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From ancient to modern

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Cover Art

This art depicts Pharaoh and the Midwives and is from the 14th century. The first article in this issue focuses on the civil disobedience of the Hebrew midwives, Moses' mother, Jochebed, and Pharaoh's daughter, who all defied Pharaoh's order to kill all the male Hebrew babies. This prevented the genocide of this ethno-religious group.

By illustrator of the Golden Haggadah, Catalonia – British Library, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=8881188

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Editorial

From ancient to modern

I am pleased to present this general issue of the *International Journal for Religious Freedom*. Many of our issues are on special topics, often containing a series of papers from a single conference. This issue rather contains an interesting variety of articles on diverse topics.

I am very pleased to introduce a new member of our editorial team. Michaele Kemp is an editorial assistant. She is a law graduate currently working as a compliance officer in Pretoria, South Africa.

We are delighted to have an opinion article from Prof Dr Thomas Schirrmacher, a founding editor of this journal, on Thomas Helwys, a little known but important early proponent of religious liberty. Schirrmacher highlights Helwys's contribution to the foundations of freedom of religion or belief in the US on the occasion of its 250th anniversary.

Starting with the ancient, the first article is a theological perspective on the biblical story of the birth of Moses. Godfrey Harold argues that all the women involved, from the midwives to the adoptive mother, engaged in civil disobedience. They risked their lives, which ultimately prevented the genocide of the Hebrew people. Civil disobedience is a perennial issue for those who are facing discrimination and persecution. You will notice that the front cover art was inspired by this story as well.

The second article examines the common narrative about Roman persecution of Christians for the first centuries after Jesus. Steven Geusens challenges the common portrayal of the Christians versus the lions as reflected in art.

Moving from the ancient to the modern, Jonas Fiebrantz, who works with an international Christian legal organization, surveys a broad range of current government restrictions on collective religious practice. This includes a wide variety of government interference with religious organizations, including registration requirements and refusals to grant legal status.

The following four article address FoRB issues in This area is in the Middle Belt region and Oyeku elucidates the roots of the ethno-religious conflict and proposes recommendations to resolve the communal violence. Samson Oyeku has done a study on Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria. Grace Gaffet addresses Chinese restrictions on religious practice using the specific example of the Early Rain Covenant Church. Kebede Bekere identifies concerns about the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in a Oromia, Ethiopia. This article was finalized before the recent outbreak of attacks on Christians in October 2026 but analyzes underlying causes of inter-religious tensions that are at the root of this violence. Finally, Ro-

hil Oberoi and Dikumoni Hazarikia identify the challenges facing the Christian population in Sri Lanka.

The final two articles address issues related to children. Lena-Elene Jajanidze zooms in on teacher training in Georgia, where teachers should have training in minority religions to overcome the impact of the dominant Orthodox hegemony. Finally, Johannes van der Walt and Izak Oosthuizen draw attention to the abuse children face in South Africa. They argue that a predominantly Christian country should have stronger protection for children. It is not often that we consider the responsibilities that go with freedom of religion or belief.

There are an unusual number of first-time authors publishing in this issue. Seven of the nine articles are first publications, several of those based on doctoral dissertations. It is a privilege to walk alongside these new authors but also requires additional time and effort on the part of the editorial team. It means as well that you will be reading fresh perspectives and insights.

We have a good variety of reviews of books that will be of interest to our readers. As well, check our regular Noteworthy section, which highlights current reports on religious freedom from around the world.

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

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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
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Thomas Helwys, the forgotten pioneer of religious freedom for everyone

Thomas Paul Schirrmacher[1]

On 4 July, the United States of America celebrated the 250th anniversary of its independence. One of the freedoms most closely associated with the American experiment is freedom of religion. Yet the idea itself is older than the United States and it took time to implement in all the states of the USA.[2] The anniversary, however, provides a fitting opportunity to remember two earlier milestones.

The English Baptist Thomas Helwys was one of the earliest Christian authors – and, in the judgment of important modern scholarship, the first to argue comprehensively in English – for religious liberty extending beyond Christian dissenters to people of any religion. He was born around 1575; by 1615/16 he was dead, though the precise date and circumstances remain uncertain.[3]

A generation later, Roger Williams founded Providence in 1636. The early Providence agreements deliberately restricted political authority to "civil things" and affirmed liberty of conscience; Rhode Island's Royal Charter of 1663 later gave this experiment a durable constitutional form.[4]

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1 Prof Dr Thomas P. Schirrmacher is the President of both the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights and the International Institute for Religious Freedom. Email: drthschirrmacher @me.com. ORCID: 0009-0001-7390-5674. An earlier version of this article was published in *Christian Daily International*, 29 July 2026. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/57z6p7vr.

2 For the broader pre-1776 history, see Robert Louis Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), esp. 1-16, 109-52; John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

3 Thomas Helwys, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*, ed. Richard Groves (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 53; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140-41. Groves calls Helwys's work the first exposition in English of universal religious liberty (Introduction, xxxi–xxxii). The formulation here is deliberately narrower than "the first ever," because earlier writers such as Sebastian Castellio had made major arguments for toleration. On the divergent dates given for Helwys's birth and death, see also *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Helwys, Thomas"; *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (GAMEO), s.v. "Helwys, Thomas (ca. 1575-ca. 1616)"; New World Encyclopedia, s.v. "Thomas Helwys."

4 For Providence, see the 1637 Providence Agreement, with its limitation to "civil things," in Online Library of Liberty, "1637: Providence Agreement"; and the 1640 Providence agreement affirming "liberty of Conscience." For the later constitutional settlement, see Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations (1663), Avalon Project, Yale Law School; Rhode Island Department of State, "Rhode Island's Royal Charter." See also National Park Service, "Rhode Island: Roger Williams National Memorial."

The contemporary international concept of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is frequently presented mainly as a product of Enlightenment philosophy or post-1945 international law. The anniversaries commemorated in 2026 remind us that important strands of the idea are substantially older and include explicitly Christian arguments developed long before the Enlightenment.[5]

Many Christians before Helwys had argued against persecution or pleaded for toleration. Sebastian Castellio and other 16th-century writers are important examples. Helwys nevertheless took a distinctive step: he denied the civil magistrate jurisdiction over religion itself and framed the protected class in explicitly open-ended terms.

1. The life of a pioneer

Thomas Helwys was born around 1575 into a prosperous Nottinghamshire family and entered Gray's Inn in London in 1593, where he studied law. As a member of the English Separatist movement, he became convinced that the Church of England had departed from the pattern of the New Testament.[6]

When persecution intensified, Helwys and other members of the congregation associated with John Smyth went into exile in Amsterdam in 1607/08. There Helwys and Smyth rejected infant baptism and embraced believers' baptism, contributing to the emergence of the early Baptist movement.[7]

Unlike many religious refugees who remained in the Netherlands, Helwys returned to England with part of the congregation around 1612 and helped establish what is generally regarded as the first Baptist church on English soil. His return exposed him again to the religious coercion from which the group had fled.[8]

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5 Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, especially 82-152; Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration*, chs. 2-3. These works emphasize pre-Enlightenment Christian arguments without denying later Enlightenment and modern legal developments.

6 Joseph E. Early Jr., ed., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 14-16; Larry J. Kreitzer, *New Light on the Early Years of Thomas Helwys* (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2018). Kreitzer documents Helwys's admission to Gray's Inn in 1593. For additional biographical detail, see "Thomas Helwys of Gray's Inn and of Broxtowe Hall, Nottingham," Nottinghamshire History, and Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, s.v. "Helwys, Thomas."

7 Early, *Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*; Larry J. Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1 (Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2019). On the emergence of the Baptist movement from the Smyth-Helwys circle, see also Marvin Jones, *The Beginning of Baptist Ecclesiology: The Foundational Contributions of Thomas Helwys* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017). On the early history of the (General) Baptists, see also B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, rev. ed. (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1996); Stephen Wright, *The Early English Baptists, 1603-1649* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006); H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage: Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

8 Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1*; Early, Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*. The precise chronology of Helwys's return is reconstructed from incomplete evidence; "around 1612" is safer than assigning a precise month.

2. The book that cost him his freedom

Around the time of his return, Helwys published *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612). A surviving presentation copy contains his handwritten admonition to King James I that the king, being a mortal man, had no power over the immortal souls of his subjects.[9]

In the printed text Helwys stated the principle with exceptional clarity: "For men's religion to God is between God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man."[10]

For Helwys, this was not primarily a secular political argument but a theological one. Every human being must answer to God personally. The civil ruler therefore has legitimate authority in civil affairs but no divine commission to compel faith or judge the conscience.[11]

Helwys then wrote the sentence for which he is best remembered: "Let them be heretics, Turks, Jews or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."[12]

Readers usually notice "heretics," "Turks" (the contemporary English term for Muslims), and "Jews." For the early 17th century, that list was already strikingly broad. Yet the decisive words may be the final two: "or whatsoever."

Those words make the formulation open-ended. Helwys was not merely adding more religious groups to a list that the state should tolerate. He was denying the state authority to decide which religions were entitled to liberty. Religious freedom thus followed from a jurisdictional limit on civil government, not from the government's approval of particular beliefs. This is why Robert Louis Wilken describes Helwys's argument as a principled defence of liberty of conscience regardless of a person's faith.[13]

Helwys was subsequently imprisoned. Older accounts commonly place him in Newgate Prison and state that he died there around 1616; recent research cau-

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9 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, Preface and Introduction; the 1612 original is digitized in Early English Books Online via the University of Michigan, *A Shorte Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity*, and in the Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

10 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53. Spelling and punctuation have been lightly modernized in the article text. In the original spelling: "for mens religion to God, is betwixt God and themselves; the king shall not answere for it, neither may the king be judg between God and man." A presentation copy Helwys sent to King James I survives in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and is digitized by the Angus Library and Archive, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

11 For the theological and eschatological structure of Helwys's argument, see Matthew H. Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait': Roger Williams and the Eschatological Roots of Toleration," *History of Political Thought* 43, no. 1 (2022): 55-80; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140-42.

12 Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53. "Turks" was a common early-modern English designation for Muslims. Original spelling: "let them be heretikes, Turks, Iewes, or whatsoever it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."

13 Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 141; Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait'," 55-80. Wilken stresses that Helwys's case was not merely a defense of Christian nonconformists but a principled argument for conscience regardless of faith.

tions that the exact place, date, and circumstances of his death cannot be established with certainty. What is clear is that he disappeared from public life after challenging the Crown's religious authority and was dead within a few years.[14]

In that qualified sense, Helwys may be remembered as a martyr for religious liberty: he accepted grave personal risk while insisting that freedom of conscience belonged not merely to his own community but also to people whose beliefs he regarded as false.

3. Roger Williams: putting the principle into practice

A generation later, Roger Williams carried remarkably similar convictions across the Atlantic. Banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Williams founded Providence in 1636. The Providence compact limited obedience to the majority to "civil things," and the 1640 agreement explicitly reaffirmed "liberty of Conscience."[15]

Whether Williams read Helwys himself cannot be demonstrated conclusively. The intellectual connection with the early English Baptist tradition is nevertheless stronger than a mere resemblance: Williams's *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644) reproduces and engages material from John Murton, Helwys's successor among the English General Baptists. Recent scholarship therefore describes Williams's theory as in significant respects a continuation and critical development of arguments associated with Helwys and Murton.[16]

Providence and Rhode Island remained exceptional for many years. Religious liberty spread only gradually through the English colonies and later the United States. The American tradition therefore did not begin in 1776; it drew on earlier theological, colonial, and constitutional experiments.

4. A legacy worth remembering

Thomas Helwys can therefore be described, with appropriate historical qualification, as the earliest known Christian writer to formulate in English a com-

14 Kreitzer, *Thomas Helwys and His World*, Part 1, whose abstract explicitly notes that even the circumstances and date of Helwys's death remain matters of speculation; compare *Early, Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys*. The older Newgate narrative should therefore be stated cautiously. Older biographical sources include Nottinghamshire History and New World Encyclopedia. One concrete chronological datum is that Helwys's uncle Geoffrey Helwys, who died in 1616, left a bequest to Thomas's widow, Joan.

15 "1637: Providence Agreement," Online Library of Liberty; National Park Service, "Roger Williams," which notes that Providence settlers agreed to make laws "only in civil things"; Providence Combination of 1640, clause affirming continued "liberty of Conscience." For standard scholarly biographies of Roger Williams, see also John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (New York: Viking, 2012); Edwin S. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

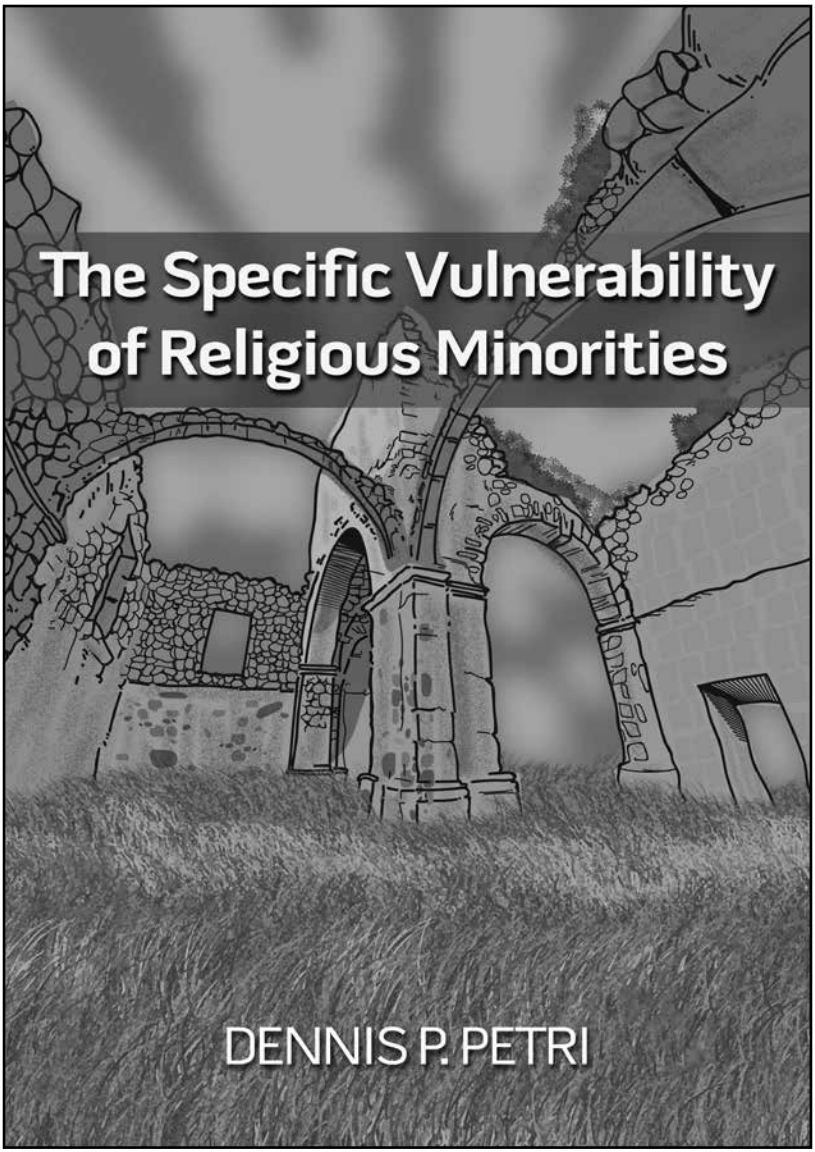
16 Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (London, 1644), which incorporates John Murton's *A Most Humble Supplication* and John Cotton's response; Young, "'To Hope, and to Wait'," 55-80, especially his analysis of Williams as continuing and reworking a line of political theology developed by Helwys and Murton.

prehensive and explicitly open-ended claim to religious liberty for people of any faith. His concern was not simply to protect selected minorities but to deny the civil magistrate jurisdiction over the relationship between God and the human conscience.[17]

Roger Williams later demonstrated that a closely related principle could sustain a functioning political community. Together they show that a major strand in the history of religious freedom arose from biblical and theological reflection on the sovereignty of God, the dignity and accountability of conscience, and the limits of earthly government – well before the mature Enlightenment theories with which religious liberty is often associated.

As the United States continues beyond its 250th anniversary, it is worth remembering these deeper roots. The road to American religious liberty did not begin in Philadelphia or with the drafting of the federal Constitution. Important milestones had already been reached by an English dissenter who told his king that the Crown had no authority over the human conscience, and by a banished colonial dissident who helped translate such convictions into political practice.

17 The priority claim is best understood in this qualified form. See Helwys, *Short Declaration*, 53; Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God*, 140–41; John Coffey, "Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution," *Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 961–985, esp. 971. Earlier Christian pleas for toleration existed; Helwys's distinctiveness lies in the comprehensive, jurisdictional, and explicitly open-ended form of his claim.



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Jochebed's resistance in Exodus 1-2

A theological analysis and its implications for religious freedom

Godfrey Harold[1]

Abstract

This article presents Jochebed's defiance of Pharaoh in Exodus 1-2 as faith-based civil resistance and embodied worship, not merely maternal instinct. Her concealment of Moses is read within a wider 'conspiracy of life' involving Shiphrah, Puah, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter, whose non-violent actions resist genocidal state power. The study argues that these women reveal the limits of political authority when law serves death rather than justice. Engaging with Romans 13, Acts 5:29, Thoreau, and Martin Luther King Jr., the article frames Jochebed as a witness to higher divine law, religious freedom, covenantal identity, human dignity, and faithful resistance under God's sovereignty.

Keywords

Resistance theory, civil disobedience, unjust law, social justice, nonviolence, higher law, conscientious objection, religious freedom.

1. Introduction

The opening chapters of the book of Exodus narrate a story of escalating oppression culminating in a state-sanctioned genocide. Yet within this ordeal of tyranny, the text also presents a powerful counter-narrative of resistance, orchestrated not by armies or political leaders but by a small group of women. In this article, I delineate how Jochebed's audacious resistance to Pharaoh's decree to murder all Hebrew male infants, meticulously detailed in Exodus 1-2, transcends mere maternal protectiveness. Rather, it embodies a profound act of worship and a theological statement against tyrannical state power, designed to save not only

1 Prof Dr Godfrey Harold is Principal, Cape Town Baptist Seminary and Research Fellow at Stellenbosch University in the Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology. This article uses British English. Article submitted: 4 Feb. 2026; accepted: 13 July 2026. Email: godfrey@ctbs.org.za. ORCID: 0000-0002-6609-9651. The paper was presented at the Theological Society of South Africa Conference held at the University of Free State under the theme 'Righteous Anger? Theological Reflections on Religious "Just Wars" and Protest Movements,' 24-26 June 2026.

her people but her religion. Her actions, alongside those of the courageous Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah, exemplify a form of resistance rooted in divine moral law, providing a foundational biblical paradigm for faith-based civil disobedience (Boesak 2017:1-15).

In this article, I argue that Jochebed's quiet yet potent refusal to comply with an unjust law establishes a theological precedent for prioritising divine mandates over state authority with respect to religious freedom and identity. This exploration will demonstrate that such acts, often perceived as solely political, are deeply theological, revealing a form of worship that challenges state-sanctioned violence and advocates for the protection of vulnerable people and their faith. Jochebed's example illustrates, therefore, a critical intersection where personal faith translates into public action, thereby framing resistance as an essential component of worship when one is confronted by decrees that violate divine principles and religious freedom.

I will first establish the socio-historical context of Pharaonic oppression, analysing the systematic nature of the genocidal edict as a direct assault on Israel's covenantal identity and future, and will then examine the 'conspiracy of life,' the collective, multi-layered resistance enacted by Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and even Pharaoh's daughter, thus highlighting the strategic and theological dimensions of their defiance. By re-evaluating Jochebed's motivation, I move beyond a simplistic reading of maternal instinct to uncover a calculated, faith-driven strategy. Subsequently, I construct a robust theological framework for resistance by reconciling the apparent antinomy between Romans 13 and Acts 5:29 and connecting this biblical ethic to the philosophical traditions of Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr. The core of the argument will focus on redefining worship not as a liturgical act but as ultimate allegiance to God, expressed through the moral imperative to confront injustice. Finally, I assert the enduring relevance of Jochebed's model for contemporary faith-based activism, arguing that her story provides a powerful blueprint for how individual courage can challenge systemic evil and catalyse movements for liberation, social transformation and religious freedom.

2. The crucible of oppression: Pharaonic edicts and Israelite identity

To grasp the significance and cleverness of Jochebed's defiance, we must understand the oppressive mechanisms of the Egyptian regime described in Exodus 1. The story doesn't depict random cruelty but a strategic, increasingly severe plan of dehumanisation and population control. The chapter begins with a new Pharaoh 'who did not know Joseph' (Ex. 1:8), a phrase indicating a conscious political and historical forgetfulness. This new ruler views the growing Israelite population not as a blessing or ally but as a threat both demographically and politically. Pharaoh's fear that Israelites might 'join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the

land' (Ex. 1:10) drives a systematic oppression aimed at suppressing their spirit and reducing their numbers (Jones 2017:157-165). As Nqwa (2022:14) notes:

> At the outset of Exodus, we encounter interlocution around Pharaoh's hypothetical but deeply harmful claims about the children of Israel: "Come let us deal shrewdly with them, or they may increase and, in event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Ex. 1:10).

The oppression unfolds in three distinct phases. First, Pharaoh imposes forced labour, by setting taskmasters over the Israelites 'to afflict them with heavy burdens' (Ex. 1:11). This policy, as Mtshiselwa (2021:502-529) notes, was intended to physically weaken the population and exploit them for state projects. However, the strategy backfires: 'the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad' (Ex. 1:12). The failure of this initial plan leads to a sinister escalation as Pharaoh secretly commands the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, to kill all male infants at birth. This move from economic exploitation to covert genocide marks a significant radicalisation of state policy by specifically targeting male infants – a strategy that Rosenstock (2023:1-23) identifies as a calculated attempt to dismantle Israelite kinship structures, cultural identity, and religion by eliminating males. Pharaoh thus aimed to force Hebrew women to assimilate through intermarriage, thereby diluting and eventually eradicating the Hebrew lineage and its covenantal claims.

Pharaoh's tyranny, as we meet it in Exodus 1, leaves no room for misunderstanding. The Egyptian taskmasters aimed to 'bend,' 'wear out anyone's strength,' 'break them down physically,' and 'crush' the Israelite slaves. Their goal was not only physical but also to 'crush their spirit to banish the very wish for liberty' (Keil and Delitzsch 1986:422). Pharaoh applied three means of oppression: forced labour, infanticide, and mass infanticide (Keil and Delitzsch 1986:422-426).

When the midwives' courageous disobedience thwarts this secret plot, Pharaoh's genocidal intent becomes public and all-encompassing by commanding 'all his people,' saying, 'Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live' (Ex. 1:22). This public decree turns the entire Egyptian populace into agents of the state's murderous policy, creating an environment of pervasive terror and surveillance. The Nile, a source of life for Egypt, is grotesquely repurposed as an instrument of death for the Hebrews. This genocidal edict is more than a political or military strategy; it is a profound theological assault as it directly challenges the covenantal promise made to Abraham that his descendants would become a great nation (Gen. 12:2). By seeking to annihilate the male line, Pharaoh positions himself in direct opposition to the

divine will, thereby transforming any act of resistance into an expression of unwavering faith in God's promises (Park 2020:27-45). It is within this perilous context, where obedience to the state means complicity in genocide and defiance carries the penalty of death, that the actions of Jochebed and the other women must be understood. Their resistance is not merely a struggle for survival but a theological battle for the future of a people and the integrity of God's covenant.

3. A conspiracy of life: The collective resistance of women

The narrative of resistance in Exodus 1-2 is not the story of a single hero but of a network of women whose collective actions form a 'conspiracy of life.' This resistance is multi-layered, strategic, and remarkably effective, operating within the private sphere to achieve public, redemptive outcomes. The defiance begins with the Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, who are the first to be confronted with Pharaoh's genocidal command. Their response establishes the ethical and theological foundation for all subsequent resistance in the narrative (Lapsey 2005:81-85).

3.1. The midwives' precedent: Strategic resistance and divine fear

The text explicitly states that the midwives 'feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them but let the male children live' (Ex. 1:17). Their 'fear of God' is not a passive emotion but an active ethical allegiance that supersedes their fear of Pharaoh. This act of civil resistance is the first and most direct challenge to the state's authority. When summoned by Pharaoh to account for their failure, they employ strategic deception by claiming that 'the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them' (Ex. 1:19; Lapsey 2005:88-89). This explanation is a masterstroke of subversive communication, as Tchamba (2025:1032-1045) observed; it not only provides a plausible excuse that saves their own and the infants' but also subtly mocks Egyptian prejudices. By portraying Hebrew women as possessing a vitality superior to their Egyptian counterparts, the midwives turn a stereotype of the 'other' on its head, using the oppressor's own worldview against him. Their actions, rooted in a sapiential wisdom that prioritises life, are divinely affirmed: 'So God dealt well with the midwives … and because the midwives feared God, he gave them families' (Exodus 1:20-21). This divine reward validates their defiance and their deception, establishing a biblical precedent that when human law mandates evil, resistance becomes a righteous, God-honouring act (Bøsterud 2021:1-9).

3.2. Jochebed and Miriam: Maternal defiance and strategic foresight

Jochebed's resistance builds upon the precedent set by the midwives. After Pharaoh's decree becomes public, the danger intensifies. Jochebed, a woman from

the house of Levi, gives birth to a son and, seeing 'that he was a fine child,' hides him for three months (Ex 2:2). When she can no longer conceal him, her faith and ingenuity converge in an audacious plan of hope. She constructs a 'basket of bulrushes,' seals it with bitumen and pitch, and places the child in it among the reeds by the river Nile (Ex. 2:3). This act is laden with theological symbolism. The Hebrew word for 'basket' (*tebah*) is the same word used for Noah's ark (Gen. 6-9), transforming this small vessel into a symbol of salvation and hope amidst a flood of state-sponsored death. Far from abandoning her son, Jochebed entrusts him to God's providence, placing him in the very river designated for his destruction, yet in a manner designed for his rescue.

This, however, was not a solitary act. The plan's success hinges on a network of female cooperation. Jochebed's daughter, Miriam, 'stood at a distance to know what would be done to him' (Ex. 2:4). Miriam's role is not passive observation but strategic surveillance. When Pharaoh's daughter discovers the crying infant, Miriam seizes the opportune moment. With remarkable courage and quick thinking, she approaches the princess and asks, 'Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' (Ex. 2:7). This intervention is pivotal. It not only ensures the child's survival but masterfully arranges for him to be nursed and raised in his formative years by his own mother, Jochebed, under the protection and payment of the Egyptian state (Boesak 2017:1-15). As a result, Moses maintains a connection to his Hebrew heritage, a crucial element for his future role as liberator.

3.3. Pharaoh's daughter: Compassion across enemy lines

Pharaoh's daughter is arguably the most unexpected link in this chain of resistance. As part of the royal household, she is an agent of the very system committing genocide. Yet upon discovering the basket, she takes pity on him and correctly recognises him as 'one of the Hebrews' children' (Ex. 2:6). Despite knowing that she is disobeying her father's explicit orders, she chooses compassion over obedience. Her act of adopting Moses is a bold act of defiance (Quine 2021). She not only rescues him but also gives him his name, meaning 'to draw out,' highlighting his salvation from water. By bringing him into the royal court, she unknowingly provides him with the education, status, and skills that he will later use to challenge the Egyptian empire (Mikva 2014:143). The collective resistance of the women, midwives, mother, sister, and even the oppressor's daughter reveals a powerful, layered subversion against imperial machinery. It shows how divine liberation often arises from the brave, strategic, and compassionate acts of those who seem powerless (Mtshiselwa 2021:502-529).

4. Theological and philosophical frameworks of resistance

Jochebed's defiance, while historically situated, resonates with enduring theological and philosophical debates concerning the relationship between the individual, the state, and a higher moral law. Her actions and those of the midwives provide a foundational case study for what would later be articulated as faith-based civil resistance. To fully grasp the theological weight of their resistance, it is necessary to examine the scriptural principles governing obedience to authority and the ethical justification for dissent.

4.1. The biblical tension: Reconciling Romans 13 and Acts 5:29

Christian discussions about civil obedience have traditionally been influenced by the apparent conflict between two key New Testament passages. In Romans 13:1-2, Paul states, 'Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed.' This verse has frequently been cited to justify unconditional submission to the government. Conversely, when the Sanhedrin commanded the apostles to cease preaching, Peter and the apostles responded, 'We must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29). This statement clearly emphasises the precedence of divine authority over human laws when the two conflict.

Rather than viewing these passages as contradictory, a nuanced theological reading sees them as delineating the proper scope and limits of state authority. Romans 13 is not a blanket endorsement of tyranny. Paul's instruction is conditional, predicated on the assumption that the state is fulfilling its divinely appointed role as 'God's servant for your good' (Rom. 13:4), punishing wrongdoers and promoting order. As Ademiluka (2019:1-11) and Du Toit (2021:1-10) point out, when a state ceases to be a minister of justice and becomes an agent of evil, as Pharaoh's regime clearly did, it forfeits its claim to absolute obedience. In such cases, the principle of Acts 5:29 becomes the overriding ethical imperative. The 'fear of God' demonstrated by the midwives is a practical application of this principle. Their allegiance was to the Author of life, not to a ruler commanding death. Jochebed's actions flow from the same theological conviction. Her refusal to surrender her son was an act of obedience to the higher law of God that sanctifies life, making her disobedience to Pharaoh an act of profound faithfulness (Ademiluka 2019:1-11).

4.2. Philosophical lineages: From Thoreau to King

This biblical ethic of conscientious objection finds powerful echoes in modern philosophical traditions of nonviolent resistance. Henry David Thoreau, in his

essay 'Resistance to Civil Government,' argued that individuals have a moral duty to not participate in or enable injustice. He famously stated, 'Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward' (Thoreau 1849). Jochebed's actions are a powerful, ancient embodiment of this principle. She refused to resign her conscience to Pharaoh's genocidal law, prioritising her moral duty to protect life over her legal duty as a subject (Mohebkhodaee 2025:125-171). Her resistance, though private and clandestine, was a profound refusal to lend her hands to the state's evil, a core tenet of Thoreauvian disobedience.

Martin Luther King Jr. expanded on this foundation by integrating it with a deep Christian theological perspective. In his Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963), King clearly distinguished between just and unjust laws, stating, 'An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. … An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.' For King, civil disobedience was not just a right but a moral duty to 'arouse the conscience of the community.' He also referenced early Christian acts of defiance, such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as historical precedents. King (1963) argued:

> Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

Jochebed and the midwives fit perfectly within this lineage. Pharaoh's edict was a quintessential unjust law; it violated the eternal law of God regarding the sanctity of life and was discriminatorily applied to a minority group. Their nonviolent, faith-driven resistance was a direct challenge to this unjust law, undertaken not for personal gain but out of fidelity to a higher moral order (Ademiluka 2019:1-11; Luban 1989:2152-2224). Jochebed's act, therefore, is not an isolated incident of maternal desperation but stands in a long and venerable tradition of faith-based activism that asserts divine law as the ultimate standard of justice.

5. Jochebed's resistance as a paradigm of worship

Jochebed's act of resistance should be understood not merely as an ethical or political statement but as a profound act of worship. This requires redefining worship by moving beyond the confines of liturgical practice and ritual observance toward a more holistic understanding of it as the expression of one's ultimate allegiance. In a context where the state demands total obedience and commands acts that are antithetical to divine character, resistance in the name of God becomes the highest form of devotion.

5.1. Beyond liturgical practice: Worship as ultimate allegiance

The prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Bible consistently challenges the division between ritual and ethics (Groenewald 2019:1-10). Prophets such as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah condemned the idea that proper worship could be compatible with social injustice. Amos particularly rejected superficial ritual practices, stating God's disdain: 'I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. … But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream' (Amos 5:21, 24). This critique underscores that genuine worship is deeply connected to ethical behaviour, especially justice for the vulnerable. Worship is not merely performing rites in the temple but a reflection of one's ultimate loyalty and who they serve in all aspects of life.

Jochebed's actions exemplify a holistic understanding of worship. Pharaoh's demand to kill Hebrew children positioned him as an ultimate authority, a pseudo-deity whose edicts determined life and death. Obedience to Pharaoh in this situation would have been idolatry, revering a human ruler who usurped divine power. Jochebed's refusal to obey symbolised her supreme loyalty. By protecting her son, she publicly declared that Yahweh, the God of the covenant and Life-Giver, was her true sovereign, not Pharaoh. Her act of defiance was an act of worship because it rightly prioritised God's command to value life over the state's order to destroy it. This reflects the theological principle that *lex orandi* (law of prayer), *lex credendi* (law of belief), and *lex vivendi* (law of living) are interconnected; what one believes and how one worships should manifest in how one lives (Plaatjies-van Huffel 2020:1-15).

5.2. Confronting unjust authority: A divine moral imperative

Jochebed's resistance was not an act of anarchy but a sacerdotal duty, a priestly act of preserving the sacredness of life in the face of a desecrating power. Thus, her actions can be seen as a 'sacramental protest,' in which faith is manifested not in words or songs but in a courageous, life-saving deed (Adamo 2019:1-8). She transformed a private, maternal decision into a public, theological statement

against the dehumanising logic of the empire (Boesak 2017:1-15). Her reverence for God compelled her to act, making her resistance a form of embodied worship.

Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives, defied the command of Pharaoh to kill the baby boys even as the Israelite women are on the birth stool. They became the symbol of resistance, standing in for the whole people of Israel. It is not just the people under imperial tyrannical rule who cannot stand tyranny, however; neither does God tolerate it. John Calvin made this point when building a framework for resistance against such conditions generally, stating in his commentary on Isaiah 14:7-8 that God, God self 'cannot endure tyrants and [God] listens in empathy to the secret groans of those who live under them' (Calvin 1981). Calvin continued:

> Here he shows how greatly tyrants are hated by the whole world. When they are dead or ruined, all men break forth into joy and express the feelings which they formerly entertained towards the tyrants, and which they dissembled through fear. Then do their hatred and spite burst forth, and not only do men make known their joy, but even the dumb creatures, as the Prophet, for the sake of amplification, adds the fir-trees and the cedars. As tyranny overturns everything, so when tyranny is done away, everything appears to be restored to its original condition.

This paradigm is reinforced by the actions of the midwives, whose 'fear of God' guided them to preserve life (Lapsey 2005:81-89). Their worship was not performed at an altar but in the birthing rooms of Goshen, where they chose allegiance to the Creator over the king's decree. This form of worship, active, risky, and life-affirming, challenges any piety that remains passive or silent in the face of injustice. It suggests that true devotion is measured not by the fervour of one's prayers alone but by courageous action when one is confronted with evil.

Jochebed's story, therefore, broadens the definition of worship to include the active and often perilous struggle for righteousness. It posits that in the crucible of oppression, the most authentic worship may be an act of holy disobedience, a testament to an unwavering commitment to divine justice over human tyranny (Boesak 2020:201-222). The next section will depict these four women's actions as architects of religious freedom.

6. A conspiracy of life, the architecture of religious freedom

6.1. Religious freedom as a theological category: Locating the Exodus narrative

The idea of religious freedom, often framed within modern international human rights, has origins that go back deep into theological and philosophical history, well

before the emergence of modern liberal democracy. Legal and religious scholars increasingly emphasise that understanding religious liberty requires examining its scriptural and theological foundations (Vilks et al. 2025:1-12; Witte 2007). This section demonstrates that the actions of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter serve not only as literary examples of civil resistance but also as early models for concepts such as conscience rights, religious freedom, and the right of faith communities to maintain their identity despite state coercion.

Religious freedom, in its fullest theological scope, involves three interconnected aspects: belief (the internal moral conscience), practice (the outward display of worship, rituals, and community activities), and communal identity (the right of a faith community to pass its beliefs through generations) (Perry 2014:121-141). Pharaoh's genocidal decree attacked all three aspects at once. By ordering the death of every Hebrew male infant, he aimed to disrupt the biological continuity of Israel's covenant community – the very means by which the Abrahamic faith was preserved across generations. As Konvitz (1978:1619-1639) notes, the ancient world understood that destroying a person's body was also a destruction of their spiritual essence. Pharaoh's order was thus more than demographic control; it was a theocratic assertion that his authority outweighed that of the God of Israel.

In this context, the women from Exodus 1-2 serve as early exemplars of religious liberty advocates. Their resistance was not just an instinctive act to protect the vulnerable but a deliberate, theologically grounded stance against the state's attempts to erase a religious community's future. Burnside (2010:243-266) highlights that the Exodus story sets a standard in which God's law serves as the highest limit on state authority, foreshadowing by many centuries the later ideas of higher-law theory[2] that support religious freedom. Below, I explore how each character's role in this story contributes to that theological tradition.

6.2. Shiphrah and Puah: The primacy of conscience and the right to refuse

The account of Shiphrah and Puah in Exodus 1:15-21 represents the earliest and most direct assertion in the biblical canon of what later natural-law and religious-liberty theorists would call the freedom of conscience – the right, and indeed the duty, to refuse compliance with a state command that violates the law of God (Konvitz 1978:1619-1639; Forji 2010:156-169). The text is unambiguous regarding their motivation: 'the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them' (Ex. 1:17). This 'fear of God' is not a private sentiment but an operative ethical category that functions as the supreme normative standard against which royal authority is measured and found wanting.

2 For an introduction to higher law and religious liberty, see Hall 2021.

John Witte Jr., in his magisterial study of the development of 'Law and Theology in the Western Legal Tradition' (Witte 2022), argues that the concept of conscientious objection, the right to refuse state commands on religious grounds, is grounded in the theological conviction that the individual conscience is accountable to a transcendent moral law that precedes and supersedes the positive law of any political community. The midwives embody precisely this conviction. Their refusal is not anarchic; they do not seek to overthrow Pharaoh's government. Rather, they act in the specific domain in which divine law and human law conflict, recognising, in a manner that anticipates Peter's declaration in Acts 5:29, that obedience to God constitutes the limit of obedience to the state.

The midwives' use of strategic deception when confronted by Pharaoh (Ex. 1:19) raises important questions for the theology of religious freedom. Tchamba (2025:1032-1045) has explored the ethical dimensions of this deception, noting that it represents a form of what contemporary philosophers call 'morally warranted dissimulation' – the use of misdirection to protect the innocent from an unjust authority. From the perspective of religious freedom, this episode is significant because it illustrates that the right of conscience does not operate in a vacuum: it must be exercised in conditions of asymmetrical power, where the conscientious objector is vulnerable to violent reprisal. The midwives' deception is therefore not a moral compromise but a pragmatic expression of the very freedom they were defending, the freedom to act in accordance with conscience even under conditions of extreme coercion (Forji 2010:156-169).

The divine affirmation of the midwives' conduct is theologically decisive. The text records that 'God dealt well with the midwives' and 'gave them families' (Ex. 1:20-21). This divine reward functions not merely as a narrative device but as a theological sanction of the principle that the freedom of conscience, when exercised in fidelity to divine law, is not merely permitted but divinely commended. Boesak (2017:1-15) reads this affirmation as evidence that the God of the Exodus honours the courage of those who resist imperial power in the name of life. For contemporary advocates of religious freedom, this divine validation constitutes a scriptural foundation for the argument that religious liberty is not a concession granted by the state but a right grounded in the nature and will of God (Witte 2007; 2010).

6.3. Jochebed: Protecting the covenantal community and the transmission of faith

Jochebed's role in shaping the theology of religious freedom goes beyond the right of individual conscience recognised by the midwives. Her actions highlight what scholars see as the communal aspect of religious liberty: the community's right

to sustain its faith identity over generations by passing down traditions, stories, and covenantal duties (Marshall 2000; Sanneh 2009). In Exodus 1-2, the attempt to kill male children directly threatened this communal aspect, the biological and cultural means through which Israel's covenantal identity was maintained.

