in countries that have laws against apostasy (Marshall and Shea 2012). In 2019, 22 countries had laws criminalizing apostasy (Villa 2022). In some of these countries, the death penalty is allowed for apostasy from Islam. In other countries, apostasy can result in severe consequences such as not receiving an inheritance or having one's marriage annulled.

Blasphemy laws also violate international human rights norms, with regard to both freedom of expression and FoRB (Marshall and Shea 2012). Blasphemy "is defined as speech or actions considered to be contemptuous of God or of people or objects considered to be sacred" (Villa 2022). In 2019, 79 countries and territories had laws or policies banning blasphemy (Villa 2022). In some of these countries, blasphemy laws are not enforced, but in others, violation of these laws can result in fines, prison sentences, lashings and even the death penalty. In some Islamic countries, blasphemy is very broadly interpreted to encompass insulting the Prophet Muhammad, and any perceived criticism of Islam or the Qur'an can be considered blasphemous.

Masud et al. identify a related problem in states with apostasy and blasphemy laws: "The problem extends beyond law and state practice to attacks by private actors. Accusations of blasphemy or apostasy put people at risk of extrajudicial killings, whether in jail or on the outside" (Masud et al. 2021:1).

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is an important example of a country hostile toward religion. The DPRK has established Juche ideology as the central principle underlying this socialist state (Schmitz 2024:30). The Ministry of Unification in South Korea interviewed 508 defectors from the DPRK to document human rights violations between 2017 and 2023 (Ministry of Unification 2023). Missionaries and converts to Christianity have been executed, sent to political

prison camps, or subjected to reformation through labor (Ministry of Unification 2023:244). There is some evidence that Christianity has been revived in recent years in the DPRK (Schmitz 2024:36-39). Christians, however, remain at risk.

Four Asian countries have enacted anti-conversion laws: India, Nepal, Myanmar, and Bhutan (Fischer 2018:1). These laws ban inducement to convert or fraud in relation to conversion. Similar legislation has been proposed in Sri Lanka (Hertzberg 2020:93). Meghan Fischer argues that these laws are enforced only to protect the majority religion and effectively ban conversion from the majority religion.

Finally, a surprising number of states have restrictions on proselytizing. Jonathan Fox (2023:270) indicates that 60 percent of states have this type of law. These restrictions range form local regulations on door-to-door distribution of literature to national laws restricting foreign proselytizers.

All the States referenced in this section are members of the United Nations. While they may not have acceded to the human rights treaties, they are still subject to international human rights norms established in the UDHR. It is therefore relevant to consider what enforcement mechanisms are available to bring government legislation and practice in line with international human rights standards.

4. Enforcement mechanisms in the UN system

"To promote and protect human rights" is one of the pillars of the UN system (UN Charter 1948). There are several other mechanisms relating to protection of FoRB, most of them based in Geneva. International law, including international human rights law, is "soft law," meaning that States cannot be forced to implement these standards. So, while there are "enforcement mechanisms," states are not required to change their domestic laws. In fact, some States make every effort to participate in various human rights enforcement mechanisms to put forward a very different narrative to the experiences of people living in that country. While States take these mechanisms seriously, it does not bring about the changes one would hope for or expect.

4.1. The UN Human Rights Council

The Human Rights Council was established by the UN General Assembly in 2006 to replace the dysfunctional Commission on Human Rights. It is still an open question whether the Council is an improvement, but it is what we now have.[5] The Human Rights Council meets for three sessions annually, in March, June and September. FoRB is considered at the March session each year.

---

5 One of the main criticisms of the Commission on Human Rights was that states would be elected as members even though they were themselves weak in respecting international human rights standards. Although the new Council was intended to avoid this problem, it continues to be an issue.

The Human Rights Council is composed of 47 member in 2024 states elected for three-year terms. Members represent all regions of the world. Current members include some countries, such as Eritrea and Iran, that are well-known for violating human rights, particularly religious freedom. Some States see membership on the Human Rights Council as a way to avoid criticism of their human rights abuses. They therefore seek membership on the Council

Representatives of civil society are permitted to make statements directly to the Council in the chamber itself. NGOs can deliver 90 second statements.

The Council can also hold a special session to address human rights violations and emergencies if one-third of the members request it. For example, the Council held a special session on Sudan in May 2023 when civil war broke out there. Again, NGOs may make short oral statements at these special sessions.

One excellent opportunity to raise issues of FoRB with the Human Rights Council is the Universal Periodic Review. Each of the 193 member nations of the United Nations is reviewed over a four-year cycle. NGOs can submit reports in advance of the half-day hearing. The country then has an opportunity to respond to the recommendations. After the hearing, the Council issues a report making recommendations to the country to improve human rights protection.

4.2.   Treaty bodies

There are 10 UN treaty bodies, which are committees of independent experts that monitor implementation of the core human rights treaties (United Nations n.d.). The treaty bodies meet in Geneva. If a State is a party to a human rights treaty, it has an obligation to implement that treaty's provisions. The Human Rights Committee, which monitors implementation of the ICCPR, is the most important one for FoRB. The Committee adopted General Comment No. 22 on Article 18 of the ICCPR, which is often referenced as articulating the appropriate interpretation of freedom of religion in international human rights standards (UN Human Rights Committee 1993). The Committee holds hearings on all State parties on a rotational basis. Furthermore, if a State has signed the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, individuals can make complaints to the Committee after all legal recourse within the country has been exhausted. Committee decisions are considered only as opinions, with no legal effect. This complaint process is therefore a tool in the toolbox but not one likely to resolve a problem.

4.3.   The Special Rapporteur for FoRB

The UN has a variety of special rapporteurs, some thematic (like the Special Rapporteur for FoRB) and some country-specific, such as the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Eritrea. The current Special Rapporteur for

FoRB is Nazila Ghanea, an Iranian who lives in England. She is very active in the promotion of human rights. The Secretariat is based in Geneva.

There are several ways to engage with the Special Rapporteur. First, there is a complaint mechanism through her office. In this manner, one can raise particular issues if the complainant is comfortable with making them public (since the office posts complaints on its website). Second, the Special Rapporteur visits countries and makes recommendations. So one can encourage her to visit a country of concern. However, the country must welcome the Special Rapporteur, who will not make a visit unless welcomed. Third, the Special Rapporteur makes thematic reports and invites input.

4.4. The UN General Assembly

The UN General Assembly, based in New York, is the entity to which all UN functions ultimately report. The Special Rapporteur, for example, reports both to the Human Rights Council and to the UN General Assembly. There is a week during the General Assembly meeting in September/October where religious freedom is addressed.

The UN General Assembly has several committees. The Third Committee, which addresses humanitarian, social and cultural issues, sits in New York in October/November and annually considers religious freedom.

5.   Religious freedom advocacy

Many organizations engage in advocacy related to religious freedom for Christians. These can be avenues of advocacy and assistance for missionaries and for those facing persecution.

Open Doors, Voice of the Martyrs, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the Jubilee Campaign, International Christian Concern, and similar organizations raise awareness in churches and advocate to governments in the West and at the United Nations. Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF) and Advocates International provide legal assistance to those who are persecuted. Some of these organizations also provide advocacy training to Christians facing persecution. All of these entities are Western-based.

The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) has offices in New York and Geneva to engage in advocacy. More than half of WEA advocacy relates to religious freedom issues. The WEA always undertakes its advocacy in conjunction with national alliances and the local church leaders in an affected country. The most effective advocacy happens at the local, national and international levels simultaneously. Although some WEA advocacy concerns individual cases, much of it relates to laws, including those relating to apostasy, blasphemy, conversion, and proselytism.

It is important to ensure that FoRB advocacy is not solely a Western concern. The IRF Roundtable was formed in Washington, DC, to encourage religious organizations to advocate jointly to the US government regarding FoRB. The IRF Roundtable is in the process of establishing regional and national roundtables to globalize this advocacy (IRF Secretariat n.d.). Although this is a positive development, because the impetus for these roundtables was initially American, the regional and national groups may be seen as West-influenced.

The International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) began in 2014 as a network of parliamentarians from around the world "with the purpose of sharing information, coordinating activity and initiating joint responses on issues of religious freedom" (Anderson and Mosey 2018:9). It now has more than 300 parliamentarians from over 90 countries as members (IPPFoRB n.d.). As Nazila Ghanea, the current Special Rapporteur on FoRB, has stated, "The role of parliamentarians in monitoring, reporting and following up on freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief cannot be overestimated" (IPPFoRB n.d.). Although the impetus for founding IPPFoRB was from the UK, it is a very global organization and can advocate at the highest levels.

6.   Training in persecution and FoRB

It is foundational to understand the local or national context for religious freedom. *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom* (Taylor et al. 2012), published by the World Evangelical Alliance, is becoming outdated but remains a good starting place to understand the complexities.

The Pew Research Center conducts an annual survey of global religious freedom in 198 countries. Its most recent report, dealing with the year 2022, identifies 59 countries with high or very high government restrictions on religion. Forty-five countries have high or very high social hostility toward religious minorities (Pew Research Center 2024). Pew reports cover persecution of all religious groups, not just Christians.

Many sources produce annual reports on the status of religious freedom in countries around the world,[6] including Open Doors International's *World Watch List*, the US Commission on International Religious Freedom's *Annual Report*, the US Department of State's *International Religious Freedom Report*, and the aforementioned Pew Research Center annual reports on government restrictions and social hostilities involving religion. The International Institute for Religious Free-

---

6   The Noteworthy section in every issue of this journal includes these reports as well as reports on individual countries.

dom has a Violent Incidents Database (IIRF n.d.a.) to provide accurate and timely information on persecution and a Global Religious Freedom Data Spectrum "to provide a comparative framework for viewing a wide range of data from organizations' country rankings on the issues of freedom of religion or belief" (IIRF n.d.b.). These reports can give an overall picture of global and regional trends. Many also give specific information about what is happening in countries. In this way, plenty of information is available about what one can generally expect in a country.

Many organizations have been developing training tools and programs on FoRB. Open Doors, International Christian Concern and Article 18 are Christian organizations that work exclusively on persecution and offer training. Some missions organizations that work in difficult areas also offer training in preparing for and persevering through persecution. Open Doors includes training in advocacy so that Christians who face persecution can have a prophetic voice to their governments.

There is also specific training available on international human rights law. The Nordic Ecumenical Network on Freedom of Religion or Belief, along with a network of other organizations, developed an online Freedom of Religion or Belief Learning Platform focused on Article 18 of the UDHR and the ICCPR (NORFORB n.d.). Faith for Rights has also developed a Toolkit on FoRB, available in multiple languages (OHCHR n.d.). These resources are aimed at a more advanced audience than missionaries and new converts, but they may be of use in some contexts.

FoRB training for missionaries should be part of broader training that includes a theology of suffering and a theology of risk. As Anna Hampton states in her article on a theology of risk in this issue:

> Living under constant uncertainty and knowing one can lose everything but not having lost it yet is one of the most challenging situations to endure day in and day out, month after month, year after year, requiring developing skills of endurance, resilience, and shrewdness in the midst of calling and faithfulness to Christ under severe pressure. (Hampton 2025:10)

In her article, Hampton references training and resources for missionaries to prepare for the risk of persecution.

7. Conclusions

While international human rights standards guarantee religious freedom, and in particular the right to proselytize and to change religion, these guarantees are not respected even though states are members of the United Nations. In many

parts of the world, Christians and the church are seen as threats to the local or national culture, to governmental authority, or to the dominant religion. As Christian missionaries seek to make disciples, they must be aware of how they will be treated by the surrounding culture and ensure that new converts are prepared for the possibility of unfriendly treatment.

As Christians seek to make disciples, extend the kingdom and build the church, they must address persecution in the same way as they must address leadership, theological training and governance issues. It is important to be aware of international human rights standards that require governments to allow Christians to practice their faith not just alone but with others, in public and in private. Training for missionaries should include learning about international and domestic laws that protect religious minorities as well as how to respond effectively to ensuing persecution. This is sensitive work, but not impossible.

References

Anderson, David and Joycelin Mosey. 2018. "Legislators lead the way to freedom of religion and belief." *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 11(1/2):9-14.

Bautista, Liberato and Nelu Bercau, *Shaping a World of Freedoms: 75 years of legacy and impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. New York: UNEQUAL World Research Center.

Bielefeldt, Heiner. 2017. *Freedom of Religion or Belief: Thematic Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur 2010-2016.* Edited by Thomas Schirrmacher. 2nd edition. Bonn: VKW. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/5xbn6z6x.

Fischer, Meghan G. 2018. "Anti-Conversion Laws and the International Response." *Penn State Journal of Law & International Affairs* 6(1):1-69.

Fox, Jonathan. 2023. "May I have a word with you? Global patterns of restrictions on proselytizing." In *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, 3rd edition, Jeffery Haynes (ed.). London: Routledge, 270-281.

Hampton, Anna E. 2025. "Facing risk, danger and fear in mission: Combining Christian theology, science, and wise best practices." *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 18(1):9-20.

Hertzberg, Michael. 2020. "The gifts of allurement: anti-conversion legislation, gift-giving, and political allegiance in South Asia." *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 35(1):93-114. Available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2020.1695815.

ICRC. 2024. "Defining armed conflict: some clarity in the fog of war." May 2. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/yvwb46k5.

IIRF. n.d.a. "Violent Incidents Database." Available online: https://iirf.global/vid/.

IIRF. n.d.b. "Global Religious Freedom Data Spectrum." Available online: https://iirf.global/global-religious-freedom-data-spectrum/.

IPPFoRB. n.d. Available online: https://www.ippforb.com.

IRF Secretariat. n.d. "Multi-faith Roundtables." Available online: https://irfsecretariat.org/multi-faith-roundtables/.

Jahangir, Asma. 2004. "Civil and Political Rights, including the question of religious intolerance." E/CN.4/2005/61. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/yc4znbnn.

Jahangir, Asma. 2005. "Elimination of all forms of religious intolerance." A/60/399. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/ew6275pr.

Lindholm, Tore. 2015. "Freedom of religion or belief from a human rights perspective." In *Freedom of Belief and Christian Mission*, Hans Aage Gravaas, Christof Sauer, Tormod Engelsviken, Maqsood Kamil and Knud Jørgensen (eds.). Oxford: Regnum Books International, 3-17.

Marsh, Christopher and Daniel P. Payne. 2007. "The Globalization of Human Rights and the Socialization of Human Rights Norms." *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2007(3):665-687.

Marshall, Paul and Nina Shea. 2012. *Silenced: How apostasy and blasphemy codes are choking freedom worldwide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Masud, Muhammad Khalid, Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen and Christian Moe. 2021. "Introduction." In *Freedom of Expression in Islam: Challenging apostasy and blasphemy laws*, Muhammad Khalid Masud, Kari Vogt, Lena Larsen and Christian Moe (eds.). London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1-13.

Ministry of Unification. 2023. *2023 Report on North Korean Human Rights.* Center for North Korean Human Rights Records.

Mutua, Makau. 2002. *Human Rights: A political and cultural critique.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

NORFORB. n.d. "FORB Learning Platform". Available online: https://www.forb-learning.org/."

OHCHR. n.d. "#Faith4Rights Toolkit". Available online: https://tinyurl.com/55sc7rev.

Payne, J. D. "Mission amid the crisis of persecution: Challenges and guidelines for research and training." In *Practising hope: Missions and global crises*, Jerry M. Ireland and Michelle L.K. Raven (eds.). Pasadena: William Carey Publishing.

Pew Research Center. 2024. "Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022." 18 December. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/yw7u22nv.

Pollis, Adamantia and Peter Schwab, "Human rights: A Western construct with little applicability." In *Moral Issues in Global Perspective*, vol. 1, Christine Koggel (ed.). Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Schmitz, Timo. 2024. "A path toward religious freedom in the DPRK: Is it possible?" *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 17(1):29-43.

Stott, John and Christopher J. H. Wright. 2015. *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (updated and expanded). Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.

Taylor, W. D., A. van der Meer, and R. Reimer, eds. 2012. *Sorrow and Blood: Christian Mission in Contexts of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom*. Pasadena: William Carey Library.

UN Human Rights Committee. 1993. CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, 30 July. Available online: https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/1993/en/13375.

United Nations. n.d. "Treaty Bodies." Available online: https://www.ohchr.org/en/treaty-bodies.

Villa, Virginia. 2022. "Four-in-ten countries and territories worldwide had blasphemy laws in 2019." Pew Research Center, 25 January. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/yck7zark.

Von Shaik, B. M. 2023. "The right to apostasy recognised? Reaffirming the right to religious freedom." *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 24(2), 267-287. Available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2023.2216138.

Walter, Christian. 2012. "The Protection of Freedom of Religion Within the Institutional system of the United Nations." In *Universal Rights in a World of Diversity: The Case of Religious Freedom*, Mary Ann Glendon and Hans F. Zacher (eds.). Vatican City: Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences Acta, 588-606.

God Needs No Defense

Reimagining Muslim–Christian Relations in the 21st Century
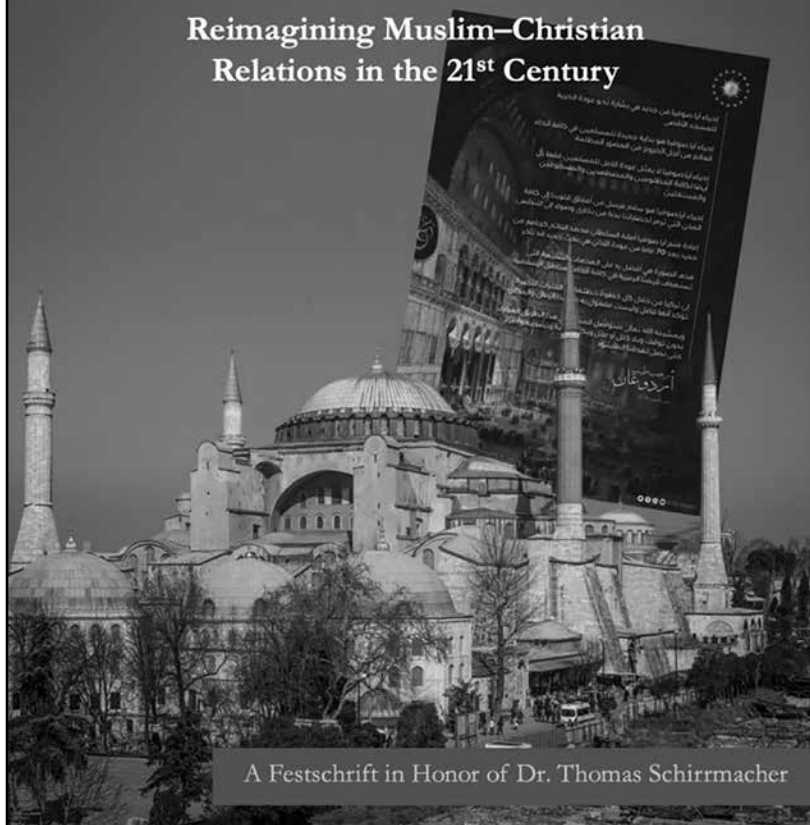
A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher

Editors:
Thomas K. Johnson and C. Holland Taylor

Is the glass half full or half empty?

Examining current initiatives on "Human Fraternity" and their implications for religious freedom and mission

Carsten Polanz[1]

Abstract

While some observers see the 2019 Catholic-Sunni Document on Human Fraternity as a powerful message against Islamist extremism, others regret the exclusion of central points of conflict. This article outlines the context of the document and compares some of its key points with the positions of the two main Muslim protagonists in the internal Islamic discourse on freedom of religion (and expression), conversion, and apostasy. The consequences for Christian missions could be great should an understanding of dialog prevail that tacitly makes peaceful coexistence dependent on largely ignoring central differences of faith and renouncing mutual missionary witness.

Keywords

Apostasy, Christian-Muslim dialog, Human Fraternity, al-Azhar, United Arab Emirates.

1. Introduction

On 4 February 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmad al-Tayyib, Grand Imam of al-Azhar, signed a "Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together"[2] in Abu Dhabi. With this and other initiatives, the United Arab Emir-

---

1   Dr. Carsten Polanz is a lecturer in Islamic studies at Giessen School of Theology (Germany), researcher at the Institute of Islamic Studies of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and executive editor of the bilingual journal *Islam und christlicher Glaube / Islam and Christianity*. His research focuses on key theological issues of Christian-Muslim dialog, contemporary Islamic jihad concepts and reform movements, and current discourses on the integration of Muslims in Europe and the future of religious freedom in the public sphere. This article uses American English. Article submitted: 8 Aug 2024; accepted: 13 Feb 2025. Email: polanz@fthgiessen.de. ORCID: 0009-0008-6573-9574. Parts of the article are based on a previous essay published in 2023 in a Catholic German-language journal for Christian-Muslim dialog: Carsten Polanz, "Gleiche Begriffe – gleicher Inhalt? Eine Problemskizze im Dialog mit dem Religions- und Gesellschaftsverständnis von Ahmad al-Tayyeb und Abdullāh Bin Bayyah," *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2023): 58-68, specifically 60-65.
2   The document is available in a total of eleven languages (including Arabic, German, English and French) at https://tinyurl.com/mrk29h7f.

ates (UAE) in particular, under the leadership of Mauritanian jurist Abdullah bin Bayyah and his Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (FPPMS), have attempted in recent years to present themselves internationally as pioneers of interreligious tolerance, a culture of dialogue, and equal citizenship for religious minorities. In response, the United Nations launched an "International Day of Human Fraternity" in 2020, and UN Secretary-General António Guterres called the document a "model for interfaith harmony and human solidarity." Apparently, for him and many other political and religious representatives, the glass is half full.

However, these initiatives have also received criticism. The document mentions "freedom of belief" but not freedom to change religion. In addition, individual Catholic voices see the sweeping equation of the diversity of religions with the will of God as a betrayal of the heart of the gospel. Others point to the UAE's poor human rights record and its anti-democratic agenda in the wake of the Arab uprisings. They warn of a "cheap dialogue." Apparently, for these voices the glass is half empty.

This paper reflects on the "human fraternity" project in terms of its implications for religious freedom and Christian mission. After a brief overview of the central contents of the document and selected voices on its reception to date, it examines the context in which the human fraternity initiatives are embedded, the positions of the two Muslim protagonists on the current internal Islamic power struggle and the limits of legitimate freedom of religion (and expression). Finally, I will analyze to what extent their understanding of dialog allows room for mutual missionary witness or tacitly makes peaceful coexistence dependent on ignoring or downplaying fundamental differences of faith.

2. Central statements of the document on human fraternity

The human fraternity document begins by stating that faith leads a believer to see in the other a brother or sister to be supported and loved. The main part of the document begins in "the name of God who has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity." This is followed by a list of groups to whom the document aims to give a voice, always using the same phrase "in the name of"[3]: innocent people whose killing God has forbidden, the poor and marginalized, widows, orphans, victims and refugees of war, the persecuted and tortured.

The two authors call for a "culture of dialogue,"[4] geared toward mutual understanding and cooperation. The document identifies "a desensitized human con-

---

3   Ibid.
4   Ibid.

science,"[5] which alienates the individual from religious values and tempts them to replace transcendent principles with materialistic philosophies, as a main cause of the crises of the modern world. As a result, many isolated and desperate people are driven into self-destructive forms of "atheistic, agnostic or religious extremism."[6] According to the document, the incitement of hatred, extremism, violence and war has nothing to do with the truth of religion, but rather with the "political manipulation of religion" for short-sighted political or economic goals. The name of God must not be misused to justify terrorism. God has "no need to be defended by anyone."[7]

The document proposes an extensive set of actions, including protection of places of worship from violent attacks, ending all forms of support for terrorist groups, a commitment to the concept of full citizenship with equal rights and obligations, and protection of the family and in particular the dignity and rights of children (also in the face of digital threats).

Freedom as a "right of every person" is also explicitly emphasized in this list of demands. Every individual should enjoy the "freedom of belief, thought, expression and action." Pluralism and "the diversity of religions, color, sex, race and language" is described as being "willed by God in His wisdom," which for the authors also represents the foundation for the "freedom of belief" and the "freedom to be different." In this respect, people should not be forced to adhere to a certain religion or culture or to follow a certain "cultural way."[8]

The two signatories pledge to promote the document among religious, political, and social leaders and institutions and to support the political implementation and further educational and scientific reflection of the principles set out in the document.

3.   Highlights of the reception to date

At a meeting with Charles Michel, president of the Council of Europe, Mohammad Abdulsalam, who as secretary general of the Muslim Council of Elders played a key role in the process, described the document as a "roadmap for peace and stability in world communities."[9] Others not involved in the project have praised the document and the initiatives it has launched. For UN Secretary-General António Guterres, it represents a "model for interfaith harmony and human solidarity"

---

5   The Arabic version speaks of the "absence of human conscience" (*taghyīb al-ḍamīr al-insānīya*). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/7yc3vkr9.
6   Ibid (English version).
7   Ibid.
8   Ibid.
9   Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3stv45ur. He outlines the entire process in Mohammad Abdulsalam, *The Pope and the Grand Imam: A Thorny Path. A Testimony to the Birth of the Human Fraternity Document* (Dubai: Motivate Media Group, 2021).

that should inspire "us all" to stand together as "one human family" and form an "alliance of peace."[10] Ibrahim Salama, director of the Human Rights Treaties Division of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, spoke in Geneva in 2020 of a "landmark document" that "provides a framework, mechanism and inspiration for action to ensure realization of the human right to freedom of religion or belief through dialogue and action."[11]

On the Catholic side, Cardinal Miguel Angel Ayuso Guixot, among others, promoted the document as a "milestone on the path of interreligious dialogue."[12] As prefect of the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue of the Catholic Church, he was involved in the drafting of the document. Even before the signing ceremony, Bishop Paul Hinder, then the church's apostolic vicar for South Arabia, had already connected the Pope's visit to the region with hopes of additional parishes for the almost one million Catholic guest workers in the UAE.[13] During a presentation to the German Bishops' Conference in Frankfurt in March 2019, Hinder said that the document was not perfect, but that it made "remarkable statements," including with regard to the paragraph on religious freedom, "which – provided they do not remain a dead letter – have far-reaching consequences."[14] Currently, many are still suffering from the non-observance of these principles.

Lebanese sociologist Rita Faraj of the Al Mesbar Studies and Research Center in Dubai saw the interfaith meeting in February 2019 as a "new horizon in Muslim-Christian relations" and considered the document historic. But she called on al-Azhar to carry out an "internal revolution that pulls Muslims out of religious isolation." Faraj criticizes the document's "conservative religious mentality" and "negative stance towards non-believers, agnostics, and atheists."[15] She also regretted the absence of clear language regarding followers of other religions such as Judaism,[16] which is not mentioned at all in the document.[17]

---

10 "Secretary-General's Message on the International Day of Human Fraternity," 4 February 2023. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwukh4jm.

11 Ibrahim Salama, "Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together: The Role of Inter-Religious Dialogue Towards the Universal Enjoyment of the Right of Freedom of Religion and Belief," 27 February 2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2ysaftvn.

12 H. Em. Cardinal Miguel Ángel Ayuso Guixot, "Religious Freedom and the Document on Human Fraternity," 27-28 February 2020. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3hh4hex3.

13 See Gerhard Arnold, "Die Toleranzoffensive der Vereinigten Arabischen Emirate (UAE) und die Weltkonferenz über menschliche Brüderlichkeit 2019," in Thomas Schirrmacher and Max Klingberg, eds., *Jahrbuch Religionsfreiheit* (Bonn: VKW, 2019), 76.

14 Paul Hinder, "Als Bischof in Arabien: Franziskanische Impulse für den christlich-islamischen Dialog," 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3tpjyrzh, 4f. The translation of these and other German quotations is by the present author.

15 Rita Faraj, "The Document on Human Fraternity: Peace Between Religions in a Troubled World," *Ecumenical Forum* 40 (2019): 282-284. Available at: https://unipub.uni-graz.at/download/pdf/4608131.pdf.

16 In this context, see also the analysis of al-Tayyib's hatred of Israel and his strong tendencies towards anti-Semitic conspiracy theories in Polanz, "Gleiche Begriffe – gleicher Inhalt?" 66-68.

17 For further examples of the reception to date, see Esther Schirrmacher, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit als Gesprächsangebot: Inhaltliche Auseinandersetzung oder oberflächliche Toleranzpolitik?" *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2023): 73.

In his reflection on the document, Felix Körner, holder of the Nicolaus Cusanus Chair for Theology of Religions at the Institute for Catholic Theology of Humboldt University in Berlin, addressed its lack of clarity regarding comprehensive religious freedom. According to him, the "freedom of belief, thought, expression and action" and the "freedom to be different" mentioned therein could also have been explicitly named as freedom to change religion, "if one already condemns any compulsion in religious matters."[18] But Körner did not go on to explain specifically why the Pope's Muslim dialog partners were reluctant to adopt this seemingly logical conclusion.

In the following discussion, I will focus on three aspects that have, in my opinion, been underexposed in the analysis so far: the context in which the document is embedded, especially with regard to the role of the UAE; the positioning of the two main Muslim protagonists in the internal Islamic discourse on freedom of religion and apostasy; and the potentially far-reaching implications for Christian mission, should an understanding of human fraternity prevail that tends to suppress fundamental differences of faith in the name of peaceful coexistence.

4.   The history and context of the document

Gerhard Arnold speaks of a veritable "tolerance offensive" with which the UAE is trying to present itself as a pioneer of a global religious and social tolerance policy. In 2007, the "Louvre Abu Dhabi" was opened, with the declared aim of promoting intercultural dialog worldwide.[19] In 2014, both the Muslim Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies (MFPPMS), under Bin Bayyah's leadership, and the Muslim Council of Elders under the leadership of Sheikh al-Azhar were established in Abu Dhabi to promote the peaceful nature of the Islamic religion and counteract religious tensions in times of increasing extremism by the Islamic State and other jihadist groups. A Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence was founded in 2016, followed by an International Institute for Tolerance in 2017. The first World Tolerance Summit took place in 2018 in Dubai.[20]

Following the signing of the Document on Human Fraternity, the Higher Committee of Human Fraternity was established to ensure implementation of the document's stated goals. In 2020, the UAE, together with 30 other countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, introduced an "International Day of Human Fraternity" at the United Nations.[21]

---

18   Felix Körner, "A Reflection on the Abu Dhabi Document," *La Civiltà Cattolica*, English Edition, vol. 3, no. 7, art. 1 (2019). Available at: https://www.felixkoerner.de/sites/default/files/2-66e.pdf.

19   See, for example, Kanishk Tharoor, "The Louvre Comes to Abu Dhabi," *The Guardian*, 2 December 2015. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2rfwvcvs.

20   See Arnold, "Die Toleranzoffensive," 63-84.

21   See also Esther Schirrmacher, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit als Gesprächsangebot," 69-74.

The UAE's involvement is taking place in the context of intense international disputes over the sovereignty of interpretation within Islam. In his article "The Battle for the Soul of Islam," James Dorsey shows the broad spectrum of Islamic actors currently competing with each other:

> This battle for the soul of Islam pits rival Middle Eastern and Asian powers against one another: Turkey, seat of the Islamic world's last true caliphate; Saudi Arabia, home to the faith's holy cities; the United Arab Emirates (UAE), propagator of a militantly statist interpretation of Islam; Qatar, with its less strict version of Wahhabism and penchant for political Islam; Indonesia, promoting a humanitarian, pluralistic notion of Islam that reaches out to other faiths as well as non-Muslim center-right forces across the globe; Morocco, which uses religion as a way to position itself as the face of moderate Islam; and Shiite Iran, with its derailed revolution.[22]

Hamdullah Baycar and Mehmet Rakipoglu[23] also describe this struggle for regional and global influence, which is being contested by the UAE and others through both military "hard power" (in Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen) and religious "soft power." In *Rivals in the Gulf*,[24] David Warren compares the contrasting strategies of Qatar and the UAE to secure the support of powerful allies (especially the USA) in the face of external and internal threats to their rule through various forms of "state branding."