Jochebed's construction of the ark of bulrushes (*tebah*) and her placement of the child Moses in the Nile must be read, in this light, as an act of communal religious preservation. The theological symbolism of the *tebah* has been widely noted in the scholarly literature: the use of the same Hebrew term for the basket of Moses and for Noah's ark (Gen. 6-9) deliberately invokes the typology of divine preservation against the waters of chaos and death (Mikva 2014:143). Less frequently noted, however, is the specifically religious-liberty dimension of this act. Indeed, Jochebed's assertion has profound implications for the theology of religious freedom.

According to Nolland (1994:26-31), one of the central theological claims of the Exodus narrative is that divine sovereignty is incompatible with the absolute sovereignty of any human political authority. Pharaoh's claim to determine who shall live and who shall die is presented throughout Exodus 1-2 as a usurpation of divine prerogative, a form of idolatry in which the state arrogates to itself attributes that belong to God alone. Jochebed's refusal to submit to this usurpation is therefore an act of theological resistance. It is a protest, conducted in the register of maternal love and faith, against the idolatrous conflation of state power with ultimate authority.

The downstream consequences of Jochebed's act are equally significant for the theology of religious freedom. The arrangement engineered by Miriam ensures not only that Moses survives, but that he is nursed and raised by his own mother in his formative years, thereby absorbing the faith tradition of his people before being educated in the wisdom of Egypt (Ex. 2:7-10; Boesak 2017:1-15). This outcome encapsulates a principle that contemporary international human rights instruments have articulated in legal terms: parents possess the right to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions (UN General Assembly 1966, Art. 18(4)). Jochebed, three millennia before this right was codified, enacted it at the cost of her own safety and security. Her action stands as a paradigmatic expression of the conviction that the religious education of children lies, in principle, beyond the reach of state coercion.

Di Berardino (2015:305-336) has argued that the history of Christianity demonstrates a recurring pattern in which the transmission of faith through mothers and the domestic sphere remains more resilient than institutional structures or hostile state power. Jochebed's story anticipates and exemplifies this pattern. Her act of faith was not performed in the private sphere, at home and along a river-

bank, yet its public consequences were incalculable. This observation has important implications for contemporary religious-freedom advocacy in contexts where formal religious institutions are suppressed. The domestic transmission of faith, embodied in Jochebed's example, represents a form of religious freedom that is simultaneously the most vulnerable to attack and the most difficult for the state to extinguish.

6.4. Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter: Solidarity, cross-boundary agency, and the social conditions of religious freedom

Religious freedom, as both a theological concept and a legal right, is not merely an individual or communal possession; it requires active cooperation by those who are not themselves members of the persecuted community (Adelman 2024:67-80). Miriam's strategic intervention and the compassionate transgression of Pharaoh's decree by his daughter represent two modalities of this essential social condition.

For the theology of religious freedom, the most significant aspect of Miriam's intervention is its character as intercession. She places herself in the precarious space between the imperial household and her own endangered family, using her quick wit and courage to engineer an outcome that neither power alone could have produced. This intercessory role anticipates what contemporary scholars of religious liberty call the 'mediating structures' argument, the claim that civil-society institutions and individual actors who stand between the individual and the state play an indispensable role in the realisation of religious freedom in practice (de Freitas 2024:1-30).

Pharaoh's daughter presents a more complex case. As a member of the royal household, she is formally an agent of the oppressive state, yet her response to the crying infant is compassionate and defiant. Dykstra (2002:148) has noted that her act of adoption transgresses not only her father's explicit command but also the ethnic and political boundaries that defined the imperial order. By naming the child and bringing him into the royal court, she simultaneously subverts the decree of death and creates the conditions for the liberation of Israel. Adelman (2024:67-80) reads this as a 'collusion of mothers' that cuts across the lines of power and ethnicity to enact a solidarity rooted in the recognition of shared humanity.

The theological significance of Pharaoh's daughter's action for the concept of religious freedom lies in its demonstration that the protection of religious minorities is not merely a duty of the persecuted community or its allies but can be enacted, even if partially and paradoxically, from within the structures of the oppressing power. This observation resonates with contemporary religious lib-

erty scholarship, which emphasises the role of 'insiders' in dominant social and political structures who choose to protect the religious freedom of the vulnerable (Solmski 2026). Pharaoh's daughter is, in this reading, an ancient exemplar of what today we would call an ally, one whose structural position within the oppressive system uniquely enables her to provide protection that others cannot.

Taken together, the actions of Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter illustrate a fundamental insight within the theology of religious freedom: the realisation of this freedom in conditions of oppression is always a social achievement, the product of a network of relationships, solidarities, and moral choices that transcend the boundaries of ethnicity, power, and self-interest (Nabergoj 2022:93-105). The 'conspiracy of life' described in this paper is not simply a story of resistance; it is a story about the social conditions under which religious freedom becomes practically possible.

6.5. Theological frameworks for religious freedom: From the Exodus narrative to contemporary discourse

The contribution of the Exodus narrative to the broader theological and philosophical tradition of religious freedom is not merely paradigmatic but constitutive. Several of the most important theological frameworks for religious liberty in the Western tradition draw explicitly on the Exodus story as a normative resource. This section traces three such frameworks – the higher-law tradition, the theology of conscience, and the covenantal model of political authority – and examines how the actions of the women of Exodus 1-2 illuminate and enrich each of these.

The higher-law tradition, which grounds the right of religious freedom in a transcendent moral order that supersedes the positive law of the state, has its most ancient biblical expression in the defiance exhibited by the Hebrew midwives and Jochebed. Konvitz (1978:1619-1639) traces the philosophical roots of this tradition through Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman thought, arguing that all three streams converge on the conviction that the authority of the state is limited by a higher moral law that the individual is obligated to obey when the two conflict. The Exodus narrative provides the biblical warrant for this conviction: the midwives' 'fear of God' acknowledges that divine law constitutes a moral limit on state authority that cannot be crossed without spiritual culpability. Forji (2010:156-169) extends this argument, noting that the distinction between just and unjust laws, which Martin Luther King Jr. would later articulate in terms drawn from Augustine and Aquinas, has its most concrete ancient expression in the story of women who chose to obey the law of life over the law of death.

The theology of conscience, which holds that the individual human conscience is the proximate locus of the awareness of divine moral law and therefore the

seat of religious freedom, is likewise illuminated by the Exodus narrative. Witte and Alexander (2010) and later Wilken (2019) trace the development of religious freedom from its biblical roots through the patristic tradition, the Reformation, and the modern period. They argue that the right of conscience is grounded in the *imago Dei*, the conviction that the human being, as image-bearer of God, possesses an inalienable dignity that the state may not violate. The midwives and Jochebed act out of precisely this sense of human dignity. Their fear of God is an internal moral awareness that makes compliance with Pharaoh's command not merely illegal by divine law but personally degrading. Their refusal is thus an assertion of their own dignity as moral agents made in the image of God, an assertion that anticipates the theological anthropology upon which later arguments for religious freedom would be built.

The covenantal model of political authority, which holds that the legitimacy of government is grounded in its fidelity to a covenant with God and that government forfeits its claim to obedience when it violates the terms of that covenant, is perhaps the most directly relevant framework for understanding the political theology implicit in the Exodus narrative. Lombaard, Benson, and Otto (2019:1-12) have argued that the post-secular turn in contemporary political theology requires a renewed engagement with the biblical and theological resources for thinking about the relationship between faith, society, and the state. Exodus 1-2 offers a particularly rich resource for this engagement. It presents a political order in which the state has usurped divine sovereignty, along with a set of actors who, by resisting that usurpation, enact the covenantal principle that God's authority transcends Pharaoh's.

The relevance of these theological frameworks to contemporary debates about religious freedom is considerable. In the contemporary global context, religious freedom is under pressure from a variety of state and non-state actors who, like Pharaoh, seek to subordinate the identity and practice of religious communities to the demands of political power. Jochebed's story, read through this lens, is not merely an ancient paradigm but a living theological resource for communities of faith who face analogous pressures in the present.

6.6. Contemporary implications: Religious freedom, human rights, and the Exodus paradigm

The United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (UN General Assembly 1981) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (UN General Assembly 1966) represent the most authoritative contemporary codifications of religious freedom as a human right. Article 18 of the ICCPR protects

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the freedom to change one's religion or belief, as well as the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice, and teaching. Article 18(4) specifically protects the rights of parents to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions (Buckingham 2024:53-66). The actions of Jochebed, Shiphrah, and Puah anticipate, in narrative form, the substantive content of each of these provisions.

Shiphrah and Puah's refusal to comply with Pharaoh's command enacts what Article 18(1) protects as the 'freedom to manifest one's religion or belief.' In their case, they live out their belief that the sanctity of life as ordained by God supersedes the king's death decree. Their defiance constitutes conscientious objection, a form of exercising religious freedom that is recognised, albeit with limitations, in international human rights law (Henrico 2019). Jochebed's act of hiding Moses and Miriam, arranging for his nursing by his own mother, enacts what Article 18(4) protects as the parental right to religious education – in this case, the right to transmit the faith tradition of Israel to the next generation in defiance of a state policy designed to extinguish that tradition. Moreover, the 'conspiracy of life' enacts what contemporary scholars call 'corporate religious freedom' (Clark and Durham 2015:256-287), the right of a religious community to maintain its collective identity, practices, and institutions (Witte 2000, 2007; Witte and Alexander 2010; Wilken 2019).

This intersectional reading is important for the theology of religious freedom because it resists the temptation to treat religious liberty as an isolated right, abstracted from the broader social conditions of justice and equality. The women of Exodus do not merely defend their right to worship; they defend a whole community's right to exist, flourish, and transmit its identity across generations amid radical vulnerability. Groenewald (2019), drawing on Amos 5:24, argues that the prophetic tradition consistently frames the pursuit of justice as inseparable from authentic worship; the women of Exodus enact this inseparability in their resistance to Pharaoh, making their story a paradigm for any theology of religious freedom that takes into account both the dignity of the human person and the demands of social justice.

Read through the lens of contemporary theology of religious freedom, the actions of Shiphrah, Puah, Jochebed, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter constitute a multi-dimensional paradigm that anticipates and enriches the most important theological and philosophical frameworks for this fundamental right. Their 'conspiracy of life' asserts the primacy of conscience over state command, the right of a religious community to perpetuate its own identity, the necessity of cross-boundary solidarity for the realisation of religious free-

dom in conditions of oppression, and the inseparability of religious freedom from the broader demands of justice. These historic contributions provide a living theological resource for all who seek to articulate and defend the right of religious communities and individuals to live, worship, and transmit their faith in freedom.

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Purging persecution or petty pursuit?

Reframing the conceptual application of persecution in the past

Steven Geusens[1]

Abstract

This article argues that persecution is not a stable historical category but an analytical construct whose meaning depends upon assumptions regarding state capacity, legal enforcement and historical memory. Through a comparison of early Christian persecution and later anti-pagan legislation, it argues that imperial intent and administrative reality frequently diverged, making 'persecution' a far less coherent phenomenon than modern historiography often assumes.

Keywords:

Persecution, late antiquity, early Christianity, ancient Rome, ancient history.

1. Episodes of persecution

Historians have long treated persecution as a defining feature of Roman religious history. Their description invites the assumption of a categorical, self-evident sequence of actions and events. The functionality of such a term as an analytical tool, however, turns the far more complex historical realities into an abstraction. The nature of concerted action against early Christians and, equally exemplary, against pagans in the ancient world, provides a context from which observations on the utility of the category of persecution can be drawn. This article, therefore, re-examines the analytical utility of persecution through a comparison of early Christian persecution and later anti-pagan incentives, arguing that the relationship between imperial intention and administrative implementation complicates the application of persecution as a coherent historical category. By providing an insight into this context, this article attempts to contribute to the wider debate on states and their management of religious groups.

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Terms such as 'state,' '(non)-Christians' and 'pagans' will be used for the sake of brevity only. Given the temporal scope, these terms are generalising notions with fluctuating meaning; moreover, as I try to demonstrate, 'state' is a problematic notion, as it encompasses all forms of (supra-)local administration, and cannot be defined as a homogeneous entity characterised by unity in action. Likewise, general terms such as 'Christians' or 'pagans' obscure the veritable diversity that was present within ancient society and, by their usage, allude to groups that are not reflections of reality. Given these nuances, the use of such terminology does not prevent us from making veritable observations on the mechanics and commemoration of persecution that so drastically shape it. In this respect, the period leading up to Constantine's conversion in 312[2] is widely seen as formative, not only because of the internal diversity of the Christian tradition (Ferguson 1999; Ehrman 2003)[3] but also because of the narrative of persecution that surrounds it. This discourse relies heavily on ancient literary sources and how later generations received and interpreted them (Fourier & Mayer 2020).[4]

For example, the extent and nature of Christian persecution are central not only to historical understanding but also to how group identity was constructed and is perceived up to the present. It equally shapes our notion of 'state,' as the declaration of loyalty to the emperors and their religious authority and status became a formal requirement, as we shall see further. Scholars like Judith Perkins and Nicole Kelley have argued that the commemoration of these events played a key role in shaping early Christian self-definition and representation (Perkins 1993:200-215; Kelley 2006:726-731). These stories were later incorporated into the broader martyrological tradition (Van Henten 1995), often amplifying their impact and shaping historical memory. For instance, the widespread copying of the early 4th-century *Martyrdom of Phileas* underscores the enthusiasm with which such texts were received and circulated (Bremmer 2021:81). Similarly, Cyprian of Carthage's refusal to betray fellow Christians, followed by his execution, offers a powerful example of this tradition, and his letter provides a long echo throughout time (Moss 2012:531-533; Koscheski 2011).

The vilification of Roman authorities is a constant in sources that reference or contemplate persecution, and their role in anti-Christian actions has long been debated. This discussion ties into a broader historical tension: the dynamic between minority religious groups and the state's management of them. It is therefore not surprising that persecution, both as an event and an idea, developed into

2 All dates are Common Era.
3 Numerous works can be cited; the introductions in Ferguson (ed.) and Ehrman are ample in their description.
4 For a more in-depth introduction to discourse and persecution, see the full reference in the bibliography.

a deeply ideological narrative with shifting interpretations across time. Indeed, the most exemplary case here is Lactantius' *De mortibus persecutorum*,[5] written in the early 4th century during the early reign of Constantine (r. 306-337). And this timing also makes apparent an observation that looms large in the history of persecution: the narratives are indicative only of post-persecution sentiments. In this work, Lactantius offers a stark portrayal of several Roman emperors, listing those whom he saw as persecutors of Christians in the previous decades (see DePalma Digeser 2000:92, who provides a complete account of Lactantius' views). The tone is polemical, as he details the supposed divine retribution that befell them. The emperor Decius (r. 249-251), for example, gained the epithet of an 'abominable creature' who had 'raged against God' (*De Mort. Pers.* 4.1-4). His successor, Valerian (r. 253-260), was described rather dramatically as having 'spilled the blood of the righteous' amply (*De Mort. Pers.* 5.1-2; Zangenberg 2018:50-51). The emperor Aurelian (r. 270-275) is in turn described as nothing short of a bloodthirsty tyrant whose more extreme plans did not come to fruition due to an early death (*De Mort. Pers.* 6.1-2). Scholars have debated whether Lactantius' account represents a transformative Christian perspective on persecution or continues an existing apologetic tradition in line with earlier writers from North Africa[6] (Städele 2003:34-35; Colot 2005:145-146; Cook 2019:386).[7] Certainly, it is one of the earliest sources to contemplate persecution so explicitly after the edicts of Serdica in 311 and Milan in 312, which traditionally end the Great Persecution. In this respect, Lactantius provided a rhetorical and stylistic template to vilify the Roman emperors that preceded Constantine.

Given that Lactantius lived through this period and also regularly emphasised the role of emperors as culprits, his work must be read with attention to the authority and influence it carried for later authors. Jerome, for instance, recognised Lactantius' prominent role in Constantine's court and cited him approvingly in his *De Viris Illustribus* amongst other works (*De Mort. Pers.* 44-45, for Lactantius' positive account of Constantine; Vir. Ill. 80, for Jerome on Lactantius, Halton 1999:111-113). That *De mortibus persecutorum* is at best a biased account is hardly surprising. The more pressing question, however, is to what extent his era should truly be regarded as one of genuine persecution, especially when that label is shaped by modern notions tied to the actions of an interventionist state. Crucially, the 'why' and 'who' questions about persecution are of interest; what role could the 'state' logically play in antiquity (Noethlichs 2006:115-117)?

5 I rely on Creed's 1984 translation; see the bibliography for the full reference. The English title is generally *On the Deaths of the Persecutors*.
6 Specifically, Origen and Tertullian can be cited; see the referenced works for discussion.
7 Cook equally cites Städele's assumption that *De Mort. Pers*. is to be regarded as a unique text rather than a mere continuation of convention.

In this regard, two periods are loosely discernible for persecution in the Roman world. We can distinguish between pre- and post-Decian eras of Christian persecution, with a dividing line in the middle of the 3rd century (Rives 1999:135-136; De Vos 2017; Kinzig 2019:68-72).[8] Though this distinction is artificial, it reflects an arbitrary point from which an important set of differences in the nature and extent of imperial involvement can be identified. The earlier phase is marked by limited and sporadic action against Christians, largely due to the absence of any centralised imperial policies. Sources from this period are also relatively scarce.

One of the most notable exceptions, alongside the brief Neronic persecution, which is also hotly debated (Shaw 2015; Jones 2017), is the early 2nd-century case of Pliny the Younger. As governor of Bithynia and Pontus, Pliny wrote to Emperor Trajan for guidance on how to handle Christians in his province. Their exchange (preserved in *Epistulae* X. 96) offers a rare glimpse into the situational approach applied to Christianity. This consultation illustrates only a snippet of what was undoubtedly a recurring, albeit arguably minor issue during the early 2nd century (Sherwin-White 1966:778-784; Humphries 2006:218-224; Öhler 2021:274-291). Before the year 250, in the absence of centralised legislative attempts to regulate Christianity, the phenomenon was handled by individual provincial governors like Pliny and their local administrations (Frend 2008:506-508). Pliny and others were not appointed or tasked specifically with this function in mind; they tackled the situation as it passed into their hands.

In contrast, direct imperial intervention marked a significant shift from this practice. The decree issued by Decius in 249-250 CE (Rives 1999:135) represents a clear break, exemplifying the point that defines our dichotomy. Although the text of Decius' decree has not survived, it clearly required individuals to provide a formal attestation of sacrifice, demonstrating their loyalty to the gods and the emperor, as a means of verifying allegiance to the Roman state (Rives 1999:137-138; Schubert 2016:176-177; Corke-Webster 2023:35). Evidence for the decree's implementation survives most clearly in Roman Egypt, where approximately 50 such certificates (*libelli*) have been preserved, each documenting participation in the required rituals (see overview in Schubert 2016). Although the decree was not explicitly directed at Christians, their refusal to conform to state-sanctioned religious practices made them especially vulnerable to its enforcement (Frend 2008:531; Potter 2018:19-20; Humphries 2018:66-71). Local bureaucracy appears to have carried out Decius' decree with surprising thoroughness, requiring written attestations of compliance at an almost unprecedented level of individual

8 This dichotomy is one way of (arbitrarily) splitting the history of Christian persecution; numerous alternative ways have been proposed, such as by de Ste. Croix or Plescia, as discussed below.

scrutiny. The evidence from Roman Egypt, which is our best source of its effects, should likely be seen as a preservation outlier, rather than representative of empire-wide efficiency. The more centralised initiative to ascertain loyalty reveals the position of Christians and their increasingly ideal role as scapegoats in times of tension (De Blois 2001:112-114).

Another key episode that shapes our understanding of persecution is the so-called Great Persecution initiated under Diocletian (r. 284-305) and his co-rulers. It began in early 303 and effectively concluded in 311 (DePalma Digeser 2012:9-12; Kinzig 2019:81-85). Lactantius referred to Diocletian as 'turning the world upside down' (*De Mort. Pers.* 7.1-2; DePalma Digeser 2012:179). The Great Persecution terminology itself implies a unified and deliberate effort to suppress Christianity. Equally, the connection between a coordinated approach and the narrative provided by later sources such as Lactantius, even if biased, distorts the image in that direction.

Three important observations complicate this interpretation. First, the pattern of persecution appears to have varied significantly across different regions of the empire. Our surviving narrative sources focus predominantly on the eastern provinces. As a result, modern scholarship tends to adopt a more cautious approach when addressing events in the western parts of the empire (Frend 1965:141-145; Barnes 1981:142; Keresztes 1983:386-387; DePalma Digeser 2012:189; Corke-Webster 2019:18). The ambiguity present here implies the administrative issues involved that complicated enforcement, as we will see further.

Second, despite the dramatic tone of many martyrological sources, a substantial number of Christians appear to have complied with the imperial edicts, either by performing the required rituals or by avoiding any action altogether (Rebillard 2012:50-54). The succeeding Donatist schism, for example, would remain a factor after the end of the Great Persecution. This challenges the notion of a unified Christian response to persecution, highlighting the diversity of reactions within early Christian communities (Humphries 2018:71). It equally complicates the idea that persecution is a univocally received reality and showcases the diverse strategies employed by communities to deal with the situation at hand. Moreover, the actual number of executions remains highly contested, and quantification is problematic (Davies 1989:68-69).

Third, persecution during this period was not limited to Christians exclusively, or what could be understood under that term. The decrees passed during the Great Persecution were in design analogues to that of Decius; nonconformism, not doctrine specifically, was the actual target (DePalma Digeser 2012:75-76).[9]

9 DePalma Digeser provides apt insights into the intellectual opinions and background leading to persecution.

Manichaeism, for example, equally came under imperial suspicion and was subjected to similar official condemnation (Lieu 2015:123-126; Matsangou 2023:66).

2. Discussing the problem of persecution

Given that these consecutive 'persecutions' appear episodic and sporadic, further discussion is necessary to explain this rhythm. In response to the irregularity of persecutions, Peter Garnsey famously argued that the more standard, tolerant position in the Roman world was not necessarily a benevolent gesture extended by the state towards religious minorities or divergent practices. Nor was it, at least explicitly, a calculated strategy for managing internal diversity. Rather, Garnsey proposed, toleration often stemmed from a fundamental recognition, or perhaps resignation, regarding the state's inability to sustain a policy of intolerance effectively. What he termed 'toleration by default' (Garnsey 1984:9) was more characteristic than the exception.

Although not all elements of this analysis are easily transferable or unambiguous in application, the core argument about the ineffectiveness of enforcing authority seems compelling (for further discussion, see Drake 2011:181-197; Mayer 2018:6-9). The underlying assumption not only reflects the difficulty of framing a coherent discourse around the contested concepts of tolerance and intolerance in antiquity but also aligns with what might reasonably be expected within such historical frameworks (Garnsey 1984:25; DePalma Digeser 1998:129-131). More broadly, it brings into focus the structural complexity to which pre-modern state power was invariably subject, whether consciously acknowledged or not. Rather than emphasising the assertive capacities of the state, Garnsey's perspective reveals its inherent limitations. The pursuit of policy goals, particularly those requiring systemic enforcement, was consistently hindered by constraints at multiple levels of authority. These limitations were not incidental but endemic, surfacing most acutely when the state's instruments proved inadequate for executing even foundational steps of policy implementation. Such structural weaknesses were especially evident in the case of religious persecution in the Roman Empire, as we will see further and as has been amply demonstrated in the scholarly discussions on the subject.

As we have seen, targeted and specific decrees that required extensive bureaucratic involvement were indeed created within imperial circles or by individual emperors. The realisation that persecution was difficult to formalise and carry out was analysed by more detailed studies in the mid-20th century. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, arguably the leading figure in the study of Christian persecution,[10] noted that the

10 A collection of essays by de Ste. Croix was posthumously published by Oxford University Press in 2013, edited by Whitby & Streeter; see References section.

correspondence between Trajan and Pliny the Younger explicitly ordered the latter not to seek out Christians (de Ste. Croix 1963:9). This aligns with the idea that the state was often unable to root out those it aimed to target through specific decrees.

Anyone following the debate between de Ste. Croix and Sherwin-White in the 1950s and 1960s would find a wealth of technical discussions mainly focused on Roman law (Sherwin-White 1952:200-202; de Ste. Croix 1963:13-14; Sherwin-White 1963:26-28; de Ste. Croix 1964:28; Corke-Webster 2017:371-374 for a summary). The 'sacrifice test,' which was a key part of Decius' now-lost decree, was portrayed by de Ste. Croix as the practical culmination of persecution (de Ste. Croix 1963:19-20). It was also the last chance for the accused to avoid a final penalty. Any stubbornness in refusing was a direct path to punishment or execution (Schubert 2016:173). Consequently, it became a dramatic moment often depicted in stories of defiance, such as the martyrdom of the Twelve Scillitans in 180, who chose death over swearing loyalty to the emperor (de Ste. Croix 1963:10). How Christianity was deemed illegal remains somewhat obscure in retrospect; the prohibition was not clearly codified in law for a long time (Corke-Webster 2017:81), yet to de Ste. Croix and those who followed him, its existence was evident. But how exactly was this persecution practically carried out? If Christianity was illegal or at least intolerable, who orchestrated the events leading to enforcement? And what circumstances caused Christians to find themselves before the court or the state?

Corke-Webster, in his recent comprehensive article on the subject, aptly shifted the question from *why* Christians were persecuted to *who* persecuted them, noting that these questions grew more intertwined throughout the 20th century, even in de Ste. Croix's work. Essentially, the implementation of persecution and the question of who 'pursued' Christians became increasingly complex. De Ste. Croix's focus on 'pagan' hostility and the similar focus by his contemporary, Frend, on Jewish-Christian rivalry exemplify the search for a clearly defined 'anti-group' (Corke-Webster 2023:7-9). If Roman authorities were unwilling (or rather unable) to identify Christians themselves, then such a group would act as a logical intermediary connecting the accused to the authorities' jurisdiction. Plescia, writing contemporaneously with de Ste. Croix and Frend, summarised these views most coherently: 'In conclusion, the initiative of the persecutions against the Christians has passed, as we have seen, from the Jews to the pagan commoners, thence to the public authorities' (Plescia 1971:129). Within his transitional formulation, identity and organisation were knitted tightly together. As he continues:

> Scattered throughout the Empire, but united by an efficient hierarchy, the Christians, with their widespread exclusive meetings, with a financial organization, with their pledges which bound the initiates to one

> another, with all this, together with the unknown of fanaticism, formed in the eyes of the public authorities a dangerous empire-wide organization. (Plescia 1971:130)[11]

The anti-Christian animosity, however, was attached too strongly to the religious identity that seemingly defined all incentives of our persecutors, as Corke-Webster (2023:8) notes (see also Van Nuffelen 2020:516-517; Praet 2014).[12] Rather, and the point is aptly conceived, Roman legal proceedings required 'accusers' to bring forth a case; *delatores* had to accuse an individual or group (Corke-Webster 2023:4-5; Johnson 1988:418-419). The severe internal diversity within Christian communities made them susceptible to intra-communal violence as supplementary to any supposed state action (Corke-Webster 2023:13; Van Nuffelen 2020:516-517). Christians may well have been common targets of violence or persecution by other groups of Christians, considering that religious identity was considerably less the driving force for non-Christians and that the state did not actively seek out individuals (Corke-Webster 2017:381).[13]

Adding to this, internal Christian differences were likely not readily understood or were of no concern to the authorities or non-Christians. Therefore, the hypothesis provides us with a logical intermediary party, yet nuance should be in order. That local animosities were always a crucial factor in persecution seems to be a credible conclusion that puts neither gravity upon the state, the non-Christians, nor intra-Christian violence. The yardstick by which we measure the intensity of persecution comes down to this very emphasis, and it is readily contrasted by clear instances of extra-communal violence as well. Corke-Webster notes the theories set forth by David Nirenberg (1996; Corke-Webster 2023:12-13), who highlighted the role played by informants and accusers, giving most persecutions and controversies a very local and non-partisan basis at their root. The sum of a problematic implementation of decrees, a legal system not adequately designed to purge society of targeted groups, and a biased assumption that persecution was driven by one party or state leads to a very different image.

3. Persecution or decline?

When we extend our temporal horizon beyond the conversion of Constantine and the gradual growth of Christian influence within the Roman world, we find

11 Plescia notes that the Christians formed a *nefaria congregatio*.

12 Corke-Webster aptly deconstructs the homogenous agency attested to vast groups such as 'pagans' or 'Christians,' thereby implying a sort of unity that did not exist. Van Nuffelen similarly notes that religion in late antiquity did not stringently define one's identity.

13 For the sake of clarity, there are precedents before this one, which fall outside of the scope of the present article.

a succession of Roman emperors issuing decrees to suppress non-Christian religious practices. All but the emperor Julian (r. 361-363) followed in Constantine's footsteps by favouring Christianity over traditional polytheistic religions during the remainder of the 4th and early 5th centuries. This curious historical situation reversed the tides of anti-Christian policies in the opposite direction. As we have seen, direct imperial involvement through decrees in regulating religious practices from the 250s onwards remained a recurring phenomenon.

The emperor Constantine's immediate position on non-Christians after consolidating power in the 310s was both elusive and contested, with links to traditional imperial and religious symbolism still overtly clear in his early reign (Bradbury 1994:120-123; Lenski 2008:213-214; Barnes 2014:18). However, Constantine's rule saw a gradual growth in 'anti-pagan' legislation and rhetoric, likely fuelled by the personal sentiment of the ruler, as evidenced by positive discrimination in favour of Christianity. Eusebius reports a letter by the emperor written in 324 in this regard, which calls the polytheist temples 'shrines of falsehood,' even if the letter was curiously long regarded as one of tolerance (Barnes 2014:110; Eusebius 1999:111).[14] Humphries notes an inscription from the city of Hispellum, voicing the citizens' desire for the renaming of the town and the construction of a temple to the imperial dynasty, which Constantine granted on the basis that no 'superstitious' elements would contaminate it (Humphries 2018:71-72).[15] But for those interested in the imperial decrees and legislation, the Codex Theodosianus (CTh) provides the most insightful information regarding imperial policy.

The codex was compiled in the 430s under Theodosius II (r. 408-450) and essentially groups imperial decrees from Constantine up to the rule of Theodosius II into a systematic overview spanning about a century (see introductions to the CTh in Honoré 1986:133-140; Matthews 1993:19-45; Harries 1998; 2007). Book XVI primarily addresses religious matters and can be read as both a legal and moral response to what was deemed incompatible with prevailing orthodoxy (Salzman 1993:362-365). Examples of regulating non-Christian religious activity are consequently rife within the Codex. The emperor Constans (r. 337-350), for example, abolished 'pagan' sacrifice (CTh 16.10.2) but deemed it worthwhile to maintain the old temples for the time being, citing their role in celebrations and festivals as too important (CTh. 16.10.3; Humphries 2018:61; Woudhuysen 2018:174-176; CTh 16.10.4) Then, it puzzlingly requires the temples to close. CTh 16.10.9 forbids sac-

14 I follow Barnes' (2014) interpretation of the letter in the *Life of Constantine*; there has been ample debate, as he explains on pages 109-111. For the mention of the letter in the *Life of Constantine*, see Eusebius, *VC* 2.56) or the 1999 Cameron & Hall translation, 111, which Barnes also uses.

15 This is paraphrased for brevity from Humphries; the evidence he uses is epigraphical, as the city was to be renamed *Flavia Constans*. For the debate on 'superstitio' in the Codex Theodosianus, see the works by Salzman cited below.

rifice yet again, and so forth (Salzman 1987:177). The matter is therefore not as straightforward as it seems.

As with Decius' edict and Diocletian's Great Persecution, it is hard to attest the efficacy of these all-encompassing do-or-die decrees in a practical sense (Humphries 2016:151).[16] The recurring reiteration of the bans on sacrifice, for example, signals at best the prevalence with which they were, or were believed to be, still practised (Gladigow 2008:270-276; Stroumsa 2008:38-39; Belayche 2009:198-202). Mark Humphries summarises this point effectively: 'It was one thing for an emperor to wish to prohibit this or that religious custom; but it was entirely another matter for that wish to be translated into practice' (Humphries 2018:63). When reflecting on the Theodosian code in relation to non-Christians, Humphries writes, 'For paganism to be extirpated by law required a degree of control over individuals that the Roman state never possessed' (2018:76). Humphries' observation has broader implications than just for the study of paganism in late antiquity. If even the comparatively sophisticated administrative machinery of the 4th century struggled to implement religious policy consistently, similar caution should be exercised when interpreting earlier episodes of Christian persecution. The issue is therefore not confined to one period but concerns the relationship between imperial legislation, local administration, and historical interpretation more generally.

Similarly to Corke-Webster's analysis of *delatores*, which were necessary to act as an intermediary link between the accused and the authorities, the reach of the Codex Theodosianus in regulating non-Christian practices is debatable. If Christian persecution required accusers, then the decree passed under Arcadius (r. 395-408) and Honorius (r. 395-423; CTh 16.10.16) requiring the destruction of temples in the countryside surely needed 'breakers.' And in contrast to the limited archaeological evidence of early Christianity, the infrastructure of traditional Roman religion offers opportunities for observation (Trombley 1995:219-221; Hahn 2011:207; Ward-Perkins 2011:187-188). Barring a set of famous narratives and instances of clear destruction, the question is how systematic we should imagine the implementation of these policies to have been. Here again, the highlighted and dramatic stories overtake the realities faced by communities, temples and rituals on the receiving end of any decree or legislation.

Particularly strong analysis has been conducted in this regard in the past decades, faulting earlier scholars for their far too exclusive reliance on legal sources and their uncritical translation of them onto the realities of 4th- and 5th-century religious transformation (Dijkstra 2011:390; Humphries 2018:73). When we examine several case studies, it becomes evident that the enforce-

16 Specifically on the rhetoric used in these laws and decrees.

ment of the destruction of temples linked to imperial orders was at best a minor affair. The destruction of Mithraea,[17] for example, is cited by Ward-Perkins to render 'most disappointing' evidence of Christian violence (Ward-Perkins 2011:194). Equally, the destruction of temples in Roman Egypt, long held to be a violent affair, is now understood as a lengthy transitional process, disconnected from a top-down, state-sponsored campaign to close or destroy them (Dijkstra 2021:5). Here, too, the complexity created by legal enforcement looms large over processes that appeared to be evident based on the reception of laws or narratives on destruction. Even if legislation against non-Christians is explicit in the Codex Theodosianus, it was always vying for attention with a string of heresies. Contemporaneous with the decree to destroy and close temples in the late 4th century, North African bishops were far more concerned with petitioning the pope to act against the schismatic Donatists (Salzman 1993:376). This excessive lobbying reached a high point in 405, when Pope Innocent I was compelled to issue a letter to halt the overflow of visiting bishops and letters coming to Italy on this issue (Merdinger 1997:97-99; Hahn 2011:4). And even if petitioning was a preliminary to legislative undertakings in the form of decrees, the painstaking implementation of them, as we have seen, was inherently thwarted and seldom led to coordinated action.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, there has historically been plenty of zeal to instigate, decree and pursue persecution on religious grounds, and our modern assumptions frame our perception of narratives and legal traces of persecution. This article, however, has provided an overview of the inherent problems associated with persecution, state authority, and legal enforcement in antiquity. It should be clear by now that persecution is not only a biased conception but also a problematic, post-factum construct spurred by limited sources and supported by shifting emphasis throughout time. Most apparent and relevant are the difficulties inherent in organising any form of persecutory acts in an ancient context. The ample citation of the works of Corke-Webster and Humphries signals reliance on their strong summary accounts of the deficiencies of local governmental and legal tools in organising persecution. The evidence suggests that even periods of heightened imperial intervention were constrained by the administrative realities of governing a vast and decentralised empire. A cross-reading of Christian persecution and subsequent attempts to eradicate

17 These are gathering places for Mithras worship, generally spread throughout the empire between the late 1st and late 4th centuries.

paganism thus exposes analogous shortcomings inherent in the enforcement of anti-religious sentiments by states, rulers, or local bureaucratic authorities. In contrast, I have tried to shed some new light on the paradigm of persecution and to provoke reflection on our own past associations (see, for example, Baudy 2006:103-105).

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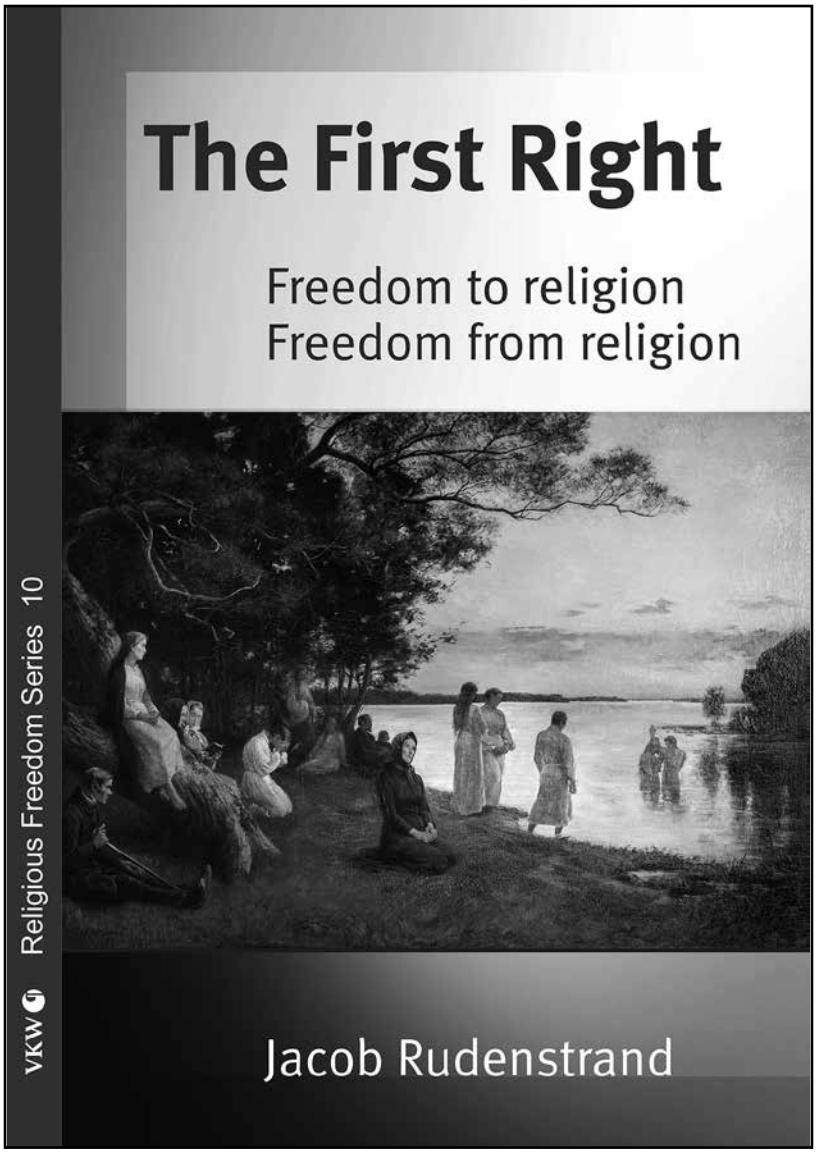
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Global trends in government restrictions on collective religious freedom

Jonas Fiebrantz[1]

Abstract

This article provides a cross-regional survey of government restrictions on the collective dimension of freedom of religion or belief, grouped into three distinct categories. *Absolute restrictions*, comprising *de jure* or *de facto* bans on religious communities, are inherently incompatible with international human rights law. *Autonomy restrictions*, including both active and passive interference in religious practice, are permissible only under strict conditions, such as respect for the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality, and non-discrimination. *Indirect restrictions,* curtailing faith communities' exercise of related rights, must abide by the corresponding international legal frameworks in addition to that overseeing freedom of religion or belief.

Keywords

Freedom of religion or belief, international law, government restrictions, global trends, church autonomy.

1. Introduction

In 2021, the Pew Research Forum reported that "government restrictions on religion – laws, policies and actions by state officials that limit religious beliefs and practices – reached a new peak globally."[2] This peak has shown no sign of reverting.[3] The latest annual report, covering 2023, shows almost one-third of all states as having high or very high levels of government restrictions, including 13 of

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2 S. Majumdar and S. Crawford "Globally, Government Restrictions Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down" (5 March 2024) Pew Research Center, 5.

3 S. Majumdar "Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022" (18 December 2024) Pew Research Center.

the 25 most populous countries.[4] Specifically, of the 198 countries covered in the study, a startling 175, or 90 percent, reported at least some incidents of government interference in worship. This represents a drastic increase since the study began in 2007, when the number was 112, or 57 percent.[5]

These worrying statistics raise an important question: what are the key global trends in restrictions on religion, what is causing them, and how do they manifest across cultures and political systems?

Much research has already been done on this question, linking this global escalation to, *inter alia,* authoritarian systems of control,[6] majority-minority religious dynamics,[7] and the rise of secular intolerance.[8] Other research has sought to address regional or national trends, such as diverse manifestations of secularism across Europe,[9] Shari'a law in the Islamic world,[10] and the concept of religious harmony in Asia.[11] This paper aims to supplement existing work by proposing a classification of global trends based on their implications under international human rights law.

The right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) is codified most notably in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Article 18(1) asserts:

> Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.[12]

A notable feature of this provision is the freedom to manifest one's religion or belief *in community with others*. The right "includes interrelated and interdependent individual and collective aspects; without one or the other the understanding and protection of this right would be incomplete."[13] The collective dimension

4 S. Majumdar and V. Jacobs "More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023" (15 June 2026) Pew Research Center, 5.
5 Id., 12.
6 A. Sarkissian, *The Varieties of Religious Repression: Why Governments Restrict Religion* (Oxford University Press 2015).
7 J. Fox, *Thou Shalt Have No Other Gods Before Me: Why Governments Discriminate Against Religious Minorities* (Cambridge University Press 2020).
8 D. P. Petri and J. Epp Buckingham "Origins of and responses to secular intolerance" (2020) 13 IJRF 1/2, 27-35.
9 J. Fox "How secular and religiously free are Europe's 'secular' states?" (2023) 16 IJRF 2, 27-55.
10 A. Saeed, H. Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Ashgate 2004).
11 J. L. Neo "Dimensions of Religious Harmony as Constitutional Practice: Beyond State Control" (2019) 20 GLJ 7, 966-985.
12 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976) 999 UNTS 171 (ICCPR), art. 18.
13 M. Yildrim "The Collective Dimension of Freedom of Religion or Belief in International Law" (2017) 513 Routledge: Law and Religion, 30.

is of particular importance in the context of government restrictions. As early as 1960, the Special Rapporteur of the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities noted, "Intervention by the State to regulate or to limit manifestations of a religion or belief are more frequent when these manifestations are performed 'in community with others' than when they are performed 'alone.'"[14]

In studying the trends in government restrictions on freedom of religion, this paper will focus on churches as the unit of analysis. For the purposes of this paper, a church is defined as an association of individuals manifesting their religion collectively, with sufficient continuity and integration to generate a distinct group identity. This definition excludes religious buildings or traditions as such, neither of which are subjects of international law, notwithstanding the fact that they may serve a significant or even essential role in collective practice. Furthermore, contrary to its colloquial usage, the term is not limited to Christian denominations but serves as a catch-all for all applicable religious communities. Consequent to this definition, the term *church freedom* refers to the collective freedoms guaranteed to these groups according to international law, including freedom of religion or belief as well as related rights such as freedom of association and peaceful assembly.

The central question posed in this paper is as follows: What are the key global trends in government restrictions on church freedom, and how do they interact with the international legal framework overseeing the enjoyment of freedom of religion or belief? In responding to this question, the paper will draw on a cross-regional survey of cases derived primarily from national legislation and secondary sources of reported incidents. These cases are divided into three categories: absolute restrictions, autonomy restrictions and indirect restrictions.

2. Legitimate restrictions: International legal framework

Before we examine these trends, it is necessary to provide an overview of the international legal framework guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion or belief and the criteria for establishing legitimate limitations on it, including its collective dimension.

As cited above, Article 18 of the ICCPR legally obligates states to protect the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. Article 18(3) indicates:

> 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

14 A. Krishnaswami "Study of Discrimination in the Matter of Religious Rights and Practices" (1960) UN Doc E/CN.4/Sub.2/200/Rev.1, 21.

> public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.[15]

Importantly, this provision does not limit the scope of the right itself but establishes "limits on permissible limitations."[16] In other words, there are no legitimate restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief other than those meeting these criteria, which must themselves be interpreted narrowly. According to the UN Human Rights Committee, which monitors the implementation of the ICCPR, "In interpreting the scope of permissible limitation clauses, States parties should proceed from the need to protect the rights guaranteed under the Covenant."[17] The relationship between religious freedom and government restrictions is one of rule and exception, rather than a balancing of competing interests. The burden of justification falls squarely on the authority imposing the restrictions, whereas the right to the free and full exercise of all aspects of one's religious freedom is presupposed.[18] These provisions are non-derogable even in times of public emergency.[19]

First, the restrictions can apply only to the "freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs". No limitations are permitted on the internal dimension (*forum internum*) of the freedom of religion or belief.[20] Only the external manifestation (*forum externum*) of a religion or belief may, under specific circumstances, be limited. This includes the collective dimension of religious freedom.

Second, any proposed limitations must be "prescribed by law", meaning that they cannot be arbitrary or enforced without a clear grounding in national legislation. The principle of legality further implies that a law be formulated with "sufficient precision to enable an individual to regulate his or her conduct accordingly" and "may not confer unfettered discretion for the restriction … on those charged with its execution".[21] In other words, "Laws must provide sufficient guidance to those charged with their execution to enable them to ascertain what sorts of expression are properly restricted and what sorts are not."[22]

Third, the restrictions must be "necessary". According to the Human Rights Committee, "Limitations may be applied only for those purposes for which they were prescribed and must be directly related and proportionate to the specific

15 ICCPR, art. 18(3).
16 H. Bielefeldt "Limiting Permissible Limitations: How to Preserve the Substance of Religious Freedom" (2020) Religion and Human Rights 15, 4.
17 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion)" (30 July 1993) UN Doc CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.4, para. 8.
18 H. Bielefeldt "Limiting Permissible Limitations" (n 16), 5.
19 ICCPR, art. 4(2).
20 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22" (n 17), para. 8.
21 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 34: Article 19 (Freedom of Opinion and Expression)" (12 Sep. 2011) UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 25.
22 Id.

need on which they are predicated."[23] This pertains to both the letter of the regulation and its implementation.

Finally, any limitation must be justified on the exhaustive grounds prescribed in the provision, namely public safety, order, health, morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. This listing is exhaustive.[24] No clear definition of these terms exists in international law, resulting in some ambiguity regarding their scope.[25] The 1985 Siracusa Principles, while not intergovernmentally adopted, offer useful expert insight on the interpretation of each ground, taking into account common state practice.[26] Further guidelines and jurisprudence exist at the regional level.[27] Even at the time of drafting, some of the grounds were contested. For instance, the English term "public order" is much narrower in its scope than the French "*ordre public*".[28] The ground of protecting "the fundamental rights and freedoms of others" also raises questions about matters including the scope of "others" as well as the specific rights and freedoms implied. In European case law, the term has become used as a catch-all for a variety of state justifications not corresponding to those explicitly provided, including concepts such as secularism, neutrality, and gender equality. This has raised concerns over state attempts to bypass the exhaustive scope of permissible limitations.[29]

Whereas certain other rights, such as freedom of assembly, association, and expression, may be limited on the basis of national security, this is not the case with the freedom of religion or belief. Where national security is a genuine concern, the limitation must nevertheless be justified on another, permitted ground.[30]

The following chapters will articulate various trends in government restrictions based on a cross-regional survey of cases, which will then be related to the above criteria to determine their permissibility under international human rights law.

3. Absolute restrictions: *De jure* and *de facto* church bans

The first group of global trends in government restrictions on church freedom may be labelled "absolute restrictions". They are absolute in the sense of threat-

23 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22" (n 17), para. 8.
24 Id.
25 G. Gunatilleke "Criteria and Constraints: the Human Rights Committee's Test on Limiting the Freedom of Religion or Belief" (2020) Religion and Human Rights 15, 24-25.
26 International Commission of Jurists "Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions in the ICCPR" (April 1985).
27 See e.g. OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights "Guidelines on the Legal Personality of Religious or Belief Communities" (2014). Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/9/9/139046.pdf; OAS Inter-American Commission for Human Rights "Inter-American Standards Concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief" (10 September 2023). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5nbhyk44.
28 UN General Assembly "Draft International Covenants on Human Rights, 10th Session" (1 July 1955) UN Doc A/2929, 139.
29 A. Portaru, *A Precious Asset? Analyzing Religious Freedom Protections in Europe* (Kairos Publications 2020), 61-62.
30 A. Shaheed "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance" (5 September 2018) UN Doc A/73/362, para. 8.

ening a total prohibition of the collective exercise of freedom of religion or belief. This category includes outright bans on certain religious groups as well as laws and policies which, while permitting religious entities in theory, render their practical functioning impossible. According to the latest Pew research, in 2023, 59 countries "prohibit[ed] worship or religious practices of one or more religious groups as a general policy", comprising almost a third of all states under review. This figure has almost doubled since 2007.[31]

In the most extreme cases, states engage in a near-total suppression of church freedom. While rare, this practice manifests in two main forms. The first is found in certain Islamic states that engage, at least formally, in the total imposition of the state religion upon all its citizens. The Maldivian Constitution, for instance, declares, "The religion of the State of the Maldives is Islam. Islam shall be the basis of all the laws of the Maldives."[32] It further asserts that "a non-Muslim may not become a citizen of the Maldives."[33] Freedom of thought and expression, like other rights, is assured only "in a manner that is not contrary to any tenet of Islam."[34] The Maldivian Criminal Code lists "criticizing Islam" as a criminal offense, including "attempting to disrupt the religious unity of the citizens of Maldives, and conversing and acting in a manner likely to cause religious segregation amongst people".[35] Similarly, the Mauritanian Constitution asserts that "Islam is the religion of the people and of the State",[36] and its Penal Code imposes the death penalty for cases of apostasy from or blasphemy of the state religion.[37] Beyond merely prohibiting the operation of minority religious groups, these states often deny the existence of adherents among their citizens at all. This is seen in official population statistics, with the Maldives and Mauritania both reporting a 100 percent Muslim population.[38]

A second form of near-total suppression occurs in atheistic states, which place heavy restrictions on the activities of all religious groups. The most extreme example is North Korea. Despite claiming to guarantee religious freedom in its constitution, in practice the state harshly suppresses all religious practice, with the exception of a small number of token state-sanctioned churches.[39] Similarly, China

31 S. Majumdar and V. Jacobs "More Countries Had Elevated Levels of Social Hostilities Involving Religion in 2023 – Appendix D: Summary of Results" (15 June 2026) Pew Research Center, 4.
32 Constitution of the Republic of Maldives (2008), art. 10(a).
33 Id., art. 9(d).
34 Id., art. 27.
35 Maldives Penal Code (1968), art. 617(5).
36 Constitution of Mauritania (1991, amended 2012), art. 5.
37 Mauritania Penal Code (1983, amended 2018), art. 306.
38 CIA World Fact Book "Mauritania" (27 September 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/46hjm9p6; CIA World Fact Book "Maldives" (22 September 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yckfkhf9.
39 Freedom House "Freedom in the World Report: North Korea" (2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bdhs4mkc, D2.

has recently begun engaging in "the worst crackdown on religion since the country's Cultural Revolution".[40] This crackdown involves the mass closure of hundreds of unregistered churches, widespread arrests of religious leaders, and a program of "Sinicization", discussed further in the next section.[41] China has also banned dozens of religious groups, deeming them "heterodox cults" on the grounds that they engage in "recruiting and controlling their members, and deceiving people by molding and spreading superstitious ideas, and endangering society".[42]

Beyond these extreme cases, specific religious groups are also subject to targeted bans. In 2019, Jehovah's Witnesses' activities were banned in 35 countries globally, from Algeria to Russia to Singapore.[43] This is generally due to the religious group's opposition to military conscription and to public expressions of national allegiance.[44] Bans on specific sects of religions also exist, such as Malaysia's ban on Shi'ites and Ahmadis from engaging in public religious practice, as they are deemed "deviant" forms of Islam.[45]

Some restrictions, while not explicit bans, nevertheless mimic the effect of an absolute restriction. One such trend involves restricting religious practice to churches that are formally registered, combined with excessively burdensome or discriminatory registration requirements. As noted by former UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief Ahmed Shaheed, "Depriving a religious or belief community of legal status can have a tremendous impact on the collective aspects of the right to freedom of religion or belief, … jeopardizing the viability of the community itself."[46] In 2018, the Angolan government issued a decree rendering all unregistered churches illegal, resulting in the lockdown of over 4,000 church buildings. Registration requirements for religious communities in Angola are extremely strict, requiring signatures from 100,000 citizens representing 12 of the 18 national provinces.[47] Tajikistan's 2009 Law on Conscience and Religious Associations explicitly establishes that "only religious associations registered in accordance with the procedures determined by this Law are allowed to do mass

40 L. Kuo "In China, they're closing churches, jailing pastors – and even rewriting scripture" (13 January 2019) The Guardian. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/247j9ct8.
41 P. Rowe, L. Chuang, H. Kendon "Corporatism, Ideology, and Religious Freedom in China From Mao to Xi" (2024) 17 IJRF 1, 13-28.
42 E. Albert "Religion in China" (15 March 2018) Council of Foreign Relations. Available at: https://perma.cc/TA65-GDYG.
43 Radio Free Europe "Countries Where Jehovah's Witnesses' Activities Are Banned" (7 February 2019). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bd5u37b8.
44 Jehovah's Witnesses "Jehovah's Witnesses Imprisoned for Their Faith – By Location". Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4k8k86zw.
45 K. Bennoune "Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights: Visit to Malaysia" (10 January 2019) A/HRC/40/53/Add.1, para. 86.
46 A. Shaheed "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance" (n 30), para. 17.
47 Friends of Angola "Angola's government targets thousands of churches for closure, obstructs protests" (3 December 2018). Available at: https://www.friendsofangola.org/archives/11020.

preaching."[48] Muslim communities are singled out as facing even greater barriers to the establishment of a mosque for public worship,[49] while the participation of minors in religious activities is prohibited entirely.[50]

A second indirect trend is the forced closure of places of worship, without necessarily denying the existence or legitimacy of the religious community as such. The inability to publicly gather effectively blocks the primary function of a church. In Russia, religious groups are not permitted to own property, forcing many small faith communities to meet in residential buildings. In 2019, one pastor had his house sealed and threatened with demolition for hosting religious gatherings, culminating in an ongoing legal case before the European Court of Human Rights.[51] In other cases, the closure is claimed to be necessary for reasons of public safety or other societal regulations. Between 2018 and 2024, the Rwandan government shut down over 8,000 church buildings for alleged violations ranging from financial exploitation to noise and building code violations.[52] Several pastors were arrested for resisting this policy.[53] Similarly, in 2019 in Spain, 60 places of worship were threatened with closure for failing to meet extremely strict safety regulations targeted specifically at religious minorities.[54]

One of the most prominent justifications for bans on church gatherings in recent history was the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Pew Research, authorities in at least 46 countries used forcible means such as arrests and detentions to enforce pandemic-related restrictions on religious gatherings.[55] A blanket ban on church services was lifted in Scotland after a coalition of religious leaders challenged its legality and proportionality. The court asserted that "while certain church practices – the reading of prayer, preaching and teaching – may be observed, or even, in the case of live streaming, participated in to a certain extent, on a computer screen or a television whilst alone, in the solitude of one's own home, that does not amount to collective worship." The prohibition on church services therefore prevented "essential features of worship" from taking place,

48 Law 739 (2009) on Conscience and Religious Associations, art. 4(9).
49 Id., art. 11.
50 Id., art. 4(15).
51 Alliance Defending Freedom International "Russian pastor may be forced to tear down his house for hosting religious services". Available at: https://tinyurl.com/nwwsm4ds.
52 Republic of Rwanda "Frequent questions on inspection and closure of prayer houses". Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yxy2bhv3.
53 L. Markoe "Rwanda closes hundreds of churches and arrests pastors" (7 March 2018) Religion News Service. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5wb86569.
54 Alliance Defending Freedom International, World Evangelical Alliance, Alianza Evangelica Espanola "Joint Submission to the 35th Session of the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review Working Group" (July 2019) Joint Submission 16. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3rxzszxy.
55 S. Majumdar "How COVID-19 Restrictions Affected Religious Groups Around the World in 2020" (29 November 2022) Pew Research Center, 7.

fundamentally undermining the applicable right.[56] A similar ruling was reached in the canton of Geneva, Switzerland.[57]

Pandemic-related measures also reinforced existing discrimination against particular religious groups. Algeria, a country with a long history of arbitrary closures of non-Muslim religious buildings, temporarily suspended activity at all places of worship due to the virus. However, when the time came to reopen, only mosques were permitted to do so, with 47 Christian churches remaining shut indefinitely.[58] Globally, religious groups filed lawsuits or otherwise publicly spoke out against church restrictions in 54 countries, often complaining of discriminatory treatment compared to other religious groups or secular gathering places such as shops and restaurants.[59]

From the perspective of international law, absolute restrictions on church freedom are never permitted, as they go beyond reasonable limitations to effectively "vitiate the rights guaranteed in Article 18".[60] Absolute restrictions also inherently infringe upon several other rights, including the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association. Additionally, as this chapter's survey demonstrates, most cases of absolute restrictions constitute forms of implicit or explicit discrimination on the basis of religion, a further violation of international law.[61]

It may be argued that certain pseudo-absolute restrictions, such as the closure of church buildings, may be justified in principle, as they do not directly target the existence of the community. However, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate that such restrictions are necessary and proportional to a legitimate aim, according to the threshold articulated in the previous chapter. Thus, for instance, overly broad registration measures are often defended as necessary to prevent religious extremism and radicalization. However, research suggests that stricter registration policies are actually correlated with an *increase* in religion-related violence, as well as increased discrimination against minority religions.[62] Similarly, where a legitimate concern for public health is identified, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the preservation of health should be achieved through the least restrictive means possible, such as mask mandates, social distancing, or other par-

56 Philip and others v. Scotland [2021] CSOH 32, P74/21, para. 61.
57 Catholic News Agency "Swiss court suspends public worship ban in Geneva" (5 December 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2khx8t9w.
58 M. Windsor "Convenient COVID-19 Closures: The Contrivance of Scotland and Algeria to Close Churches" (6 April 2021) Providence Magazine. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/6r2uuby7.
59 S. Majumdar "How COVID-19 Restrictions Affected Religious Groups Around the World in 2020" (n 55), 7.
60 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22" (n 17), para. 8.
61 ICCPR, arts. 26, 27.
62 E. A. Clark "Registration and Deregistration of Religious or Belief Communities and Security" (19 November 2020) International Center for Law and Religion Studies. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y8rwcfua.

tially restrictive measures as appropriate to the situation, without demanding a total ban on public worship.[63]

States are accountable for human rights violations not only in law but also in practice. A measure which formally appears to accommodate church freedom may nevertheless manifest itself as an absolute restriction in practice, such as when combined with excessively strict or discriminatory registration procedures. Even when bypassing the *de jure* impermissibility of explicitly absolute restrictions, the heavy burden of justification demanded by such measures makes their implementation unacceptable in all but the most extreme cases.

4. Autonomy restrictions: State interference in church activity

The second group of trends may be labelled as autonomy restrictions. These are laws or regulations that interfere, either directly or indirectly, with church autonomy, defined as "the right of religious communities to decide upon and administer their own internal religious affairs without interference by the institutions of government".[64] These restrictions range from explicit government control over church doctrine, leadership, or practice to the intrusive surveillance and monitoring thereof. This has the effect of undermining individuals' freedom to communally "manifest [their] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching".[65] It also undermines the freedoms of association and assembly. As Cole Durham noted:

> For a state to impose pressures for a religious community to organize in a particular way, particularly if this is inconsistent with the religious community's religious beliefs about how it should be organized, would invariably alter the nature of the community, and cause it to be something other than it would be under conditions of freedom.[66]

Global trends reveal both direct and indirect forms of autonomy restrictions. Some trends amount to a direct interference with the functions of a church. The most obvious examples are cases of official state religions, where the state maintains direct control over the religious institution. The degree of active control varies, from the near-total control found in several Islamic states, such as Iran

63 See e.g. Constitutional Chamber of the Geneva Court of Justice, Brunisholz et al. v Conseil d'Etat, No. ACST/40/2020, 3 December 2020, 6(a).
64 M. Chopko "Constitutional Protection for Church Autonomy: A Practitioner's View" (May 1999) Second European American Church/State Conference, 2-3.
65 ICCPR art. 18(1).
66 W. C. Durham "The Right to Autonomy in Religious Affairs: A Comparative View" in G. Robbers (ed), *Church Autonomy: A Comparative Survey* (Peter Lang 2001), 26.

and Afghanistan, to largely ceremonial affiliation, such as with the Church of England. Although international law does not prohibit the existence of state religions, the state must nevertheless maintain the freedom of individuals to practise religion outside of state-sponsored institutions. Individuals are free to adhere to a state religion but cannot be coerced into doing so, nor can the state discriminate against persons belonging to other communities.[67] This principle is violated by laws enforcing religious punishments irrespective of the faith of the alleged culprit.

For instance, Iran's Penal Code imposes imprisonment or even the death penalty upon "anyone who insults the sacred values of Islam or any of the Great Prophets or [twelve] Shi'ite Imams or the Holy Fatima".[68] Non-Muslim communities, or those adhering to different interpretations of Islamic doctrine, are thereby stripped of their religious autonomy, with their members being condemned for failing to submit to the religious principles as dictated by the state.[69] State control over religion can also manifest in the exclusion of certain groups from taking part in shared practices. In Pakistan, the Ahmadiyya community is deemed illegitimate by the state, and its members are barred from entering mosques, celebrating religious holidays, and joining in other Muslim customs.[70] A 1984 ordinance amended the Pakistani Penal Code to explicitly criminalize any instance of an Ahmadi Muslim "calling himself a Muslim or preaching or propagating his faith".[71]

Direct state interference is also present in secular states such as China, where the government exerts active control and influence over religious communities through its "Sinicization" policy, aimed at aligning religious practice and doctrine with the state ideology. This includes strict control over preaching, retranslation of religious texts to remove language at odds with Communist Party values, as well as the removal or replacement of religious symbols.[72] Clergy and other staff must adhere to strict rules, including demonstrating that they "love the motherland, support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, support the socialist system, [and] respect the Constitution, laws, regulations and rules." [73] They must

67 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22" (n 17), para. 9.
68 Islamic Penal Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, art. 513.
69 SIHA Network "A Collaborative Civil Society Statement in Response to The Law of Various Amendments (Abolishing and Amending Provisions Restricting Freedom): Exposing a wolf in sheep's clothing" (July 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/45vd3cm7.
70 M. K. "Discrimination, Marginalisation and Targeting of Ahmadi Muslim Women in Pakistan" (December 2020) Coalition for Religious Equality and Inclusive Development: Policy Briefing 4.
71 Ordinance No. 20 (1984), art. 3.
72 T. Harvey "The Sinicization of Religion in China" (September 2019) 8 Lausanne Global Analysis 5. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mur6fbjy. For a detailed analysis, see R. Madsen, ed., *The Sinicization of Chinese Religions: From Above and Below* (Brill 2021).
73 E. Allen "China's new oversight body fuels fears about religious freedom" (3 May 2021) Crux. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/tvxd97w2.

also resist and counter "illegal religious activities and religious extremism and … infiltration by foreign forces that use religion", effectively barring any interaction with unregistered churches or international religious entities.[74] Other examples include Tajikistan, where the State Committee for Religious Affairs exerts direct control the activities and maintenance of churches,[75] including approval of all religious literature via "state theological expertise".[76] A more subtle form is found in Western Thrace, Greece, where the minority Muslim community may appoint its own religious authorities (*muftis*), but all the muftis' staff – from clerks to archivists – are state-appointed, undermining true organizational autonomy.[77]

Other autonomy restrictions are indirect, relying on monitoring and bureaucratic barriers to exert influence over church functions. In August 2021, France implemented a controversial anti-separatism bill intended to "reinforce secularism (*laicité*) and neutrality", in the aftermath of a series of violent extremist attacks. The bill permits authorities to monitor religious teaching for "hate speech", requires churches to declare foreign funding, and makes registration of religious associations conditional on signing a "contract of Republican commitment".[78] In Kyrgyzstan, registering religious associations are required to provide the government with a detailed list of members, including names, place of residence, and passport information, as well as information on funding sources and core doctrines.[79] Foreign religious organizations must also provide detailed information and risk having their country activities suspended if they are deemed to pose a threat to society.[80] In February 2025, a new set of laws entered into force, further expanding the government's capacity to monitor and interfere with the activities of religious associations.[81]

Concerns over radicalization and "religious extremism" are often used to justify these measures. China's 2018 Counter-Terrorism Law empowers the state to "address both the symptoms and root causes" of extremism, including by combating extremism resulting from "distorting religious doctrine"; the goal is to "eliminate the ideological basis of terrorism".[82] The law establishes a national counter-terrorism intelligence centre, which is provided with sweeping surveillance and investigatory

74 Id.
75 M. Baryam, J. Kinahan "Tajikistan: Religious freedom survey" (22 December 2020) Forum 18. Available at: https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2625.
76 Law 739 (2009) on Conscience and Religious Associations, art. 22.
77 Daily Sabah "Greece causes outrage over violation of Muslim community's rights" (24 June 2019). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yeym6mz3.
78 Vie Publique "Loi du 24 août 2021 confortant le respect des principes de la République" (25 August 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4tv25n7e. See also N. Lefevre "French secularism and the fight against separatism" (2021) 14 IJRF 1/2, 69-83.
79 Kyrgyzstan Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations (2008, last amended May 2021), art. 9.
80 Id., art. 11.
81 OHCHR News "Kyrgyzstan: UN rights experts dismayed by new restrictions on freedom of religion or belief" (27 February 2025). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yepnmz8n.
82 Counterterrorism Law of the People's Republic of China (2018 Amendment), art. 4.

powers.[83] In Russia, a 2019 decree required all religious organizations to install security and surveillance systems, purportedly to protect against terrorism.[84] In Vietnam, religious groups, particularly those comprising ethnic minorities, receive extensive government surveillance,[85] which reportedly includes monitoring private phone conversations, as well as arbitrary arrests and interrogations of pastors.[86]

Unlike absolute restrictions on church freedom, autonomy restrictions are not inherently incompatible with international human rights law, as they merely limit rather than completely prohibiting the manifestation of religion or belief in one's community. However, "Such controls should only be permissible to the extent they are accepted autonomously, or to the extent they can otherwise be justified under international instruments."[87] In addition to the threshold articulated previously, many autonomy restrictions limit the freedom of peaceful assembly and association and therefore must also be "necessary in a democratic society".[88] Specifically, they must be "necessary and proportionate in the context of a society based on democracy, the rule of law, political pluralism and human rights, as opposed to being merely reasonable or expedient."[89]

As noted previously, national security is not a permissible ground for the limitation of church freedom. It may be argued that concerns for radicalization and religious extremism justify limitations in the name of public order or public safety. However, the claim that increasing government interference would reduce these risks is unfounded and appears to contradict mainstream research. A 2012 cross-regional study identified a number of "pathways" by which state restrictions may inadvertently increase radicalization and violence, while greater religious freedom tends to result in legitimate political engagement and a gradual moderation of radical elements.[90] In her 2024 thematic report, the current Special Rapporteur, Nazila Ghanea, highlighted the critical role religious freedom plays in contexts of conflict through "the liberation of the conscience" as well as "expanding language so that people are able to articulate visions of positive peace and sustainable peace".[91]

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83 Id., chapters 4 and 5.
84 The Moscow Times "Russian Orthodox Church Steps Up Surveillance Under Government Anti-Terrorism Orders" (26 February 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y96kytw3.
85 Human Rights Watch "Vietnam: Events of 2020" (2021) HRW World Report 2021. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4mw5cwnr.
86 See e.g. Montagnard Foundation "Montagnards: Vietnamese Military Purchases Spy Equipment Used for Persecution" (24 August 2006) Unrepresented Nations & Peoples Organization. Available at: https://unpo.org/article/5234; Union of Catholic Asian News "Vietnamese pastor released four years after arrest" (5 October 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/sb6m32ws.
87 W. C. Durham "The Right to Autonomy in Religious Affairs" (n 66), 27.
88 ICCPR, art. 21, 22.
89 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 37: Article 17 (Right to Peaceful Assembly)" (17 September 2020) UN Doc CCPR/C/GC/37, para. 40.
90 P. Henne, S. Hudgins, T. Shah "Religious Freedom and Violent Religious Extremism: A Sourcebook of Modern Cases and Analysis" (December 2012) Berkley Center: Religious Freedom Project, 7-11.
91 N. Ghanea "Peace and Freedom of Religion or Belief" (18 July 2024) UN Doc A/79/182, para. 69.

A second justification employed by states is that certain restrictions are necessary for the sake of so-called "inter-religious harmony". This argument is typically related to the permissible ground of public order.[92] Unlike the national security argument, the concern is not violence per se but rather a positive case for the peaceful co-existence of diverse religious groups. However, this argument fails in two regards. First, as illustrated in the cases above, the actual prohibitions that states impose tend to be overly broad or discriminatory, thus failing to meet the other criteria set out in international law. Second, conceptually, "religious harmony" is both unsustainable and normatively meaningless in the absence of respect for human dignity, which in turn "is not conceivable without recognition of every human being's freedom to communicate about issues of religion or belief, including the right to try to persuade others in a non-coercive manner."[93] Therefore, autonomy restrictions aimed at protecting religious co-existence frequently become self-defeating, as such measures stifle the free discourse necessary to produce and sustain religious pluralism in the first place.

In a 2018 report, Shaheed observed a strong correlation between the degree of state interference and its "entanglement" with religion, either positive or negative.[94] Five years prior, Heiner Bielefeldt, another former Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, made the "controversial" claim that "the state should not identify itself with one particular religion or belief and, in this specific sense, should remain neutral."[95] Far from a non-committal neglect of religious matters, or an active exclusion of religion from the public square, this neutrality entails a state's commitment to "respectful non-identification", refraining from interference out of a positive consideration for religious freedom. Both the maintenance of a state religion and the suppression of religious activity in the name of "doctrinal secularism", while not themselves violations, may nevertheless open the door to unjustified restrictions on church autonomy.[96]

5. Indirect restrictions: Limitations on related human rights

The final collection of trends can be referred to as indirect restrictions. These are restrictions on related human rights that have a collateral impact on church freedom. As articulated in the previous section, some rights, such as freedom of peaceful assembly and association, are inseparably linked to church freedom

92 H. Bielefeldt "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance" (13 August 2012) UN Docs A/67/303, para. 52.
93 Id., paras. 53-55.
94 A. Shaheed "Report of the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief" (28 February 2018) UN Docs A/HRC/37/49, 4-8.
95 H. Bielefeldt "Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief" (February 2013) Human Rights Quarterly 35 (1), 52.
96 Id., 52-56.

and relevant in almost all cases. In contrast, other rights intersect with church freedom tangentially, with links becoming evident in specific contexts. Examples include, but are not limited to, restrictions on freedom of expression, the right to education, and the right to political participation.

5.1. Right to freedom of expression

Freedom of expression is among the rights most closely related to freedom of religion. Bielefeldt's 2015 thematic report on the subject observes that the common misperception of the two rights as competing or contradictory arises from an incorrect assumption about the nature of religious freedom and the obligations that arise from it. Specifically, the beneficiary of the right, and of the derived protections, is incorrectly understood to be the religion or belief as such, instead of individual rights-holders.[97] The resulting conclusion is that free expression must be restricted in order to prevent offence or disrespect towards the religion or its revered figures. In practice, this view engenders so-called blasphemy or "defamation of religion" laws, which "may result in *de facto* censure of all intra-religious or belief dialogue, debate and criticism, most of which could be constructive, healthy and needed".[98] In her 2024 report on hatred based on religion or belief, Ghanea highlights "numerous examples of persecution of religious minorities or dissenters, but also of atheists and non-theists, as a result of legislation on what constitutes religious offences or overzealous application of laws containing neutral language".[99]

According to the 2025 Freedom of Thought Report, anti-blasphemy laws exist in 92 countries around the world, violations of which may result in imprisonment in 66 countries, and the death penalty in seven. This includes countries with religiously homogenous populations such as Pakistan, as well as highly pluralistic societies such as Singapore.[100] In Qatar, Article 257 of the Penal Code criminalizes anyone who "establishes, organizes or runs an assembly, association, organization or a branch aimed at opposing or challenging the basics and tenets of Islam, or calls upon, or favours or promotes another religion; cult or concept".[101] In other cases, subjective language opens the door to arbitrary and inconsistent rulings. In Poland, Article 196 of the Criminal Code penalizes "offence to religious feelings", with a fine or up to two years in prison.[102]

97 H. Bielefeldt "Two Closely Interrelated Rights: Freedom of Religion or Belief and Freedom of Opinion and Expression" (23 December 2015) UN Doc A/HRC/31/18, 70.
98 N. Ghanea "Hatred on the Basis of Religion or Belief" (8 January 2024) UN Doc A/HRC/55/47, 30.
99 Id.
100 Humanists International 'The Freedom of Thought Report: Open Data' (2026). Available at: https://fot.humanists.international/data/.
101 Qatar Penal Code (2004), art. 257.
102 Polish Penal Code (1997), art. 196.

Several states specifically prohibit expression intended to persuade others of the truth of one's religion. In India, so-called "Freedom of Religion Acts", purported to target coercive or fraudulent conversion attempts, are employed by Hindu nationalists to discriminatorily target minority Christian and Muslim groups.[103] Cases have been filed against religious leaders merely for praying at a birthday party or other social event.[104] In Sri Lanka, a 2003 Supreme Court decision asserted that proselytism by a religion other than Buddhism "would not be permissible as it would impair the very existence of Buddhism or the Buddha Sasana", and a 2018 decision likewise held that Sri Lanka's constitution did not guarantee a "right to propagate one's religion".[105] Beyond the immediate prohibition, these laws tend to have a chilling effect on religious expression more broadly.[106]

Such restrictions are often justified on the grounds of interfaith harmony. Between 1986 and 2021, Malaysia prohibited the use of certain words, including Allah, in Christian publications. The ban was originally imposed to "ensure public order and avoid misunderstanding between Muslims and Christians", despite the lack of any tangible evidence of a threat in this regard.[107] In Singapore, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act permits the government to issue restraining orders against religious leaders for, *inter alia*, "causing feelings of enmity, hatred ill-will or hostility between different religious groups … while, or under the guise of, propagating or practicing any religious belief".[108]

Closely related, secular "hate speech" laws likewise threaten the freedom of expression of persons belonging to religious communities whose views are regarded as hateful, with no clear definition of this term. In Finland, Parliamentarian and former government minister Päivi Räsänen was prosecuted for quoting the Bible on social media as well as for a pamphlet she had written for her church over a decade prior, reflecting her deeply held beliefs on marriage and sexuality.[109] Even where laws do not result in convictions, they may still have a chilling effect on expression, as the fear of legal scrutiny or public backlash may stifle the voicing of one's beliefs.[110]

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103 T. Arora "India's Defiance of Religious Freedom: A Briefing on Anti-Conversion Laws" (February 2012) IIRF Reports 1(2), 5.
104 International Christian Concern "State in Heart of India Sees Highest Number of Attacks Against Christians" (3 April 2024). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2dtw33hx.
105 A. Shaheed "Visit to Sri Lanka" (25 August 2020) UN Doc A/HRC/43/48/Add.2, para. 31.
106 H. Bielefeldt "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance" (n 92), para. 44.
107 I. Lim "Explainer: High Court's 96-page judgment on why Malaysia's 1986 'Allah' ban was quashed in Jill Ireland's case" (24 March 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2dp4t9u8.
108 Singapore 2001 Rev. Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act (SGP) art. 8.
109 Alliance Defending Freedom International "Finland's Supreme Court Acquits Parliamentarian on Bible Tweet, Convicts Her for 'Insult' in 20-Year-Old Church Booklet on Separate Charge" (May 2026). Available at: https://adfinternational.org/cases/paivi.
110 H. Bielefeldt "Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance" (n 92), para. 44.

Both freedom of religion and freedom of expression are rights exercised in community with others.[111] Article 18 of the ICCPR expressly protects the freedom to collectively manifest one's religion *in public or private*, including through communicative outreach activities.[112] The Rabat Plan of Action, an international guidance document developed in response to these questions, reiterates that the freedoms of religion and expression are "mutually dependent and reinforcing".[113] Therefore, comprehensive church freedom also entails a freedom to collective expression, both internally among its members and externally to the public.

Unlike freedom of religion, freedom of expression can legitimately be restricted on the grounds of protecting national security, as well as "for respect of the rights and reputations of others", insofar as the limitations are provided by law and necessary.[114] However, restrictions with a bearing on religious freedom must be justified under both applicable provisions. Thus, the added leeway for limitations on expression cannot be employed to undermine church freedom.

5.2. Right to education

Restrictions on access to education are related to church freedom in at least two ways. First, some regulations specifically target, either implicitly or explicitly, religious schools and educational institutions. For instance, in March 2021, the Sri Lankan government announced plans to close more than 1,000 Islamic schools (*madrassas*), on the grounds that these were not registered and were allegedly not compatible with the national education policy.[115] In Uzbekistan, all religious education activities outside of government-approved institutions are designated as "illegal religious activities".[116] In neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, the involvement of children in religious activities is prohibited outright.[117]

Second, and relatedly, the imposition of compulsory educational curricula, based on either a state religion or a secular ideology, may interfere with parents' ability to direct the religious and moral education of their children. While this is principally an individual right, it is essential for safeguarding the capacity of a religious community to collectively educate their children in accordance

111 H. Bielefeldt "Two Closely Interrelated Rights" (n 97), 21.
112 H. Bielefeldt "Elimination of All forms of Religious Intolerance" (n 92), para. 26.
113 Human Rights Council "Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred that Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence" UN Doc A/HRC/22/17/Add.4 Appendix, 10.
114 ICCPR, art. 19(3).
115 B. Mallawarachi "Sri Lanka to ban burqas, close over 1,000 Islamic schools" (13 March 2021) Associated Press. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/33duss9e.
116 Uzbekistan Law on Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations (June 2021; unofficial translation). Available at: https://lex.uz/docs/6117508, art. 3.
117 Law on Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations (2008, last amended May 2021). Available at: https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/202498/edition/1061634/ru, art. 4.

with their shared beliefs. In September 2017, several families belonging to a small Christian minority in Iran were forced to either agree to have their children take part in Shi'a Islam classes, from which they had been previously exempt, or be expelled from school, on the ground that their church was deemed an "illegal organization".[118] France's anti-separatism law adopted in August 2021 prohibited homeschooling on the basis of religious or philosophical conviction, purportedly to tackle "the development of radical Islamism" and to "strengthen respect for republican principles".[119]

The right to education is established in Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[120] Its third paragraph affirms the right of parents or legal guardians to choose schools for their children "to ensure their religious and moral education in conformity with their own convictions", requiring only that these schools "conform to such minimum educational standards as may be laid down or approved by the state".[121] This right cannot be restricted on any grounds.[122] The fourth paragraph similarly prohibits interference with the liberty of individuals or bodies, including churches, to establish and direct educational institutions, subject to the same minimum educational standards.[123] According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which monitors implementation of the ICESCR, these "minimum standards" must correspond to the broader right to education and must "maintain a transparent and effective system to monitor such standards."[124] That is, these standards cannot be used to discriminate arbitrarily against members of certain religious communities, or religious educational institutions in general.