As Warren shows, Bin Bayyah, today the mastermind of the UAE's tolerance initiatives, was closely associated for decades with Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926-2022), the Egyptian Sunni jurist who developed into a global media mufti from his Qatari exile in the 1990s and 2000s.[25] Both were instrumental in the establishment and expansion of the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) – international, cross-denominational organizations involving multiple schools of Islamic law that claim to define the balanced and truly Islamic middle way (*wasaṭīya*) between religious extremism and Western secularism.[26]

---

22 James Dorsey, "The Battle for the Soul of Islam, Ramat Gan" (Bar-Ilan University, 2021), 4ff. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/muzsha84.
23 Hamdullah Baycar and Mehmet Rakipoglu, "The United Arab Emirates' Religious Soft Power through Ulema and Organizations," *Religions* 13, no. 7 (2022): 646. Available at: https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/646.
24 David Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Abdullah Bin Bayyah, and the Qatar-UAE Contest Over the Arab Spring and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2021).
25 In this regard, see the comprehensive anthology by Bettina Gräf and Jacob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds., *The Global Mufti. The Phenomenon of Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī* (London: Hurst, 2009).
26 Cf. Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 79.

In the course of the Arab Spring uprisings, however, the two parted ways. With strong support from Qatar, al-Qaradawi sided with the insurgents and against the ruling regimes in Syria and Libya as part of his "jurisprudence of revolution" (*fiqh aṯ-ṯaura*) – with the exception of Bahrain.[27] He strongly condemned the UAE-backed military coup by ʿAbdelfattāḥ as-Sīsī, defense minister at the time and currently president, against president Muhammad Mursī, followed by his massacre in a Muslim Brotherhood protest camp in Rabaʿa. Bin Bayyah, on the other hand, remained silent about Mursī's overthrow and at the same time expressed increasingly loud doubts that democracy was "the cure for all ills, particularly terrorism."[28] With his resignation from the pro-Qatari IUMS in 2013 and the founding of the FPPMS in 2014, which was strongly supported by the UAE, the break was complete.

5. Bin Bayyah's understanding of state and society

A fruitful dialogue of cultures and civilizations must of course also address the question of the social and political system that appears best suited to protect religious freedom and other fundamental human rights. In contrast to al-Qaraḍāwī, Bin Bayyah relies on a "jurisprudence of peace" (*fiqh as-silm*) with the state-sponsored programs of the FPPMS, intended to end the "chaos of religious discourse" (*fauḍā al-ḫiṭāb ad-dīnī*), which in his view has been triggered by unqualified muftis.[29] He wants to realize justice through a specifically Islamic concept of consultation (*šūrā*),[30] which he does not want to define clearly as a form of either democracy, theocracy or aristocracy.[31] In an English-language article from 2012 on the relationship between *šūrā* and democracy, Bin Bayyah describes the prevention of unrest and oppression as well as the search for peaceful solutions as unifying concerns, but he warns that democracy could become a "source of constant dispute and disorder" due to "partisan extremity."[32] As he explained at the opening of the FPPMS on 9 March 2014, the "call for democracy" could even amount to a "call for war" in societies that lack the necessary "common ground."[33]

In his contributions, it becomes clear that, with reference to the Egyptian jurist and Muslim Brother Taufīq aš-Šāwī (1918-2009), he perceives the essence of Western democracy in a very abbreviated and distorted way as a struggle for

---

27 Ibid., 48-51.
28 Thus the English translation of Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 80, with reference to the work by Abdullah bin Bayyah, *al-Irhāb: at-tašḫīṣ wa-l-ḥulūl* (Riyadh, 2007), 56-57, which is not accessible to me.
29 See in particular Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 7, 75, 82 and 103f.
30 He cites Suras 3:159, 42:38 and 2:233 as Qur'anic foundations.
31 Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Shura (Consultation) and Democracy." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4vc2wep5. An Arabic version of this text could not be found.
32 Ibid.
33 Quoted in Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 94.

the "absolute authority" of the social majority.[34] He contrasts this caricature of democracy with his ideal of Islamic consultation, in which individual freedoms, social justice and political equality are derived from Sharia law and its fundamental, timeless objectives and principles. For him, the ruler's right to the people's obedience is balanced by his duty to enforce justice and fairness.

In view of Muhammad's own example, it appears to Bin Bayyah to be a legitimate option for the ruler to select merely a few leading representatives of the individual social groups for consultation.[35] He explicitly distinguishes his concept of consultation from "public criticism" or "open condemnation" of the ruler, because the latter can lead to violent clashes with the regime.[36] As Warren shows, Bin Bayyah expects citizens not to give up their right to justice in the face of an oppressive state, but to postpone it for the sake of peace.[37] Also notably, he compares the relationship between the ruler and the people with the relationship between husband and wife. Just as the man is free to decide (e.g. to take a second wife) despite far-reaching consequences for the whole family, the ruler cannot be restricted in his decisions due to his more extensive knowledge of all relevant facts.[38]

Bin Bayyah's explicit Islamic legitimization of autocratic rule should, of course, be appropriately classified and evaluated in the reception of the peace and tolerance initiatives of the FPPMS that he has led. Where autocratic rule is justified in principle, it seems impossible to actually implement the goal of "full" and equal "citizenship" (*al-muwāṭana al-kāmila*) of Muslims and non-Muslims formulated by over 250 Muslim scholars and heads of state from more than 120 countries, such as the Moroccan King Mohammed VI, in the Marrakesh Declaration[39] of January 2016, which was co-initiated by the FPPMS.

Although the authors of this declaration glorify Muhammad's "Charter of Medina" as a groundbreaking "constitutional contract" for the realization of a multi-religious society,[40] and although some Christian associations such as the World Council of Churches speak of a groundbreaking rethinking of religious freedom for non-Muslim minorities, critics miss "practical initiatives to further the Declaration's lofty

---

34 Bin Bayyah, "Shura (Consultation) and Democracy." Bin Bayyah does not cite a specific source for the quotations he uses.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 David Warren, "The Modernist Roots of Islamic Autocracy: Shaykh Abdullah Bin Bayyah and the UAE-Israel Peace Deal" (27 August 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2xdwezr6.
38 Ibid. According to Warren, the FPPMS's positive statement on the UAE's peace treaty with Israel should also be seen against this background.
39 See "Marrakesh Declaration on the Rights of Religious Minorities in Predominantly Muslim Majority Communities." The conference took place from 25 to 27 January 2016. The official website with the original Arabic text is currently not available. An executive summary is available at: https://tinyurl.com/27x55nxj. See also the constructive and critical analysis by Friedmann Eissler, *"Erklärung von Marrakesch: Muslime bekräftigen die Charta von Medina," Materialdienst der EZW* (2016) 3: 103-106.
40 "Marrakesh Declaration," 2 (executive summary).

goals."[41] The lack of concretization of clear and verifiable criteria may also have to do with the fact that Bin Bayyah sees the concrete forms of expression of citizenship in his writings as dependent on the regional context. He therefore explicitly distinguishes between the "absolutism of principles" and the "relativism of applications."[42]

6.   Religious freedom and apostasy for al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah

Whether non-Muslims in Muslim majority societies can actually gain full citizenship depends crucially on the concrete understanding of freedom of religion and belief. In this respect, we should examine the understanding of religious freedom outlined by al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah in various writings and interviews in recent years.

In the "al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence"[43] of 2017, for which al-Tayyeb was largely responsible, equal rights and obligations in the sense of the "Charter of Medina" are fundamentally affirmed. The declaration was published on the occasion of an international conference organized by the Muslim Council of Elders and al-Azhar entitled "Freedom and Citizenship: Diversity and Integration." Here, too, the order of society dating back to the reign of Muhammad in Medina is glorified as the "fairest system of governance."[44] Today, it is "the top duty" of a necessarily strong state "to protect the citizens' lives, freedom, properties, as well as their right to citizenship and human dignity."[45] However, this declaration lacks a concrete definition of individual civil liberties.[46]

Particularly in the context of anti-extremism initiatives, al-Tayyeb never tires of defending freedom of belief as a fundamental Islamic value. In doing so, he refers to relevant passages from contemporary discourse such as Sura 2:256: "Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clear from error; whoever rejects evil and believes in God hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold that never breaks. And God heareth and knoweth all things." He also cites Sura 10:99: "If it had been the Lord's will, they would all have believed – All who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe!?" The exploitation of human needs with the aim of winning people to Islam has, therefore, no place

---

41 Warren, *Rivals in the Gulf*, 107.
42 See e.g. Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Citizenship between the Absolutism of Principles and the Relativism of Applications," 13 March 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mvtf6e8a.
43 See "Al-Azhar Declaration on Citizenship and Coexistence Issued by His Eminence the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar," 28 February 2017, currently not on the al-Azhar website, but available at: https://tinyurl.com/e7nypwjs.
44 Ibid, 1.
45 Ibid, 3.
46 According to Friedmann Eissler, the concept of citizenship is not presented critically "but introduced quasi suggestively and yet unbrokenly linked to a traditional 'Medina model,' which cannot be thought of conclusively without the 'dhimmi status' of minorities (moreover only of the 'heavenly religions' Christianity and Judaism)." For further unresolved questions, see Eissler, "Interreligiöser Dialog. Azhar-Erklärung zum muslimisch-christlichen Zusammenleben," *EZW Materialdienst* (2017)*: 5. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2eue6bu4.

in Islamic philosophy. Forced conversions would only increase the number of hypocrites.[47] Faith as an "act of the heart"[48] cannot be forced.

Following a speech in the German Bundestag on 15 March 2016, al-Tayyeb was asked directly about the issue of apostasy. In his response, he pointed out that the Qur'an does not impose a specific punishment on converts, but that some traditions speak of punishing those who pose a danger to society. Recently, however, even entire television channels have propagated such conversions without anyone bringing those responsible to justice. No one had been hanged or killed. He therefore expressed his astonishment that anyone could even think that conversion was a punishable offense. In this statement, Sura 18:29 appears as the last word in the debate: "Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject [it]."[49]

A few weeks later, however, al-Tayyeb expressed a significantly different tone in front of a predominantly Arab Muslim television audience. In two interviews on his own al-Azhar program, broadcast on various satellite channels, on 15 and 16 June 2016,[50] he explicitly emphasized the consensus among classical legal scholars regarding the punishment of apostasy from Islam with death. Only a few have deviated from this position. All four schools of law agree that apostasy is a crime and that the persons concerned must be put to death if they do not respond to the call to repent after a specified period of time. This view is based on two sayings of Muhammad that are considered authentic. Only the Hanafis made an exception for women because they were not in a position to fight the community.[51]

Whereas the classical jurists would demand the death penalty regardless of whether the person in question turned against the community after apostasy, contemporary jurists (following the Hanafi exception regarding women) would demand the death penalty only if the apostasy takes the form of transgressions and crimes and the person concerned is guilty of "high treason" (*al-ḫiyāna al-ʿaẓmā*) against the Muslim community and rebels against what is sacred to society. Al-Tayyeb also refers here to contemporary scholars such as Abū Zahra, Maḥmūd Shaltūt, and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Khallāf, who do not classify apostasy as an *ḥadd* offense with a fixed punishment; rather, they leave the level of punishment to the discretion of the respective ruler, who can flexibly orient himself to the given "conditions" *(ẓurūf)* of society.[52]

---

47 See Ahmad al-Tayyeb, *Mafhūm al-ǧihād fī l-islām*, 2019, 20-22. Available at: https://alimamaltayeb.com/books/22/مفهوم_الجهاد_في_الإسلام.
48 Ibid, 22.
49 The speech by al-Tayyeb and the subsequent question-and-answer session are available at: https://tinyurl.com/y8me7wvz.
50 The two interviews – episodes 10 and 11 (2016) of the program "al-Imām al-Ṭayyib" – are available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjUMHu7JSpw and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EminlQOAncg, respectively. The interviewer also addresses the critical question of the extent to which the punishment of apostates can be reconciled with the principle of citizenship.
51 See "Al-Imām al-Ṭayyib," episode 11 (2016).
52 Note ibid.

What is decisive with regard to a realistic reception of human fraternity is that al-Tayyeb explicitly distinguishes between the "freedom of faith" (*ḥurrīyat al-iʿtiqād*) and the "freedom of apostasy" (*ḥurrīyat al-ʾirtidād*), because the apostate knew the truth, initially embraced it and then turned his back on it. For al-Tayyib, the apostate can represent a "danger" (*ḫaṭar*) to the community, because turning away from one's former religion can be accompanied by hatred towards Islam. However, the Shaykh also sees the possibility of "intellectual and faith-related crises" (*azmāt fikrīya wa-īmānīya*), in which the person concerned turns to another religion or sect due to material or intellectual temptations. Here he recognizes no danger for Muslims and their society, but he emphasizes once again that all previous jurists would have considered the crime of apostasy in general – i.e., without the differentiation he has made – as a threat to Islamic society.[53]

Certain attempts at moderation and contextualization of tradition are therefore just as clear here as the remaining reservations about comprehensive religious freedom. Al-Tayyeb feels that judging Islamic societies by Western standards is unfair. For him, cultures such as the West, whose context and foundations have given rise to the freedom to engage in "apostasy," "to change religion" (*taġyīr ad-dīn*) and to express "non-religiosity" (*al-lādīn*), differ fundamentally and completely from a culture in which an "Islamic legal judgment" *(ḥukm islāmī)*[54] has emerged for dealing with apostasy.

Bin Bayyah seems to indicate a similar reservation with regard to religious freedom and freedom of opinion. In an English-language article entitled "Freedom as a Human Right" (2012), he begins by stating that Islam does not question the "inner thoughts" that people have in their homes. At the same time, he threatens those who, as the "fifth column or the agents of other civilizations," publicly spread their apostasy and thus, according to his interpretation, turn against the foundations of the Muslim social system, with "due Islamic punishment."[55] Bin Bayyah's long-time colleague al-Qaraḍāwī made a very similar distinction between minor apostasy, which the person concerned keeps to himself, and major apostasy, which must be resolutely combated.[56]

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that Daniel Philpott, a political scientist at the private Catholic University of Notre Dame, called for a "mean-

---

53 See "Al-Imām al-Ṭayyib," episode 10 (2016).
54 Ibid.
55 Abdullah bin Bayyah, "Freedom as a Human Right." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yk5yx9td.
56 See Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, "Apostasy - Major and Minor." Available at: https://islamonline.net/en/apostasy-major-and-minor. See also the detailed analysis of this and numerous other writings by al-Qaradawi on apostasy in Christine Schirrmacher, *"Let there be no Compulsion in Religion" (Surah 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians – Discourses on Apostasy, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock; Bonn: VKW: 2016), esp. 265-286, and Christine Schirrmacher, "Apostasy: What do contemporary Muslim theologians teach about religious freedom?" *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 6, no. 1/2 (2013): 196-197.

ingful, authentic dialogue" instead of a "cheap dialogue"[57] in the run-up to the Pope's visit in 2019. He expressed concern that the dialog could just be part of an image campaign. Although there are much more repressive states, such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, and although Christians, Hindus and other religious minorities in the UAE have the freedom to practice their religion in private, restrictions remain. Christians cannot "be public about their faith, they cannot communicate their faith through the media or have a procession down the street. Anything that might remotely smack of evangelization, and which some brush out as proselytism, is out."[58]

While conversions to Islam are encouraged, people who want to leave Islam and turn to another religion continue to face dangers, including the potential death penalty for blasphemy or apostasy.[59] The surprisingly clear statement in the Document on Human Fraternity, "God has no need to be defended by anyone," seems difficult to reconcile with al-Tayyib's and Bin Bayyah's statements on apostasy in the intra-Islamic discourse."[60] The fact that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1990 Cairo Declaration, and the 1994 Arab Charter on Human Rights are not cited by name in the Document on Human Fraternity, in favor of a general reference to "previous International Documents that emphasized the importance of the role of religions in the construction of world peace," is probably because it was not possible to agree on a common point of reference.[61]

7.   Implications for Christian mission: Dealing with fundamental differences

One controversial passage of the Document on Human Fraternity for Catholics is the formulation directly following the emphasis on freedom of belief, thought, expression, and action, according to which pluralism and the diversity of people, not only with regard to color, sex, race and language but also with regard to religion, "are willed by God in His wisdom, through which He created human beings."[62] At this point, Timo Güzelmansur sees "an imbalance in the document, because it compares characteristics of a person, such as color or gender, with

---

57 Ines San Martin, "As Pope heads to Gulf States, issues from Islam to immigration loom." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yckh4dx6.
58 Ibid.
59 See Jason Horowitz, "Pope Francis Makes 'Historic' Gulf Tour Amid Yemen Crisis and Christian Repression." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yeszs9wa.
60 Tino Güzelmansur, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit: Anmerkungen zur Papstreise und zum Dokument", *CIBEDO-Beiträge* 2 (2019): 54–64, here 57.
61 A detailed analysis of the Muslim and inner-Islamic criticism of these declarations can be found in Christine Schirrmacher, "Islamic human rights declarations and their critics. Muslim and non-Muslim objections to the universal validity of the Sharia," *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 4, no. 1 (2011): 40-60.
62 Ibid.

which he was born and over which he has no influence, with religious affilia-tion, over which he does have influence." He also points out the serious potential implications for religious freedom should turning away from one religion and converting to another be portrayed as "disregarding the divine will."[63]

Critics such as the Roman Catholic Auxiliary Bishop of Astana, Athanasius Schneider, interpret the blanket equation of religious diversity with the will of God as a "betrayal of the gospel," because Jesus Christ is no longer witnessed to as "the only Savior of Mankind." Schneider warns against a paralysis of the Catholic "mission *ad gentes*" and emphasizes, with reference to 1 Timothy 2:4 and Acts 4:12, among others, that it is rather the will of God to "lead all men to Jesus Christ and to eternal life."[64] In a discussion with Schneider, Pope Francis acknowledged the potential for misunderstandings and clarified that, unlike the diversity of sex, he attributes the diversity of religions solely to the "permissive will of God."[65]

A look at how al-Tayyeb has defined the relationship between Islam and other religions in the past clearly shows that even for him, the controversial formula-tion is by no means intended to express the equal validity of the religions and that he quite naturally assumes an Islamic claim to absolute truth and superior-ity. In a speech given in the USA in 2002, which was published in revised form in 2020 as part of a collection of speeches by al-Tayyeb, Islam appears as a "natu-ral extension" (*ïmtidād ṭabīʿī*) of previous "heavenly messages" and as the "final form" (*aṣ-ṣīġa an-nihāʾīya*) that corresponds to God's will for humanity "until the end of time" (*ilā nihāyati z-zamān*).[66]

In the "logic of the Qur'an" (*minṭaq al-qurʾān*), for al-Tayyeb there are actually no different religions, but only the one "divine religion" (*ad-dīn al-ʾilāhī*) – which he understands as an "invitation of people to the oneness of Allah." The vari-ous "heavenly messages" therefore differ only in the area of "legislation" (*tašrīʿ*), but not with regard to "faith" (*ʿaqīda*) and "morals" (*aḥlāq*).[67] For him, this also explains why the messengers and prophets who preceded Muhammad, such as Abraham, Noah, Moses and Jesus, are referred to as Muslims in the Qur'an, al-though he clarifies that they are of course not to be described as followers of

---

63 Güzelmansur, "Menschliche Brüderlichkeit," 61.
64 Interview with Bishop Athanasius Schneider on 26 August 2019, "The Christian Faith is the Only Valid and God-Willed Religion." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3f885vr8.
65 Interview with Bishop Athanasius Schneider, 7 March 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5774uxtr.
66 Ahmad al-Tayyib, "Al-Qaul al-Tayyeb. al-Islām wa-l-adyān," in al-Tayyib, *Min kalimāt al-imām al-akbar Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib*, 2020, Vol. 2, 13. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yxha3d8c.
67 Ibid, 13ff. In an interview in March 2019, al-Tayyib explains that although a distinction must be made between the Muslim, Christian and Jewish religions in everyday conversations, there is no distinction in the "language of the Qur'an, in [Islamic?] science and in reality" (*fī luġat al-qurʾān fī l-ʿilm fī-l-ḥaqīqa*); there is no Christian or Jewish religion but only one religion, and Islam is "the final manifestation" (*āḫir maẓhar*) of this religion. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=C8FLxyRZVag.

Muhammad.[68] In the same way, al-Tayyeb assumes the unity of the "heavenly books" (*al-kutub as-samāyīa*), so that the Gospel confirms the Torah and Muhammad confirms the Torah and the Gospel.[69]

It is certainly helpful and welcome, in view of the anti-Christian incitement and violence of extremist groups such as the Islamic State, that al-Tayyeb emphasizes the special closeness between Muslims and Christians in this speech based on Sura 5:82.[70] However, one misses a genuine interaction with the Christian self-understanding of the Gospel. In another speech that he gave in March 2010 as part of an interreligious dialogue event in Washington, he explicitly emphasizes that the Qur'an "confirms the divinely revealed books in their original form and insofar as they remain faithful to the intention of the divine source."[71] He thus upholds the traditional accusation of a falsification of the Torah and Gospel by Jews and Christians. This also means that the high esteem of these two holy scriptures as guidance and light, which he often refers to in the context of dialog, clearly does not relate to the Holy Scriptures read by Christians to this day and their self-image associated with them.

In this respect, the question arises as to how an open and respectful dialog can succeed despite these far-reaching mutual reservations and questions on both sides. To merely postulate an Islamic understanding of the common essence of all religions as the necessary basis for constructive coexistence, on the other hand, would be tantamount to a theological appropriation of the Christian dialog partner.

Such can be seen in the Muslim dialog initiative "A Common Word between Us and You" by 138 Muslim scholars from 2007. The open letter, also signed by al-Tayyeb and Bin Bayyah, appeals to Christian leaders worldwide to work together for world peace on the basis of assumed commonalities such as love of God and neighbor. In doing so, the presentation completely disregards key aspects of the faith for Christians (which are not shared by Muslims, and in some cases are sharply rejected) and at the same time talks only about "formal differences" (*iḫtilāfāt šaklīya*)[72] between Christianity and Islam. Gordon Nickel has shown that the central reference text (Sura 3:64) has played a key role in the context of

---

68 Ibid, 15-18.
69 Ibid., 18-19.
70 The context of the verse, however, makes it clear that the Christians meant here obviously recognized Muhammad as a prophet: "When they hear (during the recitation in worship?) what has come down (as revelation) to the Messenger, you see how their eyes overflow with tears because of the knowledge they (already) have of the truth (through their own revelation). They say: 'Lord! We believe. List us among the group of those who bear witness (to the truth)!'"
71 To my knowledge, only this English translation of his lecture is available: Ahmad Mohamed al-Tayyeb, "Islam and the Other Religions." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3s9485vu.
72 The Arabic text is available at: https://tinyurl.com/564duzrt. Various translations and official responses from Christian churches, organizations and individuals can be found at www.acommonword.com/downloads-and-translations/ and www.acommonword.com/christian-responses/.

Islamic Daʿwa (invitation to Islam) throughout history. In the classical tradition of interpretation, to which the leading Jordanian Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought is also expressly committed, it stands in the context of a polemical dispute between Muhammad and a Christian delegation from Najran. Muhammad wanted to confront them with his call to a "common word" or "common terms" (*kalimatin sawāʾin*) to dissuade them from believing in the divinity of Jesus.[73]

So where peaceful coexistence is made dependent on theological harmonization or the suppression of obviously fundamental differences in matters of faith, at best a short-term and deceptive harmony can be achieved, which has little to do with an authentic culture of dialog and demands a high price. That price is an often rather insidious, tacit renunciation of comprehensive religious freedom, which also includes the right to conversion and mission and the possibility of controversial debate, especially on fundamental questions of faith and life.

8.   Conclusions

In times of rampant Islamist extremism and existential threats to Christian and other minorities in Muslim-majority societies, there is a great desire for "climate change" in Christian-Muslim relations. Interfaith initiatives and declarations calling for peaceful, respectful and equal coexistence in the West and the Islamic world are of course to be welcomed. The Document on Human Fraternity could make an important difference if some of the goals expressed in it were actually made the basis of concrete policy and if influential educational institutions were to promote honest and self-critical reflection on the great gap between ideals and reality in current Christian-Muslim relations.

However, many important questions remain unanswered, and some have obviously been deliberately left out. This applies, among other things, to freedom of conversion, which Heiner Bielefeldt, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion, rightly described as a "litmus test for religious freedom."[74] Bin Bayyah's "jurisprudence of peace" and his *šūra* concept are much closer to the autocracy of the UAE than to a constitutional democracy. Despite some attempts at moderation and differentiation in the examined statements on apostasy, there is still plenty of room for the arbitrary restriction of freedom of belief and expression. This means that practically anyone who wants to openly express and

---

73 Gordon Nickel, "The Use of Sūra 3:64 in Interfaith Appeals: Dialogue or Daʿwa?" *Islam und christlicher Glaube / Islam and Christianity* 2 (2015): 37-40.

74 Heiner Bielefeldt, "Schwerpunktthema Apostasie – Die Freiheit zum Glaubenswechsel," in Deutsche Bischofskonferenz und Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland, eds., *Ökumenischer Bericht zur Religionsfreiheit von Christen weltweit 2017: Das Recht auf Religions- und Weltanschauungsfreiheit: Bedrohungen - Einschränkungen - Verletzungen* [Joint Texts No. 25], (2017): 47. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdfdms9k.

perhaps publicly justify their rejection of Islam or their conversion to Christianity may still be portrayed as a traitor who threatens the inviolable foundations of state and society.

Even where influential opinion leaders such as al-Tayyeb or Bin Bayyah condemn premature and exaggerated accusations of disbelief (*takfīr*) and the vigilante justice of radical Muslims against fellow believers and demand compliance with certain jurisprudential standards, they simultaneously create an ideological breeding ground in which radical groups can continue to grow. State and religion remain closely related, so the Islamic claim to truth can be enforced with violence against apostates or heretics if they are perceived as posing a danger to society.[75]

The rather critical findings of the analysis presented here raise the question of possible alternatives. Indonesia offers much more far-reaching and less ambiguous approaches to relativizing Muslim claims to power vis-à-vis people of other faiths and dissenters. For example, the Indonesian organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Islamic non-governmental organization with 40 million members, calls on Muslims worldwide to unequivocally recognize the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including full religious freedom, in its 2017 "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam."[76]

To overcome the current identity crisis, Muslims must critically question central concepts of Muslim orthodoxy and classical Islamic law, which have been repeatedly used to legitimize violence in recent decades, because they have become obsolete due to the conditions of modern nation-states.[77] In an article entitled "God Needs No Defense,"[78] Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), former Indonesian president (1999-2001) and chairman of NU from 1984 to 1999, regretted that "normative religious constraints" and "internal control mechanisms" had defeated Islamic humanism and paralyzed Muslim societies. Apostasy and blasphemy laws therefore prevent thinking "outside the box" not only in matters of religion, but also in other areas of life such as literature, science and culture.[79]

Although NU has welcomed the Document on Human Fraternity in principle and even received, in 2024, the Zayed Award for Human Fraternity together with the Muhammadiya movement, which is also Indonesian,[80] it clearly wants to go much further in its interpretation of central concerns than the Muslim dialog

---

75 See al-Tayyib, *Mafhūm al-ğihād fī l-islām*, 22.
76 "Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam" (21-22 May 2017). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/cnf92pkb.
77 "Declaration on Humanitarian Islam," 7.
78 Abdurrahman Wahid, "God Needs No Defense," in: Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, eds., *Silenced: How Apostasy and Blasphemy Codes Are Choking Freedom Worldwide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4f72ebm3.
79 Ibid, xix.
80 For details of the award, see https://tinyurl.com/2s3jcf2b.

partners of Pope Francis examined in this article. Thomas K. Johnson, senior theological advisor of the World Evangelical Alliance, therefore advocates "global cooperation" between Evangelicals and representatives of NU's "Humanitarian Islam" in the public sphere.[81] Johnson explicitly states that such cooperation is not about a "peace of shared religious beliefs," but about a "peace of compatible approaches to life in society based on similar approaches to public ethics."[82]

This distinction is essential; neither Christian-Muslim peace nor peace in society as a whole should be made dependent on theological consensus. Christians and Muslims (like Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, and other groups) must be challenged to demonstrate their peacefulness, especially where they encounter people with fundamentally different convictions. In terms of genuine and comprehensive religious freedom, this presupposes a consistent distinction between legitimate religious claims to truth, on one hand, and claims to political power that threaten peace on the other. On this point, the two main Muslim protagonists of the Documents on Human Fraternity lack the clarity and consistency demonstrated by NU in its declarations on Humanitarian Islam.

---

81 See Thomas K. Johnson, *Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations: A New Partnership for Peace and Religious Freedom* (Bonn: VKW, 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ywzmvxcy.
82 Ibid, 47.

Understanding origins of discrimination and reflecting on Christian responses
A case study on Turkey

Wolfgang Häde[1]

Abstract

This study examines the origins of discrimination against Christians in Turkey and explores appropriate Christian responses. Based on a case study of Turkish media, it identifies historical, political, and socio-psychological factors shaping negative perceptions. The paper highlights the enduring impact of Islamic and nationalist narratives, political strategies, and deep-rooted prejudices. Drawing on biblical teachings, particularly 1 Peter, it suggests responses such as embracing Christian identity, ethical engagement, mission commitment, and exemplary conduct. While persecution persists, a biblical understanding of suffering and mission can help Christians navigate challenges while maintaining faithfulness and integrity in Turkish society.

1. Introduction

In 2017, I published (in German) a study based on a qualitative content analysis of five daily newspapers in Turkey.[2] The study revealed the perception of Christians from the viewpoint of different socio-political milieus in Turkey.

The analysis discovered a rather diverse perception of Christians in nationalistic, fundamentalist Islamist, moderate Islamist, secular Kemalist and liberal democrat milieus.[3] However, alongside diversity there is a common perception of

---

1   Wolfgang Häde (D.Th. UNISA) has been working since 2001 among Protestant churches in Turkey. With the Germany-based Martin Bucer Seminary, he is engaged in theological training in Turkey and Germany. This article uses American English. Article submitted: 6 Sept. 2024; accepted: 15 Feb. 2025. Email: wghaede@gmail.com. ORCID: 0009-0008-5210-0835.

2   Wolfgang Häde, 2017. Anschuldigungen und Antwort des Glaubens: Wahrnehmungen von Christen in türkischen Tageszeitungen und Maßstäbe für eine christliche Reaktion. Berlin: LIT (Beiträge zur Missionswissenschaft/Interkulturellen Theologie, Vol. 38). See also Wolfgang Häde, 2013. Perceptions of Christians in Turkey? A study of the climate of accusations against Christians in Turkish newspapers, *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 6(1/2): 65-84.

3   Häde, 2017, 169-170.

Christians as potentially untrustworthy and dangerous. Besides being suspicious of Christians, the newspapers – reflecting the milieu that they represent, but also influencing it – give the impression that prejudice in Turkish society is frequently exploited for political and ideological goals.