5.3. Right to political participation

The link between church freedom and political participation is self-evident, as religious beliefs can have an undeniable impact on political opinions and worldviews. Churches, merely by virtue of their existence, are likely to inspire political engagement by individual members as well as the community as a whole. This may range from a formal stance of the church, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses'

118 Christian Solidarity Worldwide "Iran: Christian children denied separate religious education" (7 September 2017). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ywpu7h52.
119 Prefet de la Seine-Maritime "Law No. 2021-1109 of 24 August 2021 strengthening respect for the principles of the Republic known as the 'CRPR law'" (10 January 2023). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/ycyzc4u8.
120 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976) 993 UNTS 3 (ICESCR), art. 13.
121 Id., art. 13(3).
122 UN Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 22" (n 17), para. 8.
123 ICESCR, art. 13(4).
124 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights "General Comment 13: The Right to Education" (8 December 1999) UN Doc E/C.12/1999/10, para. 29, 54.

commitment to the principle of "political neutrality",[125] to the more informal and varied influences of Christian denominations on politics in the United States.[126]

Many restrictions on church freedom are implemented in response to the real or perceived political influence of such faith communities. Additionally, churches may be subject to indirect restrictions aimed at removing their members' capacity for political engagement. In some contexts, political participation is limited to state-approved faith groups. In both Algeria and Pakistan, the constitution explicitly restricts eligibility for the position of head of state to Muslims.[127] The constitution of Thailand prohibits Buddhist monks and other clergy from voting in elections.[128] In November 2020, the government-controlled Supreme Sangha Council, the highest Buddhist authority in the country, ruled that monks could not participate in anti-government protests.[129]

Elsewhere, states rely on strong forms of secularism to limit the political influence of religious groups. The Mexican constitution establishes "the historic principle of separation between State and religion", according to which, *inter alia*, religious ministers cannot hold public office, "join together for a political purpose", or "proselytize in favour of a certain candidate, party or political association, or against them".[130] In November 2021, six Catholic religious leaders, including two cardinals, were convicted by the national Election Tribunal after voicing public criticism of the ruling party's stance on a number of social issues and encouraging voters to pray for spiritual discernment in their decision. One tribunal judge asserted that "votes aren't celestial or spiritual things" and that it was "logical" that "celestial inspiration is not going to cause the best people to be in popularly elected positions."[131] Also in 2021, a mayoral election in the Tlaquepaque municipality was nullified after a winner had already been announced and sworn in, on the basis that a cardinal had posted a video on Facebook urging voters not to vote for the opposing party. This was deemed adequate to invalidate the election as a whole.[132] Political participation by churches was perceived not merely as inappropriate, but as actively harmful to the integrity of the political process, reflecting the anti-clerical roots of Mexican secularism.[133]

125 Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania "Why Do Jehovah's Witnesses Maintain Political Neutrality?" (2024). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3wvz4htz.
126 M. Rotolo, G. Smith, and J. Evans "8 in 10 Americans say religion is losing influence in public life" (15 March 2024) Pew Research Center, 44-54.
127 Constitution of Algeria (2020), art. 87; Constitution of Pakistan (1973), art. 41.
128 Constitution of Thailand (2017), art. 96.
129 P. Thepgumpanat, "Thai monks ordered not to join protests" (11 November 2020) Reuters. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bddea485.
130 Constitution of Mexico (1917), art. 130.
131 Catholic World Report "Mexican cardinals and bishops convicted for denouncing pro-abortion, socialist government" (7 December 2020). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3xkzm8j3.
132 Infobae "TEPJF annulled elections in Tlaquepaque because Archbishop Sandoval Íñiguez urged not to vote for Morena" (1 October 2021). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3r48vf2w.
133 R. Torre et al. "Religious Diversity and its Challenges for Secularism in Mexico" (18 October 2017) International Journal of Latin American Religions 1, 180-199.

The right of citizens to participate in public affairs and to vote, as articulated in Article 25 of the ICCPR, is to be granted "without any distinctions mentioned in Article 2", which includes on the basis of religion, "and without unreasonable restrictions".[134] According to the Human Rights Committee, "Any conditions which apply to the exercise of the rights protected by Article 25 should be based on objective and reasonable criteria."[135]

Studies suggest that increased political participation by diverse religious groups is correlated with more moderate doctrinal positions and reduced religious violence.[136] In her 2024 report "Peace and Freedom of Religion or Belief", Ghanea recognized the danger of "the political instrumentalization of division, hatred and othering on the basis of religion or belief". However, her proposed response is not the exclusion of religion from the political sphere, but rather the need for greater freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief, in order to promote "alternative movements and pro-peace narratives", as well as to "legitimize and preserve social order or challenge society and government".[137] Relatedly, in her 2023 report, the Special Rapporteur highlighted the danger faced by religious minorities resulting from political discourse that encourages discrimination or even violence against them in the interest of garnering popularity.[138] Consistent with the maxim of "more speech, not less"[139], the capacity of church communities to participate actively in political discourse to counter such expression is essential for their self-preservation in a hostile political landscape.

6. Conclusion

While this survey of key trends is by no means exhaustive, it provides a sufficient scope to draw some general conclusions regarding the global state of government restrictions on collective religious freedom, as well as insights regarding possible responses to such phenomena.

Government restrictions on collective religious freedoms can be broadly categorized into three types: absolute restrictions, autonomy restrictions, and indirect restrictions. Whereas absolute restrictions are inherently incompatible with the right to freedom of religion or belief, autonomy restrictions may be justified insofar as they adhere to the narrow scope of permissible limitations set out in international law. Indirect restrictions are related to adjacent human rights such

134 ICCPR, arts. 2, 25.
135 Human Rights Committee "General Comment No. 25" (27 August 1996) UN Doc CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.7, para. 4.
136 P. Henne, S. Hudgins, and T. Shah "Religious Freedom and Violent Religious Extremism: A Sourcebook of Modern Cases and Analysis" (December 2012) Berkley Center Religious Freedom Project, 7-11.
137 N. Ghanea "Peace and Freedom of Religion or Belief" (n 91), para 61.
138 N. Ghanea "Freedom of Religion or Belief, From the Grass-roots" (19 July 2023) UN Doc A/78/207, para 67.
139 See also UN Secretary General "United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech" (18 June 2019).

as freedom of expression, education, and political participation and must therefore be justified under all applicable legal criteria, in addition to those required by direct restrictions. In all cases, the burden of proof is placed squarely on the government to justify its imposed restrictions, not on the religious community to justify its collective exercise of human rights.

Many of the justifications given by states reflect a widespread lack of understanding or wilful neglect of international obligations, a distorted perception of religion or specific religious communities as an inherent threat to the state or society, and/or a tendency towards the ambiguous application of laws and policies in a manner that results in overly broad or discriminatory *de facto* restrictions on religious freedom and related rights. These shortcomings are identifiable in every region of the world, including in states that purport to act as champions of religious freedom domestically or internationally.

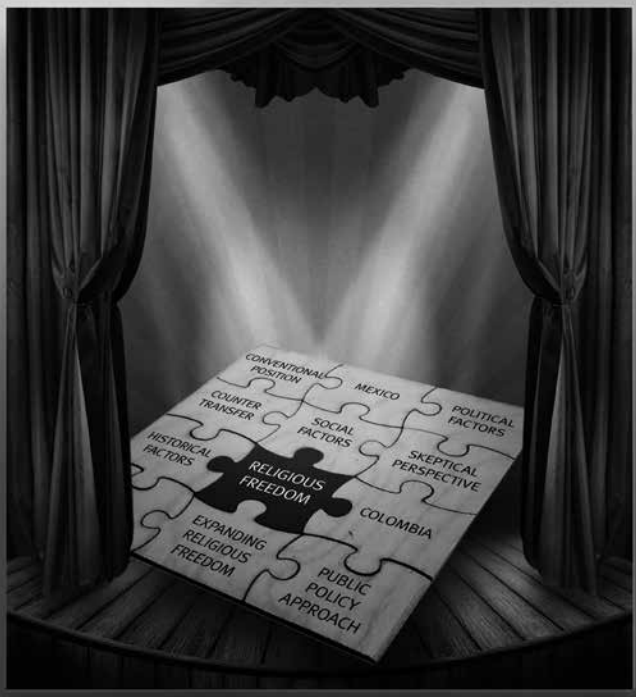
The derived classification of global trends opens the door to more in-depth research into each type, as well as the interplay between them. In particular, exploration into how national, regional and international accountability mechanisms interpret distinct violations in practice would help to strengthen the proposed model. Further investigation of state justifications for restrictions on church freedom would enhance analytical depth and add nuance to the discussion.

These conclusions also have ramifications for human rights advocacy, presenting a threefold challenge to the international community aimed at greater recognition of and respect for church freedom. First, governments must be held accountable for specific human rights violations and called upon to rectify such situations. Second, proactive efforts must be directed towards addressing the underlying causes and risk factors that lead to such restrictions. This includes, *inter alia*, countering false narratives surrounding religious communities and the alleged dangers of church freedom, as well as implementing national legal safeguards which can serve to prevent the abuse of laws and policies in practice. Third, at a broader level, a shift in the global narrative surrounding freedom of religion is needed, developing a more responsive international system wherein states hold one another accountable and where the promotion and protection of religious freedom is viewed as a strategic priority in bilateral and multilateral settings. The role of civil society in achieving these objectives cannot be overstated.

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Religious Freedom in Mexico and Colombia

An Approach to Broadening Categories and Public Policy Actions from a Comparative Public Policy Approach



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Religious persecution and freedom of religion in Ilorin, Kwara state, Nigeria

A historical perspective

Samson Kolawole Oyeku[1]

Abstract

Freedom of religion in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, is under sustained strain with communal violence, restrictions on worship and dress, and structural barriers facing minorities. Using a qualitative historical method and a socio-legal reading of religious freedom, informed by Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and USCIRF reporting, this paper traces these tensions to the 19th century jihad of Othman Dan. Fodio and Ilorin's incorporation into the Sokoto Caliphate, then examines four flashpoints: the 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance, the 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction, the 2021 hijab controversy, and the 2023 Ìsèse suppression, closing with recommendations for coexistence.

Keywords:

Nigeria, Ilorin, Kwara State, freedom of religion, religious persecution, structural violence, peaceful coexistence.

1. Introduction

Freedom of religion has deteriorated across several West African states, and Nigeria is frequently cited among them. Ilorin, the capital of Kwara State, is a useful lens on religious freedom trends precisely because it sits at the geopolitical seam between Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north and its predominantly Christian south (Chandler 2024). Before analysing specific episodes, it is necessary to say plainly what "persecution" means in this paper, since the term is often used loosely. Following John Sinclair's general definition, persecution is the sustained, cruel and unfair treatment of a person or group because of their political or religious

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beliefs (Sinclair 1992). Global Christian Relief narrows this for the Christian case to hostility, discrimination, imprisonment, displacement or violence experienced because of identification with Jesus Christ (Global Christian Relief 2026). For the purpose of this paper, however, a broader, internationally recognised standard is more useful: Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protects the right to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching, and the analytical distinction (used by bodies such as United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF)) between *direct* persecution (violence, imprisonment, killing) and *structural* or *institutionalised* discrimination (unequal access to land, schooling, or public office on religious grounds). This distinction matters because, as will become clear, not every incident of inter-religious friction discussed below rises to the level of persecution in the strict sense; some are better described as communal violence, and others as structural discrimination. Distinguishing between them, rather than collapsing them into a single narrative, is itself part of the contribution of this paper.

Florin's friction is not the overt, military-grade violence associated with the Boko Haram insurgency further north; it is, instead, structural and institutionalized, expressed through disputes over schooling, dress, land, and public ritual. The central argument advanced here is that these modern tensions are not random or inevitable but are historically tethered to the administrative structures established during the 19th-century Islamic reform movements associated with Othman Dan Fodio and consolidated by subsequent indirect colonial rule. The paper draws on a qualitative historical method combining secondary historiography, newspaper archives, and a small number of anonymised interviews conducted with affected individuals. It should be acknowledged at the outset that some of the episodes discussed (particularly the 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance and the 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction) rest on a limited range of contemporaneous press sources; this is a genuine constraint on the paper's evidentiary base, and further corroboration from court records, police reports, and additional newspaper archives would strengthen the case-study analysis in future revisions of this research.

2. Theoretical framework: Conceptualising persecution and freedom of religion

A recurring weakness in scholarship on religious conflict in Nigeria is the absence of a clear conceptual framework distinguishing persecution from the broader category of inter-religious tension. This paper adopts three complementary lenses.

First, a socio-legal lens treats persecution and religious freedom as matters of rights and their violation rather than of theology. Article 18 of the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights, together with Section 38 of the 1999 Nigerian Constitution (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999), guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, including the right to manifest religion in worship, teaching, practice and observance. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) country reporting on Nigeria repeatedly distinguishes between direct violent persecution, most acute in the north-east and parts of the Middle Belt, and structural or institutionalised discrimination (for instance in access to land for worship, or in the administration of formerly mission-founded schools), which is the pattern more visible in Ilorin (USCIRF, various years).

Second, a sociological conflict lens draws on Karl Marx's account of religion as a potential source of social division as much as cohesion; Marx's often-cited view of religion as an instrument that reconciles subordinate groups to their position is relevant here not as an endorsement but as a reminder that religious identity can be mobilised by elites for non-religious ends (Wienclaw 2019). This is complemented by the concept of *structural violence*, harm produced by social arrangements and institutions rather than by direct physical force (Galtung 1969), which better captures phenomena such as restrictions on land acquisition for church buildings or asymmetries in local civil-service representation than does the language of "persecution" alone.

Third, an identity-politics lens is needed because, in Nigeria's Middle Belt and its southern fringe (of which Ilorin is arguably a part), religious and ethnic identity overlap substantially. To be Yorùbá in Ilorin is not automatically to be Muslim or Christian, but the Fulani-led emirate structure has historically been read as both an ethnic and a religious hierarchy, which sharpens minority grievance along both axes at once (Falola 1998; Kukah 2016).

Taken together, these three lenses provide the paper with a working test: an episode is treated as persecution proper where it involves sustained, targeted harm on account of religious identity; as communal violence where it involves reciprocal hostilities without one-sided targeting; and as structural discrimination where it involves unequal institutional treatment without physical violence. The case studies in Section 5 are classified accordingly rather than treated as a single undifferentiated category.

3. Historical foundations: The Sokoto Caliphate and Ilorin Emirate

3.1. Othman Dan Fodio and the 19th-century jihad

Othman Dan Fodio (rendered variously in the literature as Usman dan Fodiyo (Hausa) or Uthman Ibn Fudi (Arabic transliteration) – this paper uses "Othman Dan Fodio" throughout for consistency) was born in 1754 in Maratta, in the Hausa kingdom of Gobir, in what is now north-western Nigeria (Kukah 2016 cf. Quick

1995, who situates his active career as 1774-1804). He was a Fulani Islamic scholar and reformer who, between 1804 and 1808, led a jihad against the Hausa ruling elites of Gobir and neighbouring kingdoms (Hodgkin 2024). Ogbu Kalu (Kalu 1978) argues that the immediate trigger was a dispute between Othman Dan Fodio and the non-Muslim ruler of Gobir in 1802, though the movement's motives combined genuine religious reform with material and political grievance. It is important to be precise about what the jihad was directed against – it targeted what its leaders regarded as syncretic and un-Islamic practice among nominally Muslim Hausa rulers, not Christianity, which had not yet reached the interior of what is now northern and central Nigeria (Last 1967; Usman 1979). Reading the jihad as a campaign against Christianity is, therefore, an anachronism this paper corrects; its immediate religio-political target was the Hausa aristocracy, and its long-term effect was the consolidation of an Islamic administrative order (the Sokoto Caliphate) over both Muslim and non-Muslim (including African Traditional Religion-practising) populations (Adamu 1978; Paden 2007).

The Hausa are among West Africa's largest ethnic groups, historically settled across present-day Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, with Hausa-speaking communities as far afield as Dahomey (Benin), Togo, Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, reflecting both migration and the language's adoption by non-Hausa populations through trade (Ojelabi 1970). Before the jihad, Hausa land comprised independent, often rival, kingdoms bound together loosely by trade and periodic warfare. From around the 15th-century, pastoral Fulani migrants entered these kingdoms from the Futa Toro region of Senegal (Onuh 2024). Othman Dan Fodio began preaching from Degel in Gobir at around the age of 20, drawing encouragement from earlier successful jihad movements among Fulani communities in Futa Jallon (Onuh 2024). The Sokoto Caliphate was proclaimed in 1804, with Othman Dan Fodio acclaimed *Amir al-Mu'minin* (Commander of the Faithful). Under his leadership and that of his successors, the Caliphate's authority extended across much of what is now northern Nigeria, southern Niger, northern Cameroon and parts of present-day Burkina Faso (Onuh 2024; Last 1967).

3.2. The incorporation of Ilorin

Ilorin was a Yorùbá settlement, founded in the late 18th century, and served as a provincial military outpost of the Òyó Empire until 1817. In that year, the Yorùbá military commander (*Àre Ònà Kakànfò*) Àfònjá rebelled against the Aláàfin of Òyó, enlisting the support of Shehu Alimi, an itinerant Fulani Muslim teacher (Britannica "Ilorin" 2025). Àfònjá's invitation brought Muslim (Hausa and Fulani) fighters into what had previously been a Yorùbá polity with an established, if smaller, Muslim presence dating from before Othman Dan Fodio's jihad. Abdullahi Smith (1987)

emphasised this point in his account of Yorùbá-Fulani contact around the fall of Old Òyó, and it complicates any simple binary between an indigenous "Yorùbá" identity and an incoming "Muslim" one. The Aláàfin, defeated, is reported in Yorùbá oral and written tradition to have died by suicide after pronouncing a curse on the Yorùbá people (Kalu 1978); this event precipitated the broader collapse of Òyó's unity (Ikime 1977). Àfònjá retained his independence from Òyó only with the continued support of Alimi's Hausa and Fulani forces (Kalu 1978), though Samuel Johnson's account describes Alimi somewhat differently, as a priest invited into Àfònjá's service rather than an independent powerbroker (Johnson 2009).

The alliance broke down over Àfònjá's promise to make Alimi overseer of Ilorin; Alimi's son, Abd al-Salam, became Ilorin's first Fulani ruler after Àfònjá's death, and pledged Ilorin's allegiance to the Sokoto Caliphate in 1823 (Akinwumi 1992). Àfònjá himself was killed by the Muslim forces he had once commanded, and Ilorin, rather than continuing to look south toward Òyó, reoriented its political allegiance northward, toward Sokoto (Ikime 1977). Samuel Johnson, writing from a Yorùbá Christian vantage point, characterised the incoming Fulani administration as more adept at statecraft than the weakened Òyó leadership it displaced, playing rival Yorùbá chiefs against one another while offering conciliatory terms to defeated rivals (Johnson 2009). This is one interpretation among several, and later Fulani- and northern-authored historiography (e.g., Usman 1979; Paden 2007) offers a different emphasis, framing the same events as the extension of an already-established Islamic administrative and legal order rather than as opportunistic conquest. Abd al-Salam's subsequent southward jihad was checked by the forces of Ìbàdàn at Òshogbo in 1840 (Akintoye 2014), fixing Ilorin's frontier and, with it, the Muslim-Yorùbá emirate identity that persists today.

3.3. Colonial consolidation

British indirect rule, formalised in the early 20th-century, entrenched rather than dismantled the emirate structure it inherited. Lord Lugard's administration adopted a policy of religious non-interference that, in practice, protected Islamic administrative and legal authority in the emirates while restricting Christian missionary activity: missions were discouraged from operating in the Muslim-administered north and were, in some cases, encouraged to redirect their personnel to non-Muslim districts further south (Turaki 2017). This colonial policy is a second, and in some respects more direct, historical root of the structural friction discussed later in this paper, because it fixed (under the imprimatur of a modern colonial state) many of the administrative boundaries between "Muslim" and "non-Muslim" jurisdictions that mission-founded institutions in Ilorin would later have to navigate.

4. The arrival of Christianity and the growth of mission education

African Traditional Religion (ATR) (the indigenous belief systems of the Yorùbá and other peoples of the area) predates both Islam and Christianity in Ilorin and continued to be practised by the general population well after the Sokoto Caliphate's consolidation (Awolalu 1976). Christian missionary contact with Ilorin began later still: Adolphus Mann, a Church Missionary Society (CMS) agent, visited in 1855 (Ayandele 1979), followed by Henry Townsend in 1858 and, separately, by Thomas Jefferson Bowen of the Southern Baptist Convention (Ayandele 1979 Ajayi 1965). In each case, the ruling Emir received the missionaries with courtesy but declined to permit a mission station. This pattern persisted through the visits of W. H. Clarke and Bishop Ajayi Crowther in 1871 (Yahaya 2001), and it was not until David Caldwell Babcock's Seventh-Day Adventist mission arrived in 1915 that missionary work gained a foothold, and even then only in Shao, a satellite community outside Ilorin proper, rather than in the city itself (Babcock 1915).

Two points follow from this chronology, and both correct a historiographical error common to earlier work on this subject, including earlier drafts of this paper. First, Ilorin's incorporation into the Sokoto Caliphate (1817-1823) predates any sustained Christian presence by several decades. The 19th-century jihad cannot, therefore, be read as a campaign against Christianity, which had not yet arrived. Second, the consolidation of Sokoto's authority over Ilorin was substantially complete well before 1903 (commonly, if imprecisely, cited as the year of the Caliphate's formal end under colonial conquest), which is itself close to the period in which Christian missions were only beginning to press inland in any numbers. The two processes were therefore near-contemporaneous at best, not sequential in the way that a "persecution of Christians by the jihad" narrative would require. What can more defensibly be argued is that the administrative and legal architecture the jihad and its Caliphate produced later became the framework within which 20th-century Christian missions, and the schools they founded, had to operate, and it is in that later, structural sense, rather than as direct 19th-century persecution, that the historical connection to the present matters.

Missionary educational expansion nonetheless proceeded steadily through the colonial and early independence periods, and it is this educational infrastructure, rather than the jihad itself, that produced the institutional flashpoints of the present day. Across Nigeria, including in Kwara State, the governments of the 1970s took over the administration of grant-aided missionary schools as part of broader public-education reforms (see generally Fafunwa 1974, on the history of Nigerian education policy). Mission bodies typically retained nominal proprietorship (their names remain on school gates and letterheads to this day) while day-to-day administration passed to the state. This ambiguous division of

authority, between historical (Christian) founders and the present (secular, state) administrator, is the direct institutional precondition for the hijab controversy examined in Section 5.3. It is precisely because schools such as Baptist School, Surulere, are simultaneously "Christian" by founding identity and "public" by current administration that a dispute over religious dress could not be resolved simply by appeal to either the mission's or the state's authority alone.

5. Contemporary manifestations of religious friction in Ilorin

Applying the classification proposed in Section 2, the episodes below are grouped by type (communal violence, structural / institutional discrimination, and individual -level social sanction) rather than presented as a single undifferentiated narrative of persecution.

5.1. Communal violence: The 1986 Palm Sunday disturbance

On 23 March 1986, a Christian Palm Sunday procession through parts of central Ilorin was confronted by a group of local Muslim residents who objected to the procession passing through what they regarded as a predominantly Muslim area. The resulting clash left eight people injured, including a police officer, and led to 11 arrests (Ogunupdate 1986). The single contemporaneous source available for this episode is a report in the *Herald* newspaper, which itself situates the incident against a backdrop of broader economic and social unrest in Nigeria at the time, including the effects of the Structural Adjustment Programme and student protests, rather than treating it as an isolated act of religious targeting. Read narrowly, and on the basis of this one source, the episode is better classified as reciprocal communal violence arising from a dispute over public space than as one-sided persecution. A fuller assessment would require the additional court, police and press records that this paper has not been able to access, and this remains a limitation of the case study rather than a settled conclusion.

5.2. Communal violence: The 2004 Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction

In August 2004, the Kwara State government curtailed a planned five-day evangelistic crusade by Reinhard Bonnke to two days, citing threats of sectarian violence from Muslim youth groups opposed to the crusade being held near Ilorin's Muslim-majority core. The decision provoked a Christian youth protest march that security forces intercepted before it reached the Government House, while a preceding demonstration by the Kwara Muslim Youth group had also been dispersed (Oyeleke 2021, reporting contemporaneous Compass Direct coverage of the episode). As with the Palm Sunday case, the available account draws on a single retrospective press source. The episode illustrates the state's willingness to restrict religious assembly pre-emptively

in the name of public order, which is itself a legitimate subject of FoRB analysis, but the evidentiary base for characterising it as persecution rather than as a state security response to a bilateral threat of violence is, again, thin, and further primary sourcing is recommended before stronger claims are made.

5.3. Structural discrimination: The 2021 hijab controversy

In February 2021, the Kwara State government closed 10 schools (mostly Christian-mission-founded but state-administered) following disputes over the wearing of the hijab by Muslim pupils. The schools were reopened on 17 March 2021 under a state policy permitting willing Muslim schoolgirls to wear the hijab, a decision that the state's Permanent Secretary for Education framed as intended to secure sustainable peace and communal harmony (Oyeleke 2021). The reopening triggered confrontations at several schools, including Baptist School, Surulere, and Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) College, Sabo Oke, where Christian protesters attempted to bar hijab-wearing pupils from entry and displayed placards asserting the schools' Christian founding identity (Oyeleke 2021). The state chapter of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) opposed the policy and pursued the matter through the courts, arguing that permitting the hijab in mission-founded schools compromised those schools' religious character (Oyeleke 2021). Understood through the framework developed in Section 2, this dispute is a textbook case of *structural* religious friction: it arises not from a single act of violence but from the unresolved, decades-old ambiguity over whether authority in these schools rests with their historical Christian founders or their present state administrators, an ambiguity created by the 1970s schools takeover discussed above. Framed this way, resolving the dispute is less a matter of assigning blame between Muslims and Christians than of clarifying institutional governance, a point taken up in the conclusion below.

5.4. Direct threat: The 2023 Ìsèse Festival suppression

In June 2023, Yeye Ajesikemi Olokun Omolara Olatunji, a priestess of the Òsun tradition, was warned by a Muslim group said to be acting with the knowledge of the Emirate authorities, to cancel a planned Ìsèse (Yorùbá traditional religion) festival in Ilorin. Following the threats, which she said included death threats received after the event was publicised online, she canceled the festival and reported being ostracised by neighbours (Shotayo 2024). This episode is significant for two reasons this paper wishes to emphasise. First, it demonstrates that religious friction in Ilorin is not reducible to a Muslim-Christian binary: adherents of African Traditional Religion, the region's oldest religious tradition, face comparable structural pressure to abandon public religious practice. Second, because

the threat here was direct and personal rather than institutional, it sits closer to the "direct persecution" end of the spectrum proposed in Section 2 than the hijab case does, even though both involve the same broad category of religious-majority assertion of public space.

5.5. Individual-level social sanction: Family and community response to conversion

At a more intimate scale, two anonymised interviews conducted for this study illustrate the social cost of religious conversion within families. One respondent, whose parents held prominent roles within the local Muslim community, reported that her conversion to Christianity in her teenage years led her parents to withdraw parental and educational support and to disengage from her marital affairs entirely (Interview, 5 September 2026). A second respondent reported sustained social ostracism, including an incident of physical harassment arranged by extended family members, following her marriage to a Christian (Interview, 14 September 2026). These accounts, while limited to two respondents and therefore not generalisable, are consistent with a pattern noted in the wider literature on inter-religious family relations in Nigeria and point to a form of persecution that operates below the level of the state or organised religious bodies (through family and kinship sanction) and that existing FoRB frameworks, which are oriented primarily toward state action, do not fully capture.

6. Discussion: Connecting the historical narrative to present-day concerns

The historical evidence in Sections 3 and 4 can now be considered alongside the case studies in Section 5. The 19th-century jihad and the Sokoto Caliphate it produced did not, on the evidence available, target Christianity, which arrived later. Rather, they established a durable Islamic administrative and legal order in Ilorin, one that British indirect rule then formalised and protected rather than dismantled. This institutional framework shaped the conditions under which Christian missions were allowed to operate from the mid-19th century onward and influenced the unresolved questions of ownership that emerged when the Nigerian state assumed control of mission schools in the 1970s. It is this later, 20th-century layer of institutional history, rather than the 19th-century jihad itself, that best explains the hijab dispute. Comparable ambiguities of institutional identity likely explain other unresolved frictions, such as restrictions on land allocation for new church buildings in parts of the metropolis. This paper flags this issue for further empirical study rather than claiming to document exhaustively here.

It is important, following Toyin Falola's broader argument about the roots of religiously coded conflict in Nigeria, to resist the idea that this friction is a fixed, inevita-

ble consequence of 19th-century history (Falola 1998). Falola locates the sharpening of religious conflict in the colonial and postcolonial period specifically in the growing political salience of religious elites from the 1930s onward, and in choices made by the colonial and postcolonial state, not in an unbroken line of causation running back to 1804. The same caution applies to Ilorin: the Kwara State government's alternating accommodation of and resistance to emirate authority, its handling of the hijab dispute, and its response (or lack of one) to threats against the Ìsèse festival, are all matters of contemporary policy choice, open to reform, rather than the unfolding of an unchangeable historical script. Existing scholarship, specifically on Nigeria's religious freedom landscape, including USCIRF's country reporting and Joseph and Rothfuss's (2012) analysis of the broader Nigerian scenario, situates Ilorin-type structural friction as one point on a spectrum whose more violent pole is the north-east insurgency, a comparison this paper endorses as a corrective to treating Ilorin's tensions in isolation (USCIRF, various years; Joseph and Rothfuss 2012).

7. Conclusion

Religious tension in Ilorin has deep historical roots, but this paper has argued that those roots lie less in the 19th-century jihad itself (which targeted the Hausa ruling elite and predates any significant Christian presence in the area) than in the administrative and institutional order the jihad and subsequent colonial rule produced, and in 20th-century policy choices, particularly the ambiguous 1970s nationalisation of mission-founded schools, built on top of that order. Applying a clearer conceptual distinction between direct persecution, communal violence, and structural discrimination, as proposed in Section 2, the paper has shown that Ilorin's contemporary flashpoints (the Palm Sunday disturbance, the Reinhard Bonnke crusade restriction, the hijab controversy, and the suppression of the Ìsèse festival) do not form a single narrative of one-sided persecution. Rather, it reveals a more varied picture in which Christians, Muslims, and adherents of African Traditional Religion have each, at different points, experienced restrictions on the public exercise of their faith.

8. Recommendations

In order to reduce religious conflict, religious leaders could take part in a standing inter-religious committee, with recognised representation from Muslim, Christian, and African Traditional Religion bodies to air grievances before they escalate. Such a committee would build on the existing patterns of everyday socio-religious exchange (gift-giving and mutual attendance at naming, wedding, and funeral ceremonies) that already characterise much of Ilorin's social life across religious lines (Adewale 1989).

In order to fulfil its constitutional obligations, the Kwara State government would be advised to apply the protections of Section 38 of the 1999 Constitution even handedly to Christian, Muslim, and African Traditional Religion practice alike. Its apparent inaction in the face of threats against the 2023 Ìsèse festival is a specific instance meriting review. The government, together with mission bodies, would also be advised to establish a joint framework (potentially a collaborative school-governance model) clarifying decision-making authority over religious dress, symbols, and observance in formerly mission-founded, now state-administered schools, so that future disputes are resolved through agreed governance rather than street confrontation. State or traditional authorities are also well placed to convene the standing inter-religious committee described above.

In order to sustain coexistence at the everyday level, civil society and voluntary associations, together with families (the settings in which most Ilorin residents actually encounter religious difference day to day), could continue to emphasise mutual respect, active listening, and tolerance of difference, without requiring any party to abandon their own conviction. This remains the most immediate and achievable path to coexistence, even where structural and institutional reform proceeds slowly.

Religious plurality has been a feature of Ilorin's social fabric since long before the jihad of Othman Dan Fodio, and it will remain one regardless of how the institutional questions raised in this paper are eventually resolved. The task facing Ilorin's religious and political leadership is not to erase that plurality's frictions by fiat, but to manage them through governance structures equal to the historical complexity this paper has tried to set out.

Further research is needed in the documentary record of religious conflict in Ilorin and in the allocation of land for new places of worship. As acknowledged in Sections 1 and 5, several of the historical episodes discussed here rest on limited press sourcing; future research on religious conflict in Ilorin would benefit from systematic archival and court-record research, and from oral-history interviews conducted at a larger scale than was possible here.

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The escalating tensions between church and state in China

The amendment of the Regulations on Religious Affairs and the responses of the Early Rain Covenant Church

Grace Gaffet[1]

Abstract

The amended Regulations on Religious Affairs in China, implemented in 2018, and the subsequent responses of the Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC) led to increasing tensions between church and state in China. This article analyses the incompatible worldviews of the Chinese government under the leadership of Xi Jinping and the Reformed church, so as to provide a framework that explains their aggravated relationship. The two worldviews reveal conflicting sources on what should be considered the highest authority and different perspectives on the proper roles of the state and church.

Keywords

China, church and state, law and religion, regulation of religion, religious freedom, Early Rain Covenant Church.

1. Introduction

Having faced hostility from the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) towards religion since 1950, some Protestant churches have accommodated the Chinese authorities and become part of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Meanwhile, others have refused to join the TSPM and formed house churches, which have sometimes been suppressed by the government but have often maintained a certain degree of religious freedom. However, since Xi Jin-

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ping took over political power in 2013, his political reforms have shrunk the space granted to religious freedom, especially for churches that publicly refused to join the TSPM.

The Early Rain Covenant Church (ERCC), a Reformed congregation, was one of these dissenters. It was founded in 2008 by Pastor Wang Yi, a former legal scholar and human rights advocate. The ERCC has been actively involved in social issues and has contributed to society by serving the marginalized. For example, the church organizes an annual prayer meeting to commemorate the Tiananmen Square massacre, it offered financial support to the families of political prisoners in Sichuan in 2011, and it operates a seminary, humanities college and school (China Change 2018).

In 2017, the State Council adopted the amended Regulations on Religious Affairs ("New Regulations"), which came into effect in 2018. All unregistered religious institutions and organizations, including Protestant house churches, faced further crackdowns on their religious autonomy and activities. The ERCC initially responded by discussing the New Regulations and house churches' responses in an interview with another pastor and, subsequently, by posting a joint statement online six months later.

The introduction of the New Regulations and the responses by the ERCC illustrate how the discrepancies between the Party-state's and the Reformed worldviews contribute to the growing tensions between the state and Protestant house churches under Xi Jinping. Drawing on textual sources, this article examines how the contrasting conceptions of the political and ecclesial spheres in China provide a framework for a deeper understanding of the government's intolerance toward autonomous house churches and certain unregistered churches' rejection of state interference. I aim to contribute to research on church-state relations in China by applying these concepts specifically to the New Regulations and the ensuing conflict with the ERCC. This study focuses on specific theological and political views of a particular Reformed church, which do not represent the views of all house churches across the nation.

The following section describes the context of the mounting conflicts between state and church, the relevant content of the New Regulations and the responses of the ERCC. The next section contrastingly elucidates the Party-state's worldview under Xi's leadership and the Reformed worldview, notably their perceptions of the roles of church and state, which explain the reasons behind the exacerbated relationship. The analysis in this section is supported by evidence from state religious regulations, Wang's responses in the interview transcripts, and the ERCC joint statement. The full transcript was published online (Wang 2018) and an excerpt was later recorded in a book chapter (Wang 2022:190-198). The final section

discusses the Party-state's and house churches' actions through the lens of various philosophical and theological perspectives.

2. Context of the growing church-state tensions

2.1. The change in church-state relations under the leadership of Xi Jinping

Since the 1950s, state-sanctioned religious bodies have been delegated by the government to oversee registered religious groups and suppress unregistered groups. After the Reform and Opening period began in 1979, religious organizations enjoyed a certain degree of religious freedom over the subsequent decades. Despite maintaining control over religion, the government regarded religion as positive for development. Hu Jintao emphasized that religious communities could contribute to economic and social development and to building a "harmonious socialist society" (Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs n.d.). Since 2013, however, Xi Jinping has sought a deepening reform while asserting his own dominance and the supremacy of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In his religious reforms, Xi has reverted toward "a more totalitarian program of party control over the *content* of religion" (Rowe et al. 2024:28). He developed the policy of Sinicization and sought to compel religious groups to alter their religious traditions by guiding their adherents to cultivate and practice socialist values that serve the political agenda and by submitting to the Party-state. In other words, the CCP desires to reinforce and solidify its authority (Madsen 2021:1-2). The violation of religious freedom of Christians intensified, from the massive cross demolition in Zhejiang province between 2014 and 2016 to the amendment of the Regulations on Religious Affairs in 2018.

2.2. The introduction of the New Regulations

In 2004, the State Council first promulgated Regulations on Religious Affairs, which were announced by the State Administration for Religious Affairs. This document was based on Decrees 144 and 155 issued by the State Council in 1994, which aimed to supervise religion, religious activities and places of worship in the PRC. The language of these two legal frameworks is consistent with Document 19 and Article 36 of the Constitution of China. Thus, the 2004 Regulations show continuity from the previous regulations in restricting the right to worship, assemble, and carry out mission work, and in describing unregistered church activities as illegal. On 14 June 2017, the State Council adopted the second version of these regulations, promulgated on 26 August and to take effect on 1 February 2018 (State Council of the People's Republic of China 2017). This latest version concerns all religious institutions and organizations, registered and unregistered, across the nation.

To distinguish different legal statuses of various religions within the PRC, Fenggang Yang (2012:85) has suggested a theory of three religious markets: "red market" represents the government-controlled religions, "black market" refers to the officially forbidden religions, and "gray market" designates the ones with ambiguous legal or illegal status, including unregistered Protestant house churches. Yang concluded that the goal of the Chinese authorities was to eliminate the gray market (ChinaAid 2017). To this end, the New Regulations provided a legal basis for dissolving churches that refused to join and be subject to the TSPM. All unregistered churches and their activities are considered illegal.

The New Regulations consist of 76 articles, or 28 more than the original version. Unlike the previous version, two chapters on "religious schools" and "religious activities" have been added (Tsai 2017:314-315). Jonathan Fox (2018:151-155) categorizes four areas of restriction in religious regulations, and three can be seen in the New Regulations. The first area concerns the autonomy of religious institutions and clergy regarding their status and functions. The New Regulations emphasize that the registration requirements of religious organizations and professionals must follow the state provisions and their professionalization, and they stipulate specific directions concerning these entities' function. The second area of restriction involves the ability of individuals or groups to engage in basic religious practices, rites and ceremonies. The New Regulations instruct religious organizations to apply for government approval if they wish to conduct a large-scale religious activity, and to comply with national provisions on the management of religious publications for public distribution. The third area of restriction refers to other types of regulation, such as state control over religious education and state ownership of religious property. The chapters on religious schools, activity venues, and assets require specific qualifications of teachers, a fixed location for religious activity and government approval for new construction. Religious groups, schools and activity sites must follow state provisions to manage and use assets that are collectively owned by the state.

Additionally, in the chapter on legal responsibilities, new articles (such as Articles 64, 69 and 74) list, in detail, the heavy fines that can be levied on individuals involved in any religious activity that takes place in unauthorized places and with unregistered staff. Most of the fines can be tens or even hundreds of thousands of yuan, making them enormous when compared with the minimum wage of 2,300 yuan per month in Shanghai city (Cervellera 2017).

2.3. Responses by Early Rain Covenant Church

Facing the state's tightening religious control, the ERCC responded in two ways. In February 2018, Pastor Wang of the ERCC and Pastor Gao Zhen of the Beijing

Gospel Church commented on the New Regulations in an interview (Wang 2018). The New Regulations presented a new dilemma because of these congregations' large size. Through this interview, Wang and Gao intended to call house churches to reflection and prayer so that these churches could respond to the regulations in a unified manner. They discussed the motivations of the Chinese authorities behind the regulations, whether house churches should divide into smaller groups for fellowship, in what way their ecclesiology influences house-church responses to the regulations, the testimony that the church presents to the entire Chinese society, and the reasons for large urban churches to stand up for small rural churches.

In September, Wang and the ERCC leadership published a joint statement, "A Declaration for the Sake of the Christian Faith," on their church website and Wang's blog;[2] approximately 446 house church pastors and leaders across China cosigned it to declare their faith. They said their statement was also for the spiritual benefit of the Chinese regime and society, and for the glory of God. In the joint statement, the ERCC starts by affirming God's supremacy and Jesus Christ as the pathway to salvation. Then, it recounts experiences of state persecution and rebukes the state for abusing its power, breaching religious freedom and creating conflicts between political and religious parties in Chinese society. Finally, the joint statement contains a public declaration on the final authority of the Bible; the ERCC's willingness to suffer under state persecution; their commitment to obeying and respecting the Chinese government's authority as long as it does not violate the teachings of the Bible; their support for the separation of church and state; and the sole authority of Christ over the church (Nation and Tseng 2022:211-214).

3. The Party-state and Reformed worldviews

To understand Xi's motivations for imposing the New Regulations and the ERCC's reactions, this section explains the Party-state's hybrid worldview, followed by the Reformed worldview. I consider how each perceives the church, the state, and their roles, as well as how their worldviews shape both the state religious regulations and the ERCC's responses to them.

3.1. The hybrid worldview of the Party-state

Since the establishment of the PRC in 1950, the Party-state worldview has been deeply influenced by Marxism-Leninism. Xi developed and reinforced the concept of "socialist spiritual civilization" used in the post-Mao period (Brown and

2 The original version of the joint statement is in Chinese on the ERCC website and Wang's blog, it is translated into English in Nation and Tseng (2022).

Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:335-336), stressing that "the people have faith, the nation has hope, the country has power" (Xinhua 2015). This concept emphasizes the cultivation and practice of the socialist core values and the "excellent Chinese traditional culture," a term that refers mainly to Confucianism. The CCP selectively implements certain Confucian elements that align with Marxism-Leninism. Thus, it has a hybrid worldview with two significant components.

3.1.1. Confucianism

Confucianism is a value system with a long history in Chinese culture. It was suppressed like other religions during the Cultural Revolution; however, the tradition of self-cultivation and *neisheng* (inner sagehood) has been preserved on a deeper mental level within Chinese Communism throughout the Maoist period (Billioud 2020:82). Since the beginning of the 2000s, Confucianism has been revived in Chinese society to respond to its social context of individualization, and to reflect on the collective dimension of society (Billioud 2020:84-85).

The Confucian philosophy emphasizes moral ideals and *jiaohua* (to educate and transform), meaning that the morality of a human being can be transformed through education and ritual. The "spiritual civilization" can be achieved through a principle drawn from an idiom in one of the Four Classics of Confucianism, "cultivate your body, rectify your mind, harmonize your home, rule the country, and all under heaven will be in peace," which accentuates the cultivation of moral conduct to attain order, peace and cohesion between oneself, family, society and the cosmos (Iskra et al. 2020:57). This cohesion reflects the interrelation and intimate connection between levels in the hierarchical structure, from individual to cosmos. The ruler or emperor is placed at the central position, and he connects the spiritual realm or heaven and the secular realm. In mirroring "his moral behavior in heaven" and *dao* (its way), he becomes the model for the nation through his moral superiority. Thus, he possesses the moral authority to operate his administration in a proper manner. His rule aims to preserve harmony by upholding the social order in the secular realm. This concept is applied by the Chinese Communist leaders to the contemporary nation (Dessein 2017:202-203).

Another principle is related to the connection between family, government and society. The Confucian understanding of government is based on its understanding of the family in the principle of filial piety. Just like the head of a household, the ruler is represented as the parent of all people in the nation, and society is represented as a gigantic "family." The Party-state has absolute power to control social affairs, including religious affairs, because state control is necessary for the good of the entire nation (Xie 2023:ch. 9), just as a father is for the good of his child. The religious groups are therefore also expected to be "patriotic."

3.1.2. Marxist-Leninism

Marxism-Leninism posits a totalitarian state that is hostile toward religion and focuses on collectivism. Marx criticizes rulers who use religion as a false consciousness to prevent people from seeking their true interests (Fox 2018:151). Following the paradigm of Leninist monolithic organizations, the CCP has established a hierarchically ordered and patriotic organization for the five official religions, and it claims exclusive authority over their religious followers (Kindopp 2004:2-3).

Xi extended his political power by centralizing his authority on himself as the general secretary of the CCP, chairman of the Central Military Commission and president of the PRC. In his interpretation of the "spiritual civilization" concept, core socialist values are placed at the center (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:336). Among the 12 socialist values, Marxism-Leninism notions and Confucian principles are interwoven in the following ways: *pingdeng* (equality) denotes the Confucian and CCP's ideological commitment to creating a society "characterized by common ownership and collective achievement of development goals"; *gongzheng* (justice) means that the Party controls the sources and definitions of justice; *fazhi* (rule of law) refers to stronger regulations (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333-334); *hexie* (harmony) connects Confucian order and hierarchy from *tianxia* (all under heaven) to the notion of upholding social stability and avoiding conflict in society, which implies that only one voice supporting the Party-state with a collective goal can achieve unity and harmony, and that any dissenting voice must be "harmonized" or silenced (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333; Pils 2019:44); *jingye* (dedication) relates to people's more profound commitment to a shared mission with the CCP, including the state's stability; *aiguo* (patriotism) asserts nationalism and simultaneously strengthens the Party (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2018:333-334). In sum, the Chinese government requires religious adherents to cultivate socialist core values so as to align with the socialist society and contribute to social harmony.

3.2. The Party-state's hybrid worldview as reflected in the New Regulations

Fox (2018:151) suggests that explicit anti-religious national ideologies such as communism can provide a motivation for engaging in religious policies. Since religious institutions and organizations participate in politics to build a civil society, autocratic regimes put religious groups, especially those independent of the state, under their control through restrictions. The government fears that religious institutions might compete with the state for political power by organizing and mobilizing people for political actions, such as opposing government policies or supporting an opposition movement (Fox 2019:5). Indeed, the Chinese government is inherently intolerant of any opposition because of its autocratic nature. Having

suffered from Western countries' humiliation in history, it suspects that foreign religions such as Christianity might oppose and threaten the state if they can gain sufficient power. The Party-state considers that influence of foreign forces, such as Protestant churches, can undermine national harmony and unity.

The CCP's perennial enmity toward religion is another reason to enforce state religious regulations. Fox (2018:150) indicates that the application of regulations to all religions, including the majority religion, implies a country's hostility to religion in general. Ani Sarkissian (2015, cited in Fox 2019:6) further identifies varieties of religious repression. Some regimes, Sarkissian notes, engage in variable repression, with stronger control of those religious organizations perceived as greater threats to the government. As mentioned in the previous section, the New Regulations restrict all religious groups, but they impose tighter restrictions on the gray market than on the red market.

The regime's worldview is readily apparent in the New Regulations, which prioritize government interests to preserve national unity and security through religious adherents' obedience and loyalty to the Party-state. The "general provisions" chapter guarantees citizens' constitutional right to freedom of religious belief. However, it emphasizes that each religious citizen must preserve the unity of the nation, ethnic, religious harmony, and social stability and must not endanger national security or disrupt public order. Moreover, several articles, such as Articles 6, 26 and 27, reinforce the supervision and inspection functions of religious affairs officials on one hand, and the required compliance by religious groups with their work on the other hand. Furthermore, Article 63 states that "using religion to harm national security or public safety, undermine ethnic unity, divide the nation, … infringing upon citizens' rights in their persons and democratic rights, [and] impeding the administration of public order" will be punished criminally or administratively in accordance with the law (China Law Translate 2017).

Additionally, the New Regulations promote socialism and prohibit the proselytization of children. Article 4 states that religion should implement core socialist values. Article 44 bans proselytization in educational institutions. Article 70 specifies the sanctions for proselytization, organization of religious activities, and establishment of religious organizations or religious activity sites in any educational institution (China Law Translate 2017).

Finally, the regulations particularly forbid the influence of foreign powers. Article 5 stresses that based on the principle of self-governance, religious groups, schools and their activity should not be dominated by foreign forces. Other articles, such as Articles 17 and 57, require foreign professional staff to obtain state approval and prohibit foreign financial support.

3.3. The Reformed worldview

Martin Luther and John Calvin acknowledged divine authority and argued for a clear separation of the earthly and spiritual realms. Following his principle of *sola scriptura*, Luther based his beliefs on Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2:13-14 concerning the divinely ordained nature of government authority and its responsibility to maintain worldly justice, peace and order (George 2013:100). Although the principles of the state are not identical to those of the gospel, government authority is ultimately from God. Calvin shared a similar view of God as a Legislator and King. God's rule was extended from the congregation beyond the church. The sovereignty of Christ covers the entire created realm (George 2013:252–253). Calvinists hold that a political community is under the lordship of Jesus Christ, and that both state and church are accountable to God (Starr 2016:9).

Regarding church-state relations and their respective roles, Luther and Calvin highlighted distinctions between spiritual and secular authorities and duties. Luther distinguished two governments and affirmed their coexistence: spiritual government produces righteousness, whereas temporal government brings external peace and prevents evil deeds. "No one can become righteous in the sight of God by means of the temporal government, without Christ's spiritual government" (Luther 2009:73-74). Chloe Starr (2016:3, 9) indicates that Luther opposed the confusion of the earthly and spiritual kingdoms. Rulers can enjoy power and authority only as God wills. Calvin described the distinctive duties of a bishop and a magistrate (George 2013:252–253). For the Calvinists, the government in its limited role is responsible for the legal protection of religious freedom, whereas the church has autonomy (Starr 2016:9, 12). Nevertheless, Luther (2009:76, 88) emphasized that Christians must be willing to submit to the secular government's limited authority in civic responsibilities and assist the government authority. He called Christians to suffer evil and injustice willingly without avenging themselves, but to seek justice and protection on behalf of others (Luther 2009:81). The state should allow itself to be criticized when it fails to protect the nation and infringes on the authority of the spiritual realm (Starr 2016:9).

Calvin urged Christians not to withdraw from the world but to engage in it. He advised them to respect and obey rulers, notwithstanding their opposition. In cases of persecution, Calvin called on Christians to engage in perseverance and prayer, entrusting their welfare to God, because the institution of the magistracy was ordained by God despite its abusive behavior (George 2013:253-254).

3.4. The Reformed worldview in response to the New Regulations

The Reformed worldview acknowledges the ultimate sovereignty of God and Jesus as the head of the church. Christians recognize the divine appointment of

earthly government by respecting the state, yet they declare their ultimate obedience to God and their willingness to suffer state persecution. Wang and the church leaders affirm God's sovereignty. In their 2022 joint statement, they affirmed the final authority of the Bible in "all righteousness, ethics, and salvation" and Jesus Christ as the only head of the church (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:211, 213). They acknowledge the divine appointment of the government and declare their eagerness to obey and respect the government. Nevertheless, they also clarify that when the government violates the teachings of the Bible and interferes in anything related to faith, they will obey God rather than men and suffer persecution peaceably, due to the "demands of the gospel and from a love for Chinese society" (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:213).

Reformed Christians perceive that the earthly and spiritual kingdoms should be clearly divided and that each fulfills a unique role. The former is responsible for civic matters, while the latter seeks both inner justice in the eyes of God and justice on behalf of others should the state fail to fulfill its role. According to its ecclesiology, the ERCC firmly supports separation between church and state. It rejects the government's control over belief of Christians and its intervention in the religious affairs of churches and religious groups in China (Wang 2022:194-196). In their joint statement, the ERCC signatories accepted lawful oversight by civil administration but refused to join any government-controlled religious organizations or to accept any kind of affiliation from the state (Early Rain Covenant Church 2022:213-214).

In an interview, Wang argued that the New Regulations reflect the desire of the CCP and its unwillingness to acknowledge the two separate kingdoms. He stated that politics and religion are united in China's governing philosophy. Instead of accepting the separate sphere of spiritual authority, the CCP pursues the sole "sphere of authority under the government" (Wang 2022:190, 194). The Chinese regime perceives the church-state relationship as a competition. It considers the church a civil governing problem that can influence the state's ideological security and even its existence. Wang desires that the government would treat the church legally and as equal to other civil organizations, with certain distinctions. Additionally, Wang objects that religious affairs are elevated to the level of ideological or national security and Sinicization of religions. He argues that the New Regulations aim for "new reforms, patriotism, and Sinicization of religion … religions should adapt to socialism with Chinese characteristics" (Wang 2018).

4. Discussion of the actions of the Party-state and house churches

The divergence of state and church worldviews explains the state's action and the church's reaction. This section will discuss the Party-state's repression under Xi's

leadership and the ERCC's resistance. Can their worldviews appropriately justify their actions and reactions? Is there room for dialogue?

The introduction of the New Regulations represents Xi's coercive implementation of state worldview that leaves no room for other worldviews. This aligns with Sander Griffioen's concept of an "embedded world view," which simultaneously fosters one specific course of action and blocks other possibilities. As the embedded worldview conceals the existence of alternative worldviews, it is harmful because "social processes follow their own irreversible tracks irrespective of human assent" (Griffioen 2012:23-24). The state cannot pressure religious groups to change their worldview or conform to the government's worldview without consent. Assent to a cause implies personal commitment, including subjectivity. A change of worldview involves a transforming state of mind, modifying all our perceptions, emotions and beliefs (Griffioen 2012:31-32).

Griffioen's concept corresponds to the case of China. Xi compels adherence to a hybrid worldview regardless of the consent of religious organizations. The New Regulations allow the Party-state to hold supreme authority and control all religious organizations. Under Xi's leadership, the Party has endorsed the accommodation of religion to the socialist society and requires religious adherents to cultivate core socialist values for a harmonious society. Not only does the state thereby violate the religious freedom of all religious groups, but it also ignores genuine public interests, namely national well-being and the common good (Griffioen 2012:46). Such negligence of the public good is indicated by Alasdair Mclntyre (1998, cited in Chaplin 2008:59), who argues that modern governments focus on their own dominance and subject the public good to ideological fantasies. His argument is reflected in the management of religious affairs in China, which implies that the Party-state prioritizes its interests and political agenda over guaranteeing religious freedom. Religious groups are not allowed to practice their faith according to their conviction. All religious worldviews are "harmonized," and dissenting worldviews are considered disloyal to the CCP and a threat to national stability.

The Party's perspective is that social harmony is the paramount norm, and it attempts to conceal any possible conflict. However, discord is unavoidable amid diverse worldviews. It is mistaken to think that conflicts between distinctive viewpoints must destabilize the public order. I agree with Griffioen (2012:45) that since social conflicts will be common throughout history, Christians must engage in public debates. The prophetic role of religion exposes social realities and seeks true harmony for a better future. Just as Cornel West (2011, cited in Calhoun 2011:120) argues, prophetic religion helps people see realities, renders

disharmony visible, and challenges people to reflect and make possible improvements. Lesslie Newbigin goes further. Criticism of religious groups in the public realm is essential. The church must question and expose the beliefs and actions of the state in light of the gospel (Newbigin 1986: 132).

The ERCC, playing its prophetic role, has indicated where it believes the government has made mistakes in its treatment of religious groups in China, as well as upholding and publicly presenting its theological position. In its declaration, the ERCC urges other churches to seek justice on behalf of other churches across the nation. It desires to pressure the government and bring about changes in society for the common good. Moreover, as Griffioen says, one can take deep conflicts seriously yet remain civil. He argues that Abraham Kuyper's idea of the religious antithesis applies not to a person or entity but refers to opposition between fundamental principles (Griffioen 2012:28, 48).

Jonathan Chaplin (2008:35) extends Kuyper's argument that critical public engagement shows the opposing party respect. For me, engaging with multiple worldviews is an enriching experience, calling for openness and humility. This perspective is supported by the views of various scholars. Griffioen (2012:29) argues that the presence of communities holding different worldviews brings different organizations into each other's "range of vision" and "play[s] an integrative role" because each worldview community reflects the presence of the others. Newbigin (1986, cited in Mouw and Griffioen 1993:66) further suggests listening genuinely in dialogue with non-Christians and learning humbly and openly from those who hold opposing views. Likewise, Chaplin (2008:48-51) calls for acknowledgement of disagreement and a spirit of mutual respect and understanding. Zhibin Xie (2023:ch. 3) adds that a willingness to accept criticism and engage in self-amendment are also essential.

These characteristics are reflected in the ERCC's attitude. In its "Ninety-Five Theses" document published in 2015, the ERCC declared its willingness and openness to meet and dialogue with state representatives. It clarified that the theses and the church's theological perspective can serve as the basis for dialogue with the state (Starr 2016:5). In its responses to the New Regulations, the ERCC proclaimed its obedience to and respect for the Chinese government concerning civic matters, consistent with Romans 13.

In contrast to the Party-state's system of "unified state and religion,"[3] in which religious affairs are regarded as internal government affairs, the ERCC supported the separation of the two kingdoms, rejecting the government's interference in

3 The CCP's idea of "separation of church and state" means that religious organizations cannot interfere in government affairs, yet it does not mean that the Party-state guarantees religious freedom of religious organizations, as mentioned above.

religious affairs (see 3.4). This ecclesiological view can be misinterpreted because of the term "separation," which may refer to a strict division with mutual non-interference, implying that the government must not have any authority over the church in any case, or that a church must not be involved in any political and social issue, which includes injustice caused by the state. Nevertheless, the ERCC acknowledges both the government's and the church's idiosyncratic authority and their coexistence. The ERCC did not consider that church and state should be strictly separated because it supported the church's engagement in the world, seeking justice when the state fails to do so, and claimed its obedience to the government in civil matters (see 3.4). Hence, instead of using the term "separation," I suggest another term, "distinction," drawn from the "sphere sovereignty" concept developed by Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd, for better precision. Kuyper and Dooyeweerd first confess God's chief sovereignty over all spheres. Kuyper characterizes the specific sovereignty of human institutions as to be exercised within their own sphere. James Skillen and Rockne McCarthy (1991:404) further explain that each sphere is identified uniquely by its "leading function." It has its own responsibility or sovereignty and a distinguishable character. For example, a government is qualified by a guiding juridical function and brings public justice to all spheres. This point is further explained by Xie (2023:ch. 9), who argues that the state exercises its authority only to protect and maintain a balance between diverse social spheres. Likewise, in an interview with Xie, Skillen elucidates the concept of "principled pluralism," according to which the government must establish laws that uphold pluralism and do justice to diverse institutions by treating them justly and giving them their due (Xie 2023:App. 2).

Finally, in view of the Party-state's totalitarian nature and the house churches' disagreement with the government's interference in ecclesial affairs due to irreconcilable differences between their worldviews, is dialogue or even cooperation between the Chinese government and house churches still possible? It seems difficult after the arrest of Wang, ERCC leaders, and congregation members in December 2018, followed by a series of harassment actions toward the ERCC in subsequent months and Wang's sentencing to nine years of imprisonment a year later (Nation and Tseng 2022:207-208). The Chinese government seems to be leaving no room for discussion and concession.

5. Conclusion

Since the establishment of the PRC, perennial tensions have existed between church and state. The deteriorating relationship caused by the state's imposition of religious regulations and the ERCC's resistance reflects the deep discrepancies between their worldviews, which primarily lie in different definitions of the highest

authority and conflicting demands for loyalty. The Reformed perspective affirms that sovereignty belongs to God alone and that Christians are ultimately responsible to God. In the separation of church and state, the church has autonomy while the government rules civic matters with limited power. On the contrary, Xi and the CCP uphold the government's supreme authority over all spheres of life and people. Confucianism was restored in Xi's political reform because he desires to "Sinicize" Marxism through it. For Xi, "socialist spiritual civilization" can be possible only under the CCP's rule in partnership with the Chinese cultural tradition. However, his reform selectively applies certain Confucian elements – only those that do not infringe the Party-state's interests – notably Xi being the moral leader or father of the nation. Under the profound influence of Marxism-Leninism, the CCP cannot tolerate the existence of any well-organized group, such as religious institutions, because it could potentially oppose the Party's authority.

The New Regulations, as one of Xi's most significant reform strategies, undermine the autonomy of religious organizations, especially house churches, and reinforce the Party-state's authority. By complying with the state's religious regulations, religious institutions are expected to contribute to individual morality by cultivating Xi's core socialist values, which implies their loyalty to the Party. The goal is to reconstruct national identity and advance civilization so as to enhance the social order and build a harmonious society, and thus a stronger nation. Confucianism serves as an ethical source for the constitution of the Chinese government and a means of governance over society.

Not only do the New Regulations infringe on the religious freedom of all religious organizations, but they also have an extensive impact on society. In her analysis of the political, economic and social implications caused by religious controls and persecution, Sarah Cook (2019:339) argues that government policies can harm the CCP's legitimacy. When religious suppression extends to state-sanctioned religious groups and increases in intensity, popular resentment grows and people's distrust in the government could be aggravated. Resources invested in controlling religions could be used to ease urgent social issues such as poverty and benefit society. Mass religious persecution worsens the legal-security apparatus, and the effort to establish a genuine rule of law is undermined.

Facing the Party-state's intensification of religious control and the unlikely possibility of dialogue between church and state, the ERCC has demonstrated how to live out its faith, respecting the government as God-given earthly authority and obeying it in legal matters. It also shows how churches may engage publicly and peacefully with political and social issues, clarify their theological standpoint notwithstanding disagreement, and strive for justice on behalf of others so that churches can be a good witness to society.

This research has focused on the ERCC, which represents a particular theological position. However, unregistered churches in China present theological diversity. Further research on church-state tensions could scrutinize different theological positions of other unregistered churches and compare them with the government's worldview. On the other hand, some unregistered churches choose to focus on church ministry and remain silent with regard to their political views. How are these churches coping with the New Regulations? What are their reactions to churches such as the ERCC, which publicly resist the government? How are they affected by these churches' activism? Finally, as mentioned in 2.2, the New Regulations also affect the registered churches; how is compliance with expanding regulations affecting the registered churches' theological legitimacy? These questions deserve close attention as they have significant implications for the future of Christianity in China.

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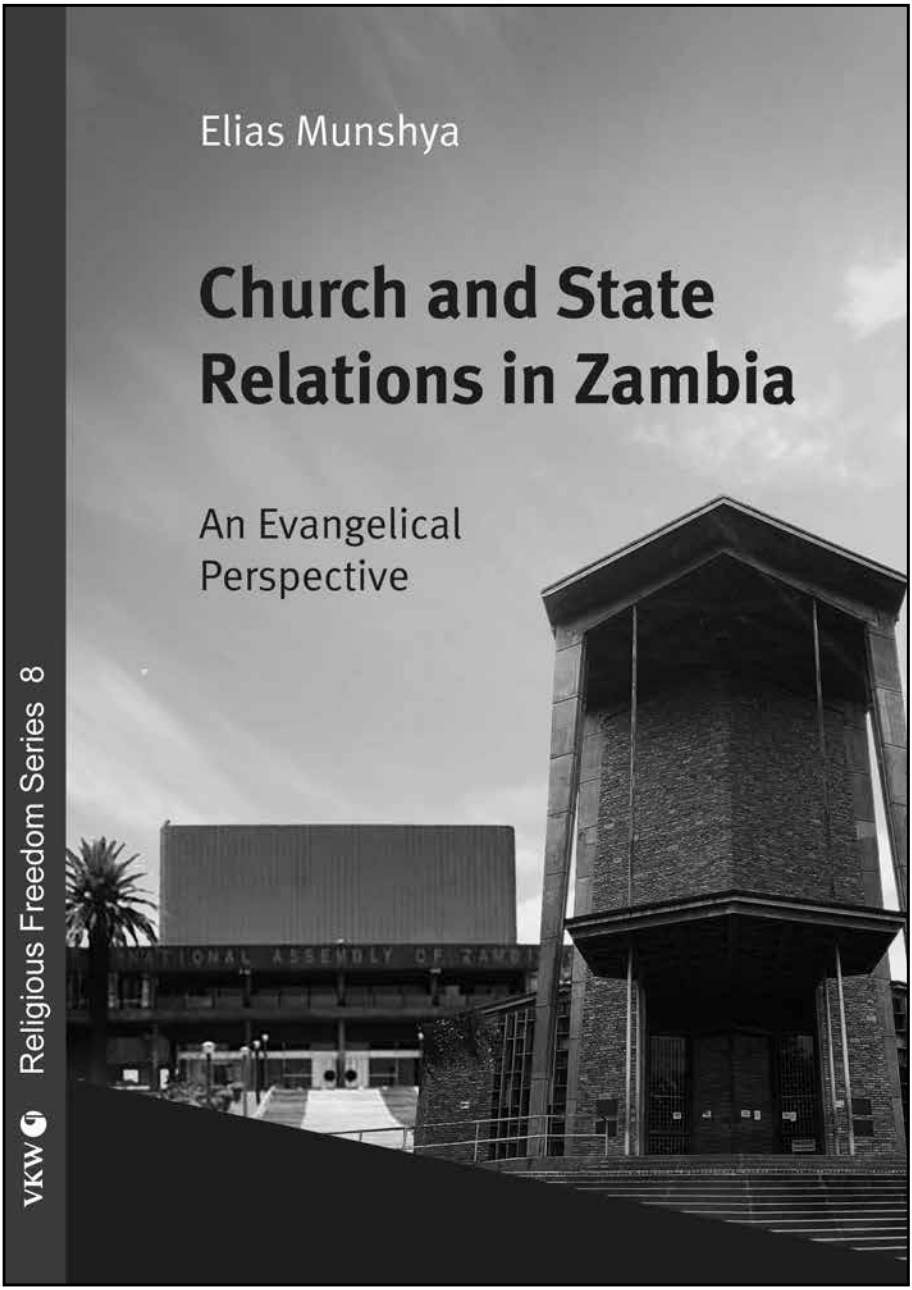
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Violations of religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Oromia in post-1991 Ethiopia

Kebede Bekere[1]

Abstract

This study examines violations of religious freedom affecting evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia after 1991. Drawing on interviews with church leaders and Muslim-background believers, supported by secondary sources, it applies Galtung's framework of direct, structural, and cultural violence. Findings indicate that attacks and hostility are reinforced by discriminatory administration, inadequate protection, and narratives portraying converts and evangelical communities as outsiders. Decentralized governance enables local majorities to influence institutions and weaken constitutional guarantees. The study argues that religious freedom requires stronger institutional neutrality, vertical accountability, impartial enforcement, and effective protection of minority rights across local governance systems.

Keywords

Religious persecution, evangelical Christianity, religious freedom, Muslim-Christian relations, religious conflicts, Oromia, Ethiopia.

1. Introduction

Ethiopia is a religiously diverse country in which Christianity and Islam constitute the largest faith traditions.[2] Since 1991, evangelical Christianity has experienced significant growth,[3] including in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, where

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2 Degwale Gebeyehu Belay et al. 2026. "Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 1, no. aop:1-19.

3 Emanuele Fantini 2015. "Go Pente! The Charismatic Renewal of the Evangelical Movement in Ethiopia," in Gérard Prunier and Éloi Ficquet (eds.), *Understanding Contemporary Ethiopia: Monarchy, Revolution and the Legacy of Meles Zenawi*, Hurst & Company: 123-146.

evangelical expansion has sometimes generated resistance and conflict.[4] Islam became firmly established in Hararghe, Bale, Jimma, and Arsi in Oromia between the 16th and 19th centuries.[5] Evangelical Christianity expanded during the 20th century through missionary and indigenous church efforts.[6] This expansion introduced new religious dynamics, particularly in Muslim-majority communities where conversion to Christianity often became a source of tension.

The secular constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) has a provision for religious pluralism and for all religious groups to enjoy freedom of religious expression.[7] However, evangelical churches and Christians in Muslim-majority areas of the Oromia Region experience persistent, systematic, multi-layered violations of freedom of religion. These violations of religious freedom of evangelical Christians range from rejection by family, eviction from home, and dispossession of private property to public and collective violent attacks.[8]

In general, religious persecution has not been the focus of scholarship in Ethiopia, and existing studies on Ethiopia have focused extensively on ethnic federalism, ethnic conflict, and macro-level manifestations of religious violence.[9] Studies on religious conflict have primarily examined relations between the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church and Islam, attacks on the Orthodox Church,[10] violence targeting Muslims,[11] and broader debates on secularism and state-religion

4 Terje Østebø 2023. "Religious Dynamics and Conflicts in Contemporary Ethiopia: Expansion, Protection, and Reclaiming Space," *African Studies Review* 66, (3):721-744.

5 UNESCO, *Harar Jugol, the Fortified Historic Town*, UNESCO, World Heritage Centre, 2006, Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3uhu6f7r; Terje Østebø 2009. "Religious Change and Islam: The Emergence of the Salafi Movement in Bale, Ethiopia," *Proceedings of the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (2):463-476; Temam Haji Adem 2019. "Syncretism of Waaqeffannaa and Islam among the Arsi Oromoo of Ethiopia," *Gadaa Journal* 2, (2):1-20; Abdo Abazinab Abamoga 2023. "History of Islamic Education in Jimma from 1830 to 2007." Haramaya University.

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7 Endalcachew Bayeh 2015. "The Place of Customary and Religious Laws and Practices in Ethiopia: A Critical Review of the Four Modern Constitutions," *Social Sciences* 4, (4):90-93; Assefa Tolera 2017. "Interrogating Religious Plurality and Separation of State and Religion in Ethiopia," *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 33, (1):39-72; Dereje Melese Liyew 2025. "The Politics of Secularism in Ethiopia: Repression and Co-Option towards the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahido Church," *Insight on Africa* 17, (2):195-212.

8 Terje Østebø, "The Role and Relevance of Religion in Ethiopia's Current Conflicts," *Addis Standard - Special Edition* (Addis Ababa, Ethiopia), 6 November 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/hweyhjbn.

9 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics," 721-744.

10 Alene Agegnehu Waga and Kelemu Zelalem Berhanu 2024. "Political Reform and Religious Violence in Some Ethiopian Regions since 2018: Evidence from Sidama, Somali, and Oromo," *Social Sciences & Humanities Open* 10:101082; Dereje Melese Liyew 2026. "Tradition in Peril: Epistemic and Physical Violence Against the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 2026:1-24 DOI: 10.1163/15718115-bja10288; Degwale Gebeyehu Belay et al., "Ethno-Religious Nationalism and the Ethiopian Orthodox Church," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 2026:1-19, DOI: 10.1163/15718115-bja10250.

11 Terje Østebø et al. 2021. "Religion, Ethnicity, and Charges of Extremism: The Dynamics of Inter-Communal Violence in Ethiopia," *Brussels: European Institute of Peace*:15-23; Yihenew Alemu Tesfaye et al. 2026. "Reframing Religious Conflict in Gondar: Land, Public Visibility, and the Politics of Difference," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 20, (2):373-392.

relations. Consequently, the relationship between ethnic federalism, local governance, and religious freedom has received limited scholarly attention.

Moreover, existing research has largely overlooked the less visible forms of discrimination embedded within local administrative and bureaucratic practices. The experiences of evangelical Christians, particularly in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, remain underrepresented in the literature despite evidence of social exclusion, administrative restrictions, and direct violence. Academic literature primarily focuses on national-level religious freedom violation incidents,[12] leading to a critical gap in empirical studies on various local hostilities. Although a few incidents have been documented by international advocates of religious freedom,[13] little is known about the violations of the freedom of religion of evangelical Christians at the grassroots level.

This study aims to address this gap by examining violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians within seven Muslim-majority zones in the Oromia Region. It identifies three aspects of the violation of freedom of religion in the Oromia Region. First, it examines the strategies employed by local state authorities to restrict the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. Second, it evaluates the extent of collusion, if any, between state actors and local social community forces in the violations of the freedom of religion of evangelical Christians and examines the role of a close-knit community in violating the religious freedom of converts from Islam to Christianity. Third, it analyzes the nature of violations of the freedom of religion encountered by evangelical Christians in the Muslim-majority areas of Oromia, ascertaining whether they are sporadic or systematic and assessing them against the religious freedom provisions guaranteed by the FDRE Constitution.

Religious discrimination is a global phenomenon that can be perpetrated by a variety of actors, including states, local authorities, and social groups.[14] Scholarship on state regulation of religion demonstrates that governments may persecute religious minorities through laws, policies, and administrative practices that restrict religious expression and religious practice, especially when the states perceive that the religious minorities compete with the state-supported re-

12 Østebø, "Religious Dynamics"; Jörg Haustein et al. 2023. *Religion in Contemporary Ethiopia: History, Politics, and Inter-Religious Relations*. Rift Valley Institute; Tinsae Ashagrie Dagnew et al. 2025. "Living as Neighbors: Neighborhood Networks and Interfaith Coexistence between Muslims and Christians in Southern Wollo, Ethiopia," *Discover Global Society* 3, (1):155.

13 Voice of the Martyrs USA. *Ethiopia Archives: Stories*, Non-Profit Organization, n.d. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3wdwxrfn; Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, Dossier. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/y5dfa9bc.

14 Laszlo Pokorny 2026. *The Hidden Costs of Faith: A Socioeconomic Analysis of Christian Persecution and Community Resilience in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (2000-2025)*. Doctoral Dissertation, ICL Institute. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/yye4ca95.

ligion.[15] Authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, in particular, frequently employ legal and bureaucratic mechanisms to suppress religious freedom.[16] However, religious persecution does not always result from explicit state policies. In many contexts, violations of religious freedom emerge from the state's inability or unwillingness to enforce constitutional protections equally across its territory.[17]

This study is primarily concerned with the latter phenomenon. Jonathan Fox argues that weak state capacity can enable local authorities to violate the rights of religious minorities when the preferences and pressures of dominant local religious communities influence them.[18] Similarly, Roger Finke and his colleagues contend that when states fail to protect religious minorities and do not hold local officials accountable for discriminatory practices, discrimination can become institutionalized at the local level. Over time, discriminatory behavior becomes normalized within local administrative systems and is reproduced by successive officials. Consequently, religious discrimination evolves from isolated acts of prejudice into a persistent pattern embedded in local governance practices.[19] These perspectives suggest that the effective protection of religious freedom depends not only on constitutional guarantees but also on the consistent enforcement of those guarantees and the accountability of state actors.

2. Religious freedom in Ethiopia

2.1. Ethiopian ethnic federalism and the emergence of local autocracy

In Ethiopia, federalism was introduced to address the country's longstanding diversity challenges by decentralizing political authority to ethnically defined regional states.[20] While federalism was intended to dismantle centralized authoritarianism and create a more inclusive political order, scholars argue that it has decentralized repression instead and created localized forms of majoritarian rule.[21] Jon Abbink argues that, by treating conflicts and administrative issues as local matters, the Ethiopian federal government distanced itself from responsibility while allowing local authorities to manage local affairs,[22] yet retaining the

15 Roger Finke et al. 2017. "Explaining Discrimination against Religious Minorities," *Politics and Religion* 10, (2):389-416.

16 Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke 2011. *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press.

17 Dane R. Mataic and Roger Finke 2020. "Compliance Gaps and the Failed Promises of Religious Freedoms," *Religion, State and Society* 47, (1):124-150. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2018.1528788.

18 Jonathan Fox 2016. *The Unfree Exercise of Religion: A World Survey of Discrimination against Religious Minorities*. Cambridge University Press.

19 Finke et al., "Explaining Discrimination,"416.

20 Asnake A. Chanie 2026. "Rethinking Ethnicity and Democratic Transition in Ethiopia: Identity, Federalism, and the Crisis of Statehood," *Politics & Policy* 54, (3):e70145.

21 Sujit Choudhry (ed.) 2008. *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* Oxford University Press.

22 Jon Abbink 2006. "Ethnicity and Conflict Generation in Ethiopia: Some Problems and Prospects of Ethno-Regional Federalism," *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, (3):389-413, 391.

power to intervene or withdraw when it chooses. Abbink further contends that the Ethiopian federal government maintained a centralized, top-down system of control that was even stronger than that of its predecessors.[23] It is important to note that Abbink arrived at this conclusion based on his analysis of Ethiopia's federal experiment during the first two decades of the federal government's tenure.

Assefa Fiseha identifies the treatment of "internal minorities" as one of the major shortcomings of Ethiopian federalism. Internal minorities, defined as citizens residing outside their designated ethnic homelands, often remain vulnerable to discrimination because they are subject to the authority of regional governments dominated by local majorities. Without strong federal oversight, these groups may find themselves politically marginalized and inadequately protected by state institutions.[24]

Several studies examining ethnic federalism have similarly highlighted challenges in the protection of minority rights. These studies show that minority communities have frequently experienced systematic exclusion from economic opportunities, political participation, and public institutions at the hands of localized majorities.[25] More broadly, scholars argue that the devolution of significant political and administrative authority to regional states, special zones, and local administrations has contributed to the intensification of ethnic tensions and the proliferation of interethnic conflicts throughout the country.[26]

2.2. Constitutional guarantees in Ethiopia

The Ethiopian Constitution of 1995 guarantees freedom of religion, equality among religious communities, and the separation of religion and state.[27] These constitutional protections created favorable conditions for the expansion of evangelical Christianity throughout the country, including in Muslim-majority areas.[28] Never-

23 Jon Abbink 2011. "Ethnic-Based Federalism and Ethnicity in Ethiopia: Reassessing the Experiment after 20 Years," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, (4):596-618, 604, 606.

24 Assefa Fiseha 2006. "Theory versus Practice in the Implementation of Ethiopia's Ethnic Federalism," in David Turton (ed.), *Ethnic Federalism: The Ethiopian Experience in Comparative Perspective*, Addis Ababa University Press: 131-164.

25 Yonatan Tesfaye Fessha and Christophe Van der Beken 2013. "Ethnic Federalism and Internal Minorities: The Legal Protection of Internal Minorities in Ethiopia," *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 21, (1):32-49; Christophe Van der Beken 2015. "Federalism, Local Government and Minority Protection in Ethiopia: Opportunities and Challenges," *Journal of African Law* 59, (1):150-177; Assefa Fiseha 2017. "Intra-Unit Minorities in the Context of Ethno-National Federation in Ethiopia," *Utrecht Law Review* 13, (1):170-189; Muluneh Kassa Eresso 2021. "Challenges in Ethiopia's Post-1991 Ethnic Federalism Entwined with Ethnic-Based Political Parties," *Mizan Law Review* 15, (2):313-350.