This article focuses on the origins of prejudice against Christians in Turkey and the reasons underlying these negative perceptions. It then reflects on responses to prejudice and discrimination that Christians in Turkey may consider. The suggestions draw from the New Testament book of 1 Peter, written to believers in a similar context to what Christians in Turkey face today. Before that, I begin with a short summary of the findings.

2.   How are Christians perceived in Turkey?

In the eyes of the fundamentalist Islamic milieu,[4] Christians belong to a valid but outdated religion resisting the truth claims of the Qur'an. The nationalist milieu in Turkey[5] perceives Christians – and especially Christian missionaries – as an instrument of the Western attempt to weaken Turkey. The moderate Islamists[6] agree with this analysis. However, because of a greater confidence about the emergence of a strong Turkey, they can admit a certain – though subordinate – role for Christians in Turkey.

Secular Kemalists[7] and liberal Democrats[8] defend religious freedom as including Christians. Their suspicion against Christians is rather a distrust in the relation of conservative Christians to the ruling elite in the USA.

3.   What changed in Turkey after 2005?

Since 2005,[9] Turkey has been experienced considerable political turmoil and change. Former Prime Minister and now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been in power with his party, the AKP, since 2002-2003. Initially seen as a hope for a moderate Islam compatible with Western democratic-liberal values, he returned more and more to his own roots in a fundamentalist, anti-Western political Islam. Starting in 2015, Erdoğan's policies took a clear nationalist turn, which finally led to the coalition between Erdoğan's AKP and the nationalist party MHP starting from 2018.

---

4   As represented by the newspaper *Millî Gazete* (see Häde 2017, 125-138).
5   Newspaper *Yeniçağ*, Häde 2017, 115-125.
6   Newspaper *Yeni Şafak*, Häde 2017, 138-148.
7   Newspaper Cumhuriyet, Häde 2017, 153-160.
8   Newspaper Milliyet, Häde 2017, 148-153.
9   The study analyzed newspapers from November 2004 to January 2005. The rationale for choosing that period of time was a fiery discussion in Turkish media and society that originated from a seemingly serious attempt by the Turkish government to access the European Union, which brought more freedom to Christian activities. All of the analyzed newspapers joined this discussion and thereby revealed their respective perceptions of Christians.

In an article published in 2020,[10] I explained the changes in the political landscape and in the orientation of the newspapers I examined in my original study. However, I found that the general perceptions of Christians had not changed substantially.

There had been a decrease in negative media coverage of Christian activities in the years since 2007.[11] In recent years, however, there has been an increase in negative reporting about Christians and especially about their missionary activities.[12] The starting point for this increase seems to have been the arrest of US pastor and missionary Andrew Brunson in 2016, accompanied by the above-mentioned nationalist turn of Erdoğan and his party.

The years after 2016 saw a wave of deportations of foreign Christian church workers from Turkey.[13] In some cases, even foreign spouses of Turkish Christians were denied an extension of their residence permits. Some foreign Christians pursued court cases against their deportation or denial of entrance. Recently, a decision on some of these cases by the Turkish Constitutional Court (*Anayasa Mahkemesi*) denied the claim by the foreign Christians that their religious freedom had been infringed.[14]

4.   What are the origins of such perceptions?

4.1.   Historical origins

The historical Islamic and Koranic perception of Christianity as an outdated religion is still operative. The Koran and the status of Jews and Christians as *dhimmi* ("protected person") allows for some religious tolerance towards them. However, Christians resisting the prophetic claims of Muhammad are characterized as liars (cf. Sura 3:71-72; 4:50).[15] The role as *dhimmi* implies sub-

---

10   Wolfgang Häde, 2020. Perceptions of Christians as reflected by Turkish newspapers: Analysis and development, *Islam und Christlicher Glaube/Islam and Christianity* 2:18-29.

11   The years 2006 and 2007 saw murders of Christians in Turkey, culminating in the massacre against three Christian men in the East Turkey city of Malatya on 18 April 2007. The murderers had been affected by the negative media coverage.

12   See for instance an article in *Yeni Şafak* on 20 January 2021 titled "The Again Growing Danger in Social Media: Missionary Activities" ("Sosyal medyada yeniden büyüyen tehlike: Misyonerlik"). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n8wbsbr. Or the column of February, 19, 2023 in the islamist daily newspaper Yeni Akit about "The ´Missionaries´ and ´Agitators´ of the Earthquake" ("Depremin 'misyoner' ve 'provokatörleri'", Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4mzuzr4k.

13   See an article of 14 July 2020 on the website of the TV Station "Oda TV" with the title: "We had said 'Give the pastor, take the pastor.' We don't take any other pastor" ("Ver papazı al papazı" demiştik … Bir daha papaz almıyoruz"). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ye3czc85. The headline of this article on the deportation of foreign pastors in Turkey alludes to the Turkish government's perceived attempt to force the extradition of political opponent Fethullah Gülen, an Islamic cleric, from the US through the arrest of American pastor Andrew Brunson from 2016-2018.

14   See a relatively objective report about the decision in the Internet: https://tinyurl.com/8fyzejmw. The article in Haber7, however, sees the decision as "proof" that those Christians were agents for foreign countries: https://tinyurl.com/m57kr8hk.

15   See Häde 2017, 23.

ordination under the Muslim rulers.[16] Christian mission to Muslims is definitely barred.[17]

The experience of the invasion by Western Christian crusaders in the Middle East is maybe more than ever part of the common memory of Muslims, especially of Turks. "The Ottoman state was born on the frontier between Islam and Christendom."[18]

During the decline of the Ottoman Empire, starting with its defeat in the Russian-Ottoman War (1768-1774), most of the people groups rebelling against the Ottomans and gaining their independence were Christians, often with the support of Christian countries.[19] Consequently, the trauma of a broken empire for Turks is connected with the idea of Christians as the culprits. Starting from there, some intellectuals have developed a grand narrative of the centuries-old struggle between Islamic and Christian civilization.[20]

History is a heavy burden for today's perceptions of Christians in Turkey. Only part of this historical burden can be covered here.

4.2. Political strategies

Turkey is an illustration of Bernard Lewis' thesis in his book *History: Remembered, Discovered, Invented*,[21] where he uses examples from the Middle East to show that history is sometimes invented for political purposes.

After the demise of the multi-religious and multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire, the founders of the Republic of Turkey needed a new foundation for nationhood. From their viewpoint, nation building required a rewriting of history that Turkified non-Turkish Muslim people groups and excluded non-Muslims. "Ankara … viewed the country's Muslims as Turks and Christians as outsiders."[22] As Christians couldn´t become "real Turks" because of their religion, it wasn't supposed to be an option for a Turk to be or become a Christian.

The *Turkish-Islamic Synthesis*, developed in the 1970s by nationalist intellectual İbrahim Kafesoğlu, which gained significance in the Turkish political life of the

---

16 Clifford Edmund Bosworth, 1982. The Concept of Dhimma in Early Islam, in Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (eds.), *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*. New York: Holmes & Meier, 41. Bosworth aptly explains the role of *dhimmi*, which is derived from Sura 9:29: "The general purport of the verse is clear: the People of the Book are exempted from the general sentence of being combatted till death, the inexorable fate of obdurate pagans, but the price of their preservation is to be reduction to a humiliating status in society as second-class citizens, liable to a poll tax."
17 Häde 2017, 28.
18 Bernard Lewis, [1961] 2002. *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 42.
19 See Häde 2017, 48-53.
20 See Häde 2017, 143-145 about interpretations published in *Yeni Şafak*.
21 Bernhard Lewis, [1975] 1987. *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented*. 1st Touchstone ed. New York: Simon & Schuster.
22 Soner Cagaptay, 2005. *Islam, Secularism and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?* London: Routledge Chapman & Hall (Routledge Studies in Middle Eastern History), 156.

1980s, claims that the Turkish people found their true identity when they adopted Islam.[23] In the wake of converting to Islam, Turks became the savior of Islam against its enemies and the spearhead of Islamic expansion. Today, these ideas retain the potential to unite nationalists and Islamists in Turkey.

Once widespread distrust is present, the opportunity to use prejudice against Christians arises. The instrumentalization of prejudice against minorities for political causes is not limited to Turkey, but it can be seen time and again in Turkish political discourse. To name just two recent examples, in the early years of the Erdoğan administration, nationalist opposition figures cited vastly exaggerated numbers of Christian missionary activities as part of their propaganda against the Islamist government,[24] which then was accused of giving to much freedom to Christian missionaries in its attempt to gain access to the European Union. In 2020 the rededication of the famous Hagia Sophia as a mosque was certainly a move by President Erdoğan designed to please his political supporters.[25]

4.3. Socio-psychological origins

Socio-psychological origins of discrimination against Christians in Turkey are harder to demonstrate, because they are often unconscious. As stated by Gordon Allport in his classic work *The Nature of Prejudice*, the identities of societal groups or even nations are shaped by the distinction between *ingroup*s and *outgroups*.[26] This distinction is inevitable. However, in contexts such as Turkey, the outgroups are often perceived not only as "the other," but as an enemy.

Christians in contemporary Turkey are evaluated as strangers who pose a threat to the country's values and to societal order. Christof Sauer has shown convincingly that fear of the stranger may occur even in an environment where Christians and Muslims have lived side by side for centuries.[27]

Another important basis for prejudice and negative perception of Christians seems to be some kind of inferiority complex in light of the superiority of Western (Christian) countries during the time of colonialism and beyond, from which the Christian minorities within the Ottoman Empire benefited.[28] Since Erdoğan came to power, one of his main goals has been to replace this feeling of inferi-

---

23 See Ünal Bilir, 2004. Der Türkische Islam als politisches und religiöses Weltbild in seinem historischen Kern von der II. Meşrûtiyyet-Periode bis zur Gegenwart. (Diss. Doktor der Philosophie, Universität Hamburg), 44-45.
24 See Häde 2017, 1-5.
25 See Häde 2020, 24-29.
26 Gordon W Allport, [1954] 1979. *The Nature of Prejudice*. 25th anniversary edition. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 41-43.
27 See Christof Sauer, 2009. The Religious Other as a Threat: Religions Persecution as an Expression of Xenophobia – a Global Survey of Christian-Muslim Convivence. *Missionalia* 37: 88.
28 See Timur Kuran, 2011. *The Long Divergence. How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 189.

ority with a new consciousness of superiority as Muslims and as Turks, but still it appears that the Turkish people have not really arrived at a balanced point of identity and a balanced self-assessment.

4.4.   Christian theological interpretations

From a Christian perspective, historical, political or socio-psychological origins of discrimination against Christians are real but do not reflect the whole reality. Biblical-theological patterns of explanation are necessary not only where other explanations seem insufficient. Beyond the visible reality, there is an invisible reality that the apostle Paul characterizes as "eternal" (not "temporal," 2 Cor 4:18[29]).

The apostle Peter presumes (1 Pet 2:4-8) that Christ as the "cornerstone" of God's eschatological temple is "precious" to those who believe, but "a rock of stumbling and a rock of offence" to those who are not obedient to God's claim in Christ. Vernon J. Sterk therefore correctly speaks about "the confrontational nature of the Gospel."[30]

Jesus himself teaches his disciples that attacks against Christians will follow "for my name's sake" (John 15:21). "The church suffers because of the hatred towards Christ by the world in rebellion against God."[31]

At times, the extent of hatred against the very small minority of Christians in Turkey seems irrational and therefore more directly demands a spiritual explanation. The biblical book of Revelation reveals God's enemy especially behind untrue accusations against the church of Jesus. Satan is called "the accuser of our brethren" (Rev. 12:10).

We have summarized some of the origins of prejudice and discrimination of Christians in Turkey. Now we will turn to recommended responses by Christians to discrimination.[32]

5.   How should Turkish Christians respond to discrimination?

Vernon J. Sterk indicates, in his study of persecution in Chiapas, Mexico, the great importance of proper Christian responses to persecution as decisive in determining the results for the church.[33] Persecution of Christians will not necessarily lead to church growth and revival. Wise and appropriate responses will help the church to survive and maybe even prosper in persecution.

---

29 Scripture quotations are taken from the King James Bible.
30 Vernon J. Sterk, 2019. *Surviving Persecution: How to Understand, Prepare, and Respond.* Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 64.
31 Christof Sauer, 2010. Bad Urach Statement – Towards an Evangelical Theology of Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom for the Global Church in Mission, in Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (eds*.). Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom – Theological Reflections*. Bonn: VKW. (Religious Freedom Series Vol. 2), 49.
32 See Häde 2017, 197-260.
33 See especially Sterk 2019, xxi-xxii.

5.1. A biblical view of persecution

One basic prerequisite for appropriate responses to discrimination should be a well-founded biblical view of persecution. Jesus Christ himself prepared his disciples for persecution and gave a proper interpretation: "If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). The apostle Paul included persecution among the basics of teaching to new believers: "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). If Christian believers do not understand that suffering for the gospel is normal, they might be ill-prepared and disappointed once trouble approaches.

5.2. Being sure of one's identity in Christ

The main method of persecution in Turkey is a steady stream of negative opinions about and slander against Christians.

> Christians need to protect their own perception of Christian identity. The new Christians might develop a 'minority psyche' with all their negative aspects as well. They might lose their courage to contribute positively to society and perceive themselves as inferiors. Alternatively, Christians might develop a sectarian attitude, trying to live in their own social ghetto and secretly feeling superior to "the others."[34]

The role of a deep knowledge of true Christian identity as an antidote against the attempts by the persecutors to define Christian identity negatively becomes very obvious in 1 Peter, which is directed to Christians exposed to mainly verbal discrimination. Peter focuses on reminding the recipients in Anatolia of who they are in God's perspective, i.e., elect and chosen by God (1:2; 2:4; 2:9). They are "living stones" (2:4) in the eschatological temple of God and are commissioned to function as a "royal priesthood" (2:9). Miroslav Volf aptly explains, "Only those who refuse to be defined by their enemies can bless them."[35]

5.3. Openness to criticism

Many of the accusations in Turkey are and have been vastly exaggerated or outright lies.[36] That makes it difficult for Christians to engage with the criticism against them and especially against their missionary activities. However, Christians in Turkey should beware of completely ignoring all accusations. Arab Chris-

---

34 Wolfgang Häde, 2012. Persecution as a battle for defining identity: Reflections from Turkey, *International Journal for Religious Freedom*, 2012, 5(1): 94-95.

35 Miroslav Volf, 1994. *Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter.* Ex auditu 10, 21.

36 See Häde 2017, 122-125.

---

tian Tony Maalouf warns, "However, while missionaries and Christian workers should be ready to lay down their lives for the Gospel of Christ, one may need to stop and analyze some of the elements standing behind the rejection of the Gospel message in the Arab and Muslim context."[37]

A qualitative engagement with criticism may lead to correction and even repentance where necessary, or to better apologetics in the Turkish context.[38] Christians have made initial attempts at Turkish-language apologetic writings.[39] In a 2021 article, Armand Aupiais names Turkish mainstream´s perception of *misyoner faaliyetleri* (missionary activities) "the Missionary Chimera"[40] and offers a more thorough report on what drives the Protestant community, especially in Istanbul.[41]

5.4. Ethics guidelines for Christian mission

As Elmer Thiessen has shown, not only is mission an ethical necessity for followers of Jesus Christ, but it must be done in an ethical manner, befitting the character and ministry of Jesus himself.[42]

In an effort to define and publish an ethics of Christian mission, several documents have been developed. The most prominent among them was the declaration "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct,"[43] released on 28 June 2011 by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) of the Roman Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA).

As its title states, the short declaration gives "recommendations," not binding rules. However, Christians in Turkey can point to this balanced document when they face accusations of strongly unethical methods of mission. Christians in Turkey are accused of promising money or education abroad for conversions, putting dollar bills in New Testaments that they distribute, baiting young Muslims with pretty girls, using threats to force conversion, and more.[44] Christian

---

37 Tony Maalouf, 2008. Missions in the Context of Violence in the Middle East, in Keith E. Eitel (ed.). *Missions in Contexts of Violence.* Pasadena: William Carey Library, 378.

38 1 Peter 3:15: "And be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you." "Answer" is here the equivalent of the Greek *apologia*, from which "apologetics" is derived.

39 See Häde 2007, 200-201.

40 Armand Aupiais, 2021. From Missionaries to Missionary Labour. Hypotheses on Contemporary Evangelicalism in Istanbul (Turkey), in Norig Neveu, Karène Summerer-Sanchez, and Annalaura Turiano (eds.). *Missions and Preaching: Comparing and de-compartmentalising the study of the missionary phenomenon. Middle East-Northern Africa*, Leiden, Brill, 92.

41 Aupiais, 92-124.

42 Elmer J. Thiessen, 2018. *The Scandal of Evangelism: A Biblical Study of the Ethics of Evangelism*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

43 World Council of Churches et al. 2011. Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World. Recommendations for Conduct. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2r6tkf3u.

44 See Häde 2017, 123-124; 134-135.

missionaries may present and indicate their adherence to the guidelines of the said declaration to distance themselves from any unethical methods of mission – regardless of whether such cases are real or just slander.

5.5.   Never accepting a Christianity without mission

Attacks against Christians in Turkey are mostly directed against missionary activities. Awareness of unethical methods of missionary work – if they occur – must never lead to accepting a Christianity without mission. Even a study of Christian missiology by an Islamic scholar in Turkey concluded that for the Christian church this would be to deny its *raison d'être*.[45]

Theologically, it is not possible for the church not to join the *missio dei*, the mission of God to save a people for his own. "The notion of mission is intimately bound up with his [God's] saving plan which moves from creation to new creation."[46] This statement is biblically clear, but today it has to be defended against the Islamic concept of Christianity as a religion that has a right to exist, but basically as subordinate to Islam and without any missionary intention toward Muslims. The indispensability of mission as a call to faith in Christ is also under attack by a pluralistic theology of religion[47] and other derivatives of a Christianity that does not accept Jesus as the only name to find salvation (see Acts 4:12).

5.6.   Living a good life

Peter wrote his first New Testament letter in a context that resembles the situation in today's Turkey. There were verbal attacks against Christians. Neighbors of the followers of Jesus perceived them as strange (1 Pet 4:4), causing them to "speak against" Christians "as evildoers" (2:12). They had a tendency to "speak evil" and "falsely accuse" (3:16).

The main Christian response that Peter seems to recommend is a good life. Seeing "your good works" may even lead those who blame Christians to glorify God, i.e., to repent (2:12). Christians are called to "put to silence the ignorance of foolish men" by "well doing" (2:15). As a result, "they may be ashamed that falsely accuse our good conversation in Christ" (3:16).

Doing good things should be a strategy for Christians in Turkey as well. I saw a TikTok video a few weeks after the devastating earthquakes of 6 February 2023 in southeastern Turkey. A few religious Muslims were talking about the Christian ac-

---

45 Süleyman Turan 2011. Misyoloji. Hıristiyan Misyon Bilimi [Missiology. Christian Science of Mission]. Ankara: Sarkaç, 18.

46 Andreas O. Köstenberger and Peter T. O'Brian 2001. *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Missions*. Leicester: Inter Varsity, 25.

47 See for instance the book by its main proponent: John Hick, 1980. *God Has Many Names*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

tivities in earthquake relief. They complained that the young Christians were very friendly to the people and even cleaned a small park regularly. This behavior was interpreted as an evil missionary strategy. Many Turkish people wrote commentaries on the website that showed this video. The great majority of them praised the Christians and called on the accusers to start cleaning parks themselves.

5.7. *Enduring injustice*

However, 1 Peter and other apostolic writings never promise that an ethical approach in mission and good living will satisfy and convince everybody. Christians should use all ethically appropriate means to avoid or reduce persecution, but they should also be prepared to endure suffering.

Peter does not just invite Christians to be ready to suffer; he puts their sufferings in a deep Christological context. Christians are "called" to endure suffering "because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps" (1 Pet 2:21). For the apostle Paul, "to suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29) is counted a privilege. He even yearns for the "fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil 3:10). In countries like Turkey where Christians experience pressure, they must be taught that following Christ is not a guarantee that all troubles will be taken away but part and parcel of following the suffering Christ.

On this path, Christ promises special support to his followers. The Holy Spirit will speak through them in times of persecution (Matt 10:20; see also 1 Pet 4:14), and every single hair on their head is under the control of their heavenly Father (Matt. 10:30).

6. Conclusions

In today's Turkey, we find a complex mixture of origins of prejudice and discrimination against the small Christian minority. The idea, dating back to early Islam, of Christians as a subordinate people inside an Islamic empire remains powerful. The long history of confrontation with "Christian" powers during the decline of the Ottoman Empire continued all the way up to the beginning of the Republic of Turkey. In the process of building the new nation, Christians were perceived as an ongoing danger rather than as contributing to the state and society.

From the perspective of the Bible and history, it would be wrong to expect that persecution will purify the church of Christ in Turkey. In contrast, the church needs purification and spiritual knowledge to be prepared for persecution. The church's response to prejudice and accusations will affect the outcome.

Christians in Turkey therefore need a clear biblical view of suffering as followers of the suffering Christ. A strong focus should be placed on believers' identity in Christ as an antidote to false definitions by their persecutors.

Leaders of the Christian community must be ready to honestly evaluate criticisms lodged against them and their missionary approaches. Ethical guidelines in mission might be helpful not only for self-correction, but also as a basis for public apologetics. However, the indispensability of active mission for the church of Jesus must never be denied.

A good and exemplary life within Turkish society is not only a requirement for Christian living but may also help to convince some members of the society to trust their Christian neighbors more than the accusations against them. However, suffering for the sake of Christ will always be part of the authentic Christian life.

Further research would be warranted to assess how Christians in Turkey – and especially the Protestants, who are most active in mission – actually respond to persecution.[48]

---

48 A 2017 study examines the efforts of religious minorities in Turkey to secure their religious freedom. However, the study focuses on the (non-Christian) Alevis and two important Orthodox minorities, the Armenians and the Arameans. See: Mehmet Bardakci, Annette Freyberg-Inan, Christoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, 2017. *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Syriacs and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom*, London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Download IIRF reports on a wide variety of religious freedom issues!

IIRF Reports

Janet Epp Buckingham

Exploring the Intersection and Universal Freedoms: Christians and Human Rights

2024/

International for Religious

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan and Dennis P. P

African Countries Dominate Ne
Anti-Religious Violence Datab
but Latin American countries
alarming rise

2024/
Internati
for Rel

Ronald Boyd-MacMillan and Dennis P. Petri

VID shows Sub-Saharan Countries are
the Epicentre of Modern Martyrdom

2024/8
International Institute
for Religious Freedom

IIRF

https://iirf.global/
publications-resources/reports

The totalitarian state then and now
A theological analysis

Torbjörn Johansson[1]

Abstract

To understand and criticize the state with regard to totalitarianism and religious freedom, one must have a standard by which to evaluate the current situation. The Lutheran Reformation, by providing a theological rationale for the limits of the state in relation to religion and the family, gives us a tool for such an evaluation. By showing how this theological understanding of the state was used in the resistance to Nazism in Germany and Norway, the article argues that the same theology is useful today in critiquing the totalitarian features of the modern welfare state, such as in Finland.

1.   Introduction

To evaluate and assess the contemporary situation in a particular country, one must have an idea of what a state essentially is and what the ideal state looks like. Of all the analyses that can be made of a state – e.g., historical, political, philosophical – from a Christian perspective, theological analysis is the most fundamental. In this article, I analyze the issue of totalitarian state and religious freedom from a biblical and confessional understanding of what a state is. A theological understanding of the state and its legitimate tasks enables totalitarian tendencies to become apparent.

My focus is not on situations where totalitarianism is obvious, as in Communist and Islamic states, but where totalitarian traits can emerge more unexpect-

---

1   Torbjörn Johansson, Theol. Dr., Rector at Lutheran School of Theology, Gothenburg, Sweden. This article uses American English. Date submitted: 9 August 2024; accepted: 1 March 2025. Email: torbjorn. johansson@ffg.se. ORCID: 0009-0008-1697-6688.

edly. From a theological perspective, as we will see, democracy can be totalitarian while forms of autocracy do not necessarily have to be.[2]

The heading "The Totalitarian State *then*" refers to the totalitarian states that emerged in the 20th century in Europe. I will examine National Socialism in Germany, which forced Christians to think through issues concerning the proper limits of state intervention. Applying this reflection should help us to address contemporary situations. In the cases we will look at, from Germany and Norway, the theologians were inspired not only directly by Scripture but also by the theological heritage of the Reformation.

I believe a continuity exists between the totalitarian state in its Nazi form and the totalitarian features that appear in the modern welfare state. In both cases, a theological understanding of the state provides a solid basis for critiquing the state's actions, and the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation can be a particularly helpful tool. I will therefore begin by looking at the Reformers' understanding of the state, and then we will consider how it was fruitfully used in the critique of Nazism and how it can be applied to the current situation.

2.   The Reformation and the state

The Lutheran reformers understood human life in terms of three different "estates" or orders: *politia, oeconomia,* and *ecclesia.* They took this division and terminology from the Middle Ages but changed the meaning of the terms according to their understanding of Scripture. Central theological features of the Reformation, such as the doctrine of the universal priesthood and the doctrine of vocation, played an important role in this transformation of estates. The Reformers' understanding of these matters found its way into confessional documents. The three estates are treated in the two most fundamental documents in the Book of Concord, namely the Augsburg Confession (Confessio Augustana, 1530) and Luther's Small Catechism (1529).[3]

Article 16 of the Augsburg Confession deals with life in society. Philip Melanchthon writes that the gospel does not overthrow government or family (*non dissipat politiam aut oeconomiam*), but that both are to be regarded as God's orders (*ordinationes Dei*).[4] He criticizes the Roman Catholic theologians' claim that

---

2   Dietrich Bonhoeffer's resistance against the totalitarian state was combined with his doubts concerning democracy. From Bonhoeffer's perspective, democracy was the way by which Hitler and the Nazi party gained power in Germany. See Wolf Krötke, *Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Theologians for a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 227.

3   In some major Lutheran churches, including the Norwegian and the Danish churches, the entire Book of Concord has not been accepted but only these two writings, together with three ancient creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, and Athanasian).

4   *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 47-51.

Christian perfection would require leaving house and home (an implicit Catholic endorsement of monasticism). Furthermore, Anabaptist groups are criticized for refusing to participate in secular government, such as by taking oaths. Instead, Melanchthon affirms the *politia* and the *oeconomia* and writes that the gospel "completely (*maxime*) requires both their preservation as ordinances of God and the exercise of love within these ordinances." A Christian citizen is obliged to obey the magistrates, unless the magistrates command sinful action.[5] Melanchthon here refers to what has been called *clausula Petri*, referring to Peter's words in Acts 5:29 that a Christian must obey God more than men.

Melanchthon uses the three concepts *politia, oeconomia,* and *ecclesia* in describing human life in society and church. Every Christian is called into all three estates, and all three are all subject to God and his commandments. Obedience to the state is limited only by Christians' obligation not to follow a sinful command – as occurred later in the 16th century when princes, through various decrees, tried to force the church to adopt ceremonies and teachings that were contrary to the Bible.

Another important article in the Augsburg Confession regarding the authority of the state is article 28, "Concerning the Church's Power." This article is primarily about the relationship between spiritual and secular power and deals with bishops who also have secular power. The spiritual power is exercised by the word of God; the secular power, ultimately, by the sword. These two authorities, the state and the church, are both from God. They are to be appreciated "as the two highest gifts of God on earth."[6] However, the separation between them is crucial, and they must not interfere in each other's spheres. Article 28 deals sharply with cases when these two are confused: "For secular authority deals with matters altogether different from the gospel. Secular power does not protect the soul but, using the sword and physical penalties, it protects the body and goods against external violence."[7] As stated in article 16, the two authorities come from God as gifts. They concern different parts of reality (the soul and body), and they use different means to achieve their goals.[8]

In Luther's Small Catechism, the same basic theological idea is encountered as in the Confessio Augustana, namely that the Christian life should be lived out in existing orders in the world. The catechism ends with the so-called Household Chart (*Haustafel*), which is Luther's name for the New Testament passages with exhortations to various groups in the church. Luther writes that these are "for all

---

5   *Book of Concord*, 51.
6   *Book of Concord*, 92.
7   *Book of Concord*, 92.
8   *Book of Concord*, 92f.

kinds of holy orders and walks of life." By the term "holy orders," Luther alludes to the various monastic orders. He argues, in contrast, that the true holy orders are those established by God: *politia*, *oeconomia*, and *ecclesia*.[9]

Luther elaborates on this idea in his *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, written in 1528, one year before the Small Catechism. Here too, he refers to "holy orders," which are instituted by God and include the priesthood, marriage, and secular authority. They can be called holy because they are commanded by God. That is how he has commanded the saints to live, and therefore these orders are holy. "For God's Word is holy and sanctifies everything connected with it and involved in it."[10]

In these central confessional texts, we can see that the Reformers place great value on life in the *politia* and *oeconomia*. Life in state and family does not represent a lower degree of perfection but, on the contrary, is the good life that God has ordained in his word. Luther could claim that since the days of the apostles, no one has so exalted the magistrates as he had done.[11] However, as we have seen, Christian submission to the state is not blind obedience. If the state does not observe God's commandments, it must be denied obedience.

A more detailed distinction between *oeconomia* and *politia* appears in Luther's exposition of the fourth commandment in his Large Catechism.[12] Here, he describes how all authority in society ultimately goes back to the authority of the parents. As an example, Luther mentions a father who is unable to educate his child and therefore enlists a schoolmaster. "Thus all who are called masters stand in the place of parents and must derive from them their power and authority to govern."[13] The relationship between parental responsibility and schools is a clear area of potential conflict between a totalitarian state and the church and family, as we will see below.

We have looked at central texts that belong to the Lutheran confessional tradition. The lines that have been drawn are relatively clear and simple, with a distinct demarcation between spiritual and secular power. However, when this is applied and translated into concrete policy, difficult considerations can arise, which Luther and Melanchthon themselves had to handle. The problem became clear when Thomas Müntzer emerged with a theology quite different from Luther's.[14] According to Müntzer, a kingdom of God would be established on earth.

---

9   *Book of Concord*, 365. Cf. 365, footnote 111.
10 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 37, ed. by Robert H. Fischer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 365.
11 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 46, ed. by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 95.
12 *Book of Concord*, 400-410.
13 *Book of Concord*, 406.
14 For Müntzer's position, see *Der Theologe Thomas Müntzer. Untersuchungen zu seiner Entwicklung und Lehre*, herausgegeben von Siegfried Bräuer und Helmar Junghans (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rubrecht, 1989).

The means of this kingdom would be violence and the sword, as in the Old Testament. In various ways, Müntzer collaborated with the peasant uprisings that were taking place and eventually managed to gather an army. When Luther advised the authorities to intervene against Müntzer, it may at first glance appear that Luther was asking the authorities to transgress the boundary between the secular and the spiritual. But for Luther, Müntzer was not only a false teacher; he was also a revolutionary. And the prince's task was to safeguard peace and justice in the kingdom, so he had the right to intervene with force.[15]

The Müntzer case highlights the difficulty of drawing the demarcation between spheres, because the religious dimension or sphere sometimes includes a political, secular dimension, which influences how the authorities act. "They are not heretics only but rebels."[16] The political, secular dimension may justify the state authority's intervention in what is primarily a matter of faith and theology and thus outside the authority's mandate. As we shall see below, this means it is not enough to look at state and religion as merely formal concepts in a structure; from a Christian perspective, the question of state action also becomes a question of content. Are the actions and values that the authorities want to promote in accordance with God's commandments? We will return to this question at the end of the article.