26 Hiwot Demelash 2022. *Does Ethnic Federalism Promote Conflict? Ethiopia as a Case Study*, available at: https://tinyurl.com/34xe692f; Takele Bekele Bayu 2022. "Is Federalism the Source of Ethnic Identity-Based Conflict in Ethiopia?" *Insight on Africa* 14, (1):104-125; Asnake Kefale 2024. "Federal Constitutional Design and Ethno-Nationalist Conflicts in Ethiopia," in André van Dokkum, Alexander Meckelburg, Shauna LaTosky (eds.), *Ethnography, History, and the Politics of Knowledge in Africa,* African Studies Centre: Leiden: 105-113.

27 Yihenew Misrak et al. 2023. "The Demands and Contests of Constitutional Amendment in Ethiopia: Analysis on the 1995 Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) Constitution," *Insight on Africa* 15, (1):88-107.

28 Jörg Haustein and Terje Østebø 2011. "EPRDF's Revolutionary Democracy and Religious Plurality: Islam and Christianity in Post-Derg Ethiopia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, (4):755-772.

theless, increased religious visibility and political transformation, especially since 2018, have coincided with renewed debates concerning religion, ethnic identity, and state neutrality.[29]

Despite constitutional guarantees, the implementation of religious freedom remains uneven. Limited efforts to address local tensions, combined with the state's preoccupation with broader political and ethnic conflicts, have left many local grievances unresolved.[30] Governmental failure to provide equal legal protection can create conditions in which minority religious groups become vulnerable to discrimination and violence.[31] Moreover, the inability or unwillingness of local authorities to prevent or respond effectively to religiously motivated violence undermines public confidence in state institutions.[32] Where local officials display religious bias, institutional neutrality is weakened, and the practical exercise of religious freedom becomes constrained.[33]

3. Theoretical framework

This study uses Johan Galtung's violence triangle as its principal analytical framework. Rather than treating violations of religious freedom only as isolated acts of physical harm, the framework distinguishes among direct, structural, and cultural violence and examines how they interact. This approach is appropriate for analyzing the experiences of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia because the findings include visible attacks, unequal institutional practices, and social meanings that legitimize exclusion.

According to Johan Galtung, direct violence refers to identifiable acts that inflict immediate physical, psychological, or material harm.[34] In analyzing the findings, this category is used to interpret assaults, killings, threats, intimidation, attacks on worshipers, destruction of churches and Christian-owned property, harassment, and forced eviction. Attention is given to the actors involved, the forms of harm reported, the contexts in which attacks occur, and the consequences for the exercise of religious freedom.

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29 Jörg Haustein et al. 2026. "Introduction: Religion and Politics in Post-EPRDF Ethiopia," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 20, (2):313-333.

30 Haustein et al., "Introduction: Religion and Politics in Post-EPRDF Ethiopia"; Selahadin Eshetu Getahun, "What Went Wrong with Islam in Ethiopia?," *Addis Standard*, 29 June 2012. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/c9fzpar5.

31 Jonathan Fox 2015. *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*. Cambridge University Press; Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*.

32 Aberham Kinfe Arega 2022. "The Ignored Tears of Religious Minority Group in Ethiopia: The Case in West Arsi Zone," *Global Scientific Journal* 10, (3):1114-1151. Available at: http://www.globalscientificjournal.com/.1144-1146.

33 Solomon G/Egziabher, "Managing Religious Conflict under the Federal System of Ethiopia: The Case of Jimma Zone in Oromiya National Regional State" (Thesis, St Mary University College, n.d.). Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4p5hskbu.

34 Johan Galtung 1969. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, (3):170-171.

For Galtung, structural violence refers to preventable harm produced through unequal institutional arrangements, administrative practices, and failures of protection.[35] This category guides the analysis of land and burial-site denials, delayed permits and title transfers, selective regulatory enforcement, taxation and licensing pressures, police inaction, judicial favoritism, and the absence of effective vertical oversight. These practices are interpreted not merely as bureaucratic inefficiency but as institutional processes that systematically limit evangelical Christians' ability to realize constitutionally guaranteed rights.

Galtung's cultural violence consists of beliefs, symbols, narratives, and norms that make direct or structural violence appear legitimate, necessary, or normal.[36] The findings are therefore examined for representations of evangelical Christians and Muslim-background believers as outsiders, traitors, infidels, threats to public peace, or persons who do not properly belong to the local community. The analysis also considers how the fusion of religious and communal identity can normalize ostracism, unequal treatment, and official inaction.

The three categories are used relationally rather than as separate boxes. Cultural narratives can justify structural discrimination; structural arrangements can create impunity and opportunities for direct attacks; and recurring direct violence can reinforce fear, exclusion, and the apparent legitimacy of discriminatory institutions.[37] Galtung's triangle therefore enables the study to trace how community norms, local bureaucracies, and identifiable perpetrators mutually reinforce violations of religious freedom.

In practical terms, each finding is interpreted by asking three related questions: What visible harm occurred and who enacted it? Which institutional arrangements, decisions, or omissions enabled or reproduced that harm? Which cultural meanings made the unequal treatment appear acceptable? This sequence links evidence from interviews and documents to the three dimensions of violence while preserving distinctions among perpetrators, institutions, and legitimizing narratives.

Applied together, these concepts support the study's central interpretation: violations of religious freedom are neither solely episodic attacks nor solely administrative failures. They constitute a mutually reinforcing pattern in which direct harm, institutional inequality, and cultural legitimation sustain one another. The framework thus provides a consistent basis for interpreting the empirical evidence on bureaucratic barriers, state inaction, and non-state social hostilities.

35 Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 170.
36 Johan Galtung 1990. "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 27, (3):291.
37 Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294-295.

4. Research methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and historically informed approach to examine reported violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia after 1991. The study covers Jimma, Bale, Arsi, West Arsi, East Hararghe, West Hararghe, and Illuababor. These zones were selected because interview and documentary sources identify them as settings in which interreligious tension, discrimination, or violence has occurred.[38] The study is therefore designed to explain mechanisms and patterns within selected cases rather than to estimate the prevalence of violations across Oromia as a whole.

Participants were recruited from two groups: local evangelical church leaders, including pastors, elders, evangelists, and a regional mission coordinator; and Muslim-background believers who had experienced or witnessed religious hostility. Initially, participants were identified through regional mission coordinators using purposive sampling, and subsequent participants were recruited through chain referrals on the basis of relevant direct experience. The final sample comprised 21 interviewees across seven zones: Arsi (N=3), Bale (N=6), East Hararghe (N=2), Illuababor (N=2), Jimma (N=2), West Arsi (N=4), and West Hararghe (N=2). This strategy provided access to participants with relevant experience but concentrated the sample within evangelical networks; the sample is therefore used to identify mechanisms and reported patterns rather than to represent all evangelical Christians of the selected zones.

Interviewees comprised four categories: 4 church leaders (CL-01 to CL-04), 5 frontline male pastors/evangelists (PE-01 to PE-05), 1 frontline female evangelist (FE-01), 6 Muslim-background believers acting as indigenous missionaries (IM-01 to IM-06), and 5 lay Muslim-background believers (MBB-01 to MBB-05). These identifiers were used in the findings and analysis of the study. Data was collected through indepth interviews, document analysis, and historical review. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The study was limited by its focus on evangelical perspectives and reliance on qualitative data, suggesting the need for broader research.

5. Findings and analysis through Galtung's violence framework

5.1. Structural violence: bureaucratic and administrative restrictions

5.1.1. Weaponization of land allocation

This section analyzes bureaucratic barriers as structural violence. The central issue is not simply whether individual officials act unfairly, but whether routine institutional procedures repeatedly produce unequal access to land, burial sites,

38 Girma Defere and Jörg Haustein 2023. *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness: Insights from Jimma.* Rift Valley Institute.

permits, legal recognition, and public religious activity. The evidence is interpreted by examining the institutional mechanism involved, the unequal outcome it produces, and the way decentralized authority and weak oversight allow that outcome to persist.

Access to land for places of worship emerged as one of the most significant challenges facing evangelical churches in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. Interview participants reported that while mosques often receive prompt approval and can sometimes be constructed before formal permits are obtained, evangelical churches frequently face delays or denials when applying for land. In response, some churches purchase private land and later seek permits and title transfers. However, local authorities reportedly delay these processes, refuse title transfers, or claim that the land is not designated for religious purposes.

As one church leader (CL-01) stated, "The most prevalent challenges we face are the denial of land for church construction and the refusal to transfer the titles of ownership for land that churches have purchased." He further noted that authorities occasionally halt church construction even when it takes place on privately owned land. This suggests that land administration has become an important mechanism through which evangelical religious activities are restricted.

Interviewees reported that the denial of burial sites was used to intimidate evangelical Christians. A church leader (CL-02) explained, "In a community where having a burial place is honored, not providing one for evangelical Christians is, in a way, discouraging others from joining this faith due to their concerns that, if they were to die, they would not have a place to rest." A local pastor (PE-01) similarly stated, "When we requested a burial place, the local authorities told us to be buried where we originally came from." International religious freedom reports have also documented cases in which evangelical Christians living as religious minorities were denied burial rights.[39] Taken together, these accounts suggest that the denial of church-construction sites and burial places can operate as both administrative discrimination and a means of discouraging religious affiliation.[40]

The interviewees stated that when they appealed their cases to higher levels of government, such as zonal and regional authorities and, in some instances, even to the federal government, they did not receive the support they needed. The mission coordinator (PE-02) explained that higher-level government officials typically received their appeal letters and responded by saying that they would contact lower-level authorities and ask them to reconsider the cases.

39 U.S. Department of State 2017. *Ethiopia 2017 International Religious Freedom Report*, 6. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2v4affke.

40 Open Doors International 2025. *World Watch List: 2025 Situation of Religious Freedom for Christians in Ethiopia*, Country Dossier 17. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/4jcfpf6v.

However, he and other interviewees claimed that these officials rarely provided written responses. The interviewees perceived this practice as a means of avoiding the creation of documentary evidence. They argued that verbal communications could not serve as proof of official action. Furthermore, because of the high turnover of government personnel, they often encountered different officials each time they visited an office and were required to present their cases repeatedly. During the fieldwork, the researcher reviewed letters concerning land-related disputes that four local churches had submitted to zonal and regional government offices. Despite these submissions, no written responses were provided by the respective authorities.

5.1.2. Selective regulatory enforcement

Local authorities seem to employ existing laws, such as those restricting noise in residential areas and governing public assembly permits, disproportionately against evangelical Christians. A pastor from a zonal city in southeastern Oromia (PE-02) stated, "Muslims can engage in any religious activities on the streets, including blocking traffic during their prayers, yet we are prohibited from preaching on the streets." A similar case was reported in another study conducted in Jimma.[41] The pastor further added that young people were imprisoned for months for peacefully preaching the gospel on the city streets. He cited an incident in which Muslims attacked the young people, but no one held them accountable even though they posted their attacks against Christians on social media in 2025, encouraging others to do the same if they see Christians preaching their faith on the streets.[42]

Other interview participants also asserted that local authorities impose restrictions on evangelical Christians, limiting their ability to gather in public spaces to celebrate their holidays, while Muslims are granted this privilege. Furthermore, when such occasions arise, local authorities engage in celebrations and deliver speeches for the Muslim community. One study corroborated the interviewees' accounts by demonstrating that Protestant Christians faced significant challenges in obtaining permits for public religious activities and evangelistic events in venues such as stadiums. Although they have recently been allowed to use stadiums without rental fees, the security charges imposed by local authorities often remain prohibitively expensive, thereby restricting the practical exercise of religious freedom.[43]

5.1.3. Administrative threats and fines

Participants reported that taxation and licensing procedures were used to pressure some evangelical Christian business owners. According to their accounts,

41 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 17.
42 See TikTok video @abdeeumar5, https://tinyurl.com/3ycw7yt3., 7 June 2025.
43 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 12.

Christian-owned businesses were sometimes subjected to higher tax assessments or unofficial demands for additional payments, and refusal could result in threats to revoke business licenses. One church leader (CL-04) stated, "They wanted us to choose between our Christian faith and bribing them or shutting down our businesses." These accounts indicate a perceived use of economic and administrative discretion against evangelical Christians, although the study does not independently establish the comparative tax treatment of Christian- and Muslim-owned businesses.

Other interviewees also reported that church leaders employed in government institutions occasionally face pressure when seeking services on behalf of their churches, creating tensions between their religious commitments and professional responsibilities. A church leader (CL-03) claimed that he was denied promotion due to his active engagement in public church activities. These experiences suggest that economic and administrative mechanisms may be used to discourage evangelical activities and limit support for local churches.

The findings may indicate that due to local bureaucratic barriers, evangelical Christians encounter significant obstacles in obtaining land, building permits, burial sites, and authorization for religious activities in Muslim-majority areas of Oromia. These barriers suggest that local institutions can restrict religious freedom even in the absence of explicit discriminatory laws.

These findings parallel previous studies, which contend that Ethiopia's ethnic federalism has inadequately protected internal minorities and has enabled local majorities to exercise considerable power over local institutions. The absence of institutions for internal minorities makes them vulnerable to discrimination.[44] Similarly, Goitom Gebreluel, a political analyst, argues that post-2018 federalism decentralized authoritarian practices, creating localized centers of power that may operate with limited accountability.[45] The findings of this study suggest that similar dynamics affect religious minorities. Although evangelical Christians are not necessarily ethnic minorities, they frequently occupy a minority position within political and social environments dominated by a particular ethnoreligious majority.

Importantly, the findings do not suggest that ethnic federalism causes violations of freedom of religion but rather that it creates a decentralizing structure that allows majoritarianism. Ethnic federalism appears to facilitate these dynamics by empowering local authorities and majoritarian communities while pro-

44 Getaye Mulugeta Kasse and Gizachew Asrat Woldemariam 2022. "The Matrix of Ethnic Federalism in Ethiopia in Protecting Internal Minority Rights: Examining Perceptions in Oromia Regional State," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 9, (1):206-225.

45 Goitom Gebreluel 2019. *Should Ethiopia Stick with Ethnic Federalism? Al Jazeera*, 5 April 2019. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/2dnftykm.

viding limited institutional mechanisms for protecting minority rights. In this respect, local government institutions may become instruments through which majority interests are advanced at the expense of minority religious groups.

Interpreted through Galtung's concept of structural violence, these practices extend beyond administrative inefficiency or isolated bureaucratic delay. In this study, the denial of land, burial places, permits, title transfers, and written responses demonstrates how formally neutral administrative systems can produce unequal religious outcomes. Because these restrictions are embedded in routine bureaucratic procedures, they limit evangelical Christians' religious freedom without necessarily relying on overt physical force or explicit discriminatory legislation.

This study shows that local state actors did not establish the structures that enabled discrimination; instead, they utilized formally neutral institutional arrangements in ways that harmed religious minorities. Their actions suggest a deliberate exploitation of bureaucratic loopholes and administrative discretion to disadvantage evangelical Christians. Consequently, structural violence was reproduced not simply through the existence of institutions but through the way local actors weaponized those institutions to restrict the rights and opportunities of a minority religious group.[46]

5.2. Direct violence enabled by structural inaction

5.2.1. Law enforcement inaction

This section examines direct violence together with the structural conditions that enable it. Assaults, killings, intimidation, attacks on worship services, and property destruction constitute direct violence because they involve identifiable actors and immediate harm. Police delays, failure to arrest suspects, adverse action against victims, and judicial favoritism constitute structural violence because they reduce protection and accountability. The analysis therefore asks both what harms occurred and how institutional action or omission made their occurrence or repetition more likely.

According to several Christians' accounts, evangelical churches typically report imminent threats and incidents, such as the burning of churches and properties, attacks during worship services, and even killings of evangelical Christians, to the police. They said that the police often respond with significant delays, refuse to arrest suspected individuals, or claim that these incidents fall outside their jurisdiction. An evangelist (PE-03) cited an example in which a group of Muslims murdered an evangelist in Jimma in March 2007, and the police did not arrest the suspects.[47]

46 Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 32, 40-43, 86-87.

47 Jennifer Gold 2007. "No Justice for Murdered Ethiopian Christian," *The Christian Post*, 14 July. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/5n6dhm3e.

An evangelist (PE-04) reported an incident that occurred at his church in Illuababor. In 2024, a group of armed Muslims stormed the evangelical church in his town, attacked worshipers, and assaulted the preacher. He stated, "We reported the incident to the police. However, they arrived only after the attackers had fled. The police arrested several church leaders whom they found at the site and placed them in jail." The case was appealed to the zonal level, and a few of the attackers were arrested but subsequently released on bail. A 2024 letter from the local church to the zonal security office provided evidence for this claim. Previously, in 2011, churches were burned, Christians were attacked, and people were killed over several days in areas near Jimma, including Asendabo and Omo Nada; local government authorities did not intervene to restore peace until the federal government stepped in.[48]

5.2.2. In the name of maintaining public peace and safety

Interview participants reported that local authorities often accuse evangelical Christians of disturbing community peace and use such allegations to justify inaction or adverse measures against them. In one incident, an indigenous missionary (IM-01) stated that a mob attacked a house used for evangelical worship, destroying property and assaulting worshipers. When victims sought assistance, some were reportedly labeled as collaborators with "anti-peace groups" and discouraged from pursuing complaints. Previous studies have documented cases in which local authorities characterized evangelical street preachers as "terrorists," thereby restricting their public religious activities.[49]

These accounts suggest that state actors may indirectly legitimize hostility toward evangelical Christians by framing religious activities as threats to public order. Such narratives shift attention away from religious discrimination and portray restrictions on Christians as necessary measures for maintaining community peace. Open Doors reported that, despite political changes at the national level, local authorities have often retained the earlier regimes' distrust of Christians, thereby limiting the full enjoyment of religious freedom by Christian communities.[50]

5.2.3. Judicial favoritism

Respondents perceived local judicial institutions as favoring members of the religious majority. Participants reported that judges and prosecutors do not consider evidence, nor do they verify the accuracy of the evidence when Muslims accuse evangelical Christians of defaming Islam. The Muslims have reportedly

48 VOA 2011. "Ethiopia Charges 130 in Church Burning Incidents," 7 March. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwcwjked.
49 Defere and Haustein, *Religion, Conflict and Social Cohesiveness*, 16.
50 Open Doors International, *World Watch List: 2025 Situation of Religious Freedom for Christians in Ethiopia*, 4.

organized false witnesses to testify in the courts against innocent Christians, leading to unjust prison sentences for the evangelical Christians. In one reported case in southern Oromia in 2010, an evangelical Christian was imprisoned after being falsely accused of desecrating Islamic scriptures.[51] This pattern indicates how localized governance structures may allow majority preferences to shape the implementation of constitutional protections.

Interviewees from all zones under study reported that when a case presented by evangelical churches against alleged violations of their rights by Muslims in the areas was substantiated, it was often referred to traditional elders for mediation. However, most of these community elders were reportedly Muslim leaders, who were allegedly biased against Christians. Consequently, the issue was frequently resolved in favor of Muslims. When evangelical Christians refused to accept these resolutions, they were accused of spreading misinformation, claiming a lack of peaceful coexistence with Muslims and disrespect for local leaders. The reliance on locally embedded conflict-resolution mechanisms may reinforce majority preferences and reduce evangelical minorities' ability to obtain impartial legal protection.

In Oromia, the diversion of many civil disputes to traditional customary courts is also attributed to weak state judicial infrastructure and heavy backlogs.[52] The Ethiopian Constitution allows Sharia courts to handle family, inheritance, and civil cases when both parties consent. Because the government does not oversee these courts, this dynamic creates a loophole for internal favoritism that strips religious dissenters or women of their constitutional rights under the guise of "mutual consent."[53]

These findings suggest that dominant community preferences may influence local security institutions and may operate with limited accountability to higher levels of government. Such patterns are consistent with the argument that state inaction can encourage further violence by creating perceptions of impunity.[54] Consequently, violations of freedom of religion are reinforced not only by acts of intolerance but also by institutions' failure to provide equal protection under the law.

From Galtung's perspective, direct violence includes visible acts of harm, such as assaults, killings, intimidation, and property destruction. The findings seem to

51 Compass Direct News 2010, "Christian Jailed in Ethiopia Accused of Desecrating Quran," *The Christian Post*, 8 October. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/3pvvw24d.

52 Teferi Bekele Ayana 2023. "Administration of Justice in Customary Courts in Oromia," *Haramaya Law Review* 12, (1):1-24.

53 Mohammed Abdo 2011. "Legal Pluralism, Sharia Courts and Constitutional Issues in Ethiopia," *Mizan Law Review* 5, (1):72-104; Girmachew Alemu Aneme 2018. *The Coupling of State and Sharia Justice Systems in a Secular State: The Case of Ethiopia*, SFB-Working Paper Series, No. 75, available at: https://tinyurl.com/mpcbhwcd; Jamaluddin Ahmed 2020. "The Structural and Organizations of Sharia Courts in Ethiopia; The Case Study of Goro Gutu Woreda Sharia Court". Thesis, Wollo University. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/bddmvhj3.

54 Heiner Bielefeldt 2013. "Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief," *Human Rights Quarterly* 35, (1):33-68; Grim and Finke, *The Price of Freedom Denied*, 86-89.

show that such violence is closely connected to structural violence because police delays, failure to arrest perpetrators, and judicial favoritism create a permissive environment for further attacks. In this sense, state inaction functions as more than passive neglect; it becomes an enabling condition through which direct violence against evangelical Christians can be repeated with limited accountability.

5.3. Cultural violence and its direct social manifestations

This section analyzes the beliefs, labels, and communal norms that make exclusion and coercion appear legitimate. Representations of converts as traitors, infidels, outsiders, or threats to social peace constitute cultural violence because they normalize unequal treatment. Ostracism, dispossession, harassment, mob attacks, and property destruction are then interpreted as the structural or direct manifestations of those legitimizing meanings. The analysis thus connects discourse and identity boundaries to their material consequences.

5.3.1. Ostracization of converts

Social ostracism emerged as one of the most common forms of violations of religious freedom experienced by Muslim-background believers (MBBs). Interview participants (IM-01 to IM-06 and MBB-01 to MBB-05) reported being labeled as traitors or infidels and subjected to pressure from family members and clan elders to return to Islam. Those who refused often faced social and economic isolation, exclusion from community support networks, and restrictions on social interaction. One participant (IM-04) explained that ostracism was intended to force converts to abandon their new faith, although it often strengthened their commitment to Christianity.

Several MBBs reported more severe consequences, including loss of income, marriage breakdown, denial of inheritance rights, and eviction from family land. One participant (IM-02) recounted being divorced by his wife under pressure from clan leaders and subsequently losing access to his home and land after refusing to renounce Christianity. Interviewees also stated that appeals to local authorities frequently resulted in referrals to community elders, whose decisions generally favored the Muslim majority.

Participants further emphasized that conversion to Christianity is often viewed not only as religious apostasy but also as a rejection of community identity. An Open Doors country dossier indicates that, in many Muslim-majority communities, conversion from Islam to Christianity is understood as both a religious and cultural rupture, often resulting in social hostility toward converts.[55] The in-

55 Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, 6.

terviewees described a close association between Oromo and Muslim identities, which causes converts to be perceived as having betrayed both their faith and their community. As a result, MBBs were frequently excluded from local associations, funeral groups, and other community institutions, reinforcing their social marginalization. The same report by Open Doors documents various forms of hostility, discrimination, and violations of religious freedom directed against Muslim-background believers in Muslim-majority areas.[56]

5.3.2. Mob mobilization and property destruction

The destruction of churches and Christian-owned property was frequently reported as a form of violation of religious freedom in the study areas. Interview participants (CL-01, IM-05, IM-06, PE-03, and PE-05) alleged that some attacks were organized through local religious networks and were often directed at churches, businesses, and homes belonging to evangelical Christians. All respondents noted that periods of political unrest created opportunities for such attacks. One pastor (PE-04) explained that perpetrators sometimes exploit chaotic situations to target churches and Christian property.

Interviewees (CL-01, CL-04, IM-03, and IM-05) described the destruction of churches and properties belonging to Christians during the unrest following the assassination of the musician Hachalu Hundessa in 2020. The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission (EHRC) documented attacks on religious institutions in several Oromia towns in the aftermath of the incident.[57]

Interviewees further argued that attacks on church buildings serve purposes beyond immediate physical damage. As visible symbols of evangelical presence and community identity, churches represent the public legitimacy of the faith within predominantly Muslim communities. Consequently, their destruction functions not only to disrupt worship activities but also to discourage the growth and visibility of evangelical Christianity.

5.3.3. Microaggressions

According to interview participants, another sign of intimidation is constructing mosques near evangelical church buildings without following the necessary laws that prohibit the construction of worship places of other religious groups near established places of worship of a religious group. Interviewees alleged that some Muslims purchase property close to churches and subsequently build mosques. These Muslims secure permits for constructing mosques from local authorities

56 Open Doors International, *World Watch List 2026: Situation of Religious Freedom of Christians in Ethiopia*, 3.
57 EHRC 2021. *Violence & Human Rights Violations Following Musician Hachalu Hundessa's Assassination*, Investigation Report. Ethiopian Human Rights Commission. Available at: https://tinyurl.com/mwsukzxj.

who are Muslims without encountering any difficulties. The interviewees claimed that the Muslims use loudspeakers to disseminate Islamic songs to interfere with the services of the church. An indigenous missionary (IM-02) stated, "We appealed to the local authorities and were told that the Muslims own the land," implying that the Muslims are the indigenous owners of the land and the Christians do not belong there. The researcher received a list of places where mosques were built in proximity to the evangelical churches and verified some of them.

The interviewees also reported that Muslim young people stand on the roads and abuse Christians going to or returning from church services. Speaking of rural areas, an evangelist (FE-01) said, "We do not let girls and women walk alone as they are often harassed and physically assaulted." Another indigenous missionary (IM-06) added, "Christians are often robbed of their phones and money by Muslim young people waiting for them in secluded areas."

Finally, the findings document incidents of direct violence. Church destruction, mob attacks, assaults on worshipers, and attacks on Christian-owned businesses emerged as recurring themes across the study areas. Such attacks often occurred during periods of political instability and frequently targeted visible symbols of evangelical presence, including church buildings and religious gatherings.

The findings also record verbal harassment, threats, intimidation, and interference with worship services. These experiences created a climate of insecurity that discouraged public expressions of faith and reinforced broader patterns of religious exclusion. The recurrence of similar incidents across multiple zones suggests that these acts are not merely isolated events but form part of a broader pattern of hostility directed toward evangelical Christians. The combination of physical violence, administrative discrimination, and social exclusion indicates that violations of freedom of religion operate through multiple and mutually reinforcing mechanisms.

The experiences of Muslim-background believers further demonstrate the social dimensions of violations of freedom of religion. Many participants reported family rejection, social isolation, economic exclusion, loss of inheritance rights, and the breakdown of marital relationships following conversion to Christianity. These responses reflect the close relationship between religious affiliation and communal identity in many parts of Oromia.

The findings further demonstrate that cultural violence operates through the stigmatization of religious conversion, the social ostracism of converts, and the construction of conversion to Christianity as a betrayal of communal identity. These beliefs and normative assumptions legitimize discrimination and sustain both structural and direct forms of violence. In Muslim-majority areas, cultural violence against evangelical Christian minorities appears to justify violations of

religious freedom in three interrelated ways. First, it reinforces a clear boundary between the majority and the minority by representing evangelical Christians as outsiders who lack legitimate belonging within the local community, thereby enabling unequal treatment by local authorities. Second, it legitimizes bureaucratic discrimination through narratives that present restrictive measures as necessary for safeguarding social harmony, public stability, and majority norms. Third, it normalizes the inaction of local authorities by shifting responsibility from perpetrators to evangelical Christians themselves, particularly when they gather in private homes after being denied land for worship or when they exercise their constitutional right to share their faith and are subsequently accused of coercive proselytization.

Taken together, the findings show a mutually reinforcing configuration of violence. Galtung's framework therefore indicates that the reported violations are not a collection of isolated incidents, but a pattern in which social narratives, institutional arrangements, and visible acts of harm sustain one another.

6. Conclusions

This article shows that violations of the religious freedom of evangelical Christians in selected Muslim-majority areas of Oromia cannot be understood solely as episodic attacks or interpersonal intolerance. Applying Galtung's framework reveals a mutually reinforcing relationship among direct violence, including assault, intimidation, eviction, and property destruction; structural violence, including unequal access to land, burial sites, permits, protection, and adjudication; and cultural violence, including narratives that portray converts and evangelical communities as outsiders or threats to social peace. The study's principal contribution is to demonstrate how these forms of violence operate through localized governance; broad administrative discretion, weak vertical oversight, and majoritarian pressure can prevent constitutional guarantees from producing effective protection. The findings support stronger institutional neutrality, documented administrative decision-making, impartial law enforcement, and effective review of local decisions affecting religious minorities. Because the evidence derives from evangelical participants in selected areas, the article identifies mechanisms and patterns rather than their prevalence across Oromia or Ethiopia; comparative research incorporating officials, Muslim community leaders, other religious minorities, and additional regions is needed to test the wider applicability of the argument.

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Religious minorities in Sri Lanka

Institutional safeguards, and challenges beyond

Rohil Oberoi[1] and Dikumoni Hazarika[2]

Abstract

This study critically examines the marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka. Although the Constitution nominally guarantees freedom of religion, the preferential status accorded to Buddhism creates an uneven landscape wherein Christians encounter significant challenges in worship practices, church construction, and registering religious places. The post-Civil War era has witnessed a resurgence of ethno-religious nationalism, militarization, and a regression of constitutional safeguards, which have intensified the marginalization of minority communities. By situating the experiences of Christians within the broader discourse on minority rights and religious freedom, this research offers powerful insights into the structural and socio-political mechanisms that perpetuate religious marginalization.

Keywords

Religious freedom, Christian minority, marginalization, Sri Lanka, minority rights.

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is a small South Asian Island with a predominantly Buddhist population. Sri Lanka's minority communities include Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The Sri Lankan Constitution grants religious freedom to all minority communities; however, Buddhism is given prominence because most of the population practices the Buddhist religion (Rifai 2020). According to the latest national census (2012), the Sri Lankan population is 70.2 percent Buddhist, 12.6 percent Hindu, 9.7 percent Muslim, and 7.4 percent Christian (U.S. Department of State, 2022). A Pew Research

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Center report (2023) titled *Buddhism, Islam and religious pluralism in South and Southeast Asia* highlights that in Sri Lanka, Buddhism is frequently regarded as more than just a religion; it is a cultural and family tradition that must be followed. The report has revealed that 95 percent of Buddhists consider adherence to Buddhism essential to authentic Sri Lankan identity (Kuruwita, 2023). Sri Lanka's socio-political history reflects a complex relationship between religion and politics. During colonial rule, Buddhism, once dominant, lost its privileged status, leading to a resurgence of Buddhist nationalism among the Sinhalese majority. The growing presence of evangelical Christian movements sparked allegations of forced or unethical conversions, fueling resentment and anti-Christian hostility (Devota 2009). Buddhist monks (bhikkus) emerged as powerful political actors, openly opposing secularism and aligning themselves with Sinhalese political leaders. This politicization of Buddhism further marginalized religious minorities, placing Christians under increased scrutiny and pressure (Devota 2016).

According to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's *2025 annual report*, religious freedom in Sri Lanka continued a concerning trajectory, marked by the systematic targeting of religious minorities. Government authorities, often in collaboration with the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious, and Cultural Affairs (BRCA), the Army, and Buddhist monks, continued to target religious minorities, particularly Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, through discriminatory laws, harassment, and land appropriation. Religious minorities also faced significant bureaucratic hurdles in registering and operating places of worship. The BRCA minister mandated that all religious institutions, regardless of their faith, must now register. Authorities threatened to raid "unregistered" places of worship, alleging they were involved in religious conversions (U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2025).

In 2012, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organization, was established. It rapidly gained prominence and attracted significant media attention. The group asserted that its primary objective was to safeguard the Sinhalese community and the Buddhist faith. It raised concerns about perceived threats to Sinhalese identity in the context of globalization, warning that the Sinhalese could become a "global minority" if such other religions were given full freedom. Buddhist political leaders have been known to exploit religious identities and sentiments for political gain. By appealing to nationalist and religious ideologies, they mobilize support while simultaneously marginalizing minority groups, thereby deepening societal divides and weakening the credibility of constitutional protections (Rifai 2020). Christian groups in Sri Lanka have reported instances of harassment by police and local authorities, primarily through burdensome and inconsistently enforced registration requirements for places of worship. Although

these actions typically do not rise to the level of persecution, government officials often side with the majority Buddhist community in cases of religious disputes.

According to Verité Research's report titled *Trend analysis of violence against Christians in Sri Lanka: November 2022 - October 2023*, 63 incidents of violence or discrimination against Christians were recorded between November 2022 and October 2023, with nearly half involving state actors (Verité Research 2024). Most cases involved threats, intimidation, or discriminatory actions. Beyond state actors, non-state actors, including identifiable individuals, residents, and Buddhist clergy, target Christians. The report also revealed that of the 63 reported instances of violence against Christians from November 2022 to October 2023, 14 (22 percent) involved identifiable individuals and 11 (17 percent) involved Buddhist clergy as perpetrators (Verité Research 2024). Typical attacks against Christians involve physical and verbal threats against pastors, disruption of services, and demands for church closures. Christians in rural areas are particularly susceptible to intimidation, discrimination, and violence. Evangelical Christians are denied public burials and school admissions (or forced to study Buddhism). Building permits for churches are frequently denied or blocked by local monks, and Christians are refused land sales or property rentals. They also encounter biased legal opinions and economic embargoes preventing laborers from working for them (Yogarajah 2008). A significant driver of this intolerance is the fear of Christian expansion through proselytization, with evangelical Christian groups, known for their active proselytizing, often attracting attention and causing friction. The rise of online hate speech, including calls for violence against churches and pastors, and the spread of disinformation further exacerbate the social environment for Christians (DFAT 2024). The state's failure to protect Christian communities from threats, surveillance, and coercive measures further draws attention to the challenges they face in exercising their religious freedom in Sri Lanka (Human Rights Watch 2024).

2. Constitutional contradictions and legal exclusion

In post-colonial Sri Lanka, although state institutions initially functioned within a parliamentary democratic framework, the system gradually evolved into an ethnic majoritarian democracy. This transformation paralleled the rise of Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism, which prioritized the interests of the Sinhalese majority. The movement aimed to utilize State mechanisms to promote the Sinhala language, Buddhism, and Sinhalese-Buddhist cultural values. This ideology was institutionalized through the Republican Constitutions of 1972 and 1978, which established Sinhala as the official language, granted Buddhism a privileged position, and obligated the State to actively support the religion (Centre for Policy Alternatives 2013).

Sri Lanka's legal framework regarding religious freedom presents a complex and, at times, contradictory landscape. While Article 10 of the Constitution unequivocally guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion as an inalienable right, and Article 12 ensures equality without discrimination on grounds including religion, the practical application of these rights is significantly impacted by Article 9. This article accords Buddhism "foremost place" and mandates the state to protect the '*Buddha Sasana*' (Minority Rights Group International, 2024). The term *"Sasana"* extends beyond the teachings of the Buddha and is often interpreted as encompassing the broader concept of the Buddhist nation, which includes religious institutions and the monastic clergy (Obeyesekere 2003).

In the case of *Provincial of the Teaching Sisters of the Holy Cross of the Third Order of Saint Francis in Menzingen of Sri Lanka (Incorporation) Bill (2003),* the Supreme Court examined the constitutionality of a private member's bill aimed at incorporating a Catholic institution dedicated to promoting the Catholic faith and providing care for orphans, children, and the elderly. The Court found the bill inconsistent with Article 9 of the Sri Lankan Constitution, which accords Buddhism the "foremost place." It ruled that the propagation of Christianity through the provision of material benefits to non-Christians was impermissible, as it could undermine the existence of Buddhism or the '*Buddha Sasana.*' The judgment reinforced the interpretation that Article 9 restricts the activities of religious minorities in ways that could be perceived as challenging the primacy of Buddhism (Gunatilleke 2023).

Another example of this judicial interpretation is the *2004 Menzingen Sisters* case. In this instance, the Supreme Court ruled that the Constitution does not guarantee the right to propagate religion, specifically stating that "the propagation and spreading of Christianity would not be permissible as it would impair the very existence of Buddhism." This ruling highlights a clear tension between the broad guarantees of religious freedom and the specific protection accorded to Buddhism, suggesting that the rights of the majority religious community may receive greater protection and freedom of manifestation than those of minority religious communities (Wickremesinghe 2009). Further complicating the legal framework are provisions within the Penal Code addressing religious offenses and hate speech, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act (ICCPR Act) and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). The expansion of the draconian and abusive PTA in March 2021 is highlighted as a new tool to target religious and racial minorities, allowing two-year detention without trial for causing religious, racial, or communal disharmony (Swincer 2023). The Online Safety Bill, passed in January 2024, criminalized speech deemed to "outrage religious feelings," a vague standard susceptible to misuse against minority voices.

Table 1: Special clauses related to hate speech in the Penal Code of Sri Lanka

Section	Description
Section 290	Injuring or defiling a place of worship with the intent to insult the religion of any class.
Section 290A	Acts about places of worship with the intent to insult the religion of any class.
Section 291	Disturbing a religious assembly.
Section 291A	Uttering words with deliberate intent to wound religious feelings.
Section 291B	Deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or spiritual beliefs.

Source: MRGI, 2024

The promotion of national, racial or religious hatred that provokes prejudice, animosity or violence is forbidden by section 3(1) of the ICCPR Act. Similarly, any act that incites violence, discord, animosity, or ill will between various religious groups is illegal under section 2(1)(h) of the PTA (Minority Rights Group International 2024). Despite having laws in the Penal Code and the ICCPR Act to address religious offenses and hate speech, the Sri Lankan government has largely failed to effectively protect religious minorities, making it difficult for them to freely practice their faith (Refer to Table 1).

Fundamental liberties like the freedom of expression and the right to practice one's religion are officially protected by Sri Lanka's constitution. However, in practice, majoritarian Sinhala-Buddhist interests frequently curtail these rights. Minorities, although legally entitled to these freedoms, often experience them as conditional or symbolic rather than claimable rights. Courts regularly uphold limitations imposed on religious attire, propagation, worship, and artistic expression if these are perceived to offend Buddhist sensibilities or challenge majoritarian norms. As such, these rights are enjoyed only at the discretion of the majority, reflecting a system of paternalistic toleration rather than true legal entitlement (Gunatilleke 2023).

3. History of Christianity in Sri Lanka

Christianity in Sri Lanka is linked to colonial rule, with Catholicism introduced by the Portuguese in 1505, followed by Protestant denominations brought by the Dutch and British. Despite this history, Christians comprise less than 9 percent of the population (De Visser 2019). Catholics have largely avoided accusations of proselytism by supporting nationalist discourse and opposing evangelical missionary activities (Brown 2021). This colonial introduction often involved suppression of indigenous religions, mainly Buddhism, and preferential treatment for converts, leading to a complex legacy where Christianity became associated

with foreign influence and, for some, a challenge to traditional Sinhala Buddhist identity. Post-independence, the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism has sometimes positioned Christianity as an "other," leading to periods of tension and even violence against Christian communities, despite constitutional provisions for religious freedom. However, Christian communities, comprising both Sinhalese and Tamil adherents, have also played roles in social welfare, education, and, at times, in advocating for human rights and inter-religious dialogue within the diverse fabric of Sri Lankan society (Minority Rights Group International 2018; Religion Media Centre 2019; Rubavathanan 2021).