Luther's struggle against Müntzer can also help us understand how the Lutheran church developed *das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment*, or the idea that the prince also was the leader of the church in his territory. As discussed above, according to Luther there are legitimate cases in which a prince can intervene against a heresy precisely because he is a prince. Moreover, the prince was not only a ruler but also a member of the church, and as such he could be part of the leadership of the church, especially in case of emergency. Strictly speaking, it was not as a prince but as a Christian brother in the congregation that he acted in ecclesiastical matters.[17] Initially, the justification for this system was the lack

---

15 Luther formulated his position in general terms – maybe with Thomas Müntzer in mind – in a commentary on Psalm 82 (1530). See *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 13, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), 61.

16 *Luther's Works: American Edition*, vol. 13, 61.

17 James M. Estes, who argues that Luther changed his position regarding the role of the magistrates under influence from Melanchthon, calls it a "cumbersome distinction." Estes, "The Role of Godly Magistrates in the Church: Melanchthon as Luther's Interpreter and Collaborator," *Church History* 67:3 (1998): 473: "Similarly, the cumbersome distinction between the prince acting sometimes as prince, sometimes as Christian brother, and sometimes as both, was difficult to take seriously." But obviously Luther took it seriously, as is shown by his elaborated defense of it in his early works, see Karl Holl's classic study, "Luther und das landesherrliche Kirchenregiment," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte I: Luther*, dritte vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 326-380. Estes' thesis that Luther changed his position during his career, has been criticized by David M. Whitford, "Cura Religionis or Two Kingdoms: The Late Luther on Religion and the State in the Lectures on Genesis," *Church History* 73:1 (2004): 41-62. Recently Estes' interpretation has been defended by Peter Olsen, "Augustine and Luther on Toleration and Coercion," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 17:1 (2024): 79-91.

of functioning church structures, but then the system became permanent. There are differing opinions about the roles played by Melanchthon and Luther during the 1530s, but we will not go into this question here. However, the accepted confessional writings should have a special status. Although the question of how Melanchthon and Luther dealt with the issues that arose is interesting, their other writings are still to be regarded as private expressions that can provide guidance, not as binding confessional documents.[18]

We have now looked at the main features of the Lutheran Reformation understanding of life in church and state. It is, of course, shaped by the conditions of the time, but in its basic features it is an interpretation of the Bible that can be adapted and applied to other historical situations. We will now see how this was done in the totalitarian situation in Germany and Norway under the pressure of Nazism, and then how it can be adapted and applied to situations today.

3.   German resistance: The Bethel Confession (1933)

The totalitarian state as a concept is associated with political developments of the 20th century. There are, of course, many aspects of the question of how to define "totalitarian," and the literature on the phenomenon is extensive.[19] Defining the term is itself part of the analysis and critique of the phenomenon. As mentioned in the introduction, the critique of the totalitarian state is based on the understanding of an ideal state. One strength of the theological concept of the state outlined above is that it operates with clear boundaries as to the task of the state. As we will see below in the German resistance to the National Socialist state, this was the crucial point of the critique and thus part of the definition of "totalitarian," as describing a state that no longer respects the boundaries set by the Creator.

In Germany, the National Socialist Party came to power through democratic elections, which it then abolished. However, it was not the abolition of democracy that caused some theologians to sound the alarm early on, but something else. Rather, their theological understanding of the state caused them to perceive the deeper change that was beginning. Like a seismograph, they perceived a movement that only later became apparent to others.

---

18 Cf. Hermann Sasse, "Church Government and Secular Authority According to Lutheran Doctrine" (1935), in *The Lonely Way: Selected Essays and Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Matthew C. Harrison (Saint Louis: Concordia, 2002), 179: "Our doctrine must be taken first of all from the church's confessions. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church has certainly not adapted every individual thought of the Reformer as its doctrine and placed each under 'we believe, teach, and confess' of its confession."

19 For an overview of the questions, see Emilio Gentile, "Total and Totalitarian Ideologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed. Michael Freeden and Marc Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 56-72.

Theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse were among the co-authors of the so-called Bethel Confession written in 1933, after Hitler came to power.[20] Both were among Hitler's first opponents, but while others cited political reasons, these two men had theological reasons for their opposition. Specifically, the totalitarian state that they saw emerging no longer respected the boundaries within which it should operate. Instead, it wanted to encompass the whole of human life and to intervene in all its different spheres – family, child-rearing, faith, values – as if it were above them all.

The Bethel Confession was written after it became clear that the National Socialists' church-political party, "German Christians", had won in the church election. The opposition tried to rally around a common confession. However, they did not succeed in making the Bethel Confession such a unifying confession, and instead the Barmen Declaration of 1934 would take on this function. But the Bethel Confession has nevertheless been called "a shining, sharp and impressive witness to what theological work could still be accomplished in the summer of 1933."[21]

In the Bethel Confession, the article "Church and State" deals with controversial issues.[22] Notable is the frequency of words such as "border" and "limit." The article emphasizes that both church and state come from God, yet they are separated by "insurmountable borders." The task of the state is to protect human life, to preserve discipline and honor (with reference to Confessio Augustana article 28). The church, on the other hand, has the message of Christ and salvation in him as its mission. The danger that the confessors have in mind is then explicitly stated when the confession warns against "worshipping an *unlimited* authority as life-giver and life-bringer" (emphasis added). In summary, the question about limits is crucial in order to reach a correct understanding of state authority. When the state transgresses its God-given boundaries, it embarks on a collision course with the Christian church.

In a manner reminiscent of the Augsburg Confession, the Bethel Confession warns against various forms of confusion between spiritual and secular power. It states that the church misunderstands its task if it seeks to be a political power by demanding that baptism should be a requirement for citizenship in the state. Its true service to the state is instead to offer "a scriptural proclamation and confession." The opposite abuse occurs when the state wants to use the church as an instrument for its own goals. The false state cannot bear to hear of Christ's power to rule the world. This sharp criticism of various forms of confusion between the

---

20 For their cooperation and the text of the Confession in English translation, see Torbjörn Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny: An Examination of the Bethel Confession Proposed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Hermann Sasse in August 1933*, trans. Bror Erickson (Irvine, CA:1517 Publishing, 2023).

21 Klaus Scholder, *Die Kirchen und das Dritte Reich*, vol. 1 (Munich: Propyläen Taschenbuch, 2000), 647.

22 See Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 48-49.

two powers means that all forms of a "Christian state" are rejected. The task of the authorities, whether dealing with pagans or Christians, is to carry the sword rightly, remaining within their boundaries.[23]

The article on church and state makes a clear distinction between the earthly and the heavenly realms. The secular state's task is to protect and sustain earthly life by using the sword as a defense against evil. The church cannot protect earthly life. At the same time, this earthly life is the home of decay and belongs to the "realm of death." Salvation is something different and comes only through Christ. The task of the church is to preach and confess and thus to bring man into the "realm of salvation."

Sasse and Bonhoeffer, the main authors of the Bethel Confession, were among those who first discerned the evil in National Socialism and sounded the alarm. Why were they not deceived like so many others of their contemporaries?

Sasse, then a Lutheran pastor in Berlin and later a professor of church history in Erlangen, held a clear conviction of what a state should be, and he combined his view with insight into the political realities that arose as National Socialism grew stronger. In summer 1932, half a year before Hitler came to power in January 1933, Sasse published an article strongly criticizing the program of the National Socialist Party.[24]

Sasse argued that it was impossible for Christians to accept the National Socialist party program. He particularly criticized its article 24, which stated as follows: "We demand freedom for all religious confessions within the state, so far as they do not threaten its existence or counteract the morality or moral sense of the Germanic race."[25] The description of the church's freedom as conditional and placed below other values caused Sasse to react strongly. "One may perhaps forgive National Socialism all its theological sins, but this article 24 excludes every possibility of dialogue with the Church, whether Protestant or Catholic."[26] According to Sasse, the issue was thus ultimately about religious freedom, and in particular the freedom to preach the gospel without hindrance. On this point, Klaus Scholder writes that theological considerations, not political ones, guided Sasse.[27]

The American theologian Ronald Feuerhahn emphasizes that Sasse's critique of National Socialism was an example of spiritual discernment.[28] Since Sasse took Scripture's words about supernatural forces seriously, he could clearly see

---

23   Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 49.
24   Johansson, *Faith in The Face of Tyranny*, 20.
25   For the program, see https://tinyurl.com/ydathced.
26   In the official yearbook of the Protestant churches, *Kirchliches Jahrbuch*, here after Ronald Feuerhahn, "Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel," in *The Beauty and the Bands*, ed. John R. Fehrmann, Daniel Preus, and Bruce Lukas (Crestwood, MO: Luther Academy, 1995), 159-172, 161.
27   Cf. Feuerhahn, "Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel," 162.
28   Feuerhahn, "Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel," 162-165.

the evil of early National Socialism. In a 1936 letter, he wrote to a friend in the United States that he had seen people go to mass meetings and be completely transformed: "You must understand National Socialism, Fascism and Bolshevism just as embodiment of great superhuman spiritual powers in the sense of Eph. 6:12 which subject whole peoples to themselves."[29] Sasse described the National Socialism movement as "infinitely hard to understand." He explained how it had gained a foothold in the hearts of the Christian people because it began as a political movement that held many Christian values and was perceived as a counterforce to the prevailing decay. But behind this, something else was secretly developing, and over time its "demonic and antichrist powers" became visible. Feuerhahn underscores the importance of the spiritual perspective: "For Sasse, it was because this ideology was seen in a theological perspective, not merely political or human, that its real nature was clear. He saw it frankly in terms of 'forces,' of 'spirits,' of cosmic powers." This, Feuerhahn continues, set Sasse apart from many other theologians of his time who preferred to speak of "ideas" rather than of "spirits."[30] This spiritual dimension was thus combined with his understanding of the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine.

Much has been written about Bonhoeffer, the other main author of the Bethel Confession, but what is particularly important here is his theological analysis of the state. Already in 1933, Bonhoeffer had a clear idea of the limits within which the state must operate. In his *Ethics* manuscript (written between 1940 and 1943 and published posthumously), he developed his understanding of society and state, particularly in his thoughts about the various "mandates." Instead of *Amt*, "office," a term commonly used in contemporary theology and that he himself had used in the past, Bonhoeffer now uses the term "mandate": "By 'mandate' we understand the concrete divine commission grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of scripture."[31] He argues that the term "office" has become secularized and so connected with a bureaucratic system that it is no longer workable. The word "mandate" is his way to try to recapture what was previously meant by "order," "estate" or "office."[32] By "mandate," Bonhoeffer means that a person is endowed with divine authority: "The bearer of the mandate acts as a vicarious representative, as a stand-in for the one who issued the commission."[33]

---

29 Feuerhahn, "Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel," 164.
30 Feuerhahn, "Hermann Sasse on Law and Gospel," 163f.
31 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, ed. by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 389.
32 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 389f.
33 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 389. Cf. Martin Luther's exposition of the fourth commandment in The Large Catechism, where the parents are said to be "God's representatives." See *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 401.

Bonhoeffer finds four divine mandates: marriage, work, government, and church. He sees his elaboration of them as an interpretation of the Lutheran doctrine of the three estates.[34] Bonhoeffer believes that the enduring value of the three-estates doctrine is that the estates are placed side by side, not hierarchically as superior and subordinate. This means that the authorities must not enter into the order of the church, nor may the church encroach on the order of the authorities, which would lead to imposed ecclesial control (*kirchliche Fremdherrschaft*).[35]

Bonhoeffer's use of the mandates is his response to contemporary Lutheran theology's understanding of "orders of creation." Among the contemporary Lutheran theologians, people, race, class, and nation could also be counted among the given orders. But Bonhoeffer does not want to include them among the mandates. Why? As mentioned above, Bonhoeffer argues in his *Ethics* that the mandates are grounded in the revelation of Christ and the testimony of the Scriptures.[36] He justifies the number of mandates by the fact that the Bible ascribes precisely these tasks to man and makes promises attached to them. Here we see how Bonhoeffer activates one of the basic principles of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura*. In his analysis and understanding of the state, he is bound to what Scripture has to say about man's life in state, society, and church. This concept of biblical revelation thus guides him to assess the situation in a different way from many of his contemporary theologians.

In summary, their theologically motivated understanding of the state enabled Sasse and Bonhoeffer to see what was happening in National Socialist Germany.

4. Norwegian resistance: *Kirkens Grunn*

The Bethel Confession was written in 1933, but the Barmen Declaration attracted support from a larger collection of German pastors in 1934. In the Nordic countries, a similar confessional document with a broad impact appeared in 1942, when *Kirkens Grunn* (*The Foundation of the Church*) was published in Norway.[37] One of the leaders behind this confession was Bishop Eivind Berg-

---

34 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 16, ed. Mark S. Brocker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 549.
35 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 16, 549.
36 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, 389.
37 See Torleiv Austad, *Kirkens Grunn: Analyse av en kirkelig bekjennelse fra okkupasjonstiden 1940-45*, Oslo: Luther forlag, 1974, 27-32, for the text of the confession. For English translation, see Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration", *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28:2 (2015), 294-299. Austad has treated the Norwegian position during the war in a larger context in "Attitudes Toward the State in Western Theological Thinking," *Themelios* 16:1 (1990), 18-22. In Denmark, a similar document to "The Foundation of the Church" was published in March 1944: "Kirken og Retten i den aktuelle Situation" (Church and Justice in the Current Situation), but it never played a similar role to the document in Norway. The author was Regin Prenter, later professor in Aarhus, and it was supported by Knud E. Løgstrup, professor at Aarhus University. See Jørgen Glenthøy, *Kirkelige dokumenter fra besættelsetiden. Officielle og uofficielle hyrdebrev, bekendelser og erklæringer fra den danske kirke – samt et tillæg fra den norske kirke og den tyske Bekendelsekirke, udgivet i anledning av 40 års dagen for Danmarks befrielse 5. maj 1945*, 19-24.

grav, who was imprisoned during part of the occupation.[38] Gathering around *Kirkens Grunn*, the pastors of the Norwegian state church resigned their offices in protest against the pro-German party *Nasjonal samling* (National Rally), led by Vidkun Quisling. In essence, *Kirkens Grunn* was about the church's freedom from the state. This confession, too, contains a specific understanding of the state and its mission.

The fifth article is entitled "On the Proper Relation of Christians and the Church to the Authorities."[39] In line with the Confessio Augustana, it emphasizes that both state and church come from God and must not be confused with each other. They are called two "orders" or "regiments." Obedience to the state is inculcated, but this obedience has a limit. God is confessed as the Lord over all orders and above all authority on earth. If the state does not maintain justice and righteousness, it becomes a demonic power. In a manner similar to Bonhoeffer's description of the mandate, the parallel positions of these two orders are emphasized. Toward the end of the article, it warns against the "totalitarian demands" to rule consciences.

Article 4 is entitled "On the Right and Duty of Parents and the Church in the Upbringing of Children." Here, the area of conflict between different understandings of the scope of the state is concretized. The document draws a clear line on behalf of parents' right and duty to raise their children in a Christian way. In line with this claim, the right to Christian schools (article 3) is also asserted.

Without going deeper into the confession, we can state that it draws similar theological conclusions as the Bethel Confession, with references to Confessio Augustana article 28. In this way, Bishop Berggrav used the Lutheran idea of two kingdoms or regiments as a criticism of the German occupying power and its attempts to force the Norwegian church and people to come under it. This is an obvious example of a theologically motivated struggle against totalitarian claims.

So far, the lines are as expected, but it may be surprising that the same Bishop Berggrav, a few years after the end of the war, warned against the totalitarian state in a new form, namely the modern welfare state.

5. The modern welfare state

The period after the end of the Second World War was characterized politically by the emergence of the modern welfare state. In a lecture to the Lutheran World Federation's conference in Hanover 1952, Berggrav delivered a speech entitled

---

38 Gunnar Heiene, *Eivind Berggrav: En biografi* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1992), 353-362.
39 See Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration," 294-299. for the text of the confession and an analysis. For an English translation, see Torleiv Austad, "The Foundation of the Church. A Confession and a Declaration," *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 28:2 (2015), 294-299.

"State and Church Today: The Lutheran View"[40] One of the questions he raised was "Can the modern welfare state be reconciled with the Lutheran doctrine of two regiments?" Based on a Lutheran two-regiment doctrine, he analyzed the postwar situation. "The problem arises whether the Lutheran doctrine of the two regimes maybe maintained under these changed conditions or whether the new state enters so deeply into the spiritual regime that there is no longer any room for the church."[41] The new welfare state stresses unity within it, he observed, and therefore it is important for it that all citizens have the right convictions.

Berggrav here draws a straight line from the Nazis' stress on right view of life (*Lebensanschauung*) to the welfare state's "democratic conviction," with the implication that young people must be brought up in a way that will be beneficial to the state.[42] What Christianity says is pushed into the private sphere and must not be allowed to clash with the views of the state. Practically, this question is related to the entire education sector, but also to the extensive diaconal work that the church did at this time and that gradually passed into state management.

As for the area of upbringing and education, Berggrav refers to parental rights on a fundamental level, emphasizing that all influence must be in line with God's commandments. If the state pursues a view contrary to God's clear commandments, it makes itself the ultimate judge of good and evil. In this, Berggrav sees the danger that the state is in a certain way "deified." In this way, it wants to take God's place as an omnipotent "kind of All-Father." The state wants to be enough.[43] Berggrav sees this kind of state in the process of developing. The modern state, he says, has learned from the totalitarian state to hide its true motives. It does not propose anything directly against God's commandments and thus tries to cover up its real intention.[44] Berggrav calls this desire to become everything to man "presumptuous pride," predicting that a "gigantic struggle" will be required to oppose it.[45]

Berggrav presented his speech in a politically tense situation as Communism was strengthening its grip on Eastern Europe. When the Lutheran World Federation gathered in Hanover, a Hungarian bishop had been placed under house arrest because of his criticism of the regime. Other representatives, loyal to the Communist authorities, were sent to participate in his place. Berggrav's speech

---

40 Eivind Berggrav, "State and Church Today: The Lutheran View," *Proceedings of the Second Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation. Hannover, Germany, July 25-August 3, 1952*, ed. Carl E. Lund-Quist (Lutheran World Federation, 1952), 76-85. In Norwegian: "Stat og kirke idag," in *Kirke og kultur* 57 (1952), 449-462.
41 Berggrav, "State and Church Today," 81.
42 Berggrav, "State and Church Today," 82.
43 Berggrav, "State and Church Today," 83.
44 Berggrav, "State and Church Today," 84.
45 Berggrav, "State and Church Today," 83.

was interpreted as support for the suspended bishop and a sharp criticism of the Communist idea of the state.[46] The speech sparked a debate in Germany but did not provoke any major reaction in Norwegian politics.[47] The cool reception was related to the fact that the welfare state in the 1950s was a high-priority political project, especially for the Norwegian Social Democrats but also for the other parties.[48]

Several debates over the last decades have involved the same issues that Berggrav addressed in his speech. "Welfare state" is a concept that needs to be differentiated. Such a state can look different in different countries, depending on their history and political development. We must also take confessional aspects into account to understand the different appearances of the welfare state in different parts of Europe.[49] Among the questions discussed have been how the origin of the welfare state is related to the Evangelical Lutheran context and how the welfare state's social responsibility relates to other initiatives such as the church's diaconal work. I will not go into these questions, but instead I will focus on the most relevant aspect in this context: the welfare state's power over questions of values and of conscience. After describing some of the features of the current situation, I will finally evaluate them over against the theological guidelines described above.

6.   Totalitarian features today

The Nordic democracies are examples of how the secular welfare state has been implemented on a large scale. These are obviously not totalitarian states, but a number of conflicts within them show that the threat of totalitarian thinking did not disappear with the end of National Socialism. Since World War II, there have been numerous ideological tensions and debates within the Nordic welfare states that can be analyzed on the basis of the two-regiment doctrine described above.

One relevant factor is that the state has grown enormously large compared to when Berggrav was writing about the welfare state in the 1950s. Its authority today is in many ways so different in its structure and size that it is difficult to make comparisons to previous eras. For many people today, state and society have merged, and this means that the values rewarded and promoted by the state permeate large parts of society and various spheres of life. The question

---

46 Aud V. Tønnesen, "Velferdsstaten og den lutherske toregimentlaeren," *Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift* 112 (2011), footnote 5.

47 Tønnesen, "Velferdsstaten og den lutherske toregimentlaeren," 204.

48 Aud V. Tønnesen, "Eivind Berggrav og velferdsstaten," *Arv og utfordring: Menneske og samfunn I den kritiske moraltradisjon*, ed. Sein Aage Christoffersen and Trygve Wyller (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1995), 176f.

49 Aud V. Tønnessen, "Kirken og velferdsstaten," *Theofilos* 12 (2020), 390-393.

becomes, as Berggrav perceived, how to apply the categories of the two-regiment doctrine in this new situation. Amidst the new difficulties posed by contemporary states, I would argue that the two-regiment doctrine is even more important as an aid to orientation.

One conflict that remains relevant in modern welfare states is between the church and the political parties. In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, the dominant party in the 20th century, has had a stated strategy not to extinguish the church, as Communism tried to do in the Soviet Union, but instead to take it over and use it for its own purposes. Up to this day, the Social Democratic Party and other political parties are part of church politics.[50] Other obvious conflicts have involved the family, children, and the education sector. Sweden has had a battle for decades over whether confessional schools should be allowed to operate. Furthermore, the state aggressively pursues issues related to the redefinition of marriage and gender, issues that deeply interfere with many Christians' conscience and beliefs.

We could say much about these questions, but here I want to keep the focus on the root of all of them, namely the authorities' desire to control ideas and values. This tendency is difficult to measure in a society and can generate different subjective perceptions.[51] The *Zeitgeist* can exert strong pressure without being directly visible and is experienced differently depending on one's personality and where one participates in society. The term "political correctness" is used to describe what constitutes a permissible way of thinking in the society.[52] However, some events clearly demonstrate the pressure exerted with regard to thinking and speaking correctly. One such event is the series of trials faced by Päivi Räsänen, formerly Minister of the Interior and currently a parliamentarian in Finland. Räsänen was prosecuted because of the manner in which she expressed support for the traditional Christian view of marriage as between a man and a woman, a position grounded in her Christian faith and confession.

This case deserves attention, not least because it reveals something that might otherwise exist in a hidden and unspoken way. The atmosphere of secular intol-

---

50 Recently, a doctoral dissertation has been published describing this process; see Per Evert, *Landet som glömde Gud: Hur Sverige under 1900-talet formades till världens mest sekulärindividualistiska land* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma Bokförlag, 2022).

51 On the question of secular intolerance and the problem of how to assess its intensity, see Dennis P. Petri and Ronald R. Boyd-MacMillan, "Death by a Thousand Cuts: Perception of the Nature and Intensity of Secular Intolerance in Western Europe," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13:1/2 (2020): 37-53. Through interviews with representatives of faith-based advocacy organizations, they discuss and systematize experiences in the current situation.

52 Bernd Wannenwetsch discusses the phenomenon of political correctness in relation to the boundaries of the two-regiment doctrine in "The Simultaneity of Two Citizenships: A Theological Reappraisal of Luther's Account of the 'Two Regiments' for our Times," in *Simul. Inquiries into Luther's Experience of the Christian Life*, ed. Robert Kolb, Torbjörn Johansson, and Daniel Johansson (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2021), 177-194.

erance revealed in the trial understandably has caused other Christians to engage in self-censorship.[53] The executive director of Alliance Defending Freedom International, Paul Coleman, commented on this aspect of the case: "The state's insistence on continuing almost five long years, despite such clear and unanimous rulings in favor of Mrs. Räsänen from the lower courts is alarming. The process is the punishment in such instances, resulting in a chill on free speech for all citizens observing."[54]

Finland's Prosecutor General brought charges of "agitation against a minority group" against Räsänen. She has been acquitted in the first two instances (District Court, 2022, and Court of Appeal, 2023) but the prosecutor has taken the case to the Supreme Court.[55] Räsänen commented that she was "ready to continue to defend free speech and freedom of religion before the Supreme Court, and if need be, also before the European Court of Human Rights."[56]

Our analysis of the case can be divided into two parts. The first part concerns a state passing laws contrary to God's description of marriage in the Bible. In doing this, the authorities commit a sin, since they are subject to God and his commandments. The second part is about how the authorities treat those who, due to their faith and conscience, are critical of the state's decisions. This second part is of particular interest relative to the totalitarian features of the modern state. In the Finnish case, the state is transgressing its boundaries in relation to both *ecclesia* and *oeconomia*. According to the Lutheran perspective, teaching matters of faith and values is both a right and a duty for the family and the church. If the state does not allow this, a totalitarian trait is emerging. As the modern state tries to embrace everything and does not stop at the limit of infringing on the individual conscience, Bishop Berggrav's words seem to have come true.

7. Conclusion

The freedom to practice the Christian faith is threatened not only by obviously totalitarian states, but in addition, totalitarian traits can be seen in modern welfare states. These states are of course not defined as totalitarian, but they nevertheless contain problematic aspects. They adopt totalitarian features in the course of trying to force everyone to conform to their values. Common to all different totalitarian threats is that the demarcation line described above between the spiritual and secular spheres is not respected. This border is not only about protecting the

---

53 See Dennis P. Petri and Boyd-MacMillan, "Death by a Thousand Cuts," 43.
54 See ADF International, Press Release, "Bible-tweet case to be heard at Finnish Supreme Court," 19 April 2024. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4rrc6yhe.
55 For a description of the case, see ADF International, "Bible-tweet case to be heard at Finnish Supreme Court." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y4fcp5xe.
56 ADF International, Press Release, "Bible-tweet case."

Christian faith from interference from the secular power, but also vice versa, to prevent the church from interfering in areas of secular authority.

Lutheran theology, which often has been accused (and rightly so) of being too compliant with and obedient to state authority, also has important theological tools for analyzing and criticizing the state and its relationship to religion. Central to the resistance in Germany and Norway was the great emphasis placed on various boundaries. While all three estates – or four mandates in Bonhoeffer's articulation, or two kingdoms – are under God, they have been given different tasks and different means to fulfill their tasks. When these different spheres of life and different means are mixed together, destructive situations arise, for both the state and the church.

Christians have at times been the primary force in shaping cultures; at other times, they have been one of several voices in shaping culture and society, or they have been marginalized, persecuted, and forced to go underground. In all different situations, it is helpful to know what the political authority is, including its tasks and limits. It is a matter of discerning when the authority is a good servant of God (Romans 13) and then a co-player of the church – as when the Roman authorities save Paul from religiously motivated violence (Acts 21:32) – and when it is an enemy, as it appears in Revelation 13. As with forces in the spiritual realm, so it is with forces in the earthly kingdom; spiritual discernment is required to know with whom one is dealing.

Towards a mission hostility index
Initial explorations

Christof Sauer[1]

Abstract

This article explores the feasibility of creating a mission hostility index based on the data of the World Watch List regarding discrimination and persecution of Christians. Using Jordan as a case study, clusters of questions on (1) social risk of individual Christian witness and (2) obstructions of collective Christian witness are found to be sufficient to establish such an index. Questions on (3) conversion and (4) anti-Christian activities have complementary value. Extensive critical considerations mark the way for further phases in exploring a mission hostility index.

1.   Introduction

As a researcher of both freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and mission studies, I am intrigued by the interconnections between these two fields. Having examined various approaches to measuring FoRB or persecution over the years, as well as various studies and indices on related sub-questions, I have wondered about the feasibility of an index measuring hostility against Christian mission.

In this paper, to introduce the topic, some examples of contemporary hostility against Christian mission are presented, followed by reflections on the connection between mission and religious freedom. Next, the article reflects on the rationale for and potential approaches towards a mission hostility index, and then it introduces the data source used for this exercise. The core of the article is a fea-

---

1   Christof Sauer (*1963) is part time Professor II at Fjellhaug International University College, Oslo, and Consultant for its Research Project "Religious Freedom and Religious Persecution." The research on which this paper is based, was presented among others at the General Assembly of the International Association for Mission Studies in Sydney, Australia, in 2022 and at the symposium on "Mission and Religious Freedom" at Fjellhaug in 2023. American English has been chosen, whereas the main source employs British English. Submission date: 30 June 2024; acceptance: 7 January 2025. Email: christofsauer@icloud.com; ORCID-Id: 0000-0002-4976-7574.

sibility study on establishing separate criteria regarding "social risk of individual Christian witness," "obstructions of collective Christian witness," "conversion-related matters," and "anti-Christian activities" and whether and how these could be combined into an index. The article concludes with an extensive assessment of questions excluded, issues not covered by the data, a comparison with existing scales, reflections on generic limitations of a mission hostility index based on the said data, and indications of a possible way forward in research.[2]

2.   Examples of contemporary hostility against Christian mission

Eighteen employees of International Assistance Mission were detained by the Taliban security forces in Afghanistan in September 2023 on charges of "inviting people to join Christianity" or "propagating and promoting Christianity" (VoA 2023). The organization responded, "We stand by the principle that aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint. All IAM staff agree to abide by the laws of Afghanistan."[3]

When authorities in the Philippines want to silence their critics, including Christian missionaries tending to the needs of the vulnerable poor and downtrodden, they label these people as communist recruiters or financiers. Numerous Christian leaders and missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, have been red-tagged, arrested, and driven into hiding since the May 2022 elections. Others disappear completely or are imprisoned, tortured, or murdered, usually at the hands of security personnel with sweeping powers and guaranteed impunity (Kendall 2023).

The Home Secretary of the UK clarified on 8 September 2023 that "silent prayer, within itself, is not unlawful" in a letter for the police forces across the country. This statement comes in response to many months of controversy over "buffer zones" outside abortion facilities that have led to the arrest of several citizens for praying silently inside a buffer zone (OIDAC 2023).

These three examples illustrate how hostility against Christian mission, aid work, and peaceful persuasion activities manifests itself around the globe in Western (UK), majoritarian Christian (Philippines), and decidedly anti-Christian (Afghanistan) contexts.

---

2   A prior article emanating from the same research project was published in German (Sauer 2024). Although there is a substantial overlap in data, the prior article put Jordan in the foreground and compared the data with research by Feldtkeller on Jordan, whereas the present article emphasizes the exploration of the feasibility of a mission hostility index, de-emphasizes the details on Jordan, and adds substantial new and critical reflection on a mission hostility index. Thus, there is sufficient new material in this article, in addition to making this research accessible in English for the first time.
3   After a decree in November 2022 that prohibited women from working with foreign and domestic organizations, several international aid agencies, including faith-based NGOs, closed their operations in Afghanistan (IAM 2023).

3.   Connections between mission and religious freedom

Mission and religious freedom are "like two sides of the same coin" according to Andreas Feldtkeller (2002:261),[4] a leading professor of religious studies and missiology at Humboldt University in Berlin. Religious freedom provides "leeway to make use of alternatives regarding religious orientation." If no religious alternatives are available in a society, freedom is indeed limited.

Mission in the broadest sense means for Feldtkeller (2002:267)[5] "that religious teachings are made accessible to people who are not already connected to these teachings through their ancestry." This takes the shape of a non-coercive offer that can be voluntarily accepted or freely rejected. This needs to be distinguished from two other basic types of transmission of religion, which occur, respectively, within the framework of the community of descent[6] or with a connection to the expansion of political rule.[7] Mission, in contrast, has a different intention from these types of transmission of religion, namely to "make known to all people a way to overcome a deficit common to all." (Feldtkeller 2002:267) Therefore, the social appearance of mission is different from cultural inheritance and conquest: "People are put before a decision as individuals" and won for a religion (Feldtkeller 2002:267). All this happens by peaceful means. In history, of course, there have been hybrid forms, mixing the said three types of transmission of religion. This is also a problematic factor in the history of Christian mission.

The above description of mission can be applied to the activities of any religion or worldview. In the context of this paper, the present time (rather than prior history), the freedom to *do* mission, and the *de facto* restrictions on Christian mission are of specific interest.

The protection of religious freedom under international law (in article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and other instruments) expressly also protects the right to what is called proselytism in that context (cf. Bielefeldt et al. 2016). There should be no need to remind readers of this fact, but unfortunately it is sometimes ignored.

4.   The "why" and "how" of a mission hostility index

There are various reasons for which different actors might be interested in knowing about hostility against Christian mission. In the world of praxis, interested

---

4   Translation by author.
5   Feldtkeller promotes the study of *missio religionum* (the mission of any religion) within the framework of religious studies.
6   The individual and collective self-perception is then dominated by the statement "I am (or we are) born as … ," e.g., Muslims or Christians.
7   The individual or collective self-perception might then be dominated by statements of coercion or incentives such as "since my people were conquered by XY, it has become so difficult to hold on to our religion," "we were offered benefits," or "we were forced to convert to the religion of our new rulers."

parties might include those conducting Christian mission or advocating for religious freedom as a human right. Researchers interested in the issue might include those studying issues related to Christian mission, most often within theological faculties.[8] Or people may refer to mission hostility when examining – through the lenses of various human sciences or law – the right to peacefully manifest and non-coercively propagate one's religion or belief, or restrictions and prohibitions imposed by state or societal actors or any hostile counter-reactions to mission.

Those interested might wonder whether mission hostility can be measured and compared across delimited entities. To my knowledge, there has been no such attempt to establish anything like a mission hostility index (MHI).

To create one, different options come to mind. One would be to design an index and methodology from scratch and bear the burden of acquiring the data needed, possibly through original field research.

Another approach would be to examine existing tools and consider whether their data contains questions and results that might be reprocessed to build a mission hostility index.

Various reports or indices endeavor to describe or measure restrictions and violations of religious freedom, social hostility on account of religion, or discrimination and persecution of Christians.[9] Which of these would offer itself most readily to explore the feasibility of an MHI based on its data? My choice for an initial project was the World Watch List (WWL) on persecution of Christians, produced by the Christian aid agency Open Doors International, because the most common alternative sources of data appeared to have different degrees of limitations or obstacles for capturing mission hostility, as summarized in Table 1.[10]

5. Data source on mission hostility

Among the FORB reports that appear with some regularity, the WWL contains the most extensive data pertaining to Christians, makes use of one of the most complex methodologies, and has unique access to grassroots sources. Its focus on Christians permits it to go into a degree of depth and detail that the other reports cannot achieve. Compared to another promising source, the Religion and State dataset (Fox 2017), the WWL additionally provides narrative country dossiers that help to interpret the numerical data.

---

8   The author started his theological career as a missiologist.
9   For a review of a wider range of general FORB reports, cf. Marshall 2021; also see Petri 2022.
10   The following table is tentative and is not meant to make statements on the general quality of these data. I am not claiming that it would be impossible to pursue a similar project with some of the other data sources. However, most of them would have more obstacles. For example, while disaggregated Pew data can be requested, it is only disaggregated by question, not by religious group. In the meantime, I have also conducted an analysis of RAS data (unpublished manuscript).

Table 1: Other global data on religious freedom		
Report/Ranking	Characteristics	Limitations re MHI
The Religion and State Project (J. Fox)	• all countries above 250,000 inhabitants • dataset every 10 years • current data 1990-2014 • 3 questions on restrictions on proselytizing • differentiated scale	• dated at the time, not annual • no narrative country profiles or explanation of numerical data
Aid to the Church in Need: International Religious Freedom Report	• every two years • all countries	• limited frequency • no scoring • probably fewer mission related questions
US Department of State: International Religious Freedom Report	• annual • all countrie	• no scoring • limited information on Christians • no particular interest in mission
USCIRF: Annual Report	• annual	• 28 countries only • as above
Pew Research Center: Global Religious Restrictions	• (annual) • focus on government restrictions and social hostilities against any religion	• limited access to detailed data • limitations of source • limited interest in mission

The WWL[11] is, according to my knowledge, the prime source that specifically assesses in detail questions on freedom of Christian mission or hostility against it, and that it does this for numerous countries on an annual, incident-level basis and scores the results. The WWL and its associated data are among the most cited tools for measuring discrimination or persecution of Christians and violations of religious freedom and – in my opinion – provide a useful tool for nuanced understanding and transnational comparison, if used appropriately (Sauer 2022a, 2022b, 2023).[12]

To assess the feasibility of using WWL data, its methodology[13] has to be properly understood. Any limitations regarding its research design might potentially

---

11 The original documentation of the World Watch List data is found at opendoorsanalytical.org (password: freedom).
12 For a critical study of the conformity of the WWL questionnaire with international human rights law, see Hoffmann 2017.
13 My narrative seeks to summarize succinctly the most relevant aspects of a highly complex tool. The extensive published methodology document spans 107 pages (WWR 2024).

have implications for the results of a mission hostility index. While World Watch Research monitors all countries and uses simplified tools and indices by others to assess which countries meet the threshold to be examined in detail, the extensive methodology outlined in the following is applied to those 76 countries considered to have the highest levels of persecution of Christians currently (status: WWL 2022).

The basis is a standardized questionnaire that asks, among other things, 84 questions about country-specific events and conditions; the answers are assessed and given a point score. The questionnaire is completed country by country in the course of each year by Open Doors field staff and church and network leaders, either directly in the countries concerned or with the assistance of staff involved with the countries, as well as by independent experts who have competence about the religious freedom situation of the country. All receive training about the use of the questionnaire, and the meanings of questions and terminology are defined. Many have built up extensive experience in applying this tool over the years. The questionnaire does not ask about opinions but about facts, experience and knowledge that can be substantiated. The data collection method can therefore be qualified as "structured expert interviews."

This data is then processed by persecution analysts at World Watch Research. They verify the responses received and the scores given, asking for justifications or rectifications along the way. These persecution analysts have extensive experience regarding their respective portfolio of countries. Every year, they proceed country by country and question by question to consolidate a final response and to score each question based on the input received, taking the results achieved in the previous cycle as a starting point. The scores awarded by the respondents are not blindly aggregated arithmetically, e.g., as an average, as this is not an opinion survey. Rather, the respondents' input is calibrated into scores congruent with the qualitative responses. The perceived competence and nationwide comprehensiveness of the respective respondents is taken into account in the process. The aim is collective, complementary competence. Analysts also consult country-specific published sources and news reports collected throughout the year. The persecution analysts record how they arrived at the final scores and justify any possible deviations from the previous year's score. The final question-level scores are then aggregated quantitatively to calculate scores on 'spheres of life' and a final overall score.

Furthermore, prior to publication, these results are externally audited on a sample of countries for their validity and for the consistent application of the stated methodology.[14] Thus, the final answers to the WWL questionnaire and the result-

---

14 I coordinated and conducted this audit for almost 10 years after first having advised World Watch Research about improving the methodology in 2013. For my reflections from that early stage, see Sauer (2012).

ing scores for any specific country emanate from a qualified expert assessment that triangulates information from informed practitioners, expert researchers, and published sources. In addition, the analysts at times exercise a degree of peer review to make sure that they have interpreted the questions consistently across countries.

As for the architecture of the questionnaire itself, the 84 questions are grouped into six blocks, all equally weighted for the final country scores of the WWL. One block covers physical violence; the other five cover different aspects of pressure on Christians.

The 12 questions on physical violence include how many Christians were killed and how many places of worship were damaged or destroyed for faith-related reasons. The nature of these questions does not lend itself to measuring mission hostility specifically,[15] and we therefore leave them aside. The remaining 72 questions about pressure on Christians cover four spheres of life (the private sphere, family life, local social life and the national level); plus, as a fifth sphere, church life. I scrutinized these questions for their relevance to a mission hostility index.

The scoring grid used for each question consists of a scale from 0 to 4 (for "No" and four categories of "Yes") and four variable answer elements, namely: (1) the number of categories of Christian communities affected by persecution, (2) the proportion of the general population living in the territory affected by persecution, (3) the intensity of persecution, and (4) the frequency of persecution.[16] Each of these elements and the allocation of points are more closely defined. The question score is the average of the four answer elements. Special rules apply when the question is not applicable or the answer is unknown. (See Table 2)

Concerning the Christian communities affected by persecution, the WWL methodology differentiates categories. Not all may be present in a given country and they may be affected differently by persecution. The four categories include expatriate Christians (if they are forced to meet separately), historical Christian communities, non-traditional Christian communities, and converts. (See Table 3)

Among the 84 numerically scored questions of the WWL, almost a quarter could be identified that directly or indirectly touch on aspects of mission. They can be grouped into four categories: (1) social risks of individual Christian witness, (2) obstructions of collective Christian witness, (3) dealing with conversions as a fruit of mission, and (4) anti-Christian activities.[17]

---

15 There is no record of whether, for instance, killings of Christians are related to mission hostility.
16 Persecution is defined as "any hostility experienced as a result of one's identification with Christ" (WWR 2024:7).
17 In a complex matrix of the usual differentiations, such as *forum internum* and *forum externum*, individual and collective manifestation of religion, legal frameworks and *de facto* lived reality, as well as government restrictions versus social hostilities and assaults, a different grouping of questions would have been conceivable. But focusing on a perspective of mission, the grouping presented here made the most sense to me.

Table 2: Scoring grid for the WWL questionnaire					
	0 points	**1 point**	**2 points**	**3 points**	**4 points**
(1) Number of categories of Christianity affected by persecution	None	(see Table 3 below)	(see Table 3 below)	(see Table 3 below)	(see Table 3 below)
(2) Proportion of general population living in the territory affected by persecution	None	Above 0%-25%	26%-50%	51%-75%	76%-100%
(3) Intensity of persecution	None	Low	Medium	High	Very High
(4) Frequency of persecution	None	Sporadic	Quite frequent	Frequent	Permanent

Table 3: Scoring for the number of categories of Christian communities (CCC)				
Points	**4 CCCs present in country**	**3 CCCs present in country**	**2 CCCs present in country**	**1 CCC present in country**
1	1 out of 4 affected	-	-	-
2	2 out of 4 affected	1 out of 3 affected	1 out of 2 affected	-
3	3 out of 4 affected	2 out of 3 affected	-	-
4	4 out of 4 affected	3 out of 3 affected	2 out of 2 affected	1 out of 1 affected

The complexity of the data led me to reduce the scope of initial explorations to a single country analysis. Consequently, limitations concerning the generalizability of certain results remain, and fuller verification would require a broader, multi-country study. By evaluating the respective results for Jordan[18] in the WWL 2022 dataset, I tested whether the questions selected are sufficiently mission-spe-

---

18   The choice of the sample country had to do with the prior essay (Sauer 2024).

cific to contribute reliably to an MHI. I also tested how each group of questions by itself would contribute to an MHI and whether any by itself or a selection of them would suffice to establish an MHI.

In the next section, I examine the four categories of questions individually.[19]

6. Social risks of individual Christian witness

The three questions addressing this issue in the WWL all come from the block of 10 questions about "private life."

6.1. Has it been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with those other than immediate family (extended family, others)? (Q1.8 = 3.5p)[20]

The reason for the very high question-level score of 3.5 (on a scale of 0 to 4) is that Christians speaking to Muslims about their faith would be easily misunderstood as an attempt at evangelization, which is forbidden in Jordan, and understood as a threat to national security (WWR 2021:27).

Due to space limitations, I will not discuss the details regarding Jordan as thoroughly as I did in a previous German-language paper (Sauer 2024). There, I established that mission hostility aspects in Jordan were properly assessed by these questions and correspond with the systemic background interpretation in a scholarly source (Feldtkeller 1998).

6.2. Has it been risky for Christians to display Christian images or symbols? (Q1.5 = 3p)

Displaying Christian images or symbols is avoided by secret converts for fear of giving themselves away and by traditional Christians for fear of animosity.[21]

6.3. Has it been risky for Christians to reveal their faith in written forms of personal expression (including expressions in blogs and Facebook etc.)? (Q1.4 = 3p)

The risk is again strongest for converts, for the same reasons as above (WWR 2021:26f).

The methodological challenge in combining the scores of these three questions lies in the fundamental problem of which mathematical method would

---

19 Questions that were not specific enough, while also relating to mission, were excluded from the evaluation (see section 10.1).

20 "Q" signifies the original numbering of the respective question in the WWL questionnaire. Thereafter, the points scored in WWL 2022 are given. Regarding the exclusion of the parallel question 1.7 see section 10.1 below.

21 I thank World Watch Research for access to the results on a question level, as the country dossiers discuss only the four questions with the highest scores each per category.

come closest to reality: an accumulation or averaging, the exclusive concentration on the most problematic factor, or a weighted evaluation? I have opted for the following combination in processing the WWL questions for an MHI. First, overlapping questions are bundled and unified and the average of their scores is taken, so as not to give a single topic too much weight. Then, this result and all other questions are treated equally and their average is calculated. In the case of the questions about social risk, I saw no necessity of bundling, so a simple average was calculated (See Table 4).

Table 4: Social risks of individual Christian witness		
WWL #	Question	Points (of 4)
1.8	Risk of expressing faith beyond the family circle	3.5
1.5	Risk of manifestation of images/symbols	3
1.4	Risk of written expressions of faith	3
	Average	**3.16**

None of these questions could be identified as particularly representative for this group of questions.

7. Obstructions of collective Christian witness

This group of five questions differs from the previous one in the communal aspect. They emanate from the spheres of "national life" (2 questions) and "church life" (3 questions) in the WWL, which indeed overlap.

7.1. Have Christians, churches or Christian organizations been hindered in publicly displaying religious symbols? (Q4.12 = 3p)

There was pressure in 2021 to remove Christian banners containing verses from a biblical psalm from places in the capital city. However, crosses on (traditional) churches are tolerated (Cf. WWR 2021:12).

7.2. Has openly selling or distributing Bibles and other Christian materials been hindered? (Q5.14 = 3.5p)

Bible distribution has been a classic means of mission. Opposition to the Christian faith usually also turns against the Bible as its central document of faith. In Jordan, the distribution of Christian material is permitted only in certain designated places affiliated with churches and must not be perceived as proselytism (WWR 2021:12).

7.3. Have churches, Christian organizations, institutions or groups been prevented from using mass media to present their faith (e.g. via local or national radio, TV, Internet, social media, cell phones)? (Q5.16 = 3.5p)

A missionary aspect can always be implied in public media dissemination of religious content in a multi-religious context (WWR 2021:15).

7.4. Have Christians been hindered in expressing their views or opinions in public? (Q4.8 = 3.75p)

The high score seems plausible due to the very limited freedom of speech, which causes Christians to exercise self-censorship (WWR 2021:29).

7.5. Have churches been hindered from organizing Christian activities outside church buildings? (Q5.5 = 3.75p)

Faith-promoting activities must often be practiced outside church walls. Ten arrests were reported in this connection (WWR 2021:7, 30).

For an evaluation, the questions can be bundled into three equally weighted subgroups. (See Table 5).

Table 5: Obstructions to collective Christian witness			
Sub-group	**WWL #**	**Question**	**Points (of 4)**
1	4.12	Public manifestation of religious symbols	3
2	5.14	Bible/Scripture dissemination	3.5
3	5.16	Use of media for the presentation of faith	3.5
	4.8	Public expression of opinions	3.75
	5.5	Christian activities outside church buildings	3.75
		Weighted Average*	**3.42**

* Weighted Average = [Q4.12 + (Q5.14 + Q5.16)/2 + (Q4.8 + Q5.5)/2]/3. The letter "Q" precedes the number of the respective question in this formula. In the following tables, the subgroups mentioned in the left-most columns are all weighted equally.

The questions on Bible or Scripture distribution or media use for faith presentation could possibly be representative of obstructions of collective Christian witness, as for Jordan their scores (from WWL 2022) are closest to the average.

Table 6: Overall assessment on Christian witness	
	Points (of 4)
Social risks of individual Christian witness	3.16
Obstructions to collective Christian witness	3.42
Average	**3.29**

When we compare the scores for individual and collective Christian witness (see Table 6), the score for collective witness is about 10 percent higher. In the synopsis of the two topical scores, an average of 3.29 points results when both are weighted equally.

One could already be satisfied with this result with regard to an MHI. However, since numerous other complementary questions in the WWL shed light on related topics, these will also be examined for comparison.

8.   Conversion: opposition, sanctions, non-recognition

In discussions of the right to freedom of religion or belief, change of faith forms a mirror image of mission.[22] Therefore, one might be tempted to simply answer the question of the freedom to do mission in praxis in terms of freedom to convert. It is interesting to examine the conversion-specific questions of the WWL to see how opposition to conversion and mission hostility score comparatively and to what degree the realities they cover overlap. These questions come from four different areas of life in the WWL questionnaire (private life, family life, national life, church life).

8.1.   *Has conversion been opposed, forbidden, or punishable, including conversion from one type of Christianity to another? (Q1.1 = 3.5p)*

The question is aimed both at state measures to prevent conversions and at conversion-averse pressure from the dominant majority society.

The score is justified by the fact that leaving Islam, although not criminalized, is nevertheless not permitted. Several converts from Islam were reportedly physically or mentally abused, especially during police interrogations (WWR 2021:26).

---

22   The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief at the time, Heiner Bielefeldt, dealt with the "right to try to convert others by means of non-coercive persuasion" as an element of his thematic report on the "right to conversion as part of freedom of religion or belief" (cf. Bielefeldt 2017). In his scholarly capacity, he and his research colleagues commented, "The right to convert others, for example through missionary activities, is inherently intertwined with the right to change one's own religion or belief" (Bielefeldt et al. 2016:196).

8.2.   Have churches been hindered from openly integrating converts? (Q5.7 = 4p)

The maximum score is due to routine surveillance activities by state intelligence agents, which make most church leaders wary of openly welcoming and integrating Muslims or converts for fear of negative consequences, including possible closure of their church (WWR 2021:29).

The other three questions deal with negative consequences in terms of personal status and family law in the lives of converts.

8.3.   Have officials at any level refused to recognize an individual's conversion as recorded in government administration systems, identity cards, etc.? (Q4.2 = 3.5p)

The mention of religion in official documents or registers can become a trigger for religious discrimination. If such an entry cannot be changed after birth, this has potentially far-reaching discriminatory implications for a person's legal status, as well as in family law (Andrews 2016).

8.4.   Have spouses of converts been put under pressure (successfully or unsuccessfully) by others to divorce? (Q2.11 = 3p)

Female converts are particularly at risk (WWR 2021:34).

8.5.   Have Christians lost their inheritance rights because of their conversion to Christianity or (if a person already was a Christian) other types of Christianity? (Q2.13 = 3.25p)

Table 7: Hostility to conversion			
Sub-group	WWL #	Question	Points (of 4)
1	1.1	Conversion ban/rejection	3.5
2	5.7	Hindrance of church integration	4
3	4.2	Impossibility of changing religion in official documents	3.5
	2.11	Pressure to divorce	3
	2.13	Loss of inheritance rights	3.25
		Weighted Average	**3.58**

The right of inheritance of apostates from Islam could be withdrawn by sharia courts. The influence of the clan is decisive (WWR 2019:23; WWR 2020:20).

A conversion hostility marker (see Table 7) could be calculated from three equally weighted values: (1) the rejection of conversion in general (Q1.1), (2) the hindrance of church integration (Q5.7), and (3) the bundled personal status and family law issues (Q4.2, 2.11, 2.13).

In search of a potentially representative question, either that about prohibition of conversion or that about change of religion in official documents could be representative of the question of hostility to conversion, as their rating for Jordan is very close to our conversion hostility marker.

As a next step, it is of interest to compare the hostility to mission to the hostility to conversion. (See Table 8).

Table 8: Comparison of hostility to mission and hostility to conversion		
	Points (of 4)	
Social risks of individual Christian witness	3.16	3.29 (average)
Obstructions to collective Christian witness	3.42	
Hostility to conversion	3.58	
Difference	0.29	

With a slight difference of 9 percent, the conversion hostility marker appears to be a relatively good indication of the approximate degree of mission hostility. At the same time, it is only of limited use for the more precise determination of mission hostility, as it takes into account only the situation of converts, whose religious freedom is even more restricted than that of traditional and non-traditional Christian entities. In this respect, it makes sense to collect data on an MHI separately from conversion issues.

9. Anti-Christian activities: From disinformation to pressure to apostatize

There remains a fourth cluster of questions to be examined. Hostility to Christian mission might be accompanied by various measures directed against Christians to make them give up their faith. Such matters are considered in the areas of community life and national life in the WWL questionnaire.

9.1. Has media reporting been incorrect or biased against Christians? (Q4.10 = 3p) Have Christians been subject to smear campaigns or hate speech? (Q4.11 = 3p)

Media bias is reportedly because the media are mainly controlled by the government, which protects Islam. The greatest pressure, however, is seen in social media, where Islamists agitate against Christians. Converts and evangelical Christians are most likely to be affected.[23]

9.2. *Have Christians been put under pressure to take part in non-Christian religious ceremonies or community events? (Q3.5 = 3p)*

This is seen to affect all Christians during Ramadan. They are also expected to participate in the Muslim fast, especially in the countryside. Even in the capital city, public eating by non-Muslims is punishable by a heavy fine.

Converts of Muslim descent who keep their Christian faith secret are forced to participate in Islamic or ethnic events, as well as Islamic rites and traditions, so as not to betray themselves.

9.3. *Have Christians been pressured by their community to renounce their faith? (Q3.7 = 3.5p)*

"Pressure can be expected on converts from Islam whose Christian faith has become known, especially where the local community is made up of conservative Muslim families" (WWR 2021:28).

It appears appropriate to bundle the two media-related questions to avoid redundancy in establishing a marker for "anti-Christian activities." (See Table 9).

Table 9: Anti-Christian activities			
Sub-group	WWL #	Question	Points (of 4)
1	4.10	Disinformation in the media	3
	4.11	Smear campaigns or hate speech	3
2	3.5	Pressure to participate in non-Christian traditions	3
3	3.7	Pressure to apostatize	3.5
		Weighted Average	**3.17**

A closer look at the questions suggests that at least the first two do not necessarily correlate with hostility to mission. This consideration speaks against in-

---

23   Cf. also the incident with the publicly displayed psalm (section 6.1).

cluding this block of questions in an MHI. It is, however, certainly of interest (a) as a separate measure of its own that can be read alongside an MHI, as well as (b) for a more comprehensive determination of the pressure of discrimination and persecution on Christians.

10.   Delimiting a mission hostility index

Having established four different markers – namely social risks of individual Christian witness, obstructions of collective Christian witness, hostility to conversion, and anti-Christian activities – we need to recapitulate which are suitable to become part of a mission hostility index. Comparing the four markers, the average of the two markers on Christian witness is midway between the scores of hostility to conversion and of anti-Christian activities in the case of Jordan (See Table 10).

Table 10: Comparison of hostility to mission, hostility to conversion, and anti-Christian activities		
Marker	Points (of 4)	Average
Social risks of individual Christian witness	3.16	3.29
Obstructions of collective Christian witness	3.42	
Hostility to conversion	3.58	
Anti-Christian activities	3.17	
Average	3.33	

If one were to try to combine all four markers equally into a comprehensive mission hostility index by calculating their average, the result would be a very similar value for Jordan as for its average of the markers of Christian witness by itself. This might suggest that methodologically it could be redundant and uneconomical to go beyond considering the explicit questions on Christian witness for an MHI. However, this cannot be verified on the basis of a single example. Furthermore, and much more importantly, it was argued in terms of content that the marker of hostility to conversion is latently higher by nature than hostility to mission, and that the elements of anti-Christian activities do not necessarily correlate with hostility to mission. Therefore, both these markers should be excluded from an MHI for reasons of factual focus.

11. Critical review

It remains to put these results in context in view of methodological issues. Therefore, this final section will critically review the WWL questions excluded from consideration for an MHI and the issues not covered by the questions selected, conduct a comparison of the resulting scores with existing WWL scores and sub-scores, and point out some generic limitations of an MHI based on WWL data, before proposing a way forward to further advance this line of research.

11.1. Questions excluded

Some questions from the WWL questionnaire had to be excluded from consideration for an MHI due to their lack of specificity, even though they were initially considered.

Question 1.7, "*Has it been risky for Christians to speak about their faith with immediate family members?*" covers many other family constellations beyond those of the Christian converts and their witnessing to their non-Christian families. Thus, this question is not specific enough to detect mission hostility even though it does cover mission hostility to some extent.

The following two questions were excluded because they do not differentiate between missionary and non-missionary purposes: Q4.4, "*Have Christians been hindered in travelling for faith-related reasons?*" and Q5.19, "*Have churches been hindered in their interaction with the global church (both foreigners visiting and nationals being able to visit Christians in other countries, attend conferences etc.)?*"

Q2.4, "*Have Christian baptisms been hindered?*" could be a natural follow-up to the questions on conversion. However, this question may also apply to the baptism of descendants of Christian parents, and thus it is not uniquely linked to mission.

11.2. Issues not covered

When brainstorming more systematically about potential indicators of mission hostility, one can find numerous aspects that are not covered by the WWL questions or are subsumed in more general questions. The main reason is that the WWL questionnaire is designed to mirror the lived experience of Christians rather than more abstract and structural concepts. It also focuses on Christian life in general and not solely on mission.

Table 11 illustrates the plethora of aspects that could be considered if one were designing an MHI from scratch. This does not necessarily falsify the results achieved with the current sample of questions. However, it may indicate that an MHI designed from scratch could possibly achieve more precise results.

Table 11: Issues not or less covered by WWL questions	
History	Is there historical baggage in the collective memory of this country regarding what they perceive as Christian mission or as Western impositions (forced Christianization, crusades, colonialism, imperialism)?
	Has there been a disparate development of different areas in this country or among different ethnic groups, where one part has accepted the Christian faith and the other not?
Predominant culture	Is there a non-Christian majority religion or Christian denomination perceiving itself as superior, acting in an exclusivist manner and using state power and social influence to oppose or hinder Christian (or denominationally different) mission?
	Is there an ideological antagonism by the state or majority society against Christianity or particular expressions of Christianity?
	Is there a secular antagonism against truth claims or an antagonism against criticism of non-Christian religions?
	Are truth claims automatically linked with imposition, manipulation, compulsion, or violence?
Constitution	Is there a state religion or ideology anchored in the constitution?
	Is peaceful spreading of one's faith to those not already adhering to it part of the constitutionally protected manifestation of faith within the framework of religious freedom?
Law	Are there specific laws forbidding or limiting Christian mission or aspects thereof (anti-apostasy, anti-conversion, anti-blasphemy, anti-proselytism, anti-hate speech, etc.)?
Security and Public Order	Are national security concerns hindering Christian mission (terrorism, extremism labels, red-tagging)?
	Are public order concerns hindering Christian mission (health risks of prayer for healing, hurting public sentiment)?
Administration	Are administrative measures used to limit or hinder Christian mission (license requirement, censorship of literature, importation bans, regulations on NGOs, regulation on receiving foreign funding, etc.)?
Christian subculture	Is there an intra-Christian hostility against mission (e.g., due to a pluralist theology of religion, or a dislike of apologetics or polemics)?

11.3. *Comparison to existing scores*

Another form of critical review is to compare the results against the existing scores already calculated and published by the WWL, and to double-check if there would be any potential proxy value that would make the separate exercise of calculating an MHI superfluous (See Table 12).

Table 12: Comparison of MHI scores to WWL sphere scores								
	Individual	Collective	MHI	Country Score	Private Life	Family Life	Community Life	National Life	Church Life
2022	3.16	3.42	3.29	2.64	3.09	3.35	2.63	2.95	2.99
Average 2019-23				2.59	3.11	3.31	2.66	2.85	2.99

To make this comparison, the WWL scores are transposed to a scale of 0 to 4 from the country scores on a scale of 100 and the spheres of life scores on a scale of 16.7. To test the degree of fluctuation of the WWL scores, the respective average scores for the WWL from 2019 to 2023 have been added. This demonstrates rather negligible deviations over the years.

The question to what extent a country's score on the WWL is a proxy for the score on the MHI cannot be reliably answered from data on a single country. However, the fact that this one sample country yields an MHI score significantly higher than its general WWL country score makes such a proxy function unlikely.

Among the scores on the different spheres distinguished in the WWL, the score for family life (3.35p) comes mathematically closest to the MHI (3.29p) for Jordan in 2022. However, none of the questions from this sphere are actually employed for the MHI. The fact that mission hostility and pressure in family life show the same intensity in Jordan might be a coincidence. The other four areas all score significantly lower (2.63 to 3.09), although individual questions from three of those blocks were used for the MHI. This might indicate that mission hostility is indeed a distinct measure and tends to have an intensity that exceeds the levels of hostility, discrimination and persecution experienced on average,

as well as in private life, community life, national life and church life in general. However, this possibility would need to be tested on a larger sample of countries.

11.4. Generic limitations of an MHI based on WWL data

A final question concerns the limitations of the proposed MHI, emanating from the nature of the WWL research design and data and from their inherent limitations.

First, the WWL does not cover the whole world. The number of countries covered is limited to those where persecution levels are highest, which for WWL 2022 numbered 76. This means that Western countries are not assessed, even though mission hostility expressed by secularism would be of interest for comparison. The scale of the WWL is also difficult to apply to countries with lower levels of persecution, because it was not designed for these.

Second, the situation of converts is over-represented in the scores. They receive 25 percent of weight where they exist as a group, even if they are only a tiny fraction of all Christians in a country. This was done purposefully in the WWL methodology so as not to overlook their fate, as would easily be the case in some other approaches.

Third, subnational scenarios, particularly in indigenous territories in Latin America or in regions of territorially large countries, might not be sufficiently detected because the WWL score is a macro-level aggregate.

12. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the feasibility of creating a mission hostility index based on the data of the WWL produced by Open Doors International. Using Jordan as a case study, four clusters of relevant questions were identified. Clusters of questions on social risk of individual Christian witness and on obstructions of collective Christian witness were found to be sufficient to establish an MHI. A formula has been established to reasonably combine these. While questions on conversion and on anti-Christian activities have complementary value, they should be excluded from an MHI proper. Extensive critical considerations showed the added value of an MHI compared to the WWL country scores or sphere scores, as well as the limitations of this exercise, and marked the way forward for further steps in exploring a mission hostility index.

A second phase on the way to an MHI could test the indications established in this pilot study on a limited number of countries with very different contexts and drivers of persecution. This would help to minimize the effects of country-specific idiosyncrasies as well as of possible patterns prevalent in contexts with the same type of forces that are hostile to Christian mission. I would therefore suggest using one country from each of the eight "drivers of persecution" categories identified in the WWL. In addition, all continents should be represented, and it

might be preferable to select those countries with the largest Christian\ populations covered in each category, if possible.

As a third phase, one could proceed to a tentative evaluation for all countries represented in the WWL.

References

Andrews, J. 2016. *Identity Crisis: Religious Registration in the Middle East*. Gilead Books.

Bielefeldt, H. 2017. *Freedom or Religion or Belief: Thematic Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur 2010-2016*. VKW.

Bielefeldt, H., N. Ghanea and M. Wiener 2016. *Freedom of Religion or Belief: An International Law Commentary*. Oxford University Press.