One of the bloodiest eras in the nation's history was the civil war that raged between the Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and the largely Sinhalese government until it ended in 2009. However, the post-war period failed to deliver lasting peace or reconciliation (Ganguly 2018). Instead, it gave rise to heightened religious nationalism, particularly among Sinhalese-Buddhist hardliners, who began targeting minority religious communities, including Christians (Gunatilleke 2018). As Buddhist nationalism gained momentum, it created societal divisions and led to communal violence and the increasing marginalization of religious minorities. Among those affected, Christians have faced widespread violations of their rights, including restrictions on religious freedom (DeVotta 2018). These violations take various forms, ranging from threats and intimidation, destruction of churches, and physical assaults, to discrimination, hate propaganda, and harassment by government authorities.

The threat is not uniform, with certain sections of the Christian population appearing "considerably more vulnerable than others." The non-Catholic portion of Christians, representing about 1 percent of the population, is highlighted as "especially vulnerable" (Swincer 2023). Likewise, Bauman and Ponniah (2017) highlight that Christians and other religious minorities experience discrimination, social harassment, and occasionally violence. Again, State laws aimed at preventing "unethical conversions" are seen as potential instruments of oppression against religious minorities (Pearl 2006).

In 2002, the monthly tabloid, the Buddhist Times, was launched as an anti-Christian newspaper. This publication featured distorted and inflammatory articles alongside vivid pictures, aiming to portray Christianity as an enemy of Buddhist culture and religion (Dhammika 2004). Various reports, including those by the U.S. Department of State and Minority Rights Group International, consistently document instances where state actors, particularly police and local government officials, are complicit in harassment, intimidation, and discrimination against Christian minorities. They often side with the majority religious communities, impede the registration and construction of churches, and fail to

adequately investigate and prosecute attacks against Christians. The government led by Mahinda Rajapaksa (2005-2015) is described as turning a blind eye to these attacks (U.S. Department of State 2023; Minority Rights Group International 2024). This culture of impunity for perpetrators of religious violence is a recurring concern (De Silva 2025). The situation highlights the need for politicians to protect minority religious rights in Sri Lanka.

4. Research methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating both primary and secondary data to explore the marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka. It employs a qualitative research approach, with primary data collected through field observations and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

A total of 12 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted across the Western and Southern Provinces of Sri Lanka, where Christian communities have a significant presence. The Southern Province comprises the coastal districts of Galle, Hambantota, Matara, and Tangalle. The Western Province includes the maritime districts of Colombo, Negombo, Dehiwala- Mount Lavinia, and Moratuwa.

FGDs' discussions aimed to capture lived experiences, perceptions, and community narratives related to the marginalization of Christians. Participants were selected using convenience sampling and included both men and women from diverse denominational, professional, and educational backgrounds, ensuring a broad representation of perspectives. Each focus group consisted of 8 to 10 participants. It was facilitated by a trained moderator proficient in Sinhala, Tamil, and English, allowing for inclusive and strong discussion across linguistic and cultural contexts. These discussions provided rich qualitative insights into the lived experiences of religious discrimination, social exclusion, and institutional bias.

In addition to FGDs, observational field notes were maintained to record contextual and non-verbal cues, including community interactions, spatial arrangements of worship places, and visible forms of state presence or restriction. The study also utilizes secondary data, systematically gathered from a wide range of credible sources. Official documents from government and non-governmental bodies, and news media articles reporting on incidents of religious persecution have also been analyzed for this study.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1. Patterns of marginalization and discrimination

Christians in Sri Lanka, particularly evangelical communities, have endured systemic marginalization and repeated acts of violence, often perpetrated by lo-

cal groups led by Buddhist monks and religious leaders. These acts range from physical assaults and destruction of church property to the murder of clergy (Minority Rights Group International 2016). Their freedom to practice their religion has been restricted. In 2003, 91 churches were attacked, demolished, or set on fire (Verité Research and NCEASL 2018). In 2009, churches such as the Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala were desecrated and robbed, while the Assemblies of God Church in Puttalam was set ablaze. Despite its legal status, state authorities destroyed the Calvary Christian Church in Rajagiriya the following year, demonstrating the public's and government's animosity towards Christian organizations (NCEASL 2019; NCEASL 2020).

Violence continued into the next decade. In 2011, the Prayer Tower Church in Marawila was desecrated using human excrement, and in 2012, mob-led disruptions, including Buddhist monks, damaged church properties and interrupted services in Puttalam. In the early 2010s, religious icons were destroyed, and worshippers were threatened at the St. Thomas Church in Kandy and the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla. A group of about 200 people, including monks, stormed the Apostolic Church in Nikaweratiya in January 2013, threatening the clergy and causing significant damage. In May, the Good Shepherd Church in Badulla was again vandalized by a group of around 50, including Buddhist monks (CPA 2013).

The trend persisted in subsequent years. The Hope Church in Panadura was attacked in 2014 by 60 individuals led by monks, while the Calvary Christian Church in Anuradhapura was vandalized by unidentified assailants. In 2015, attacks were reported on St. Anthony's Church in Jaffna and St. Thomas Church in Kandy. In June 2016, the Evangelical Church in Matara was targeted by around 50 people, including monks, who disrupted the service and assaulted members. Thirty individuals looted and desecrated the Galle Seventh-day Adventist Church in 2017. The Bethel Church in Colombo was severely damaged in July 2018 by a mob of around 70. The Vineyard Community Church in Kurunegala, previously attacked in 2009, was again targeted in January 2019 (NCEASL 2019; Kaur and Oberoi 2025). A 2016 report highlighted that 60 percent of violations were perpetrated by state actors, including police and administrative authorities, through misapplication of laws and failure to protect victims. Additionally, religious nationalist groups and mobs have contributed significantly to this hostility (Minority Rights Group International 2016).

Over the years, incidents of violence against Christians have escalated, peaking in 2019 with the tragic Easter Sunday bombings that killed over 250 people. More recent incidents include the 2020 vandalism of the Holy Cross Church in Batticaloa, the 2021 mob assault on the Grace Church in Vavuniya, and the 2022 attack on the Life Church in Colombo by a group of around 50 individuals, resulting in property destruction and physical assaults. These incidents reflect enduring

communal tensions and systemic violence against Christian minorities (NCEASL and Verité Research 2022; Oberoi and Kaur 2025). Forty-three incidents of anti-Christian violence and intimidation, including threats, disruptions of services, and physical attacks, were documented in 2023 alone (NCEASL 2024; Persecution.org 2024).

Open Doors International's report of 2025, *Sri Lanka: Persecution Dynamics – WWL 2025 reporting period 1 October 2023 - 30 September 2024,* highlighted some major incidents of violence against the religious freedom of the Christian community, more specifically. According to the report, a group of 25 Buddhist monks surrounded a pastor's home in a southern village on Sunday, 31 December 2023, threatening to beat him and drive him out if he persisted in holding church services. In response, the pastor courageously adapted by dividing his congregation into smaller groups to continue worship discreetly (Open Doors International 2025).

In 2024, Christians in Sri Lanka continued to face serious persecution and intimidation from both local communities and religious leaders. In March 2024, anonymous letters containing false accusations against a local church were distributed to households in a village. Soon after, local Buddhist monks and villagers submitted a petition to authorities demanding the cessation of the church's activities. Another incident occurred in July 2024; violence escalated when a pastor was stabbed and seriously injured. The attacker was reportedly influenced by residents who claimed the pastor was receiving foreign funds to build a church, highlighting the dangerous misinformation and hostility faced by the Christian community throughout the year (Open Doors International 2025:7).

5.2. Content analysis from focus group discussions

Several key themes emerged from the discussions. Christians live with fear of attacks and conceal their Christian identities. They face institutional bias. As a result, they have developed strategies of resistance and resilience.

5.2.1. Fear of attacks and religious expression

A dominant concern raised across all FGDs was the pervasive fear among Christians of facing backlash for expressing their faith. Participants reported a heightened sense of vulnerability, citing incidents of both verbal and physical aggression targeted at individuals and Christian institutions. These included episodes of vandalism of churches, hostile remarks, threats, and public ostracization.

A female participant from Western Province said, "They call us outsiders in our own land. I have lived here for 45 years, but during festivals, we are not even acknowledged." Such fears are not abstract but grounded in real experiences. Participants shared accounts of discrimination in employment, education, and social inter-

actions. The threat of being identified as Christian was compounded by the potential for violent retaliation. Several participants also alluded to the 2019 Easter Sunday church bombings as a turning point, after which churches became heavily guarded, while Christian community organizations became harder to locate or openly operate. The researcher corroborated these claims during field visits, noting that while churches were visibly guarded, offices of Christian organizations were discreet or difficult to find. The securitization of Christian spaces reflects the community's ongoing anxiety and reinforces the perception of being targeted and unsafe.

5.2.2. Concealment of religious identity in public and professional spaces

A common pattern observed was the deliberate hiding of one's religious affiliation as a method of dealing with challenges. Many Christians mentioned they would refrain from outwardly displaying their beliefs, for instance, by not wearing religious symbols or engaging in religious conversations in open spaces. This form of self-censorship was particularly prevalent in professional environments, where participants feared discrimination or reprimand. A participant working in a Colombo hotel said, "We are told by our employer not to disclose our religious identity if anyone asks." This was mostly a problem in places like hotels, stores, and factories, where Christian workers were told or felt like they had to hide their faith. People also avoided using religious phrases or symbols in public places like parks, malls, or on public transportation to avoid causing tension or conflict.

The concealment of religious identity was not merely a reaction to immediate threats but also a manifestation of cumulative experiences of marginalization. Participants indicated having observed or endured mockery, stereotyping, and social exclusion in both personal and professional contexts. The internalization of fear and the resulting behavioral modifications illustrate the serious extent of religious marginalization in everyday life.

5.2.3. The case of Pastor Jerome Fernando: Legal and cultural ramifications

A recurring reference in multiple discussions was the 2023 prosecution of Pastor Jerome Fernando, a prominent Christian leader charged with blasphemy[3] for allegedly making remarks deemed offensive to Buddhism. This case was frequently cited as emblematic of the contested nature of religious freedom in Sri Lanka, highlighting the differential treatment of religious communities by the state. Par-

3 Sri Lanka's blasphemy laws are defined in Articles 291A and 291B of the Penal Code, which prohibit utterances that are meant to hurt or offend religious sensitivities. Violations may result in imprisonment for up to two years, a fine, or both. These laws are criticized for potentially violating free speech and being used to target minorities and government critics.

ticipants highlighted the incident as an example of a larger institutional bias in which minority religious figures, particularly those from the Christian community, face immediate legal consequences. In contrast, members of the majority religious group are rarely held accountable for similar derogatory statements about minority faiths. A male participant from Western Province said, "We are afraid to even talk about our religion now. One wrong word, and we could be arrested like Pastor Jerome."

Participants believed that blasphemy laws and cultural standards were implemented unfairly, further marginalizing Christians and limiting open discussion about religious problems. The case of Jerome Fernando sparked broader debates about institutional bias, state surveillance, and the dwindling space for minority religious perspectives.

5.2.4. Institutional bias and legal vulnerabilities

The FGD participants exposed institutional bias against Christians in Sri Lanka. There was a strong conviction that laws governing land use, public assembly, and religious registration were either deliberately delayed or selectively enforced against Christian groups. Due to this legal vulnerability, Christians face challenges in building churches and hosting public events. Due to this systemic discrimination, the community has been forced to adopt alternative strategies, such as operating under the guise of house churches or trusts.

The FGD participants used words like "religious," "fear," "discrimination," and "beliefs" to express worries about safety and social acceptance, showing the intolerance regularly faced by Christians in Sri Lanka. Many people hide their beliefs to avoid bad consequences.

5.2.5. Resistance and resilience of the Christian community in Sri Lanka

The conversation with the FGDs also revealed how the Christian community in Sri Lanka has become more resilient. For example, to provide social services preventing the impression of proselytization, Christian organizations increasingly collaborate with Buddhist clergy and government agencies.

In order to combat discrimination and address unjust state actions, the National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka (NCEASL) and Religious Liberty Commission (RLC) have been very active in legal advocacy. The RLC advocates for religious freedom before national and international organizations, provides legal assistance, and informs Christians of their constitutional rights. It also works closely with Muslim leaders to monitor religious violence against all minorities and has spearheaded movements for institutional reform, including the creation of a Ministry of Christian Affairs. These joint and legal initiatives demonstrate the

Christian community's vibrant civic engagement in support of democratic rights and pluralism.

Many Christians have adopted regional religious and cultural customs to counteract the pervasive belief that Christianity is a vehicle promoting foreign influence. Celebrations such as the Sinhala-Buddhist New Year, Buddhist almsgiving traditions, and participation in ecumenical religious holidays (e.g., Poya and Vesak) demonstrate intentional efforts to assimilate into mainstream Sri Lankan society. Methodists, Catholics, and other religions support interfaith activities, encourage cultural awareness among converts, and prohibit public displays or disturbance during sacred Buddhist observances. These approaches reflect a deliberate shift towards contextual theology and community-based ministry fitted to Sri Lanka's distinct religious landscape.

Furthermore, respondents claimed that a lack of institutional support and increased religious antagonism pushed Christian communities to migrate to nations with more inclusive cultures. Christian leaders in Sri Lanka and overseas have aided these migrant movements by offering leadership and developing support networks. These travel patterns not only reflect sociopolitical marginalization but also demonstrate the global reach of the Christian community's coping strategies.

5.2.6. Synthesis

Across all themes, the focus group findings show that Christians in Sri Lanka face multi-layered marginalization that includes fear of propagating religion, facing legal vulnerability, and social isolation. A wider crisis of religious freedom and pluralism in the nation is reflected in selective legal enforcement. These results support the study's main argument that state policies, social pressures, majoritarian politics, and internalized coping mechanisms all contribute to the structural and experiential marginalization of Christians in Sri Lanka.

6. Reclaiming religious freedom: normative recommendations

Promoting inclusive governance and social cohesion requires the enactment of policies that foster tolerance, diversity, respect for human rights, and equitable governance for all communities. All acts of violence, discrimination, intimidation, and hate speech based on religious affiliation should be investigated and prosecuted promptly and impartially, irrespective of the identity of the perpetrators. In this regard, judicial sensitivity must be strengthened to ensure the fair and impartial handling of cases involving religious violence and discrimination against Christians, with those responsible being held accountable under the law. Legislative reforms are equally important to safeguard Christian religious freedoms and minority rights by strengthening existing legal frameworks, introduc-

ing effective protective measures, and ensuring equal treatment for all religious communities. Furthermore, a fundamental shift in attitudes is needed among government institutions, law enforcement agencies, and civil society to foster a culture of inclusivity and actively protect the rights of religious minorities. Finally, international engagement should be strengthened through collaboration with international human rights organizations and foreign missions to draw global attention to issues concerning religious freedom and minority rights in Sri Lanka and to encourage meaningful measures to address these challenges.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of religious freedom and minority rights in Sri Lanka discloses a worst-case scenario of marginalization of the Christian population. Although there are constitutional articles that guarantee freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and the prohibition of discrimination, Christians regularly experience fear, verbal and/or physical assault, and systematic discrimination in fields of employment, education, and social life. This atmosphere is so pervasive that it often causes people to cover up their religious identity even in the workplace and other social settings, revealing a significant gap between legal frameworks and lived reality.

In response to this persecution, the Christian population has adopted primarily nonviolent strategies, mindful of its minority position within a predominantly Buddhist country and the limited commitment to democratic values. However, regardless of the changing governments in Sri Lanka, violence and discrimination remain consistent. Legal reforms, like modifying the Buddhism clause (because it gives preference to the Buddhist faith), or removing old legislation, are unquestionably necessary. At the same time, constitutional protections and amendments to laws are ineffective without a broader political revolution that dismantles entrenched majoritarianism and promotes a truly inclusive political culture (Gunatilleke 2023). At the grassroots level, religious leaders, civil society actors, and interfaith-based organizations such as the National Peace Council and Caritas Sri Lanka have worked together to encourage interreligious cooperation in Sri Lanka. In a situation where top-down political solutions have frequently failed to address long-standing grievances and mistrust among religious communities, such bottom-up peacebuilding initiatives are essential, as stated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2019).

Oberoi and Kaur (2025) also argued that religious plurality is necessary in Sri Lanka's multi-religious society, where Buddhism is the majority religion but Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity are also practiced. Encouraging mutual respect, tolerance, and understanding among different religious groups promotes peace-

ful coexistence. Pluralism reduces community conflicts and promotes a sense of belonging and inclusivity. As a result, this study supports the idea of establishing a pluralistic society in which an existing multi-religious society can allow all citizens to peacefully practice their faith.

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Promoting interreligious and democratic competencies in future educators

Findings from Georgia

Lena-Elene Jajanidze[1]

Abstract

Navigating religious diversity is central to democratic education, yet formal legal neutrality can mask structural inequalities. In Georgia, where the Orthodox Church's majoritarian privileges often contrast with constitutional equality, this study examined interreligious values, attitudes, and self-reported pedagogical readiness among 53 pre-service teachers in a one-year teacher preparation programme. Focus group discussions explored participants' critical dispositions through the lens of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Although participants endorsed universal humanistic values, many conflated *de jure* legality with *de facto* justice. Only those with prior intercultural or religious education training demonstrated readiness to apply diversity pedagogically.

Keywords:

Interreligious competence, freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), teacher preparation, substantive equality, democratic culture, intercultural education, Georgia.

1. Introduction

Religion significantly shapes political, social, and personal life, thereby influencing voter behaviour (Esmer & Pettersson 2007), political participation (Driskell et al. 2008), economic preferences (Gill & Lundsgaarde 2004), and attitudes towards social policy (Koch 2006). At an individual level, religion forms a core part of identity, providing belonging and guiding personal development (Cushner et al.

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2000; Gill 2001). In Georgia, where approximately 83 percent of the population adheres to the Georgian Orthodox Church, far exceeding the Muslim (11 percent) and Armenian Apostolic (3 percent) minorities (Geostat 2016), navigating religious diversity is a critical educational imperative.

Formally, Georgia's legal framework, including Article 16 of the Constitution of Georgia (1995) and Article 13 of the Law on General Education (2005), mandates religious neutrality and non-discrimination in public schools. However, from the perspective of protecting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) (Bielefeldt 2013), this nominal equality often masks structural hierarchies, wherein the socio-political dominance and institutional privileges of the majoritarian Orthodox Church systematically marginalise religious minorities within public education. Reports consistently indicate that religious minorities face systemic barriers in educational settings, exacerbated by a gap between *de jure* neutrality and *de facto* majoritarian privileges (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2022; Public Defender of Georgia 2020-2023).

Addressing these disparities requires moving beyond a superficial reliance on formal legal protections, such as statutory non-discrimination clauses and declaratory mandates of school neutrality, which often create a false sense of compliance among educators. Instead, teacher education demands the development of substantive interreligious competencies that enable prospective teachers to critically recognise, reflect upon, and navigate non-formalised power asymmetries and majoritarian dynamics in the classroom (OSCE/ODIHR 2007). Teacher preparation programmes are the fulcrum of this transformation. Educators are expected to model inclusive practices, respect diversity, and foster democratic values (Council of Europe 2017); however, achieving these goals requires specific religious literacy to translate formal policy frameworks into equitable practice.

The driving hypothesis of this article is that while future educators in Georgia frequently express strong humanistic commitments, an uncritical reliance on formal legal neutrality, combined with a lack of targeted interreligious training, leaves them inadequately prepared to address structural religious inequalities in practice. To substantiate this argument, this study examines the knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills of students enrolled in Georgia's national one-year (60-credit) post-baccalaureate teacher preparation programme. Designed for university graduates holding subject-matter degrees and seeking state teacher certification, this mandatory programme operates under national qualification standards that formally emphasise democratic values, yet it lacks a dedicated curriculum on interreligious education or FoRB (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement 2016). Rather than merely documenting these competencies, the analysis explores how teacher education should evolve to bridge the gap between theoretical legal parity and the complex reality of religious diversity.

Ultimately, this article explores the potential of a pedagogical shift towards teaching for substantive equality.

2. Contextualising interreligious education: From formal neutrality to substantive competence

To understand the critical role of interreligious education, we can begin by noting that religion broadly shapes personal identity, social cohesion, democratic participation, and educational practice (Cushner et al. 2000; Driskell et al. 2008; Esmer & Pettersson 2007; Gill 2001; Koch 2006). The tension between *de jure* constitutional guarantees and *de facto* majoritarian hegemony in education is a central theme in European human rights jurisprudence. Under Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and Article 2 of Protocol No. 1, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) mandates that states must maintain strict neutrality and impartiality, ensuring that public education is conveyed in an objective, critical, and pluralistic manner (Evans 2008).

The practical enforcement of this ECHR standard of objective, critical, and pluralistic educational neutrality highlights the difficulty entailed in protecting religious minorities within majoritarian systems. In *Folgerø and Others v. Norway* (2007), the ECtHR ruled that the qualitative and quantitative dominance of Christianity in mandatory curricula violated parental rights, establishing that exemption mechanisms must not impose psychological pressure or undue burdens on minority students (Martinez-Torrón 2012). Conversely, while the Grand Chamber in *Lautsi and Others v. Italy* (2011) accepted the display of crucifixes as a 'passive symbol' within the state's margin of appreciation, the ruling underscored the ongoing risk that institutionalised majoritarian symbols could compromise classroom inclusivity. Finally, in *Osmanoğlu and Kocabaş v. Switzerland* (2017), the court affirmed that although social integration can justify mandatory participation in school activities, the overarching objective remains the cultivation of pluralism and tolerance. Together, this jurisprudence demonstrates that formal legal neutrality is insufficient if state-sponsored frameworks subject minority students to structural assimilation or psychological marginalisation

In Georgia, constitutional and educational frameworks formally guarantee religious freedom and promote inclusivity (Constitution of Georgia, Article 16; Law on General Education of Georgia 2005, Article 13; European Convention on Human Rights 1950). Yet despite these legal provisions, societal and institutional engagement with religious diversity remains highly uneven (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2022; Public Defender of Georgia 2020-2023).

In view of this systemic discrepancy between formal guarantees and practical realities, the cultivation of specific interreligious competencies emerges as a

pedagogical necessity. Often referred to as religious literacy, these competencies extend far beyond the mere acquisition of factual knowledge about different religious traditions. Rather, they encompass the cognitive, affective, and reflective capacities required to critically evaluate worldviews and navigate power dynamics within pluralistic societies (Koch 2006).

Koch (2006) analytically frames this competency through two interrelated principles: synergy and normativity. Synergy involves a deep, reflective engagement with one's own beliefs, establishing the foundation for personal agency; normativity denotes the capacity for critical, respectful interreligious dialogue and the recognition of shared ethical frameworks. From an analytical perspective, these principles are not static traits but active processes. They are essential for transforming religious diversity from a potential source of conflict into a resource for democratic learning. However, developing these dual capacities is inherently complex. Encounters with cultural or religious difference frequently provoke anxiety, uncertainty, or avoidance, reflecting psychological barriers tied to perceived 'otherness' (Baffelli 2023; Dinnel et al. 2002). Consequently, moving from a stance of value-neutral avoidance to constructive, reflective engagement requires targeted pedagogical intervention (Greeley 1989; Koch 2006).

To understand why pedagogical intervention in Georgia often falls short, these psychological barriers must be analysed alongside the structural context. While the Georgian legal framework nominally aligns with democratic principles of religious freedom, a critical FoRB perspective reveals significant underlying tensions (Bielefeldt 2013). According to the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools (OSCE/ODIHR 2007), state education must actively ensure pedagogical objectivity to protect minority rights against structural marginalisation. Yet critical FoRB scholarship emphasises that constitutional guarantees of equality frequently mask *de facto* hierarchies, particularly in post-Soviet contexts where a dominant religion is intrinsically tied to national identity (Bielefeldt 2013; Metreveli 2020). As Bielefeldt (2015) highlights, relying on formal legal parity is academically and practically insufficient. Systemic privileges granted to a majority church, such as those institutionalised in Georgia, can inadvertently undermine genuine religious freedom in educational settings by normalising majoritarian dominance.

This structural illusion of equality directly impacts the efficacy of teacher education. Empirical studies in Georgia reveal a consistent pattern: although individuals generally express a formal, superficial acceptance of religious diversity, meaningful interreligious or intercultural engagement remains critically low (Gambashidze 2017; Jajanidze 2022; Kublashvili 2021; Malazonia et al. 2017; Tabatadze et al. 2013). Prospective educators are expected to demonstrate intercul-

tural sensitivity and address diverse learner needs (Law on Teacher Education, n.d.). However, without a critical awareness of the distinction between *de jure* neutrality and *de facto* structural asymmetry, teachers risk inadvertently reproducing the very marginalisation the legal framework claims to prevent.

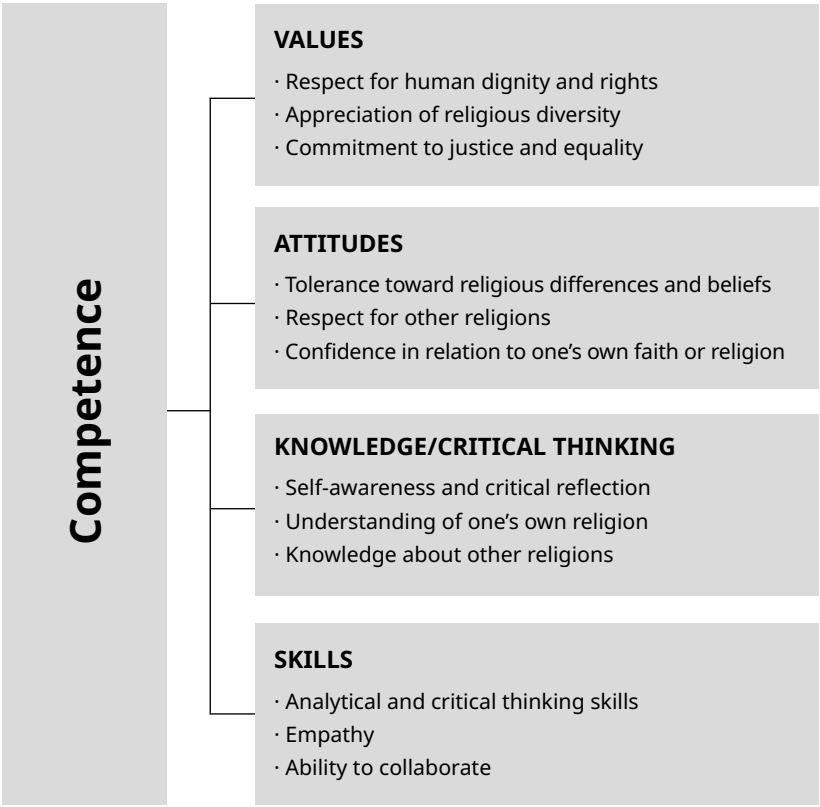
Internationally, the Council of Europe's Competences for Democratic Culture (2017) demand the active integration of knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills to disrupt these superficial understandings of parity. Therefore, evaluating Georgia's one-year (60-credit) teacher preparation programme requires more than assessing basic intercultural and interreligious literacy. It necessitates an analytical focus on whether the programme successfully equips students to recognise systemic privileges, negotiate cognitive anxieties surrounding 'otherness,' and foster substantive equality in their future classrooms. By situating the empirical findings within this critical theoretical nexus, this study explores the extent to which prospective educators are genuinely prepared to navigate the complexities of religious diversity.

3. Research design and methodology

This qualitative study examined how pre-service teachers perceive, articulate, and critically reflect upon religious diversity in the context of democratic citizenship education. The study focused on Georgia's national one-year teacher preparation programme (60 ECTS), the post-baccalaureate pathway for graduates seeking certification to teach in public schools.

Data was collected in March-April 2024 through focus-group discussions with 53 participants enrolled in the programme across five higher education institutions in Georgia, including three in Tbilisi and two in regional centres. The sample comprised 38 female and 15 male participants specialising in civic education (n = 32), history (n = 14), and Georgian language and literature (n = 7). Participants included Georgian Orthodox Christians (n = 46), Muslims (n = 5), and unaffiliated persons or other religious participants (n = 2). The institutional distribution was intended to provide variation in geographic, social, and religious backgrounds rather than to enable university-level comparison.

Focus-group discussions explored four dimensions aligned with the Competences for Democratic Culture (Council of Europe 2017): knowledge and critical understanding, values, attitudes, and skills. Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, combining deductive coding based on these competence dimensions and FoRB frameworks with inductive coding of emergent themes. National educational and regulatory documents, including the Law of Georgia on General Education, the National Curriculum, the Teacher Professional Standard, and relevant human rights monitoring reports, were used as contextual sources.



The analysis was guided by four research questions:

1) How do future teachers understand and reflect upon cultural and religious identities?
2) What values regarding religious diversity, justice, and equality do they express?
3) What attitudes towards religious differences and non-majoritarian beliefs emerge?
4) How prepared do participants perceive themselves to be to navigate religious diversity and power asymmetries in public-school classrooms?

4. Analysis of research findings

In accordance with national accreditation standards and the unified national framework governing Georgia's one-year teacher preparation programme, university mis-

sions and programme curricula across institutions share a shared normative mandate: explicitly emphasising the promotion of democratic competencies, adherence to European educational standards, and the cultivation of values and skills aligned with these principles. Likewise, the official curricula of the programme across institutions integrate democratic and intercultural values designed to prepare future educators to work effectively in religiously, culturally, and linguistically diverse classrooms. These institutional requirements are reinforced by national legislation, including the Law of Georgia on Higher Education (2004), the Law of Georgia on General Education (2005), the Teacher Professional Standard (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia 2020), and the Code of Ethics for Teachers.

Although these legislative frameworks and university-level curricula formally emphasise democratic competencies and intercultural values, the empirical data reveal a significant divergence between institutional declarations and the lived realities of prospective educators. Rather than merely describing participant responses, the following analysis examines these empirical findings through the lens of interreligious competence, highlighting the structural tensions between declared humanistic ideals, deeply ingrained majoritarian norms, and practical pedagogical readiness.

4.1. Values

The study participants universally endorsed respect and care as core pedagogical values, often grounding these ideals in humanistic principles or religious beliefs such as forgiveness and equality. However, focus-group discussions exposed a notable normative gap between these declared values and actual attitudes. While participants theoretically advocated for the equal treatment of diverse students, their practical reflections frequently revealed an implicit preference for Orthodox Christianity and ethnically homogeneous peers. This dissonance often manifested as stigmatisation towards non-religious individuals or religious minorities. One participant's experience illustrated this point: 'I myself was an example of this unequal treatment. I was not baptised. I felt that I was not like the others – not as much of a Christian as they were. Society influenced me, and I felt pressured. Eventually, I decided to be baptised.' This account highlights the pervasive social pressures that enforce majoritarian conformity, contradicting formal commitments to inclusivity. It may be also understood as a form of psychological coercion and structural marginalisation, potentially constituting a direct violation of FoRB. Furthermore, many respondents explicitly linked Orthodox Christianity with national identity and civic values, treating Orthodoxy as functionally a state religion. Such ethnocentric conceptions of national belonging suggest that the development of genuine interreligious values requires more than theoretical endorsement; it demands critical reflection on how majoritarian hegemony shapes personal and professional attitudes.

4.2. Knowledge or critical reflection

Regardless of their specific affiliation, all respondents identified religion as a central component of their identity, with none expressing complete indifference. However, the depth of interreligious knowledge varied significantly. Muslim participants and students from history programmes demonstrated a more nuanced understanding of diverse faiths, particularly Abrahamic traditions, than their Orthodox Christian counterparts, who relied primarily on family, church, or school-based instruction rather than independent inquiry.

Analytically, the data showed a direct correlation between interreligious exposure and critical openness. Participants who engaged deeply with unfamiliar religions exhibited more nuanced understandings of rituals and traditions, which increased their receptivity to diversity without compromising their personal beliefs. Conversely, a lack of knowledge generated anxiety. As one respondent noted, 'I have never been to a synagogue or a mosque because I feel uncomfortable. … I am afraid I might not behave appropriately. … I don't know how to act, for example, in a mosque.' However, when proactive engagement occurs, cognitive barriers are dismantled: 'I decided to familiarise myself with the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses, curious about what was written that so many people feared. … There was nothing dangerous. I now understand that they believe, and I do too, just in a different way.'

4.2.1. Awareness of legal rights and status of religious minorities

Consistent with the theoretical framework's distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* equality, participants exhibited limited awareness of the actual legal status of religious minorities. Most uncritically defended the Georgian legislative framework, citing superficial examples (e.g., the freedom to wear headscarves or pray) as absolute proof of systemic equality. Relying on the trope of 'Georgia's long-standing history of tolerant attitudes,' the majority avoided critically examining the law's structural application.

Notably, in one focus group featuring both Muslim and Orthodox Christian students, Muslim participants were markedly reserved in expressing concerns about religious inequality, whereas Christian participants felt more secure in openly critiquing the implementation of minority rights. This dynamic itself underscores an underlying power asymmetry that contradicts the students' assumptions of unproblematic equality.

4.2.2. Participation in religious holidays and non-working days

The structural illusion of equality became most evident when the subjects discussed public holidays. According to Georgia's Labour Code (2010), 13 holidays (totalling 17 days of the year) are non-working, of which the majority are Orthodox

Christian; minority religious holidays are largely disregarded. Minorities remain dependent on employer discretion for alternative rest days, lacking guaranteed protection (Institute for Tolerance and Diversity 2023).

Most respondents, including some minority representatives, were initially unaware of these provisions. However, upon reflection, participants universally acknowledged that this institutionalised privileging of Orthodox holidays is 'not entirely fair.' A Muslim participant articulated the emotional impact of this structural disparity: 'This truly makes me feel a sense of injustice. … How is this handled in European countries? Surely it's possible to share.'

Respondents recognised that such practices constrain the public expression of minority faiths, such as by causing challenges for Muslims performing prayers in educational settings, and foster majoritarian dominance. This realisation highlighted a critical gap between formal legal protections and practical implementation, directly hindering the cultivation of substantive interreligious competencies.

4.2.3. Financial support for religious organisations

Further demonstrating an emerging yet incomplete critical reflection, nearly half of the respondents critiqued the state's financial and property allocations to the Orthodox Church as a form of 'political indulgence.' One participant stated, 'Privileges should not be granted to any single religion … even in financial matters.' While respondents recognised that such structural advantages undermine genuine religious freedom, they struggled to articulate alternative, equitable frameworks. Analytically, this reveals a specific pedagogical challenge: while future teachers can identify systemic inequality when prompted, they lack the conceptual tools and interreligious training necessary to propose practical solutions that balance majoritarian realities with minority rights.

4.3. Attitudes

The development of interreligious attitudes is a dynamic process shaped by exposure, cognitive biases, and long-term socialisation. The qualitative data illustrate how initial perceptions-often rooted in fear or stereotypes-dictate relational dynamics in diverse settings.

4.3.1. Interreligious experience

Direct, ongoing interaction with diverse religious groups strongly correlated with tolerant attitudes. Conversely, limited experience bred scepticism. A substantial majority of participants (representing approximately two-thirds of respondents across four of the five focus groups) exhibited a clear bias towards Abrahamic religions, dismissing other faiths as less legitimate 'sects.' This unfamiliarity frequently manifest-

ed itself as anxiety towards newer religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Baha'is (often confused with Bábism), driven by misinformation: 'Other sects don't, but Bábism scares me because I first learned about it in a negative context, hearing that its followers carried out terrorist acts. … Even after seeking more information, I still feel a certain fear towards them.' These reflections indicate that deconstructing negative initial biases requires sustained pedagogical intervention, emphasising that exposure and critical reflection are indispensable for attitude transformation.

4.3.2. Gender aspects

Preliminary observations from the data suggest a gendered dimension to interreligious apprehension, with female participants reporting higher levels of anxiety regarding unfamiliar rituals. This hesitation was not rooted in hostility or perceived threat, but rather in a fear of committing social or religious missteps: 'I'm not very religious. That's why I avoid interacting with them; I don't want to unintentionally offend sacred topics … it's more that I'm afraid of making a mistake.'

Given the study's qualitative scope, sample size (N = 53), and demographic overrepresentation of female participants (38 female and 15 male, mirroring broader national enrolment trends in teacher education), this pattern should be treated as a preliminary observation rather than a definitive gender-based conclusion. Crucially, however, it illustrates a broader pedagogical challenge, in that the lack of practical interreligious knowledge actively paralyses social interaction. This issue warrants more extensive investigation across larger, quantitatively representative samples.

4.3.3. Attitudes towards Muslim ethnic Azerbaijanis in Georgia

The intersection of religious and ethnic identity heavily influenced participant attitudes. Respondents generally demonstrated higher acceptance of ethnically Georgian Muslims compared to Azerbaijani Muslims, frequently citing language barriers and cultural distance. Strikingly, one focus group expressed intense hostility towards ethnically Georgian converts, exposing deeply entrenched ethnocentric expectations: 'I cannot forgive a Georgian for being Muslim or practicing any other religion if I find out they have changed their faith.' This conflation of national identity and Orthodox Christianity underscores that negative attitudes towards non-Orthodox individuals persist strongly. It signals an urgent need for teacher preparation programmes to address diversity management and the decoupling of civic identity from religious affiliation.

4.4. Skills

Ultimately, the translation of knowledge and attitudes into pedagogical action (skills) remains the most significant challenge. When participants were asked

how they would navigate religious diversity and power asymmetries in public school classrooms, a majoritarian pattern of pedagogical avoidance emerged across focus groups. Confronted with sensitive topics or potential normative friction, participants predominantly reported relying on instructional silence, topic suppression, or passive adherence to an unexamined concept of 'neutrality'. As one civic education teacher candidate explicitly admitted, 'Religious diversity creates a challenge because people may have different opinions. … I might have to skip certain topics.' This reliance on instructional avoidance underscores a critical gap in practical pedagogical skills. Lacking specialised didactic tools to moderate value conflicts, future teachers revert to self-censorship and curricular omission. In practice, this instructional silence disproportionately affects religious minorities, as it leaves dominant majoritarian narratives unexamined and deprives minority students of an inclusive, safe space for self-expression.

A crucial empirical divergence emerged when comparing participants across subject specialisations and prior educational backgrounds. Candidates who lacked specific exposure to intercultural pedagogy or religious history expressed profound paralysis when asked to address majoritarian, religiously laden curricular content in pluralistic classrooms. When discussing how to teach about Abo Tbileli,[2] a core component of the Georgian literature curriculum depicting a Muslim Arab who converted to Christianity and was martyred, a respondent lacking relevant training expressed avoidance: 'I don't understand how I'm supposed to teach 'Abo' differently … should I hide it or make up a new story?'

Conversely, a minority of participants, specifically those who had completed prior targeted undergraduate coursework in the history of religions or intercultural education, demonstrated marked reflective agency and practical readiness. Rather than resorting to avoidance or distortion, these candidates articulated multi-perspective pedagogical strategies and the ability to contextualise sensitive heritage texts: 'Couldn't I give students a topic to write about, such as Abo's sister's diary? They could explore her experiences and doubts.' Another added, 'The topic of Abo is important for Christians … I could focus on his behaviour towards friends and family to present a nuanced perspective.'

These reflections confirm that targeted intercultural training is essential. The focus-group process itself served as a catalyst for critical self-reflection, as participants confronted their own unconscious biases. For instance, one participant reflected upon a childhood interaction with a Muslim peer regarding dietary re-

2 Abo Tbileli was an 8th-century Christian martyr of Arab origin who converted from Islam and was executed for his faith in Tbilisi around 6 January 786. He is venerated as a saint in the Georgian Orthodox tradition and is remembered as a symbol of religious conviction and interfaith history in Georgia (Georgian National Academy of Sciences, n.d.

strictions: 'Now I realise how awkward I behaved and probably projected onto him. I now understand that incident and my behaviour.'