Feldtkeller, A. 1998. *Die ,Mutter der Kirchen' im Haus des Islam. Gegenseitige Wahrnehmungen von arabischen Christen und Muslimen im West- und Ost–jordanland*. Erlanger Verlag für Mission und Ökumene.

Feldtkeller, A. 2002. Mission und Religionsfreiheit, *Zeitschrift für Mission* 28:261-275.

Fox, J. 2017. Religion and State Codebook: Round 3. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3zewsyhv.

Hoffmann, A.N. 2017. Measuring Freedom of Religion: An Analysis of Religious Freedom Indexes. MA thesis in Human Rights, University of Vienna. Available at: https://utheses.univie.ac.at/detail/42942.

IAM 2023. IAM Responds to Detainment of Staff Members and Recent Developments in Ghor (September 16). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdzjwhc2.

Kendal, E. 2023. Philippines: Still red-tagging missionaries. RLPB 701, 12 July. Available at: http://rlprayerbulletin.blogspot.com.

Marshall, K. 2021. *Towards Enriching Understandings and Assessments of Freedom of Religion or Belief: Politics, Debates, Methodologies, and Practices* (CRE-ID Working Paper 6, Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development). Institute of Development Studies. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2z5ahcyd.

Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe (OIDAC) 2013. Update: UK Home Secretary Clarifies that "Silent Prayer" is not Unlawful. (September 8). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mptzxmbh.

Petri, D. P. 2022. The Tyranny of Religious Freedom Rankings, *Review of Faith & International Affair*s, 20:1, 82-88, DOI: 10.1080/15570274.2022.2031064. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3cudsyb5.

Sauer, C. 2012. Measuring persecution: The new questionnaire design of the World Watch List. *IJRF* 5/2:21-36. Available at: https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/80.

Sauer, C. 2022a. Alarm Bells Against Discrimination: What Global Surveys and Country Comparisons on Persecution are Helpful For, *IIRF Reports* 2022/1, International Institute for Religious Freedom. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdcez3rs.

Sauer, C. 2022b. Suggestions for an appropriate use of World Watch List data (2021), *IIRF Reports* 2022/2, International Institute for Religious Freedom. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mrkfwtab.

Sauer, C. 2023. Berichte zur Religionsfreiheit und Christenverfolgung: Ihre Stärken und Grenzen, *ideaSpezial Christenverfolgung 2023-2024,* October (8):12-13.

Sauer, C. 2024. "Einschränkungen der Freiheit christlicher Mission: Explorationen zu einem Missionsfeindlichkeits-Index am Beispiel Jordaniens". In: J. Mausolf und E. Zemmrich (eds). *Vielfalt und Anerkennung. Facetten religionsbezogener Forschung im Kontakt zu Andreas Feldtkeller*. Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 123-139.

VoA = Voice of Asia 2023. Afghan Taliban detain 18 aid workers, including American, on charges of preaching Christianity. (September 15). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/26a324v5.

World Watch List. Available at: opendoorsanalytical.org (password: freedom).

WWR = World Watch Research 2019. Jordan: Full Country Dossier. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3sh4auc5.

WWR = World Watch Research 2020. Jordan: Full Country Dossier. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/32yp42df.

WWR = World Watch Research 2021. Jordan: Full Country Dossier. December 2021, https://tinyurl.com/2mxksjpu.

WWR = World Watch Research 2024. Complete World Watch List Methodology. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5fsvpb2x.

Religious freedom without freedom of speech?

A negative trend at European universities

Anja Hoffmann[1]

Abstract

Previous research has demonstrated that the labeling of Christian beliefs on controversial issues, such as marriage and gender, as "offensive" or "hate speech" has a chilling effect on freedom of expression and religion. Building on these findings and on recent studies of free speech at universities, the present paper examines Christian self-censorship in the university context and confirms that Christian students are particularly prone to censor their views out of fear of negative consequences or being seen as offensive. One cause of this problem is secular intolerance at universities, which has far-reaching consequences for society as a whole and requires effective remedies.

1. Introduction

Whereas in the past religious communities have argued for speech restrictions to protect religions from offensive speech (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 6), today we see a flip side of this phenomenon. In some Western states, there is a strong push for speech codes that restrict the freedom of members of religious communities to express their beliefs when they diverge from mainstream views.

The freedom to express religious beliefs in public is a fundamental part of the right to freedom of religion. While both freedom of expression and freedom of religion are well anchored in international and European law, these rights

1 Anja Hoffmann (*1992) is the executive director of the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe. She holds a master's degree in human rights, with a specialization in religious freedom. She has published reports and news articles and delivered lectures on religious freedom of Christians in Europe. Article submitted: 28 June 2024; accepted 13 January 2025. This article uses American English. Email: observatory@intoleranceagainstchristians.eu. ORCID: 0009-0003-2265-8073.

have been increasingly challenged by the creation of ill-defined and overly broad "hate speech" legislation, which has led to the investigation and even prosecution of Christians for expressing their beliefs on issues such as marriage, family and sexual ethics. These prosecutions and the labeling of some Christian beliefs as "offensive" speech have had a chilling effect, leading Christians to increasingly censor their own views on these controversial issues. However, self-censorship among Christians appears to be not only a legal problem but a broader societal phenomenon, fueled by fear of negative consequences when expressing one's views. In this regard, the university context has been particularly affected by self-censorship among students and by secular intolerance, including negative prejudice against Christians.

Methodologically, the following article provides a broad literature review in regard to the concepts of secular intolerance, Christian self-censorship, and the chilling effect. The small amount of research currently available on Christian self-censorship has identified the university context as an area of particular intolerance toward Christians and of resulting self-censorship. Based on this premise, the present article draws on existing research on Christian self-censorship and studies on self-censorship among university students in general in order to explore the potential implications for Christian students and the root causes of this phenomenon. Some of the existing research on freedom of speech in the university context refers to political categories such as "conservative," "labor," "left" and "right." As these categories are not directly related to the exercise of free speech among Christians, they will not be developed further in this article. However, they do seem relevant in the context of secular intolerance and Christian self-censorship, since most of the calls for speech restrictions and attacks on Christian students and professors who express their views on issues such as marriage or abortion come from students on the political left, and since most of the controversial issues on which self-censorship is most prevalent have a political dimension.

Structurally, this article begins by discussing the relationship between freedom of thought, conscience and religion and freedom of expression (section 2), demonstrating that the former depends on protection of the latter. In this context, it discusses the scope and limitations of these rights (section 3), the emergence of hate speech legislation (section 4), and its chilling effect (section 5). The article then goes on to discuss the resulting self-censorship, starting with an overview of the existing literature on this concept (section 6), followed by the presentation of various studies that confirm the phenomenon of self-censorship among European university students in general and Christian students in particular (section 6.1). Finally, drawing on existing research on secular intolerance, the article ex-

amines secular intolerance and the labeling of certain Christian views as "offensive" as root causes of self-censorship in the university context. The conclusion (section 7) considers the implications of and possible remedies for self-censorship among Christian university students.

2. The interrelatedness of freedom of expression and religious freedom

The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom of opinion and expression, enshrined in Articles 18 and 19 of the United Nations (UN) International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), have sometimes been perceived as two conflicting rights (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 5). This perception usually stems from the misconception that freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) includes the protection of religion from offensive expression or ridicule. However, as the former UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, has pointed out, "freedom of religion primarily confers a right to act in accordance with one's religion but does not bestow a right for believers to have their religion itself protected from all adverse comment" (United Nations General Assembly 2006:para. 37). Today, in contrast, we are seeing a reverse phenomenon, with strong demands for speech restrictions causing certain expressions of traditional religious beliefs to be labeled as offensive and sometimes even criminalized.

Viewed properly, freedom of religion and freedom of expression are two closely related rights that mutually reinforce each other (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 30). They have been termed the nucleus of the United Nations Bill of Rights (Nowak 1993:301), pointing to their common philosophical foundation. Furthermore, manifestations covered by the right to freedom of religion can be described as expressions. Even if some religious manifestations go beyond the mere "expression" of one's beliefs (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 72), legal commentaries have described the public dimension of freedom of religion as closely related to freedom of expression (Nowak 1993:320).

According to Special Rapporteur Bielefeldt, the common feature of both rights is the focus on the human being as the rights holder, which shows that individuals must be protected regardless of the nature of the opinions or religious beliefs they hold. For Bielefeldt, this approach is the only way for democratic states to take "religious and philosophical pluralism seriously, including irreconcilable differences in beliefs and practices" (United Nations General Assembly 2015:para. 14).

3. Scope and legitimate limitations of freedom of religion and expression

As this article discusses restrictions on freedom of religion and freedom of expression, it should be noted that both Article 18 and Article 19 of the ICCPR con-

tain limitation clauses. In the context of fundamental rights, limitation clauses set out the lawful scope of permissible limitations by specifying their substantive content and the permissible purpose of the limiting act (Ali Nassir 2018:302-305).

Limitations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18 ICCPR) are permissible only with regard to religious manifestations, which is commonly referred to as the "public dimension" of religious freedom. According to Article 18(3) of the ICCPR, the "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others."

However, the "private dimension" of religious freedom enjoys absolute protection under human rights law, as laid out in Article 18(2), which states, "No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice."

Freedom of expression, as enshrined in Article 19, naturally concerns only the "public dimension" (as the right to hold opinions privately is covered by Article 18). According to Article 19(3), limitations of the right to freedom of expression must be "provided by law" and must be "necessary for respect of the rights or reputations of others" and "for the protection of national security or of public order (ordre public), or of public health or morals."

The wording of these articles was the result of intense negotiations between the various UN member states. With regard to freedom of expression, the changes between the earlier version, found in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which does not contain any limitation clauses, and the later version of Article 19 contained in the ICCPR reflect the controversies between Western states, which advocated for free speech, and Soviet states, which pushed for severe speech limitations. The dispute resulted in the introduction of Article 19(3) and also of Article 20(2), which outlaws "any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence" (Coleman 2016:27).

4. Hate speech legislation and its implications for freedom of expression and religion

However, debates between Soviet and Western states over restrictions on freedom of expression did not end with the drafting of the ICCPR, as the USSR and allied states pushed continually for further prohibitions on "hate speech" (Coleman 2016:28). Perhaps the most far-reaching provision to this end was Article 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1965, which calls on states "to adopt immediate and positive

measures designed to eradicate all incitement to, or acts of, such discrimination," including the "dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority."

Because Article 4 of the ICERD and Article 20(2) of the ICCPR require states to take positive measures to prohibit speech that incites discrimination, even those states that initially opposed the introduction of these provisions began to enact hate speech laws following the ratification of the treaties (Coleman 2016:37). In many European states, these laws have since been expanded. Though they were originally linked to the categories of national, racial and religious identity, many national hate speech laws have been amended to include other groups and less clearly defined categories such as transgender identity and sexual orientation. This is the case, for example, with the newly introduced Scottish Hate Crime and Public Order Act of 2021 (OIDAC 2021).

Furthermore, the lack of a definition of hate speech in international law has allowed for broad interpretations that have moved further and further away from the original rationale of restricting speech that incites imminent violence. According to the Council of Europe's 2009 Manual on Hate Speech, for example, hate speech "does not necessarily manifest itself through the expression of hatred or of emotions. It can also be concealed in statements which at a first glance may seem to be rational or normal" (Council of Europe 2009). Similarly, the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency called for a binding EU instrument to effectively counter "expression of negative opinions against LGBT people" in its section on hate speech (European Union 2010:36). It has even been argued that the use of the "word 'family' and the phrase 'traditional family values' is itself [sic] a form of hate speech" (Wenke 2013).

Against this backdrop, it should come as no surprise that an increasing number of Christians have been investigated and even prosecuted for alleged hate speech when expressing their religious views in public. A prominent example is the court case against Finnish Member of Parliament Päivi Räsänen and Lutheran Bishop Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, who were charged with criminal offenses for publishing material about their biblical understanding of marriage and sexual ethics (De Pater and Hoikkala 2024).

5. The chilling effect on freedom of expression

The implications of hate speech legislation and the resulting criminal prosecution of Christians for expressing religious views on issues such as marriage, family, or sexual ethics in public is not limited to the personal fate of those prosecuted. These prosecutions send a chilling message, implying that the expression of religious views on certain topics comes at the risk of social exclusion, professional harm, or even legal charges. The paralyzing effect that results from attacks on the

expression of Christian beliefs, including through legal proceedings, has been described as a chilling effect (Esparza et al. 2023:12). It has been persuasively argued that this effect is independent of whether Christians win or lose these legal cases, since a potential legal victory does not reduce the harm of interrupted careers, increased stress, workplace bullying, and other negative experiences resulting from facing legal charges (Petri and MacMillan 2020:45-46).

Since one of the main fears fueling the chilling effect is social exclusion (Esparza et al. 2023:12), legal charges are not the only driving force. In a series of interviews conducted by Esparza et al. (2023) as part of an exploratory study on self-censorship among Christians (see section 6 for further details), it became clear that while some Christians indeed feared being subjected to legal proceedings on charges of discrimination, others feared disciplinary proceedings in their work or places of study, leading the majority to keep expressions of faith and opinions on issues related to life, marriage and the family private, as they had witnessed sanctions or prosecutions to which colleagues or peers had been subjected (Esparza et al. 2023:22).

Moreover, since laws have a communicative function (Robinson 1996:208), it is reasonable to assume that if criminal law severely restricts freedom of speech, "the culture of such a society will also adopt a restrictive attitude to freedom of speech" (Coleman 2016:119). Such a restrictive societal attitude can also contribute significantly to the chilling effect.

Beyond specific hate speech legislations, the adoption of laws in general has an impact on what people consider the ethical norm. For example, since the passage of same-sex marriage legislation, it has become increasingly unacceptable for people to express disapproval of this practice (Petri and Buckingham 2020:31).

Restrictions on freedom of religious expression are therefore not limited to the creation and enforcement of hate speech and similar legislation; they also imply the broader societal problem of self-censorship among those who hold religious beliefs contrary to mainstream views on marriage, family, or sexual ethics, or other contested topics.

6.   Self-censorship: A common response to the chilling effect

Recent research has confirmed the existence of self-censorship among Christians. Petri and Boyd-MacMillan (2020:43), based on interviews with representatives of more than 20 faith-based advocacy organizations in Western Europe, found that Christians are more frequently resorting to self-censorship and "seem to have become accustomed to being silent about their views when they depart from the mainstream."

In 2021, the International Institute for Religious Freedom, the Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, and the Observa-

tory of Religious Freedom in Latin America presented an explorative study on self-censorship among Christians in France, Germany, Colombia and Mexico, titled *Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the "Chilling Effect"* (Esparza et al. 2023), which has been published in *IJRF*.

The study is based on unstructured interviews and did not answer the question of the quantitative scale of self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:25). However, it confirmed the presence of this phenomenon among Christians (Esparza et al. 2023:13) and contributed to the further development of the concept of Christian self-censorship. It thereby added to the existing definition – "Christians censor their own convictions and actions if they go against the prevailing culture" – the notion "that self-censorship is also a consequence of the perception of a hostile environment or the suspicion that there will be negative consequences for the person or their closest circle for the mere fact of expressing their beliefs" (Esparza et al. 2023:22).

A particularly evident manifestation of the chilling effect of speech restrictions and social hostilities against the Christian worldview, along with the subsequent self-censorship among Christians, has appeared in the university context. In the interviews conducted by Esparza et al. (2023:18), respondents identified universities as one of "the most hostile environments for people with alternative worldviews, including Christian worldviews."

6.1. Self-censorship at European universities

Several recent studies have confirmed the rise of self-censorship at European universities. For Christian students, the chilling effect at European universities has direct implications for their ability to express their faith. However, Christians are not the only ones prone to self-censorship in the university context.

The following section presents recent studies on the general state of freedom of speech at European universities and then discusses the implications of this situation for Christians. Since there are no quantitative studies on self-censorship among Christian university students, this analysis remains preliminary and qualitative.

Examples are taken from British and German universities. There is a practical reason for this choice: currently, most studies on freedom of expression in European universities come from these two countries. While the right to freedom of expression is guaranteed in both countries, the current situation in German and British universities and societies in general presents a different picture.

6.1.1. The state of free speech at British and German universities

In recent years, the United Kingdom has witnessed a contentious discourse surrounding freedom of speech, particularly within the university context. Some

authors have expressed concerns regarding students' inability to articulate their perspectives, the denial of platforms to visiting professors or guests, and the perception of academic freedom restrictions among staff members (Simpson and Kaufmann 2019:4; Lackey 2018).

As early as 2016, the UK Higher Education Policy Institute conducted a survey of 1,006 full-time undergraduate students enrolled in publicly funded higher education institutions across the UK to gauge their perceptions of freedom of speech on campus (Hillman 2016:ii). Although only eight percent of students reported feeling restricted in their free speech, the percentage of students who reported feeling "completely free" to express their opinions and political views was already relatively low at 41 percent (Hillman 2016:7). When the same survey was conducted again in 2022, the proportion of students who believed that "universities are becoming less tolerant of a wide range of viewpoints" had increased to 38 percent, up from 24 percent in 2016 (Hillman 2022:13).

A study by the Policy Institute at King's College London, based on two representative surveys of UK university students and published in September 2022, indicated that while a majority of students felt they could express their views freely, more than half also believed that this was not the case for everyone (Hillman 2022:13). According to the findings, 65 percent of students felt that free speech and robust debate were well protected at their institution, and 80 percent felt personally free to express their views at their university. However, a significant proportion of students, 51 percent, said that the "climate at their university prevents some people from saying things they believe because others might find them offensive." This viewpoint was shared by an even higher percentage of the UK general public, with 79 percent of respondents concurring (Hillman 2022:13).

These numbers indicate that self-censorship is primarily a concern for those who dissent from the prevailing narrative at universities and whose views are labeled as offensive by those who oppose their views. The topics on which students were most likely to hold back from expressing their views were politics (36 percent), religion (35 percent), gender identity (34 percent), and transgender issues (33 percent) (Hillman 2022:24). Another topic where self-censorship is particularly high is the sanctity of unborn life. According to a survey of pro-life students in the UK, over 70 percent of students who adhere to pro-life views reported feeling unable to articulate their perspectives during seminars and lectures (Alliance of Pro-Life Students 2021).

In Germany, the annual Freedom Index, a survey conducted by the German Statista Research Department based on personal interviews, has revealed a persistent decline in the perception of free speech among the general public over the past several decades. According to the most recent iteration of the Freedom In-

dex, released in 2023, which surveyed 1,047 respondents, 44 percent of Germans expressed the opinion that the freedom to voice political opinions is not guaranteed, while 40 percent asserted that free speech is still upheld. This percentage affirming free speech marks the lowest recorded since 1990, when 78 percent of respondents still held such a view (Statista Research Department 2023). According to the German Allensbach Institute, this is the lowest level of perceived freedom of speech since the 1950s (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2021).

When asked to identify topics that they considered particularly sensitive, the ones mentioned by the largest percentages were Islam (59 percent), patriotism (38 percent), and gender equality (19 percent). In comparison, in 1996, only 3 percent to 16 percent of respondents reported experiencing difficulty in speaking about these subjects.

In the university context, Revers and Traunmüller conducted a preliminary study on freedom of speech at German universities in 2020. They collected survey data from social science students at Goethe University Frankfurt, which is considered a most likely place for self-censorship, due to its history as focal point of the leftist student movement (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:473). The result revealed evidence of conformity pressures on the campus. One-quarter of the students reported having been subjected to personal attacks when expressing opinions that diverged from the prevailing ones, and 33 percent expressed a reluctance to voice their views openly on controversial subjects (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:474).

The two German studies also reveal a strong difference in the propensity to self-censor along the political spectrum. According to the Allensbach survey, 62 percent of right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, or Alternative for Germany) voters said they could not freely express their opinions, while 62 percent of supporters of the left-wing Green Party did not see any problems with freedom of expression. Similarly, Revers and Traunmüller commented, "Left-leaning students are less likely to tolerate controversial viewpoints and right-leaning students are more likely to self-censor on politically sensitive issues such as gender, immigration, or sexual and ethnic minorities."

This finding aligns with the results of a survey conducted by the King's College London Policy Institute, which revealed that students with a Conservative voting tendency were substantially more likely than those who voted Labour to perceive the chilling effect as affecting them (Hillman 2022:30). A similar finding emerged from a representative survey of US college students, in which over half of the respondents were reluctant to share their views on at least one of five controversial topics: politics, race, religion, sexuality, and gender (Stiksma 2020). The study also found that politically conservative students were more reluctant to speak about controversial topics (Stiksma 2020; Gallup and Knight Foundation 2018).

In their study, Revers and Traunmüller (2020:479) concluded that European universities have become an environment in which a certain ideological perspective dominates, leading individuals with divergent or minority views to hide their opinions so as to avoid social exclusion.

6.1.2. Self-censorship among Christian university students

Addressing the question of the extent to which Christian university students are affected by self-censorship is challenging due to the diversity of opinions and political views present across Christian denominations, as well as the scarcity of data specifically addressing this phenomenon. However, substantial evidence suggests that Christian university students are among those most likely to censor their own views.

As previously discussed, the preliminary study *Perceptions on Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the "Chilling Effect"* identified the university context as one of "the most hostile environments for people with alternative worldviews, including Christian worldviews" (Esparza et al. 2023:18).

Furthermore, a recent study by Voice for Justice UK, which included qualitative and quantitative research based on questionnaires completed by 1,562 respondents from different Christian denominations and age groups, found that only 36 percent among the younger generation felt free to express their views at work or in other public settings (Voice for Justice UK 2024:2).

Religion is clearly among the issues on which self-censorship is most prevalent, and many of the other socially sensitive issues, such as marriage and gender or sexual ethics, which are associated with high pressure to take "politically correct" positions (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach 2021:4), touch on aspects of Christian social teaching. People who hold a traditional Christian worldview on these issues will naturally be among those most affected by pressure to censor themselves.

However, Christian university students also seem to be affected by intolerance of their views and identity, making them particularly vulnerable to censorship pressures. In 2023, a research study based on a sample of over 8,000 students at four different UK universities was published, examining students' views and their experiences on campus. It found that Christians were among the three groups most likely to feel mistreated because of their worldview (Peacock et al. 2023:21). In one focus group, a Christian sociology student expressed her experience in this way:

> I wouldn't feel comfortable expressing my religious worldviews in a
> seminar. I do think it's largely a secular university and I mean Chris-

> tians ... have a bad reputation with secular, left leaning spaces. ... If I expressed them in a seminar, for example, it would either get shot down ... or it would just start a debate that I don't want to be part of. (Peacock et al. 2023:16)

This analysis points to two root causes of Christian self-censorship that seem to be of particular importance: intolerance of Christians in a secular environment and the fear of being labeled offensive when expressing Christian views.

6.2.   Root causes of self-censorship among Christian university students

We have noted above that overly broad hate speech legislation and the prosecution of Christians for alleged hate speech when they express their religious beliefs on issues such as marriage, family, and sexual ethics, as well as the fear of social exclusion, are root causes of the chilling effect that leads to self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:12). Moreover, the fear of being labeled as "offensive" and the perception of a general intolerance of Christians in the secular environment seem to be other root causes of self-censorship in the university context that deserve further investigation.

6.2.1. The Christian worldview as offensive speech?

Requests for restrictions of offensive speech have risen dramatically on European campuses in recent years. In 2022, in a Higher Education Policy Institute poll of 1,000 full-time undergraduate students, 61 percent said that "when in doubt" their own university "should ensure all students are protected from discrimination rather than allow unlimited free speech," up from 37 percent in 2016 (Hillman 2016). Protection from discrimination, however, is not limited to calls for restrictions on speech. According to a recent King's College study, 41 percent of students agree that academics who teach material that offends some students should be fired (King's College London 2022). Similarly, an analysis by the Civitas research team, which surveyed all 137 registered UK universities between 2017 and 2020, found that "over half (55 percent) of all universities experienced a 'cancel culture' of open letters or petitions which pushed for the restriction of views of staff, students or visiting speakers on campus" (Civitas 2020).

Niamh McIntyre, a student who succeeded in shutting down an Oxford University debate about abortion, has insisted, "The idea that in a free society absolutely everything should be open to debate has a detrimental effect on marginalized groups." According to him, stopping the abortion debate was justified because "as a student, I asserted that [this debate] would make me feel threatened in my own university" (McIntyre 2014). A case study from the United Kingdom found that

even at Catholic and Anglican elite universities, views considered "intolerant" or "overly conservative," including on gender, were not tolerated. "We are intolerant of people we perceive as being intolerant," a student remarked (Peacock et al. 2023:16). Increasingly, it seems that students want to be protected from offense more than they want the freedom to speak (Coleman 2016:115).

The threshold of what is considered offensive, however, seems to have been lowered significantly, leading to an increasing labeling of Christian worldviews on subjects such as marriage and gender in this way. This phenomenon is exemplified by the findings of a Whitestone Insights survey, which revealed that 23 percent of individuals age 18 to 34 expressed support for the ban on the general sale of the Bible, "unless the offending parts" that "some perceive as hate speech" were edited out (Christian Today 2023). This exceedingly broad conception of hate speech should be viewed in the context of European hate speech legislation, which has been discussed above.

Evidently, the framing of a traditional Christian worldview as hate speech has had a chilling effect, leading Christians to refraining from expressing their views on socially critical topics out of fear of being perceived as hateful (Right to Life UK 2024; OIDAC 2024). Consequently, it is not surprising that one of the primary reasons why students self-censor is the potential that peers will criticize their views as offensive (Revers and Traunmüller 2020:479).

The chilling effect that these speech restrictions have on university students was characterized by the Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom at the UK Office for Students as follows: "When an institution fails to protect, or punishes, legal speech, the effect goes well beyond the speaker. It casts a penumbra of silence. This is the chilling effect" (Billot 2023).

6.2.2. Secular intolerance and self-censorship

A close examination of the underlying factors contributing to Christian self-censorship within a secular academic environment, which many Christians perceive as hostile to their worldview (Peacock et al. 2023:16), suggests that the concept of secular intolerance offers a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. This term has been used (Boyd-MacMillan 2006; Petri and Visscher 2015:91-122; Petri and Buckingham 2020:27-35) to describe the hostile atmosphere that leads to discrimination against Christians in the West. Drawing on Rowan Williams's (2012) concept of "programmatic secularism," which holds that the state should not be clouded by religious convictions, secular intolerance describes a radical form of secularism that aims to exclude religion from the public sphere (Petri and Buckingham 2020:29), based on the conviction that religion should have no influence on society, especially in education and politics (Petri and Visscher 2015:99-122).

While sometimes promoted in the name of "neutrality," secular intolerance has been shown to be anything but neutral. The Open Doors World Watch Research Unit, for example, describes secular intolerance – which, according to the organization, is one of the engines of Christian persecution – as an attempt to "transform societies into the shape of a new, radically secularist ethic." Christian individuals or organizations that do not conform to the new social norms on issues such as marriage and family are likely to face discrimination (Open Doors Analytical 2017). Consequently, secular intolerance is not manifested only in isolated incidents involving Christian activists but is rather a shared experience among Christian leaders (Petri and Boyd-MacMillan 2020:37).

Western secularization has led to growing religious illiteracy, or "an increasingly misinformed understanding of what religion entails, with the corollary that public policies and legislation reckon less fully with religious sensitivities" (Petri and Boyd-MacMillan 2020:32). This development reinforces secular intolerance (Petri and Buckingham 2020:31), as it contributes to negative stereotyping of Christians, as well as to legislation that does not adequately accommodate religious freedom.

In a study analyzing open-ended interviews with 20 faith-based organizations, Petri and Boyd-MacMillan (2020:43) found that many Christians resort to self-censorship in the face of secular intolerance and have even become accustomed to remaining silent about their beliefs that do not conform to mainstream views. Further research in this area has confirmed that "Christians self-censor in order not to be affected by the hostile secular environment" (Esparza et al. 2023:25).

It is safe to assume that the same relationship between secular intolerance and self-censorship also holds true in the university context. One illustrative case involved discrimination against the Christian Student Mission in Germany (SMD). In 2018, the SMD revealed that its local student groups had been denied or had lost accreditation at more than 30 German universities (Enders 2018:2; Lutz 2018). Without accreditation, student groups cannot use any campus facilities, let alone hold events, set up book tables, or distribute leaflets. The student governing bodies that denied accreditation justified their decision by pointing out that the SMD had indirectly supported the German March for Life, an annual pro-life demonstration that calls for the protection of unborn children and better support for pregnant women. According to the student body, the march was "homophobic and anti-feminist" (Lutz 2018), and therefore the SMD did not deserve to be recognized as a student group. The other main reason given for the *de facto* ban of the group was that "religion has no place on campus" (Lutz 2018). Clemens Schweiger, the leader of "Campus for Christ," one of the banned groups, observed, "The atmosphere at universities has become much more anti-Christian. As a Christian

organization, we hardly get any space. The Christian faith is being pushed into the private sphere" (Lutz 2018).

While most forms of secular intolerance in the university context seem to revolve around negative comments, mistreatment and administrative actions, some Christian students have also reported facing violence or suspension. In these cases, secular intolerance in connection with a "new, radically secularist ethic" (Open Doors Analytical 2017) appears to affect especially those Christian students who openly express conservative worldviews on topics such as marriage and sexual ethics or are actively involved in pro-life groups. According to Hans-Joachim Hahn, the head of the German Professors' Forum, there has been an increase in incidents of aggressive political groups undermining the right to freedom of expression, a development that has raised concerns among not only students but also academic staff. Professors who hold conservative Christian worldviews "are attacked and defamed via social media and their lectures are sometimes physically threatened," he wrote after a lecture on abortion at Göttingen University was prevented by activists (Katholische Nachrichten 2019).

Such incidents of discrimination and intolerance have an evident chilling effect on Christian university students, leading them to censor their views. Julia Rynkiewicz, a Christian midwife student from the United Kingdom who faced a four-month suspension after her university learned about her leadership of a pro-life student group, expressed this relationship in an interview with the *Telegraph* (Swerling 2020) as follows: "What happened to me risks creating a fear among students to discuss their values and beliefs."

7.   Implications and Remedies

Widespread self-censorship among Christian college students has far-reaching implications. First, it can lead to long-term structural changes in society as a whole. If the Christian worldview is completely negated in universities, future power structures and narratives will be shaped by only one dominant, secular worldview. Second, if freedom of religion and conscience is not protected in universities, Christian students may be driven out of those fields where secularist ethics are particularly dominant, leading eventually to the total exclusion of Christians from certain professions.

The present analysis highlights this problem. By comparing recent studies on freedom of expression at universities and self-censorship among Christians with earlier research on secular intolerance, we can see that secular intolerance, which manifests itself in demands for speech restrictions and intolerance toward Christian students, is a root cause of self-censorship among Christian students. Specifically, the labeling of certain worldviews, such as the belief that marriage

is a union between one man and one woman, as offensive hate speech is a main reason why some Christian university students resort to self-censorship, particularly on issues such as marriage or sexual ethics. Furthermore, self-censorship does not affect only Christians but is a broader societal problem.

One remedy for this phenomenon seems to lie in rediscovering the true scope and permissible limitations of the human right to freedom of expression. Incitement to violence through speech is, rightly, considered illegal and not protected as free expression. However, support for marriage as the union of a man and a woman is not incitement to violence and should not be treated as such. If free speech is to prevail on European campuses, it is crucial to help students realize that not every disagreement constitutes discrimination (Anderson 2019: 363) and that, for good reason, there is no human right to be protected from offense.

On a practical level, those who promote open, pluralistic debate and freedom of speech in universities will have to take into account the high sensitivity and need for emotional security experienced by the younger generation. Helping students to rediscover the beauty of controversy and to understand education as a search for truth, sometimes through exposure to different arguments, will be crucial. This is also true for Christian students who sometimes prefer quiet harmony to open debate.

Despite the broader context of the problem, self-censorship should also be highlighted as a religious freedom issue. Since the expression of religious views is an integral component of religious freedom, there can be no religious freedom without freedom of expression. Further research on the relationship between secular intolerance and the freedom of Christians to express their religious convictions, particularly in the university context, would be important in this regard.

In this context, the promotion of religious literacy in universities will be important to counter current misconceptions about the Christian faith and the resulting hostile attitudes. As most European universities have a history as Christian institutions, students should learn about the history of their institutions and the contributions of the Christian faith to European democracy and human rights law. A better knowledge of history in general will also help students understand more fully the value of freedom of expression and the dangers of restricting it.

Finally, a better understanding of one's own faith and Christian ethics has proven to be a successful means for Christians to overcome self-censorship (Esparza et al. 2023:14). Therefore, moving beyond self-censorship involves a personal dimension and responsibility. It will also require a concerted effort by Christian churches and institutions to equip the younger generation with sound knowledge of faith, doctrine, and apologetics so that they can provide meaningful responses in today's controversial debates.

References

Legislation

Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act (2021)

Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act (2023)

Higher Education and Research Act (2017)

Other sources

Anderson, Ryan T. (2019) "Challenges to True Fairness for All: How SOGI Laws Are Unlike Civil Liberties and Other Nondiscrimination Laws and How to Craft Better Policy and Get Nondiscrimination Laws Right," in *Religious Freedom, LGBT Rights, and the Prospects for Common Ground*, William Eskridge, Jr. and Robin Fretwell Wilson (eds)., Cambridge University Press, 361-377. Available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3370373.

Ali Nassir, Muhammad. (2018) "Negative governmentality through fundamental rights: the far side of the European Convention on Human Rights," *European Law Journal* 24 (4-5): 297-320.

Alliance of Pro-Life Students. (2021) *Over 70 percent of "Pro-life" Students Feel Unable to Express Views in Seminars and Lectures*. Available at: https://prolife students.org.uk/2021/02/10/press-release/.

Billot, James. (2023) *Free speech tsar: I will be "viewpoint-neutral," UnHerd*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/34x6djvv.

Boyd-MacMillan, Ronald. (2006) *Faith That Endures: The Essential Guide to the Persecuted Church*. Lancaster: Sovereign World Limited.

Christianity Today. (2023) "Nearly a quarter of young Brits open to banning the Bible." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4d6x76cj.

Civitas. (2020) *Academic Freedom in Our Universities: The Best and the Worst*, Civitas: Institute for the Study of Civil Society.

Coleman, Paul. (2016) *Censored*. 2nd ed. Vienna: Kairos Publications.

Council of Europe. (2009) *Manual on Hate Speech*. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/168071e53e.

De Pater, Arie and Ville Hoikkala. (2024) "Free Speech under Threat in Finland and Beyond?" *IIRF Reports*, 2024/13. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y4ec8drk.

Enders, Christian. (2018) "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit," *smd transparent*, 2 September. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3fuwhv8y.

Esparza, Marcelo Bartolini, Friederike Boellmann, Marcela Bordón Lugo, Teresa Isabel Flores Chiscul, Dennis P. Petri, Hugues, and Secondat de Montesquieu. (2023) *Perceptions of Self-Censorship: Confirming and Understanding the "Chilling Effect."* IIRF, OLIRE and OIDAC Europe, 12: 1-29.

European Union. (2010) *Homophobia, transphobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity*. Luxembourg: Pub-

lications Office of the European Union. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5c3kcwht.

Fletcher, Nick (ed.). (2024) *The Costs of Keeping the Faith*. Voice for Justice UK.

Gallup and Knight Foundation. 2018. *Free expression on campus: What college students think about First Amendment issues.* Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5ceyata8.

Hillman, Nick (2016) Keeping Schtum? What students think of free speech. HEPI/YouthSight Monitor. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4vbehp9u.

Hillman, Nick. (2022) "'You can't say that!' What students really think of free speech on campus," Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/tf444tus.

Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach. (2021) *Die Mehrheit fühlt sich gegängelt Eine Dokumentation des Beitrags von Dr. Thomas Petersen in der Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung Nr. 136*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2hty64pm.

Katholische Nachrichten. (2019) *800 Professoren gegen Denk- und Sprechverbote in Forschung und Lehre*. Available at: https://www.kath.net/news/68061.

King's College London. (2022) "The state of free speech in UK universities: what students and the public think." Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yn6wcvz5.

Lackey, Jennifer (ed.). (2018) *Academic freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lutz, Anna. (2018) *Unis schließen Christen aus*, *PRO*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ytzfsk6a.

McIntyre, Niamh. (2014) "I helped shut down an abortion debate between two men because my uterus isn't up for their discussion," *The Independent*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdd77ayy.

Nowak, Manfred. (1993) *U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: CCPR commentary*. Kehl am Rhein: N.P. Engel.

OIDAC (Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe). (2021) *Controversial hate crime bill in Scotland ratified by Parliament*, Available at: https://tinyurl.com/vyaekr7y.

OIDAC. (2024) "Self-censored," *YouTube*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CD3EJnDlbRk.

Open Doors Analytical. (2017) *World Watch List Methodology*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/az8844ed.

Peacock, Lucy, Mathew Guest, Kristin Aune, Alyssa N. Rockenbach, B. Ashley Staples, and Matthew J. Mayhew. (2023) *Building student relationships across religion and worldview difference*, Coventry University, Durham University, North Carolina State University and The Ohio State University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4a9zz98x.

ANJA HOFFMANN

Petri, Dennis and Ronald Boyd-MacMillan. (2020) "Death by a thousand cuts," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13(1/2): 37-53. Available at: https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/101.

Petri, Dennis and Janet Epp Buckingham. (2020) "Origins of and responses to secular intolerance," *International Journal for Religious Freedom* 13(1/2): 27-35. Available at: https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/article/view/100.

Petri, Dennis and Frans Visscher. (2015) "Revisiting Sphere Sovereignty to Interpret Restrictions on Religious Freedom," *Philosophia Reformata*, 80: 99-122. DOI:10.1163/23528230-08001007.

Revers, Matthias and Richard Traunmüller. (2020) "Is Free Speech in Danger on University Campus? Some Preliminary Evidence from a Most Likely Case," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 72: 471-497. DOI: 10.1007/s11577-020-00713-z.

Right to Life UK. (2024) *Manchester students left "terrified" as out-of-control mob barricades, spits on, threatens, and wishes rape on them for their pro-life views*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4jksmp7k.

Robinson, Paul. (1996) "The Criminal-Civil Distinction and the Utility of Desert," *Boston University Law Review*, 76: 201-214.

Simpson, Thomas and Eric Kaufmann. (2019) *Academic Freedom in the UK*. London: Policy Exchange.

Statista Research Department. (2023) *Perceived freedom of expression in Germany until 2023*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mtpbjae7.

Stiksma, M. (2020) *Understanding the Campus Expression Climate: Fall 2019*. Heterodox Academy. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yuptht63.

Swerling, Gabriella. (2020) "Banned Catholic pro-life midwifery student wins apology and payout," *The Telegraph*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/49nxe9v9.

United Nations General Assembly. (2006) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir, and the Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, Doudou Diène, further to Human Rights Council decision 1/107 on incitement to racial and religious hatred and the promotion of tolerance*, A/HRC/2/3.

United Nations General Assembly. (2015) *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief*, A/HRC/31/18.

Wenke, Joe. (2013) "Deciphering Hate Speech: How Coded Words Like 'Family' Breed Contempt," *HuffPost*. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yk2fst7s.

Williams, Rowan. (2012) *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.

Noteworthy

The noteworthy items are structured in five groups: annual reports and global surveys, regional and country reports, specific issues, films, and courses. Though we apply serious criteria in the selection of items noted, it is beyond our capacity to scrutinize the accuracy of every statement made. We therefore disclaim responsibility for the contents of the items noted. The compilation was produced by Janet Epp Buckingham.

Annual Reports and Global Surveys

Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022
Pew Research Center, 18 December 2024
https://tinyurl.com/yw7u22nv
This annual report assesses the level of religious persecution in 2022 and also includes a five-year look at the relationship between religion-related government restrictions and social hostilities in each country.

Global Persecution Index 2025
International Christian Concern, 3 January 2025
https://www.persecution.org/gpi/
ICC's 2025 Global Persecution Index offers an in-depth analysis of drivers of persecution in 20 countries, along with stories of Christians enduring persecution for their faith in Christ.

GCR Red List 2025
Global Christian Relief, 9 January 2025
https://globalchristianrelief.org/red-list-prayer-guide/
The report focuses on nations that have committed the most killings, building attacks, arrests, displacements, and abductions and assaults during the reporting period of November 2022 to November 2024. It also includes policy recommendations from their advocacy team.

World Watch List 2025
Open Doors International / World Watch Research, 15 January 2025
https://tinyurl.com/en4wv4pj
This report is Open Doors' annual ranking of the 50 countries where Christians face the most extreme persecution. The top three countries are North Korea, Somalia and Yemen.

2025 Annual Report
USCIRF, 25 March 2025
https://tinyurl.com/5yut2bzh
This annual report documents developments during 2024. It recommends that 16 countries be designated Countries of Particular Concern and that 12 more be put on the State Department's Special Watch List. The report urges the US government to make FoRB a priority issue.

Regional and Country Reports

Afghanistan: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
This report covers the legal framework for religious freedom in Afghanistan and the deteriorating situation for human rights under the Taliban, particularly restrictions on women.

Algeria: Country Update
USCIRF, 8 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/yz2vzdk8
This report provides an overview of the current religious freedom conditions in Algeria. It addresses the legal framework the government utilizes in violating religious freedom and belief in the country. These frameworks include blasphemy laws and legal restrictions on the activities of religious communities, including Ahmadiyya Muslims and evangelical Christians.

China: Sinicization of Religion: China's Coercive Religious Policy
USCIRF, 23 September 2024
https://tinyurl.com/42cxbs9x
This report provides an overview of the Chinese government's Sinicization policy and its application to repress religious groups in the country.

China: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 17 December 2024
https://tinyurl.com/69vt4cv7
This general briefing focuses on the legal framework of religion in China and the impact of the Sinicization policy. It addresses the repression of house churches in China. In addition, it addresses the persecution of the historic Uyghur Muslim community.

Cuba: Religious freedom conditions in Cuba
USCIRF, 6 September 2024
https://tinyurl.com/y74wam7v
This country update summarizes Cuba's repressive legal framework, documents the government's ongoing harassment of worshipers, and provides an update on religious prisoners of conscience.

Cuba: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/3zhwbxwu
This report explains how the Cuban government continues to routinely and systematically violate freedom of religion or belief. Religious leaders are regularly visited by government officials and pressured to support government policies.

Europe: Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe Report 2024
Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe, November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/muju5vh3
This report provides data on anti-Christian hate crimes in the countries of Europe during 2023. It also provides examples and analysis of discrimination against Christians in the workplace, at universities, and in various areas of life, as well as restrictions on the religious freedom of Christians in Europe in 2023 and 2024.

India: Country Update
USCIRF, 2 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/3a3v23st
This report provides an overview of the worsening situation for religious freedom in India during 2024. It also examines the increasing frequency of attacks against religious minorities and their advocates, including the targeting of places of worship.

India: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/e8kdvx7
This report covers the legal framework for religious freedom, the Hindu nationalist agenda, communal violence, and the targeting of religious minorities.

India: Hate and targeted violence against Christians in India: Yearly report 2024
Religious Liberty Commission of Evangelical Fellowship of India, 10 March 2025
https://tinyurl.com/3uskxspk
This annual report details 840 verified incidents of violence and targeted persecution against Christians in India, which is an increase from 601 in 2023. It identifies hotspot areas and patterns of persecution.

Iran: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/jtsf99vh
This report describes the legal framework for religion in Iran and the impact of recent political events on the treatment of religion. It also identifies violations of the rights of Christians and other religious minorities.

Iran: The Tip of the Iceberg: Documented rights violations against Christians in Iran
Article 18, Open Doors, MEC, CSW, January 2025
https://articleeighteen.com/reports/15541/
This annual report documents criminal cases against 96 Christians in 2024. It contains an analysis of over three million case files of the Tehran judiciary between 2008 and 2023 that were leaked.

Iraq: Religious Freedom Challenges in Iraq 10 Years after ISIS's Genocide
USCIRF, 30 September 2024
https://tinyurl.com/ycxxws7a
This report provides an overview of ISIS's genocide and other crimes against Iraq's religious minorities beginning in 2014. It also highlights ongoing religious freedom challenges facing these communities 10 years later.

Mexico: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/y2ydmd67
This report examines the legal status of religion in Mexico, identifies issues of forced displacement, and addresses the challenge of organized crime to freedom of religion.

Myanmar: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024

https://tinyurl.com/4ck3hzsj
This report identifies the challenges that the ongoing civil war has had on religious minorities, including the Rohingya Muslims and Christians.

Myanmar: Country Update
USCIRF, 31 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/kvvn9xeb
This report argues that the escalating conflict in Burma (Myanmar) continues to negatively affect conditions for freedom of religion or belief.

Nicaragua: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/374hh498
The report covers the legal framework for religious freedom, forced closure of civil society organizations, prohibitions on religious activities, and forced exile of religious leaders.

Nicaragua: The Persecution of Christians in Nicaragua 2018-2024
European Centre for Law and Justice, 7 January 2025
https://tinyurl.com/crnaa265
This report documents the systemic campaign of repression against Christians under President Daniel Ortega since 2018. More than 870 attacks against the Catholic Church have been recorded, while evangelical churches, initially spared, are now also targeted.

North Korea: We cannot look away
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 11 September 2024
https://tinyurl.com/56thnaw8
This report looks at freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) inside the country and considers internal and external changes that have impacted human rights, including FoRB, in the DPRK over the past decade.

Pakistan: General Briefing
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024
https://tinyurl.com/mryt5utm
This report focuses on the legal framework for religious freedom, the challenge of blasphemy laws, and the violence against religious minorities. It also addresses abduction, forced conversion and marriage of minority girls.

Pakistan: A Merciless Cycle: Abduction, forced faith conversion, and child marriage of religious minority girls in Pakistan & implications for United States Policy
Jubilee Campaign, October 2024
https://jubileecampaign.org/a-merciless-cycle/
This written testimony to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom focuses on cases of abductions, coerced faith conversions, and child marriages of Hindu and Christian girls in Pakistan, which receive minimal investigation or prosecution.

Spain: Annual Report on the Situation of Religious Freedom in Spain in Relation to Evangelical Churches 2023-2024
FEREDE, 20 December 2024
https://tinyurl.com/yr5yvdxd
In this annual report, FEREDE describes a series of difficulties that Evangelicals face in their daily lives, mainly due to the low value placed by public administrations on religious diversity in the country and situations of discrimination in the treatment of non-Catholic groups.

Sri Lanka: Trend Analysis of Violence Against Christians in Sri Lanka: November 2022-October 2023
National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/3943jcvv
This study examines key trends in religiously motivated violence against Christians between November 2022 and October 2023, based on data collated by the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka. A total of 63 incidents of violence against Christians are analyzed.

Sri Lanka: A Brief Examination of Contested Religious Sites in Sri Lanka
Minor Matters, 9 December 2024
https://tinyurl.com/3y4t58fy
This report explores land conflicts and contestations related to places of religious worship, highlighting their underlying causes and implications. It also identifies key trends, broad issues, and case studies across nine districts, while examining relevant laws, structures, and the critical players involved in these matters.

Sri Lanka: Harmful Content Against Religious Minorities on Social Media November 2022 - August 2024

National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka 2024

https://tinyurl.com/mrx7bvxv

This report highlights the relationship between harmful speech and violations of freedom of religion or belief. It documents harmful expression against religious minorities in Sri Lanka.

Sudan: General Briefing

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024

https://tinyurl.com/y4rsu6js

This report addresses the impact the conflict between the combatants in the civil war and the impact on religious minorities.

Türkiye: A Human Rights Perspective on the Multi-faceted Right (Not) to Believe in Türkiye

Norwegian Helsinki Committee, February 2025

https://tinyurl.com/2jnjvjjm

This report offers a comprehensive examination on the current situation of the freedoms to believe, not to believe, or to believe in "non-mainstream doctrines" in Türkiye. It also identifies areas of non-compliance with international human rights standards and provides recommendations to authorities for safeguarding everyone's freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief.

Venezuela: General Briefing

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024

https://tinyurl.com/yc6v567n

This report addresses how religious communities has been impacted by the authoritarian regime and how they have responded.

Vietnam: General Briefing

Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 25 November 2024

https://tinyurl.com/49j88trn

This report outlines the legal framework for freedom of religion in Vietnam. It identifies the repression of minority groups that have high populations of Christians, including the Montagnards, the Khmer Krom, and the Hmong.

Specific Issues

Employment: The Right to Freedom of Thought, Conscience, Religion or Belief of Women at Work

OSCE, 20 November 2024

https://www.osce.org/odihr/579388
This booklet offers OSCE participant states, businesspeople, unions, civil society organizations and religious or belief groups practical recommendations to ensure respect for and protection of women's right to FoRB in employment.

Extremism laws: Issue update: The abuse of extremism in Central Asia
USCIRF, 31 December 2024
https://tinyurl.com/ym95v5xe
This report argues that Central Asian governments' legislation, including extremism laws, has been influenced by decades of Soviet rule of the region. When the Central Asian governments of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan enforce extremism laws, they regularly go beyond using the legislation to address legitimate security threats and penalize individuals engaged in peaceful religious activities.

Gender: Regional challenges in the intersection of Freedom of Religion or Belief and Gender Equality: West Asia (Middle East) & North Africa
Stefanus Alliance, 2024
https://tinyurl.com/4km7ee33
This report presents key regional issues and opportunities in the intersection of FoRB and gender equality in the WANA region.

Hate Crime Prosecution at the Intersection of Hate Crime and Criminalized 'Hate Speech': a Practical Guide
OSCE, 15 November 2024
https://www.osce.org/odihr/579391
This guide supplements existing Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights guidance on prosecuting hate crimes by outlining the legal and conceptual differences between hate crime and criminalized 'hate speech'; outlining the consequences of misapplying 'hate speech' provisions to prosecute hate crimes, along with practical guidance on how to avoid this error; and making recommendations on how to improve practice at the national level.

Perpetrators: Who carries out attacks against religious communities and individuals? Insights from the VID (2022-2023)
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 12 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/2a4zybky

This report uses data from the Violent Incidents Database to explore incidents that occurred in 2022-2023. It suggests that the most recurring known perpetrator category was "Organized crime" (28 percent), followed by "Government officials" (21 percent) and Ethnic group leaders" (15 percent). Fifteen percent of all incidents recorded in 2022-2023 were committed by "unknown" perpetrators.

Refugees: State of the Golden Door Report
World Relief and Open Doors USA, 14 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/nhzhzb4n
This report details the current state of religious persecution around the world and its connection to US refugee resettlement and asylum policies. The report shows that while progress has been made in terms of refugee resettlement, the number of Christians who face high levels of persecution or discrimination on account of their faith has also risen to 365 million, or one in seven Christians worldwide.

Religious nationalism: Comparing Levels of Religious Nationalism Around the World
Pew Research Center, 28 January 2025
https://tinyurl.com/3ae3bxdp
Pew Research Center conducted this survey to examine the role of religion in public life in 36 countries across the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East-North Africa region, North America and sub-Saharan Africa. The countries have a variety of historically predominant religions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism.

Sacred places: Actions against places of worship in 2022–2023 (VID)
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 12 October 2024
https://tinyurl.com/p4f5xnh4
This report documents that out of 4,338 incident records (rows) in the Violent Incidents Database (VID) in 2022-2023, 489 involved attempts to vandalize, desecrate or destroy places of worship.

Violent conflict: Faltering states and growing churches
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 7 January 2025
https://tinyurl.com/rx3h5nfj
This report argues that amidst the spiraling global violence, the church is suffering even more while seeking opportunities to offer assistance, relief, peace and hope.

Films
The 21

https://www.the21film.com/

This 13-minute animated film tells the story of the 21 Coptic Christians killed on a beach in Libya in 2015. The execution was filmed and the video was shown around the world. This film tells a different narrative; it tells the story of the faith of these martyrs. The film was on the shortlist for Academy Award consideration. It is now available for screening. See an interview with the Producer at IJRF 14(1/2):22.

A Faith Under Siege: Russia's Hidden War on Ukraine's Christians

https://www.faithundersiege.com/

This 60-minute documentary tells the story of Russia's targeting of Evangelical and Protestant Christians. Believers there have endured seized churches, tortured pastors, abducted children, and coerced renunciations as they struggle to keep their faith alive in secret.

Courses
Christian Theology and FoRB

The Swedish Mission Council (SMC), 29 January 2025

https://tinyurl.com/2r8pm278

SMC has released a new online course, "Christian Theology and FoRB," to help Christians understand why their faith commitment should call them to support freedom of religion or belief for all people. The course takes about five hours to complete and covers four themes: (1) free will and the image of God, (2) FoRB and love for our neighbours, (3) God's call to discipleship, and (4) mission and evangelism.

Book reviews

Publishers: Do you have a new book published? We have expert reviewers. Do you want to advertise your book? We have space in future issues.

Reviewers: Have you seen a recent book that you would like to review? The book review editor can get a review copy.

Contact: bookreviews@iirf.global

Book Reviews

Christianity and Criminal Law
Edited by Mark Hill QC, Norman Doe, RH Helmholz, and John Witte Jr.
*London and New York: Routledge 2020, 382 pp., ISBN 978-0367495787, US $180.00
hardback; $54.99 paperback; $49.49 eBook*

This volume is part of a larger series exploring Christianity's interactions with distinct areas of jurisprudence such as human rights, family law, and natural law. The book is organized into four sections: (1) the connected history of Christianity and criminal law; (2) Christianity's interactions with principles of criminal law; (3) Christianity's relationship with specific criminal offences; and (4) Christian perspectives on criminal law enforcement. Contributors represent a range of professional backgrounds; in addition to legal scholars, at least one of whom is also a Christian minister, authors include a parole board member and a practicing lawyer.

The volume's essays cover much thematic ground. The historical section summarizes Christianity's engagement with criminal law from biblical times through the Enlightenment. The treatment of that later period by Heikki Pihlajamäki rebuts common characterizations of the era as mainly secular. Other chapters address church disciplinary practices and the role of criminal law in Christian theological reflection, such as in Brent A. Strawn's essay on law and procedure in the story of Adam and Eve. Complications in criminal law jurisdiction over Christians in pagan antiquity and then within Christendom are examined by Markus Bockmuehl and RH Helmholz, respectively.

Against this historical backdrop, tensions around conscience, responsibility, mercy, justice, dignity, and social order emerge as persistent themes. The volume opens with a provocative essay by Lord Judge, the aptly named former Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales, who ponders what the future will hold for Christianity and criminal law. After all, religion is increasingly privatized and public life is increasingly secularized. Contributions in the last three sections respond to Lord Judge's question in different keys. For example, what is the understanding of culpability in a society with a post-Christian sense of sin – if there is any sense of it at all? David McIlroy's essay on mens rea identifies Christianity as the historical source for punishment based only on "voluntary acts committed with a guilty mind" by a specific individual (132). Does the displacement of the social ideal of the Kingdom of God lead to statism? Nathan Chapman suggests that Christianity lent societies "ambivalence towards the State's authority" that "has inspired both expansions of and

limitations to the State's legitimate exercise of power to punish crimes against the State" (154). Can due process survive post-Christian changes in the idea of human dignity? Peter Collier finds happy convergences between secular and Christian histories and philosophies of these concepts. Does Christianity compel human solidarity with criminals and non-judgmentalism? Jeffrie G. Murphy says the faith deals more with attitudes toward punishment than its permissibility per se, but Albert W. Alschuler wrestles with the possibility that Jesus "may have opposed criminal punishment altogether" (300) – positions with serious implications for Christian participation in the debate around prison abolitionism.

As deep as the volume is philosophically, its scope is still limited. It focuses almost exclusively on Northern Europe and the United States, apart from Daniel Philpott's essay on modern transitional justice and Norman Doe's references to modern Orthodox canon law. None of the authors come from Hispanic, French, or Italian backgrounds. Only one essayist, Chloë Kennedy, is a woman, though her assessment of the criminalization of sado-masochistic erotic acts is certainly eye-catching. There are no discussions of the historical Christian East or of Christian imperialism's reshaping of African, Asian, Latin American, or Oceanian criminal law. Likewise omitted are questions of crimes against the environment and animals. In short, real-world history is beyond the book's range – pagan persecutions of Christians (and vice versa), inquisitions, and burnings of heretics and witches are occasionally cited but do not take center stage.

Of particular note for this publication's readers, contemporary issues of criminal law and religious freedom appear only in Jeroen Temperman's discussion of modern blasphemy laws. Church sex-abuse scandals, litigation over the secrecy of Catholic confessions, and radical Christian groups' conflicts with criminal laws are not addressed in detail.

These omissions define the book's position more than undermining its project. The volume is a lively introduction to intellectual connections between Christianity and the criminal law of Northern Europe and the United States. Readers will gain a solid conceptual foundation on the relationship between Christianity and criminal law.

Stylistically, the volume features visually appealing typography and page layouts. One minor quibble: biographical information on the authors appears only at the start of the volume, rather than at the beginning of each essay.

Quoting Jesus Christ, volume editor John Witte Jr. (my colleague and mentor) would call the issues raised here "weightier matters of the law." This book makes it a little easier to bear them intelligently.

Matthew P. Cavedon, Emory University School of Law, Center for the Study of Law and Religion

When Christians Face Persecution: Theological Perspectives from the New Testament

Chee-Chiew Lee

London: Apollos, 2022, 224 pp., ISBN: 978-178974268, US $22.99

When a weaver produces a scarf or blouse from divergent threads, he or she may pull 50 or more unique threads together to weave a single pattern just a few inches long. This multivariant thread-pulling provides an apt illustration for Lee's strategy.

Lee, associate professor of New Testament at Singapore Bible College, has drawn on her New Testament expertise to produce a helpfully novel overview of the persecution of Christians in the first century. The strategy of focusing phenomenologically on the reception and response of first-century Christians sets her project apart from the extant literature on persecution.

Lee makes many useful distinctions in this work. For example, she emphasizes that not all opposition to Christians constitutes persecution, unless "it can be established that unjust treatment results from the opposition" (21). For Lee, persecution refers to "the unjust treatment meted out to people due to their faith in Jesus Christ as their God, and their Lord and Saviour" (21). This definition maintains a connection to both the long Catholic tradition of odium fidei (hatred of the faith) and the Protestant emphasis on justice.

Persecution by definition is unjust. But for Lee, the concept of justice here is perspectival. In her words, "What may be perceived as 'unjust' by the persecuted may be deemed 'just' for the persecutor. Therefore, as this study seeks to describe the New Testament authors' view, I will adopt the perspective of the persecuted" (21).

While leaving open the question of whether one definition of justice can be considered correct or authoritative, Lee consistently models a strategy of maximum "thread collecting." She develops a richly descriptive account, leaving prescriptions and syntheses to the conclusion. In her effort to aid the greater evangelical goal of seeing the full tapestry of persecution and its influence on Christian faith, Lee allows the texts and the characters contained therein to speak for themselves, without instinctively rushing to theological unity. The narratives of Acts, Luke, John, and Revelation present a unique and colorful array of persecution encounters and responses.

Lee notes the tension in her approach and hopes to balance unity and diversity in a manner similar to the method followed by James D. G. Dunn in his New Testament Theology (25). Her quest for various responses to persecutions opens up the potential for seeing "theologies" in the different texts, contexts, and authors of the New Testament, while still allowing evangelical Christians to emphasize the unity of the New Testament in its message in response to those who claim otherwise (24).

After establishing her working definition and clarifying her methodology, Lee examines the various New Testament threads of persecution in three parts: the reasons for persecution, the responses to persecution, and the overall message of perseverance in persecution. With regard to the first thread, she offers a helpful view of the first-century Greco-Roman world, with a particular emphasis on the religious nature of cultic practices. The gods and religious practices were almost utilitarian. Opposing such practical approaches to life was akin to being anti-human – a slur that was lobbed at Christians in the first century. In addition to the Greco-Roman worldview, other contextual reasons why Christians were persecuted include intensifying opposition from Jews and hostility from "Satanic opponents" (58ff.).

Along the second thread line, Lee demonstrates the real strength of her work, focusing specific attention on concrete responses to persecution throughout the New Testament. Relying heavily on Luke-Acts but also including Pauline and Johannine literature, Lee categorizes the first response as resistance and perseverance. She then moves to examples of responses that signal apostasy and assimilation. Here Lee leans on the Gospels and the book of Hebrews, particularly the strong admonitions against falling away. Finally, she characterizes the third group as accommodation and adaptation, starting with Peter as his story unfolds in the Synoptic Gospels.

The final thread of Lee's research involves placing together all the threads to formulate a New Testament pattern of responding to persecution. She sees perseverance as the predominant outcome, resulting from the reorientation of shame and honor around Christ; the righteousness and vengeance of God in the face of suffering; the faithfulness of God through suffering; and the empowerment of saints by the example of fellow believers who remained faithful through trials.

Overall, Lee's work is a welcome addition to the field of persecution study. Whereas other works lean toward conflation – perhaps too quickly encapsulating persecution episodes under various theological umbrellas such as righteousness[1] or character development[2] – Lee's work leans in a different direction. If anything, her strategy may lean toward inflation – that is, an emphasis on threads with a slight aversion to seeing an underlying theological pattern. Nevertheless, all these approaches are needed and desired as the New Testament cannot be understood rightly apart from recognizing the presence of persecution against Christ and his followers. Lee has produced a helpful overview of the many ways in which Christians suffered persecution in the New Testament.

Gregory C. Cochran, Director of Applied Theology, California Baptist University

---

1 See Gregory C. Cochran, Christians in the Crosshairs: Persecution in the Bible and Around the World Today (Lexham Press, 2016).
2 Josef Ton, Suffering, Martyrdom, and Rewards in Heaven (University Press of America, 2002).

Religious Conversion: Indian disputes and their European origins

Sarah Claerhout and Jakob de Roover

Abington: Routledge, 2022, 180 pp., ISBN 9781032113302, £108 (hardcover)

The question of religious conversion in the Indian subcontinent has long been a subject of intense debate. Its complexities, stemming from historical, social, and religious factors, have created a contentious landscape where conversion is often seen not merely as a personal spiritual choice but as a broader cultural and political act. Claerhout and De Roover venture into this fraught terrain, offering an analysis that blends historical insight with contemporary concerns. The book brings to light the fundamental tensions between different traditions in India, especially in their divergent views of what constitutes religious freedom.

One core strength of the book lies in its exploration of the historical underpinnings of these debates. Claerhout and De Roover argue that many modern Indian concerns about religious conversion are deeply rooted in Christian discourse, specifically Reformation theology. This claim sheds light on how Western and Indian conceptions of religion and conversion differ profoundly. In Western contexts, religion is often understood as a set of personal beliefs that can be changed or adopted relatively freely. However, in the Indian context, particularly within Hinduism, religion is deeply intertwined with cultural identity, social structure, and community belonging. Religious conversion in the Hindu context is, therefore, not merely a shift in belief but a potentially destabilizing act that can threaten the cohesion of the social order.

This tension is especially pronounced in Hindu responses to proselytism. For many Hindus, proselytism represents a form of aggression that could undermine the very survival of Hinduism. The authors illustrate this point by highlighting concerns that are particularly evident in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi, who is presented as the quintessential voice of Indian opposition to conversion. Gandhi viewed religious conversion as a form of violence that disrupted the harmony of Indian society.

However, one significant limitation of the book is its narrow focus on the perspectives of upper-caste Hindus, particularly those aligned with Vedic traditions. The authors' use of the term "Indian" seems to refer primarily to those who oppose conversion, largely ignoring the plural voices that exist within India. This is a crucial oversight, as the discourse on religious conversion in India is far from monolithic. Although Gandhi's views are certainly influential, they do not represent the entirety of Indian thought on the subject.

A glaring omission in the book, except for a very brief account, is the absence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a towering figure in Indian history who articulated a powerful argument in favor of religious conversion, particularly for Dalits (formerly known as untouchables). For Ambedkar, conversion was not just a matter of personal belief; it was a necessary means of escaping the oppressive caste system that was deeply entrenched in Hindu society. Ambedkar famously declared that for Dalits, conversion was as important as national independence was for India. His view provides a stark contrast to Gandhi's, and his omission from the book weakens its claim to represent the full range of Indian disputes over conversion.

Ambedkar's perspective also highlights another key issue that the book does not sufficiently address: the socio-economic dimensions of conversion. Claerhout and De Roover focus primarily on religious and philosophical arguments and do not engage with the material realities that often drive individuals to convert. For many Dalits, conversion to Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam is not only a spiritual decision but also a way to escape the social and economic marginalization imposed by the caste system. The book also neglects the arguments of proponents of religious conversion, who contend that opposition to conversion serves as a mechanism of social control, aimed at preserving the hierarchical caste system. This critique is particularly relevant in the context of Ambedkar's arguments, as he saw the upper-caste resistance to conversion as an attempt to prevent Dalits from achieving social mobility and equality.

While the book offers a compelling critique of the role of Christian discourse in shaping Indian debates on conversion, it also risks oversimplifying the issue. By suggesting that earlier debates about religious conversions have aligned with Christian interests, the authors imply that Indian opposition to conversion is merely a reaction to Christian proselytism. While this claim may hold some truth, it fails to capture the complexity of the issue.

Religious Conversion: Indian Disputes and Their European Origins is a valuable contribution to the study of religious conversion in India. Its examination of historical and philosophical roots of the debate is insightful, and its critique of the role of Christian discourse in shaping these debates is thought-provoking. However, the book's narrow focus on upper-caste Hindu perspectives and its failure to engage with the views of marginalized communities, particularly Dalits, limit its scope. A more comprehensive analysis that includes the voices of figures like Ambedkar and considers the socio-economic dimensions of conversion would have strengthened the book's argument.

Aruthuckal Varughese John, Dean of Faculty and Professor of Theology at the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies, Bangalore

Religious Pluralism and Law in Contemporary Brazil
Paula Montero, Camila Nicácio, and Henrique Fernandes Antunes (eds.)
Cham: Springer Nature, 2023, 240 pp., ISBN: 978-3031419805, US $122.66
(hardcover)

This comprehensive work delves into the complex relations between religion and law in contemporary Brazil. Part of the "Law and Religion in a Global Context" book series, it addresses minority rights, religious freedom, secularism, and the human rights language through which religious debates are articulated.

Each chapter presents case studies illustrating the intricate interactions between religious groups, legal institutions, and society at large. From the outset, the editors set the tone for the discussion by framing it within the context of Brazil's 1988 Constitution, which formalized pluralism as a constitutional principle. The authors argue that this legal framework has created significant tensions between the traditional notion of secularism and the emerging demands for religious freedom and tolerance. This tension is explored from various perspectives, including legal disputes over religious education in public schools, the role of evangelical jurists in shaping human rights discourse, and documentation of religious intolerance in police records.

A central theme of the book is the ongoing debate on the role of religion in the public sphere, especially in legal and educational systems. The chapter "Religion and Laicity in Dispute: Two Categories Under Construction in Brazil's Legal Debate on Religious Education in Public Schools" provides a detailed analysis of legal controversies surrounding religious education in public schools. The authors trace the historical evolution of this debate and highlight how the 1988 Constitution's recognition of pluralism has reshaped the discourse, creating new challenges to balance religious freedom with the secular nature of the state.

Another chapter analyzes the National Association of Evangelical Jurists (ANAJURE), which mobilizes the Brazilian legal system to promote religious freedom from an evangelical perspective, constructing legal strategies to protect its beliefs while challenging progressive agendas such as attempts to criminalize homophobia. This chapter underscores the growing political power of evangelical groups in Brazil and their impact on shaping the legal landscape.

Another chapter addresses tensions surrounding the patrimonialization of religious practices, such as the religious use of ayahuasca. It demonstrates how these traditions, especially in Indigenous and Afro-Brazilian contexts, are simultaneously recognized as expressions of cultural rights and cultural heritage. This formal recognition has profound implications, challenging the state to balance

cultural preservation with the regulation of rituals involving psychoactive substances, and to address aspects of safety and respect for community autonomy. The author concludes by suggesting that the patrimonialization of ayahuasca goes beyond cultural protection; it legitimizes and integrates these practices within the Brazilian legal framework, reinforcing the value of these traditions in the context of the country's religious and cultural pluralism.

The book reveals the dynamism and complexity of religious pluralism in contemporary Brazil, where the 1988 Constitution has opened up a space for debates on religious freedom, inclusion, and tolerance in a distinctly diverse setting. The case studies provide a broad view of how law becomes a tool of negotiation and dispute among different social and religious groups, revealing the multiple strategies mobilized by these groups to defend their beliefs and rights in the public arena.

Although the book offers a valuable analysis of minority rights and inclusion in the religious context, it could have explored more intensely the importance of protecting the freedom of moral self-determination and doctrinal self-definition of religious denominations. By focusing on inclusion and minority rights, the work somewhat sidelines the question of how to ensure that inclusion coexists with the right of religions to preserve their core beliefs and practices. The absence of a more detailed analysis of this issue leaves a significant gap regarding the challenges of pluralism, which involves balancing respect for individual freedoms with the autonomy of religious traditions.

Nevertheless, the collection successfully documents the transformations of the religious field in Brazil and challenges the reader to reflect on the role of legal institutions and public policies in protecting diversity and mediating religious conflicts. Religious Pluralism and Law in Contemporary Brazil is an essential work for understanding the limits and possibilities of pluralism and secularism in a pluralistic society. It is relevant not only to scholars of law and religion but also to anyone interested in understanding the challenges of building a society that genuinely embraces diversity in its multiple expressions.

Prof. André Fagundes, Brazilian Center for Studies in Law and Religion (CEDIRE)

Islam, Religious Liberty and Constitutionalism in Europe
Mark Hill KC and Lina Papadopoulou (eds)
Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2024, 281 pp., ISBN 978-1509966950, US $130

This anthology provides a comprehensive summary of the 31st Annual Conference of the European Consortium for Church and State Research (held at Thessaloniki, Greece in September 2021). Hill is a London lawyer specializing in religious

liberty; Papadopoulou is an associate professor of constitutional law at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

In 19 contributions, the 20 academics from varying backgrounds address a range of topics related to the subject of religious freedom for Muslims in European countries, including the interconnection between European values and Islam, as well as the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Europe. Furthermore, they address related topics such as populism and xenophobia, as well as the social integration of Muslim minors, religious liberty, and the foreign funding of Islam. Additionally, human rights concerns and female religious practice in Islam are explored.

As the Muslim population in Europe is expected to continue growing, from 6 percent today to a projected 8 percent in 2030, in the context of a rising secularism in Europe, controversies over how Muslims practice their faith are present in most European countries. One topic addressed in this anthology is the perception of human rights in Islam, as opposed to Christianity and Judaism. For some, the two perspectives are not appreciably different from one another. For others, constitutionalism in Europe is a specifically Christian heritage, whereas for others it is a sign of Christian bias, which often coincides with discrimination against minorities, particularly Islam.

In his chapter, Maurits S. Berger posits that the notion of European values being "clear" is a misperception, as they are not synonymous with human rights. Nevertheless, these values are safeguarded by human rights. Five areas of discussion arise in this context: secularism, the Islamic headscarf, the burqa, Islamic Sharia, and Sharia courts in some European countries. Berger concludes that there is a discernible bias against Islam, which gives rise to double standards in Europe and a tendency towards an us-versus-them mentality. To achieve a long-term equilibrium between opposing values, he proposes that tolerance is the pivotal element, entailing a re-evaluation of the fundamental tenets underlying those values.

Samoa Bano focuses on the experiences of Muslim women in relation to religious practice: She delineates the manner in which female autonomy and choice were constrained in the past as scholars only concentrated on the "patriarchal nature of religion" (97). Bano highlights the need for female believers in Muslim communities in Europe to have equal access to justice.

In her contribution about Islamophobia, Papadopoulou elucidates why this topic is more pertinent than ever. A few decades ago, there were fewer Muslim communities in Europe and the influence of different social platforms on the World Wide Web had not begun. But now, religious diversity in Europe is undergoing significant changes as a result of the influence of second- and third-generation immigrants, as well as new migrants. Furthermore, Papadopoulou explains, the phenomenon of "neo-racism" in Europe is not limited to targeting individuals on the basis of their

race but also extends to those of a different religious affiliation. In particular, Islamophobia, especially in the media, has witnessed a notable surge. She defines Islamophobia as a form of racism targeting various markers of perceived Muslimness (212). In examining instances of Islamophobic discourse, Papadopoulou suggests a distinction between "official" anti-Muslim hate speech and rhetoric that incorporates anti-Islamic defamation elements, though the two can overlap.

The conference and the book were driven by a clear intention to facilitate the participation of Muslims in the discourse, thereby ensuring that their voice can be heard and that their experience will not be merely a topic of discussion by others. The book offers important insights on Islamophobia in Europe, a topic that is currently the subject of lively debate in many countries, particularly in Central Europe.

The editors deliberately omitted a concluding chapter to emphasize that there are no definitive answers to the issues discussed. Instead, they underscored the importance of striving for equal liberty and dignity for all.

Dr. Esther Schirrmacher (PhD in Islamic Studies from University of Bonn/Germany)

Religious Freedom and Populism: The Appropriation of a Human Right and How to Counter It
Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges (eds.)
Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2024, 268 pp., ISBN: 978-3839468272, €42.00, digital version is open access on the publisher website

Bernd Hirschberger and Katja Voges have edited a rich and thought-provoking volume on a burning issue that remains as timely as ever. The project is rooted in an online conference, "Religious Freedom and Populism," hosted in November 2022 by the German Commission for Justice and Peace and the Pontifical Mission Society missio Aachen. This background explains why the German-speaking world, where the main challenge is posed by the populist radical right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), receives special attention. But these contributions are just a handful among a diverse collection of 19 chapters with impressive geographical, disciplinary, and analytical variety.

The regional focus on Europe is complemented by case studies on Brazil, the United States, Russia, Turkey and Lebanon. Disciplinary angles include political science, sociology, and communication studies as well as legal, historical, and some theological perspectives. The contributing scholars and practitioners analyze (the interplay between) numerous political, religious, and societal actors. This diversity of perspectives revolves more consistently around core aspects of

FoRB than other recent contributions on religion, populism, and right-wing ideology (e.g., Cremer 2023; Kitanović, Schnabel, and Caseiro 2023).

The volume's concern with populism centers on the demagogic use of simplistic and polarizing, yet purposefully ambivalent rhetoric through which far-right actors camouflage their anti-democratic intentions. More specifically, the authors elucidate how "populists and extremists" appropriate and reinterpret the universal human right of freedom of religion or belief as a political and strategic instrument for discriminatory, clientelistic, and ultimately power-seeking purposes. FoRB is claimed and promoted for one's own religious (or often rather cultural) community, while being weaponized against the liberties of other religions or beliefs. Combined with the estrangement of liberal and progressive forces from promoting FoRB, a polarizing vicious cycle of appropriation and withdrawal emerges in national settings, the European parliament, or intergovernmental and transnational networks.

The contributions in this volume offer clear empirical and normative perspectives on these often ambivalent, thorny issues. The book instructively debunks the practices, paradoxes, and perils of misusing FoRB for ideological, political, and potentially violent ends. Complex, contextually contingent cases such as the trajectory of the Russian Orthodox Church from Stalin to the Putin era or the recent rise of violent intolerance by certain Christian actors toward Afro-Brazilian religions are usefully deciphered for non-country experts. Other studies contrast the surprisingly secular and feminist Norwegian version of right-wing populism with the murders committed by extremist Anders Breivik, or discuss (in several contributions) how Islamophobia is politically weaponized in both Western states and Turkey. The reader even learns that Christof Sauer, the founder of this journal, had to protest against being nominated without his knowledge by AfD parliamentarians for the board of trustees of the German Institute for Human Rights.

Among the signs of hope and proposals for solutions highlighted in the volume are firsthand practitioner accounts of how the Adyan Foundation contextualizes and promotes FoRB in Lebanon, and how dedicated professional diplomats on both sides of the Atlantic worked diligently throughout cycles of populist and non-populist governmental leadership to establish the intergovernmental International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance (now the Article 18 Alliance). The book closes with an entire toolbox of strategic recommendations for countering and dismantling problematic appropriations of FoRB as a human right.

Given the volume's title, the useful conceptual clarification of FoRB in a chapter by Heiner Bielefeldt could have been complemented by a similarly systematic conceptualization of populism. Rather than drawing on meanwhile established minimal definitions of populism from ideational, discursive, or political-strategic perspectives

in comparative politics, the volume operates with a looser menu of typical patterns of polarizing, demagogic, right-wing rhetoric. A flexible analytical perspective on 'populist' framing practices may be necessary to cover the diverse array of cases in this volume, but it has limitations with regard to providing a sharp conceptual grip on some of the studied phenomena (as acknowledged in the chapters on Brazil, France, and Denmark). The main discursive thrust of the FoRB appropriations analyzed throughout the book does not so much reflect populist 'people-versus-elite' antagonisms as far-right religious, cultural, sexual, and/or ethnic identity cleavages between 'members' and 'non-members' of an imagined national community. Most authors seem more worried about the substance of far-right ideological 'othering' than about the expression of populist 'anti-elitism.' In this sense, the volume could have benefitted from more intense dialogue with the burgeoning literature on religious nationalism (e.g., Perry, Schnabel, and Grubbs 2022; Saiya 2023).

The authors deserve credit not only for highlighting the threats far-right ideology poses to human rights and democracy, but also for repeatedly tackling the lukewarm embrace of FoRB by liberal and left-wing political forces. Many pieces can indeed be read as an effort "to break free from the prevalent stereotype that religious freedom is solely a right for the devout and conservative" (248). Despite an acknowledgment "that conservative policy-making is perfectly legitimate in the democratic space" (172), some pieces tend to inextricably subsume polarizing, Manichean discursive strategies and conservative policy stances on family values or abortion under 'populism' (e.g., the chapters on Hungary and the United States). Overall, the volume offers plentiful arguments as to why and how progressives should wholeheartedly embrace FoRB and anyone committed to democracy should counteract right-wing populists (and extremists). Less clear guidance is provided on the related question of how conservative, faith-based moral convictions could or should be articulated in a pluralistic, democratic spirit. Paradoxically, the unintended consequence might be preaching to the choir of progressive democrats while alienating conservative ones.

Future debates and research may address this point. One could also further integrate the book's primary focus on domestic politics (in mostly Western democratic settings) with potential policy solutions for effectively aiding persecuted believers in other regions and promoting FoRB worldwide. This volume questions Viktor Orbán's instrumental politicization of the Hungary Helps program before domestic and European audiences, but it does not discuss the actual aid provided to selected recipient communities outside Europe (61-64, 257). Other voices within the FoRB community, in turn, tend to foreground the latter without problematizing the former (Hodge 2024). Likewise, efforts to articulate a broad understanding of Christian persecution or publishing quantitative rankings could backfire in polarized domestic debates

(216-217, 254). Open Doors staff, for instance, do indeed express concerns about their cause being hijacked by populist radical right actors, but on the other hand, there is anecdotal evidence that its World Watch List may motivate at least some governments around the globe to deal with or even prevent FoRB violations (192; see also Petri 2022:83). Bringing both dimensions together would resonate with the editors' concluding call for extending research on FoRB and populism to India and other regions. Good candidates for studying how left-wing populism puts pressure on religious institutions and individual believers could be Nicaragua or Venezuela.

This book is a comprehensive and highly recommended resource for understanding and countering far-right (populist) challenges to FoRB.

References

Cremer, Tobias. 2023. The Godless Crusade: Religion, Populism and Right-Wing Identity Politics in the West. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hodge, David R. 2024. Addressing the growing global persecution of Christians: Hungary Helps as a model initiative for other state actors? International Journal for Religious Freedom 17 (1):91-105.

Kitanović, Elizabeta, Patrick R. Schnabel, and Sofia Caseiro, eds. 2023. Alternatives to Populism from a Human Rights Perspective. Geneva: Globethics Publications.

Perry, Samuel L., Landon Schnabel, and Joshua B. Grubbs. 2022. Christian nationalism, perceived anti-Christian discrimination, and prioritising "religious freedom" in the 2020 presidential election. Nations and Nationalism 28 (2):714-725.

Petri, Dennis P. 2022. The tyranny of religious freedom rankings. Review of Faith & International Affairs 20 (1):82-88.

Saiya, Nilay. 2023. Christian nationalism's threat to global democracy." Review of Faith & International Affairs 22 (1):102-107.

Stephan Fouquet, Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, University of Freiburg

Who Lost America: Why the United States Went "Communist" and What to Do about It
Stephen Baskerville
London: Arktos, 2024, xxxv + 216 pp., ISBN 978-1915755674, US $29.95

Stephen Baskerville's new book promises to explain what he calls the "coup d'état" that he believes allowed the left to seize control of the United States government from about early 2020. Although detailed accounts of these events have

filled the public consciousness, Baskerville insists that none so far has explained them. His approach to the question is unique and compelling.

Baskerville spends less time recounting events or criticizing the left for what he sees as their illegitimate seizure of power and their policies than excoriating the "establishment right" (along with "the rest of us") for allowing it to happen. The underlying justification for this approach is that while the left is doing what is in its nature in its attempt to seize political power, the right shares a portion of the blame for its internal deficiencies that prevent it from acting effectively against this naked power grab.

Among the reasons Baskerville gives for the left's victory is the professionalization of politics – that is, citizens delegating their civic responsibilities to political professionals such as lobbies and law firms. Ironically, corporate special interests are less the villains than ideological groups claiming to speak for the broader "public interest." Although the left spearheaded this innovation, the right has imitated it.

A corollary trend is that churches have done something similar. They once played a vital role as civic institutions. Like individual citizens, for whose voices they provided organization and direction, churches were non-professional, at least when they spoke out on civic issues and abuses of government power. In fact, Baskerville suggests that religious sects in early America marked the beginning of America's unrivaled political pluralism and even constituted the first "pressure groups." Yet they too have now been superseded by professional versions, mostly operated by legal practitioners and think tanks. In fact, Baskerville surprisingly attributes the decline of the churches' civic involvement and political participation less to secularization and hostility from the secular-liberal left than to their "displacement" by conservative Christian advocacy firms.

Baskerville expresses admiration for the skills and effectiveness of professional lawyers and campaigners who labor to serve as substitutes for church involvement (though less for their organizational leaders), but he also suggests that they are fighting a losing battle by meeting the left on a battlefield of its choosing.

Conservative and Christian advocacy groups are outgunned, out-funded, and (more importantly) incredibly underrepresented in the judicial and media class. I know this personally from my 20 years of experience in international Christian advocacy.

Baskerville pushes this envelope further when he explicitly addresses the implications for religious freedom. In the days when churches were proactive civic leaders who concerned themselves with vital social issues – indeed, they were unapologetic political activists, unhesitant to speak out on public issues such as slavery and war – there was no need to advocate for religious freedom. Religious

freedom was a given because the churches had made themselves an immovable voice of change in culture.

Only when they had abdicated their civic involvement on broader social-political issues to professional lobbies did Christian churches find themselves defenseless against not only a general cultural secularization but also more aggressive intolerance from an organized left that, in the West, is increasingly hostile to Christian faith.

There are pragmatic but unconvincing reasons why the church has delegated its responsibilities to a professional class of campaigners. In the United States, some fear the Johnson amendment and its threat of the removal of tax-exempt status. Others worry that addressing controversial moral and political issues will offend their members and diminish their congregation's size or capacity for outreach. Whatever the case, the mass voice of believers and the voting base they represent has become ignored by policymakers and the political elite. Christian advocacy groups, on their own, can appear marginal and not representative of the views of the greater public. Baskerville cogently analyzes how, as a result, these same advocacy groups have lost ground and are forced to play on their back foot by defending their most basic right to share the playing field with the left as a religious freedom problem.

This line of discourse represents only one section of Baskerville's book, but it is typical of the kind of provocative, outside-the-box argument that runs throughout it.

Baskerville does not hide his conservative sympathies, but the book is far from a standard right-wing polemic. On the contrary, he criticizes the overproduction of just such right-wing rants and the organized right far more than he does the left. So readers of whatever ideological sympathy might gain a broad understanding of the overall dynamics at work.

This also prevents the book from being out-of-date. Though published last year, before Donald Trump's re-election, references to the "triumph of left" are still salutary, because these larger dynamics arguably still operate. Trump was not elected or supported by the "professional" right-wing leaders that Baskerville criticizes; arguably Trumpism arose precisely because of their failures not only to oppose the left effectively, but to address issues that affect ordinary citizens. If he is correct, failure by Trump and the MAGA Republicans to act more effectively could still bring consequences similar to what he seeks to explain here.

One need not agree with all of it to appreciate how the book forces us to re-think our basic assumptions in order to come to terms with the disturbing politics that has brought about this triumph of the radical left and defeat of the professional right since roughly the start of the COVID-19 outbreak and the 2020 defeat of President Donald Trump.

Readers interested in religion and ideology will find more extended sections on charity/welfare, education, and gender/sexual ideology similarly suggestive within the larger argument that by transforming civic life into contests between professional "politicos" we may have predestined the triumph of the secular left and the eclipse of everyone else.

Roger Kiska, Christian Legal Centre, London, UK

Global Declarations
on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights
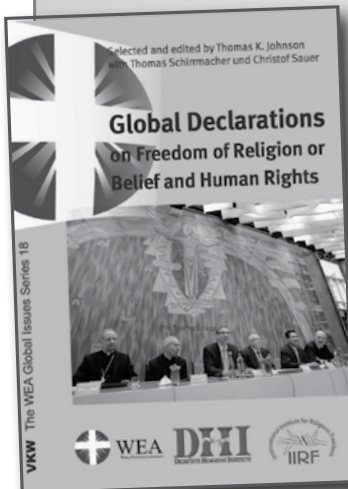
by Thomas K. Johnson, Thomas Schirrmacher, Christof Sauer (eds.)

(WEA GIS, Vol. 18)
ISBN 978-3-86269-135-7
Bonn, 2017. 117 pp.,
€12.00 via book trade

Guidelines for authors

This document combines essential elements of the editorial policy and the house style of IJRF which can be viewed on www.ijrf.org.

Aims of the journal

The IJRF aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on religious freedom in general and the persecution of Christians in particular. The term persecution is understood broadly and inclusively by the editors. The IJRF is an interdisciplinary, international, peer reviewed journal, serving the dissemination of new research on religious freedom and is envisaged to become a premier publishing location for research articles, documentation, book reviews, academic news and other relevant items on the issue.

Editorial policy

The editors welcome the submission of any contribution to the journal. All manuscripts submitted for publication are assessed by a panel of referees and the decision to publish is dependent on their reports. The IJRF subscribes to the Code of Best Practice in Scholarly Journal Publishing, Editing and Peer Review of 2018 (https://sites.google.com/view/assaf-nsef-best-practice) as well as the National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals (http://tinyurl.com/NCBP-2008) and the supplementary Guidelines for Best Practice of the Forum of Editors of Academic Law Journals in South Africa. As IJRF is listed on the South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (DoHET) "Approved list of South African journals", authors linked to South African universities can claim subsidies and are therefore charged page fees.

Submission adresses

- Book reviews or suggestion of books for review: bookreviews@iirf.global
- Noteworthy items and academic news: editor@iirf.global
- All other contributions: research or review articles and opinion pieces must be submitted online through the IJRF website: https://ijrf.org/index.php/home/about/submissions.

Selection criteria

All research articles are expected to conform to the following requirements, which authors should use as a checklist before submission:

- **Focus:** Does the article have a clear focus on religious freedom / religious persecution / suffering because of religious persecution? These terms are

understood broadly and inclusively by the editors of IJRF, but these terms clearly do not include everything.

- **Scholarly standard:** Is the scholarly standard of a research article acceptable? Does it contribute something substantially new to the debate?
- **Clarity of argument:** Is it well structured, including subheadings where appropriate?
- **Language usage:** Does it have the international reader, specialists and non-specialists in mind and avoid bias and parochialism?
- **Substantiation/Literature consulted:** Does the author consult sufficient and most current literature? Are claims thoroughly substantiated throughout and reference to sources and documentation made?

Submission procedure

1. Submissions must be complete (see no. 6), conform to the formal criteria (see no. 8-10) and must be accompanied by a cover letter (see no. 3-4).
2. The standard deadlines for the submission of academic articles are 1 February and 1 August respectively for the next issue and a month later for smaller items such as book reviews, noteworthy items, event reports, etc.
3. A statement whether an item is being submitted elsewhere or has been previously published must accompany the article.
4. Research articles will be sent to up to three independent referees. Authors are encouraged to submit the contact details of 4 potential referees with whom they have not recently co-published. The choice of referees is at the discretion of the editors. The referee process is an anonymous process. This means that you should not consult with or inform your referees at any point in the process. Your paper will be anonymized so that the referee does not know that you are the author. Upon receiving the reports from the referees, authors will be notified of the decision of the editorial committee, which may include a statement indicating changes or improvements that are required before publication. You will not be informed which referees were consulted and any feedback from them will be anonymized.
5. Should the article be accepted for publication, the author will be expected to submit a finalized electronic version of the article.
6. Include the following:
- Articles should be submitted in Word and an abstract of no more than 100 words.
- Between 3 and 10 keywords that express the key concepts used in the article.
- Brief biographical details of the author in the first footnote, linked to the name of the author, indicating, among others, the institutional affiliation,

special connection to the topic, choice of British or American English, date of submission, contact details including e-mail address.

7. Authors are encouraged to also engage with prior relevant articles in IJRF, the Religious Freedom Series, and IIRF Reports (www.iirf.global) to an appropriate degree. So check for relevant articles.

8. Articles should be spell-checked before submission, by using the spell-checker on the computer. Authors may choose either 'British English' or 'American English' but must be consistent. Indicate your choice in the first footnote.

9. Number your headings (including introduction) and give them a hierarchical structure. Delete all double spaces and blank lines. Use as little formatting as possible and definitely no "hard formatting" such as extra spaces, tabs. Please do not use a template. All entries in the references and all footnotes end with a full stop. No blank spaces before a line break.

10. Research articles should have an ideal length of 4,000-6,000 words. Articles longer than that may be published if, in the views of the referees, it makes an important contribution to religious freedom.

11. Research articles are honoured with one complimentary printed copy.

12. For research articles by members of the editorial team or their relatives, the full editorial discretion is delegated to a non-partisan editor and they are submitted to the same peer review process as all other articles.

Style requirements

1. IJRF prefers the widely accepted 'name-date' method (or Harvard system) for citations in the text. Other reference methods are permissible if they are fully consistent.

2. A publication is cited or referred to in the text by inserting the author's last name, year and page number(s) in parentheses, for example (Mbiti 1986:67-83).

3. Graphics and Tables: These must be attached as separate files. Indicate in red where they should go in the text. Every effort will be made to place them in that spot.

4. Image Quality: minimum width must be 10.5 cm at 220dpi or simply 1000 pixels. The width of the image always goes over the entire width of the type area (10.5cm), but is flexible in height. Please send the image in its own file (e.g. JPG, TIF, EPS), not in a Word document.

5. Tables and "simple" diagrams: These will likely be redesigned by our layout expert. Please attach them in a separate file.

6. Footnotes should be reserved for content notes only. Bibliographical information is cited in the text according to the Harvard method (see 2 above). Full citations should appear in the References at the end of the article (see below).
7. References should be listed in alphabetical order of authors under the heading "References" at the end of the text. Do not include a complete bibliography of all works consulted, only a list of references actually used in the text.
8. Always give full first names of authors in the list of references, as this simplifies the retrieval of entries in databases. Keep publisher names short.

Guidance for Graduate Students
International Institute for Religious Freedom

The International Institute for Religious Freedom can provide guidance for students who are writing a thesis or dissertation on a topic related to religious freedom. The IIRF can also assist with publication opportunities.

Please send a letter of interest to info@iirf.global.

Books published by IIRF (iirf.global)

1. **Religious Freedom Series**
   - Re-Examining Religious Persecution – Constructing a Theological Framework for Understanding Persecution. Charles L. Tieszen. 2011.
   - Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom. Christof Sauer and Richard Howell (eds). 2011.
   - Freedom of Religion or Belief: Thematic Reports of the UN Special Rapporteur 2010-2016. Heiner Bielefeldt. 2017.
   - "Let there be no Compulsion in Religion" (Sura 2:256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians. Discourses on Apostasy, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights. Christine Schirrmacher. 2016.
   - Grievous religious persecution: A conceptualisation of crimes against humanity of religious persecution. Werner N. Nel. 2021.
   - The Specific Vulnerability of Religious Minorities. Dennis P. Petri. 2021.
   - Beyond a Reasonable Doubt. Did the Islamic State commit genocide against Christians in Iraq? Áquila Mazzinghy. 2023.
   - Church and State Relations in Zambia: An Evangelical Perspective. Elias Munshya. 2024.

2. **Global Issues Series**
   - The Persecution of Christians Concerns Us All (3rd ed.). Thomas Schirrmacher. 2018.
   - Bad Urach Statement: Towards an evangelical theology of suffering, persecution and martyrdom. Christof Sauer (ed.). 2012.
   - Human Rights. Thomas Schirrmacher. 2014.
   - Human Rights – A Primer for Christians (Revised Edition). Thomas K. Johnson. 2016.
   - Global Declarations on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights. Thomas K. Johnson, Thomas Schirrmacher, Christof Sauer (eds). 2017.

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The International Journal for Religious Freedom is published twice a year and aims to provide a platform for scholarly discourse on religious freedom in general and the persecution of Christians in particular. It is an interdisciplinary, international, peer reviewed journal, serving the dissemination of new research on religious freedom and contains research articles, documentation, book reviews, academic news and other relevant items. The editors welcome the submission of any contribution to the journal. Manuscripts submitted for publication are assessed by a panel of referees and the decision to publish is dependent on their reports. The IJRF subscribes to the National Code of Best Practice in Editorial Discretion and Peer Review for South African Scholarly Journals.

IJRF is freely available online: www.ijrf.org
It is also available on SABINET and EBSCO.

INTERNATIONAL INSITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
www.iirf.global

AcadSA
PUBLISHING

VKW