This reflective shift confirms that prospective teachers possess the capacity for interreligious growth when provided with structured, deliberative spaces. However, without the systematic integration of scenario-based learning and critical FoRB literacy in state-accredited teacher preparation programmes, this self-reported readiness remains dormant, leaving future educators unprepared to handle real-time classroom dynamics.

5. Discussion

Synthesising the empirical evidence demonstrates a critical disconnect between normative democratic aspirations and actual pedagogical agency among pre-service teachers in Georgia. Although participants demonstrated strong endorsement of abstract human rights principles, their conceptualisations of pluralism remained heavily constrained by unexamined majoritarian assumptions and a formalistic understanding of state neutrality. This disconnect produces an uncritical endorsement of formal legal frameworks that, in practice, masks majoritarian hegemony, ultimately compelling pre-service teachers towards pedagogical avoidance when confronted with religious diversity in the classroom. Consequently, generic teacher preparation fails to foster the reflective agency required to transform religious complexity into an active resource for democratic citizenship. Addressing this systemic challenge requires moving beyond abstract humanistic declarations towards structural FoRB literacy and scenario-based pedagogical action.

5.1. The pedagogical paradox: De jure parity vs. de facto majoritarian hegemony

The thematic analysis of prospective teachers' knowledge base and value orientations reveals a significant tension between formal legal principles and lived institutional realities. When evaluating the educational and societal status of religious communities, participants initially maintained a strong defence of Georgia's legal and constitutional framework, framing it as inherently neutral, fair, and rooted in a historical tradition of national tolerance. However, when they were prompted to examine concrete institutional asymmetries, such as the state's preferential calendar designation of majoritarian religious holidays or privileged financial allocations, a sharp cognitive dissonance emerged. Participants initially perceived the *status quo* as equitable, but detailed systemic analysis compelled many to acknowledge that formal equality on paper does not automatically translate into substantive fairness in daily life.

This empirical pattern directly validates Bielefeldt's (2013, 2015) theoretical critique regarding the frequent confusion of formal (*de jure*) parity with substantive (*de facto*) equality under FoRB standards. Without critical FoRB literacy, future educators mistake statutory non-discrimination clauses for actual societal equity, overlooking how majoritarian privilege operates through implicit institutional norms, official calendars, and socio-cultural dominance.

Furthermore, this uncritical posture carries profound pedagogical consequences. As established in ECtHR jurisprudence, most notably *Folgerø and Others v. Norway* (2007) and *Lautsi and Others v. Italy* (2011), public educational environments that fail to critically interrogate state-sponsored religious privileges inevitably exert an undue psychological pressure on religious minority students, compelling implicit conformity or socio-religious marginalisation. In the Georgian context, where Orthodox Christianity is tightly interwoven with national identity, an educator's inability to identify structural asymmetry reinforces majoritarian dominance within the classroom, converting public schools from inclusive spaces of democratic learning into environments of passive assimilation.

5.2. Cognitive anxiety, 'synergy,' and the intersectional boundaries of identity

The data on prospective teachers' attitudes towards religious differences and non-majority belief systems revealed a pronounced hierarchy of tolerance. While traditional Abrahamic faiths (such as Islam and Judaism) were generally granted a baseline of socio-historical legitimacy, non-majority and non-Abrahamic groups, specifically Jehovah's Witnesses and Baha'is, were frequently marginalised through stigmatising framing as 'sects' or potential threats to social cohesion. Moreover, intersectional dynamics deeply conditioned these attitudes:

- Ethno-Religious Boundaries: Participants exhibited high acceptance towards ethnic minority Muslims (e.g., Azerbaijani Georgians), framing their faith as an acceptable, traditional component of their ethnic heritage.
- National Belonging vs. Apostasy: Conversely, ethnic Georgian converts to Islam or Protestantism were frequently viewed with scepticism or overt disapproval, with their conversion being interpreted as a betrayal of Georgian national identity.

These findings map directly onto Koch's (2006) theoretical model of interreligious competence, specifically the dimension of synergy. Koch posits that true interreligious synergy requires an individual to possess both a secure, critically reflected understanding of their own identity and a deep cognitive familiarity with the internal logic of the 'other.' When pre-service teachers lack structured knowledge regarding non-majority belief systems, their attitudes are dictated by societal stereotypes and identity preservation mechanisms.

As highlighted by Baffelli (2023) and Dinnel et al. (2002), high levels of cognitive anxiety, stemming from a fear of making doctrinal errors, losing control over classroom discussion, or compromising national-religious identity, lead educators to erect rigid boundaries around group identity. Consequently, attitudes towards diversity remain reactive rather than reflective; without systematic intervention, cognitive anxiety converts pluralism from a democratic resource into a perceived socio-cultural threat.

5.3. Pedagogical readiness, 'normativity,' and practical skills: moving beyond avoidance

When evaluating self-perceived and practical pedagogical readiness to handle religious diversity in public school classrooms, the vast majority of pre-service teachers reported a reliance on strategies of pedagogical avoidance. The primary tactics cited included skipping controversial textbook sections, enforcing a strict silence on religious topics, and retreating to a superficial, non-committal stance of 'neutrality.' However, a crucial exception emerged among participants who had completed prior specialised coursework in history or intercultural education. These individuals demonstrated marked reflective agency and practical confidence, proposing multi-perspective pedagogical strategies. For instance, when discussing historical narratives laden with religious complexity, such as the hagiography of Abo Tbileli, these candidates demonstrated the ability to contextualise the text historically and humanistically, enabling constructive discussion without imposing dogmatic interpretations or alienating non-Orthodox students. This divergence in practical capability illustrates Koch's (2006) concept of normativity, or the capacity to actively negotiate, moderate, and resolve value conflicts within pluralistic spaces on equal terms. General teacher training instils basic pedagogical theories, but it fails to impart the specialised skills required for normative negotiation.

This observation is corroborated by the Council of Europe's (2017) Competences for Democratic Culture (CDC) framework, which emphasises that abstract democratic values and cognitive knowledge remain inert unless accompanied by targeted practical skills, such as multi-perspective analysis, critical listening, and conflict transformation. Without deliberate scenario-based training, pre-service teachers lack the practical tools necessary to operationalise democratic values, falling back on avoidance and thereby perpetuating majoritarian silence in the classroom.

5.4. Policy and curricular implications for 60-credit teacher preparation programme

The empirical and theoretical insights synthesised in this study carry direct policy implications for higher education reform and national teacher qualification

frameworks in Georgia, particularly regarding the standardised 60-ECTS Teacher Preparation Educational Program.

To bridge the gap between abstract democratic values and practical classroom competence, systemic curricular restructuring is required across three core pillars:

- Embedding mandatory FoRB modules: The 60-ECTS curriculum must integrate dedicated instruction on human rights and FoRB literacy. Training must move beyond basic legal overviews to include critical analytical tools that help teachers recognise structural asymmetry, dynamics of church-state relations, and minority rights.
- Transitioning to scenario-based pedagogy: Teacher preparation courses must reduce reliance on passive lecture formats and adopt case-based, scenario-driven instruction. Exposing pre-service teachers to simulated classroom dilemmas helps de-escalate cognitive anxiety, moving educators away from strategies of avoidance and towards active moderation.
- Institutionalising multi-perspectivity in subject didactics: Subject-specific methodology courses (especially in history, literature, and civic education) must explicitly model multi-perspective teaching methods. Educators should be trained to present historical and cultural texts through diverse lenses, enabling them to honour cultural heritage without marginalising non-majority students.

While this study provides nuanced qualitative insights into the dispositions of 53 pre-service teachers across Georgia, the analytical scope of these findings suggests critical pathways for future empirical inquiry. The qualitative focus-group design effectively captured socially negotiated discourse and self-reported readiness; however, prospective educators' articulated values and stated pedagogical strategies may diverge from their real-time behavioural choices in complex classroom environments.

Building directly upon the empirical patterns identified in this research, particularly the high levels of cognitive anxiety and reliance on pedagogical avoidance, future studies could employ longitudinal, classroom-based observational frameworks to evaluate how graduates of the 60-ECTS programme manage religious diversity in practice over time. Intervention studies evaluating dedicated, scenario-based FoRB modules within teacher education curricula will be essential to establish evidence-based models for overcoming majoritarian blind spots.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the cultivation of interreligious competence and democratic readiness in future educators requires significantly more than

the passive absorption of humanistic values or an uncritical reliance on statutory frameworks. Moving from diagnosis to structural reform, this study highlights the urgent necessity to reconfigure teacher preparation in Georgia from passive constitutional literacy towards critical, diversity-sensitive pedagogy. Addressing the pervasive tension between abstract democratic ideals and majoritarian classroom practices requires a systemic shift in how teacher training programmes operationalise FoRB. Generic teacher preparation, which tends to conflate formal legal neutrality with substantive justice, leaves pre-service teachers vulnerable to majoritarian hegemony, ultimately pushing them towards pedagogical avoidance when they encounter religious complexity in the classroom. Left unaddressed, this instructional silence risks perpetuating educational spaces where religious minority students face implicit coercion, psychological marginalisation, and the denial of their fundamental rights.

Bridging this gap between declared democratic values and practical classroom execution demands a structural and pedagogical transformation in teacher education. It is insufficient for interreligious and democratic competencies to remain simply as declaratory policy goals within university missions or national legislation. The empirical evidence provides a clear mandate for systemic reform, in that pre-service teachers who completed targeted coursework in intercultural education or the history of religions exhibited significantly higher levels of reflective capacity, cognitive synergy, and practical readiness to utilise diversity as an educational asset. Consequently, national accreditation bodies and higher education institutions should restructure the standardised 60-ECTS Teacher Preparation Educational Program. The curriculum should transition from theoretical instruction to experiential, scenario-based learning, multi-perspective didactics, and explicit training in FoRB literacy, elevating interreligious moderation from an optional, peripheral addition to a core, assessable professional competency.

Beyond the Georgian context, this study offers vital theoretical and empirical contributions to the broader international scholarship on teacher education, human rights, and democratic culture in transitioning and majoritarian societies. It underscores that interreligious competence is not an innate disposition that develops spontaneously through general higher education; rather, it is a contextually mediated, specialised skill set requiring deliberate pedagogical cultivation. In societies where a dominant majoritarian faith is interwoven with national identity, public education serves as a critical battleground between passive majoritarian conformity and authentic pluralism. By equipping future educators with the analytical capabilities to deconstruct structural privilege and the normative tools to moderate value conflicts, educational systems can transform classrooms into genuine foundations for pluralistic, democratic societies.

To build upon these insights, future research should employ longitudinal observational methodologies to examine how graduates of reformed teacher preparation programmes operationalise FoRB principles and manage religious diversity in live classroom environments over time. Furthermore, given the empirical variations identified in this study, future inquiries should systematically investigate the intersectional and gendered dimensions of interreligious anxiety among teacher candidates, providing the empirical foundation needed to design even more targeted, context-sensitive pedagogical interventions.

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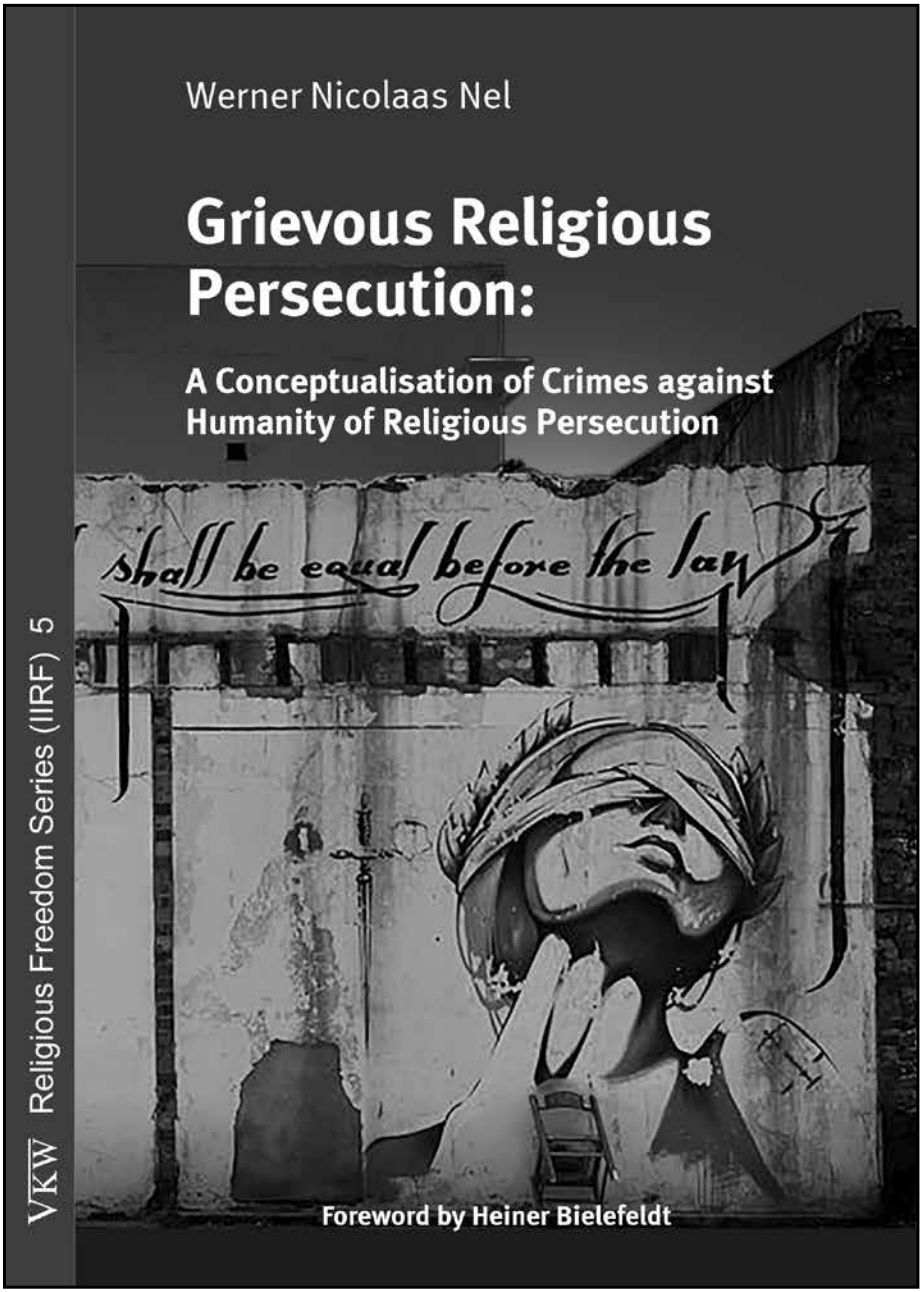
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Freedom of religion, child protection and moral formation

A South African perspective

Johannes L. van der Walt and Izak J. Oosthuizen[1]

Abstract

This article explores the paradoxical relationship between religious freedom and child abuse in South Africa. Despite strong constitutional protections for both religious freedom and children's rights, child abuse remains widespread. The study argues that protecting children is both a legal obligation and a moral duty inherent in the exercise of religious freedom. Drawing on constitutional principles, children's rights frameworks, natural law ethics, and the concept of hospitality as safeguarding, the article contends that religious communities, families, and society share responsibility for protecting children.

Keywords

Freedom of religion, children's rights, child abuse, natural law ethics, safeguarding, hospitality, legal protection frameworks, South Africa.

1. Introduction and core thesis

To the best of current knowledge, no major, legally recognised, mainstream religion teaches that violence against children or the commission of crimes against children is morally justified or should be actively pursued by adherents. On the contrary, most religious traditions promote moral principles that emphasise the protection and well-being of children and explicitly condemn child abuse. This does not imply, however, that individual adherents do not at times perpetrate crimes against children, nor does it negate the fact that some religious communities have historically practiced customs that are now widely regarded as harmful

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to children, such as severe corporal punishment, enforced child marriage and child labour, or the denial of educational opportunities. In certain instances, followers may interpret prescriptions contained in sacred texts in ways that lead to harmful practices, including the use of excessive physical discipline. Religious affiliation also does not necessarily indicate the frequency of religious practice (church, mosque or temple attendance), the quality of faith and belief, or adherence to the religious teachings regarding the upbringing of children.

Contrary to what can be expected of a country that possesses comparatively strong constitutional protections for freedom of religion (Benson 2011), South Africa experiences high levels of violent crime and violence affecting children (UNICEF 2013; Crofford 2026; also see section 4 below where this statement is substantiated). Although a review of the available evidence suggests that the constitutional enshrinement of religious freedom does not necessarily correlate with child safety due to the interplay of a large variety of social, political, economic and other factors (United States Commission on International Religious Freedom 2026),[2] one could assume that the adherents of mainstream religions that explicitly decry violence and crimes against children, and who live in a country in which the rights of children are pertinently protected, would refrain from such behaviour. That is, however, unfortunately not the case in South Africa.

High levels of crime against children continue to be registered in South Africa, where children supposedly enjoy constitutional and legal protection, and whose population could be regarded as "largely religious." Around 85 percent of the population states that they belong to various Christian denominations, around 2.4 percent to traditional African religions, around 1.6 percent to the Muslim religion, 1.0 percent to the Hindu religion, and nearly one percent to other religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, the Baha'i and others – with only around 9.0 percent declaring that they do not belong to any religious grouping (Statistics South Africa 2022).

As South African educationists, we as the authors of this article feel deeply concerned about the level of violence and crime perpetrated against children in this country despite the constitutional and legal protection that children are supposed to enjoy, and despite the fact that children are regarded as gifts from God and should be cherished (cf. Ps. 127:3 in the Bible; Surah 42:49-50, 25:74, 64:15 in the Qur'an; several places in the Hindu Upanishads and Vedas). In view of this

2 According to one of the reviewers of this article, factors such as secular humanism, the mainstream media, the availability of pornographic material, alcohol abuse, recent legislation allowing the use of cannabis, the problem of broken families and absent fathers, the abolishment of corporal punishment, and the explicit sex education taught to children in the Life Sciences and Life Orientation programmes in the context of the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (2011) also play roles in this regard. The reviewer also pointed out that the Basic Education Law Amendment Act, promulgated in 2024, may have a detrimental effect on future adults because it tends to replace parental authority with state authority.

concern, we contend *that the protection and safeguarding of children constitute not only a legal obligation, as a necessary implication of the constitutional right to freedom of religion, belief and conscience, but also a moral obligation of people enjoying the freedom of religion to safeguard the children entrusted to them. In principle, religious communities, traditions and institutions possess both the freedom and the responsibility to cultivate moral formation, hospitality, compassion and safeguarding practices that protect children from abuse and exploitation (see section 4). Genuine religious freedom cannot be separated from accountability where the dignity, safety and best interests of children are threatened.*

2. Research method and structure of the article

To substantiate this core theoretical argument, the study systematically synthesises existing scholarship from several disciplines, ranging from religious freedom issues, ethics (moral philosophy), educational theory, and the social sciences, to law and jurisprudence (cf. Creswell & Plano Clark 2018:35). A methodical, legal, society-focused, comparative approach (Venter 2022:59) was followed to establish the extent to which extent legal measures provide for freedom of religion and belief, and for the protection, care and best interests of children.

The logical sequence of the argument, as outlined above, is reflected in the structure of the article. It began by outlining the problem of child abuse in the context of freedom of religion and faith, and by stating the contention of the article (section 1). Section 3 hereafter is dedicated to a discussion of South Africa's constitutional stipulations regarding freedom of religion, as well as the respect for and protection of children's rights and their best interests. Section 4 presents a discussion of child abuse in South Africa despite many measures intended to protect them, such as legislation that safeguards both freedom of religion and the safety and well-being of children. Based on the subsequent conclusion that South Africans, despite their proclaimed widespread religiosity and their enjoyment of freedom of religion, seem to have lost their moral compass with regard to the treatment of children, a brief discussion of natural-law ethics is presented as a possible solution to the problem, along with a discussion of hospitality in the sense of the safeguarding of children. In the final section, we return to the problem outlined at the beginning of the article by reconsidering the core theoretical argument of the paper.

3. South Africa's legislative and jurisprudential provisions regarding freedom of religion, and their implications for the safeguarding of children

South Africa's Constitution is widely regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, as it guarantees freedom of religion, faith and belief, as well as respect

for children's rights and for their welfare. Section 15 of the Constitution (RSA 1996) enshrines freedom of religion. South Africa's constitutional democracy protects freedom of religion, belief and conscience as well as the rights and dignity of children. This protection creates an important ethical and legal intersection: religious communities are free to practise and transmit their convictions, but this freedom also compels them to bear responsibility regarding the care, protection and safeguarding of the children entrusted to them. South Africa's constitutional democracy is in line with international policies and statements that all aim at the recognition and protection of children's rights and their personal welfare, as will now be indicated.

3.1. International children's rights

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN General Assembly 1989) represents a significant milestone in recognising children's rights as it stipulates that States Parties shall respect the child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. However, it also provides that 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' (Article 14). The significance of this Convention lies in the fact that, during its formulation, faith-based civil society organisations contributed theological perspectives and advocated strongly for the recognition of children's agency, evolving capacities and empowerment. In doing so, the drafters acknowledged that 'religious law or doctrine may be acknowledged as part of a child's life, but cannot supersede protections against discrimination, violence or harmful practices' (Kavalauskas et al. 2026:262).

3.2. Constitutional and other legal measures ensconcing freedom of religion and the protection of children in South Africa

South Africa's Constitution (RSA 1996) provides strong and detailed protection of freedom of religion by explicitly guaranteeing the right to freedom of religion, allowing legal challenges when religious rights are violated, protecting minority religious communities, and requiring that children's best interests be respected in matters affecting them. It also stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief, and opinion. Religious observances may occur in public institutions such as schools only if participation is voluntary and conducted on an equitable basis. The Constitution provides strong protection for freedom of religion through a Bill of Rights, particularly Section 15 thereof. Section 15(1) stipulates that everyone has the right to freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion. The Constitution establishes South Africa as a secular

constitutional democracy, not a religious state. It neither promotes nor opposes any religion; instead, it protects the rights of people of all religions or faiths, as well as those who declare that they do not adhere to any religion.

The requirement that, within the constitutional framework of religious freedom, children's best interests be respected in matters affecting them resulted in the promulgation of the Children's Act (38 of 2005; SA 2005). Its long title indicates that the Act was enacted 'to give effect to certain rights of children as contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996; to set out principles relating to the care and protection of children; and to define parental responsibilities and rights.' Chapter 2 of the Act affirms the rights enshrined in the Constitution and aligns them with applicable international legal instruments concerning the safety, protection, and care of children. The chapter also informs all actions, policies, and legislative measures relating to child protection, care, and well-being, as well as any proceedings or decisions affecting the status and interests of the child.

The Act was followed up in 2019 by the Department of Social Development's adoption of the National Child Care and Protection Policy (DSD 2019). According to this policy, childcare and protection are conceptualised as a comprehensive programme of care, support and protection of all children for the purpose of securing their well-being and enabling them to develop to their full potential.

3.3. Court cases

It is clear from the overview given above of the policies and legal framework regarding freedom of religion, on one hand, and of the safeguarding and protection of the rights and welfare of children on the other hand that there is an area of complexity regarding the balance between (a) parents' (in fact, all educators') right to raise children according to their religious beliefs, and (b) children's right to develop their own personal beliefs. South African courts tend to resolve this tension by applying the constitutional principle that the best interests of children are paramount.

In contrast to the view expressed in the National Policy on Religion and Education (DoE 2003) that South Africa was a secular state, the Constitutional Court in the case of *State v Lawrence* (1997) ruled that the Constitution envisaged a cooperative – rather than a separatist – relationship between the state and religion or religious institutions (Smit 2013:158). Chief Justice Chaskalson explained the concept of religious freedom by stating that according to the Constitution (RSA 1996), everybody in South Africa has the right to religious belief and to freely express and practise their belief. According to him, it is their 'right to entertain such religious beliefs as a person chooses – the right to declare religious beliefs openly and without fear of hindrance or reprisal, and the right to

manifest religious belief by worship and practice or by teaching and dissemination.' This right was later confirmed in the Constitutional Court case of *Christian Education South Africa v Minister of Education* (2000). In this case, the court not only referred to this right as an individual right, but by referring to Sections 18 and 31 in the Bill of Rights (RSA 1996), it held that freedom of religion in South Africa has to be seen as a collective right 'prohibiting the state from denying them the rights collectively to profess and practice their own religion.' This verdict confirmed the judgment in the matter of *Wittmann v Deutscher Schulverein, Pretoria* (1998).

Two other court cases demonstrate how the principles of religious freedom and the interests of the child have been taken into consideration. In the case of *Christian Education v Minister of Education* (2000), the Constitutional Court (led by Judge Albie Sachs) acknowledged that religious beliefs should be treated with respect but held that some limitations on religious practice were justified because the state had a duty to protect children from violence and to promote their dignity and well-being. The Court concluded that children's rights and interests outweighed the claim to use corporal punishment in schools. In this case, the Court respected the principle of religious freedom but also protected the best interests of children by upholding the ban on corporal punishment.

In another landmark case, *Kotze v Kotze* (2003), the parents' divorce settlement contained a clause stipulating that the minor child would be expected to continue participating fully in the Apostolic Church's activities and adhere to its doctrines. The court held that the clause was unconstitutional in that it violated the child's freedom of religion and the constitutional principle of acting in the best interests of children. This verdict was later confirmed in the case of *Hay v B* (2014), where the court recognised the sincerity of the parents' religious convictions but nevertheless authorised a blood transfusion because the child's life was at risk. The court held that the child's welfare and best interests were paramount and that emergency treatment could proceed despite parental religious objection.

3.4. The delicate balance between freedom of religion policies and the welfare of children

South Africa's policies on freedom of religion have had a significant impact on the care and safety of children, both positively and, in some cases, through challenges that require careful balancing of the rights of the various parties involved. Because the Constitution guarantees and enshrines freedom of religion and equality, no child should be treated unfairly because of their faith or belief system. This means that children from minority religions are protected in schools and other institutions, that children who do not follow a particular religion are

protected, and that schools (for instance) must respect religious diversity and avoid favouring one religion over others.

It is also clear from the preceding overview that both international children's rights instruments and South African law recognise that children have spiritual as well as physical and emotional needs, and that adults should not only be aware of them but also provide for them as far as possible. Adults, in the contexts of religious and other communities, are called upon to provide moral guidance and value education, social support, youth programs and mentoring, and care for vulnerable children. Children are protected from forced religious participation.

Section 28 of the Constitution provides an important principle regarding the treatment of children. It states that a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. This means that religious practices are allowed only if they do not harm the child, and that courts and state authorities must prioritise children's welfare over competing interests. The right to freedom of religion does not protect harmful practices such as the physical or sexual abuse, neglect or exploitation of children. Religious organisations remain subject to the country's child protection laws. If a child is endangered, the state may intervene regardless of any religious justification proffered by the offender. Most importantly, although South African law recognises freedom of religion as an important right, this right is not unlimited. When a religious practice threatens a child's health, safety, development or dignity, the Constitution requires that the child's welfare must take precedence. This balance helps to align freedom of religion with the broader goal of protecting and caring for children.

Human freedom, including freedom of religion, also includes the possibility of self-harm and – inadvertently – harm to others such as children, thereby creating a moral dilemma (Houston 1998:164). Despite all the legal and jurisprudential measures discussed above, a disturbingly large percentage of the children in South Africa are subjected to abuse and maltreatment, as we will briefly illustrate in the following section. The abuse of children in homes, schools, communities or religious institutions raises not merely criminal and ethical concerns but also questions regarding the proper exercise of religious freedom within a constitutional order founded on dignity, equality and human rights.

4. Violence and crime against children in South Africa

According to Le Cordeur (2024:13), many South African children are confined in isolation under deplorable conditions and subjected to sexual abuse, while others live without adequate nutrition, clothing, or meaningful contact with their families. Although reliable statistics on child abuse remain difficult to obtain, available data reveal the seriousness of the problem. Of the approximately 16,000

children reported missing in South Africa between 2008 and 2023, more than 4,000 have not been found. During the 2024-2025 fiscal year, 26,852 cases of child abuse and neglect were reported, an increase from 23,732 cases in the previous year. These included approximately 9,860 cases of sexual abuse, 9,485 cases of neglect, 3,965 cases of physical abuse, and 595 cases of abandonment (Africa Check 2025; News24 2025). Given the significant underreporting of abuse, the actual incidence is likely to be considerably higher.

Occasionally, victims manage to escape their abusers and report their experiences. Van der Merwe (2023:6) recounted the case of a young boy who succeeded in freeing himself and his three younger sisters from their father, who had imprisoned and repeatedly assaulted them. Prins (2019:20) reported the rape of a young girl in the presence of her grandmother; Otto (2023:1) described a case in which the parents of four young children were convicted of repeatedly raping them, with the eldest daughter forced to witness the abuse of her siblings. The youngest victim was only three years old. Another widely publicised case involved six-year-old Joslin Smith, who disappeared after being left in the care of her mother's boyfriend. Her fate remains unknown, and her disappearance has become emblematic of the vulnerability of many South African children.

Child maltreatment takes many forms, including physical, emotional and psychological abuse, sexual exploitation, neglect, child labour, human trafficking, forced marriage, exposure to domestic violence, and deprivation resulting from war, displacement, social inequality, and gender discrimination. In some cases, harsh treatment is justified through ideologies of "hard individualism," which seek to cultivate resilience and self-sufficiency in children (Allerton 2020/2023). In some parts of the world, children are exploited as labourers or forced into prostitution to supplement family income.

Children raised under such conditions experience a profound restriction of their personal freedom. Concepts such as safety, abuse, personal autonomy, and freedom are inherently ethical in nature because they concern the quality of interpersonal relationships and the obligations individuals and societies owe to their most vulnerable members.

5. Religious freedom, moral formation and child safeguarding

South Africa's constitutional democracy simultaneously protects freedom of religion, belief and conscience and the rights and dignity of children. This creates an important ethical and legal intersection: religious communities are free to practice and transmit their convictions, yet they also bear profound responsibilities regarding the care, protection and safeguarding of children entrusted to them. In principle, religion plays a positive role in communities in that it promotes the cul-

tivation of moral conscience. Religious teachings also tend to reinforce compassion for the weak and needy, including children, who cannot fend for themselves. Religious institutions such as churches, mosques, synagogues and temples have also historically contributed to child welfare.

As mentioned above, high rates of child abuse persist in South Africa despite widespread religious adherence among adults, and despite several legal measures to protect the welfare of children. Many factors, such as those mentioned in footnote 2, as well as widespread poverty, resource shortages, cramped living conditions, a lack of privacy, exposure to adult behaviours, and alcohol and drug abuse could be responsible for religious teachings being overridden (UN General Assembly 2026). Several academic publications and research reports directly discuss this paradox, namely why child abuse remains pervasive in South Africa despite South Africans' high levels of religious adherence. One of these ascribes the paradox to the possibility that religious organisations and people either ignore the abuse of children or fail to challenge the social norms and practices that hide such abuse (Grobbelaar & Jones 2020:34-64). Weber and Bowers-Du Toit (2018) ascribe it to what they term an "ecosystem of violence" driven by deep historical, spatial and economic inequalities (in this case, on the Cape Flats). Niyodusenga (2021) looked at how the institutional realities of religious organisations complicate the protection of children. He found that while religious leaders are prepared, willing and able to offer spiritual and social support, they often find themselves at a loss when having to comply with mandatory laws due to a lack of knowledge of procedures, harbouring of fears about the safety of a child after reporting an incident, and concern about the reputation of the religious community. In their examination of the link between religiosity and child abuse risks, Rodriguez and Henderson (2010) concluded that extrinsic religiosity, i.e. using religion for ensuring social conformity or status, combined with strong demands for social conformity, could in practice lead to an increased risk of physical abuse because behavioural compliance is often applied through harsh physical discipline.

As discussed, the inhabitants of South Africa have, due to all the conditions and considerations mentioned above, not displayed commendable behaviour regarding their treatment of children. We surmise that although they believe themselves to be religious or to be adherents of a mainstream religion, many of these "believers" may be believers only in a nominal and superficial sense, may have lost sight of the moral aspects of the religion they purport to belong to, or their personal socio-economic circumstances may have caused them to interact in a morally reprehensible manner with children. The abuse of children within homes, schools, communities or religious institutions raises not merely criminal and ethical concerns but also questions regarding the proper exercise

of religious freedom within a constitutional order founded on dignity, equality and human rights.

South Africans learn about their moral duty towards others and, more specifically, towards children not only in their respective religious institutions but also in school in examinable subjects such as Life Orientation and Life Skills. The problem is that around 40 percent of the Grade 1 cohort of any specific year tend to drop out along the way and never complete their schooling. In dropping out, they swell the number of NEETs (people not employed and not in training), thereby contributing to the national unemployment rate, which officially stands at 33.7 percent, or 43.7 percent when discouraged workers – those available for work but no longer looking – are included (Prashad 2026). Their lack of schooling and the dismal conditions in which they and their families eke out a living may be one reason why they lack the necessary moral fibre to do the right things by other people, including children, and why they indulge in all sorts of criminal behaviour, such as drug peddling and gang warfare, that negatively impacts the welfare of the children in their care or vicinity.

One possible answer to this deleterious situation regarding the treatment of children in South Africa and elsewhere is to consider the legal protection that children enjoy as well as the natural law governing the welfare and safeguarding of children. Houston (1998:177) remarks that people's actions towards others, including children, are ethically significant because of the intentionality and the desire involved. People tend to impose an interpretive framework based on their view of moral order on their understanding of agency when interacting with children. This explains why we must resort to natural law as a common denominator among the various religions, to keep sensitising people about their duty to children. "Duty" here refers to two natural law principles: not to inflict harm on children, and to act in their best interests.

Natural law 'appears to be able to give the means of establishing a clearly defined rule that can … be applied universally' (Thompson 2018:68). Conscience, religiously inspired or otherwise, holds that a condition such as child abuse is wrong in itself. To be concerned about the safety of children, and thus to do whatever is required to ensure their safety, is a matter of ethical concern because it pertains to the issue of caring for the interests of the child (Stoker 1967:251).

People naturally and spontaneously understand that an act or a condition is good or bad, right or wrong, irrespective of one's life and worldview, or what the consequences of the act or condition might be. In practical terms, the sexual abuse or abduction of a child is morally wrong and repulsive, irrespective of the negative results that the abuse might lead to later in the child's life as an adult (such as, for instance, chronic depression, a failed marriage, or emotional confu-

sion). Moral precepts exist independently of our judgements and are knowable by reason. If this were not the case, why would moral norms such as caring for others, including children, exist in most cultures (cf. Wilkens, 2017:13)? Since all people – irrespective of religion or life and worldview – are in some way aware of these norms, they are obligatory for all. Natural-law ethics is the theory that morality is rooted in core truths about what we are as human beings, the inborn understanding of how people should live and relate to one another (Peterson 2017:83, 84). They can do so "naturally" (Sacks 2011:66). From a very tender age, a person learns that harm is always wrong and should be avoided, and that treating others well and with empathy and compassion is always good and should be adhered to (Peterson 2017:89; Haidt 2012:11-12).

Ethics in general explores such notions as motivation, desire and intention as the basis of moral agency – in this case, when interacting with a child. Experience of agency in such interaction brings the ethics of subjectivity into focus (Houston 1998:179). This ethic holds that human morality is a series of disclosures in which the deepest being of an actor expresses itself in the form of words and deeds in the process of interacting with (*in casu*) a child. This insight, according to Houston, shifts the focus from outward acts to inward character. Inner character – conscience, integrity – finds expression through outward acts. Put differently, a person's subjectivity is taken to be the wellspring of action – in the case of dealing with children, within the framework of moral order and religious or moral freedom. A person's intention when interacting with a child is of prime significance in the moral life (Houston 1998:180).

One of the most potent ways to display character, conscience, integrity, empathy and compassion is to show hospitality to a child. Hospitality is a core concept in many religions and philosophies of life, as well as in the African philosophy of Ubuntu[3] (Kretzschmar 2017:35). Hospitality is a sacred obligation for many people, and it entails the welcoming and safeguarding of the vulnerable, including children, as "the least among us". Children should never be exposed to unsafe conditions; rather, they should always be treated hospitably. Hospitality – understood as safeguarding – according to De Muynck, Both and Boer (2026:8), means to be with others in such a manner that they will see and know that one is being fully accepted as an individual, and as a member of the community. Hospitality refers to a relational practice rooted in the recognition of the other's inherent dignity as well as in the moral imperative to welcome the stranger. It radiates a readiness to offer space to the other (Ruitenberg 2011; Pierron 2024).

3 Ubuntu refers to the traditional African life view that all people are connected, and that one's well-being depends on the well-being of others. It literally holds that 'I am because we are.'

According to De Muynck et al. (2026), the following are keywords describing hospitality:

- Safety: each child is an individual with rights and responsibilities and should be accepted without reservation;
- Care and empathy: their needs should be met as far as possible, their fears should be addressed, and their aspirations should be supported as far as possible. In some cases, to do so would require a change in their parents' or caregivers' (the host's) attitude and approach towards children.
- Equivalence: all children should be seen as equal in value although they may be different (unequal) in terms of personality or achievement.
- Justice: every child should be treated fairly and justly.
- Sharing the burden of another: parents and caretakers should be aware of the physical and psychological burdens that some children must carry, and they should lighten the weight of the burden with the necessary support (De Muynck et al. 2026:9).

The key notion associated with hospitality – in the sense of "safeguarding" – according to De Muynck et al. (2026:8), is to make children's stay with their parents or caregivers as enjoyable and safe as possible. Derrida (1999:50) was correct in seeing hospitality (in the sense of safeguarding the interests of others, in this case children) as shaping all human interaction and, therefore, as the core principle of ethics.

As already mentioned, parents, caregivers, the government and its legal systems act, in principle, as protective institutions for the safeguarding of children. Religious institutions and faith communities such as churches or religious bodies can, and should, also act as safeguarding networks. Such institutions, in the form of religious schools, pastoral care, religious charities, and the spiritual formation that they provide, can play a pivotal role in keeping children safe.

6. Discussion

Hospitality, as Hughes-Warrington (2012:317) observed, entails the welcoming of people based on charity and civility, and in response to legislated duty and/or a moral imperative. We went further than this in our argument above in averring that hospitality, especially with respect to the safety of children, should be interpreted as safeguarding. Derrida (1999:83) spoke of "absolute hospitality". Hospitality or safeguarding in this sense is not bound to any convention, law, right, debt or duty.

Why then, given this circumscription of hospitality as safeguarding of children, and given all the policies and legal measures already in place in South Africa for the protection of children, are there still so many instances of child abuse? The most plausible answer to this question is probably a lack of knowl-

edge and insight into what freedom of religion and conscience entails; of undeveloped or underdeveloped adult consciences; of adult consciences that have become hardened or even deadened because of prevailing social, socio-economic and political circumstances. Moral discretion (the Greek word *phronesis* – wisdom – comes to mind here) is required when dealing with children. An adult must know in all circumstances and conditions what is morally admissible or non-admissible when dealing with children. The alarm bells of conscience ought to start ringing when morally inadmissible things are perpetrated against a child. One's feeling of "something is not right" should come to the fore in such circumstances (Van Olst 2025:109). Vorster (2017:162) correctly concluded that the appropriate moral attitude cannot be formalised in a set of rules (conventions, policies, and laws). The moral compass of conscience – guided by religious conviction, if it exists – should guide grownups' attitudes towards, and in their dealings with children. Those in the presence of children should "naturally know" in their "inner self" that something is not right, and that child abuse will have dire consequences.

The discussion above has substantiated the core thesis of this article by showing that the protection and safeguarding of children indeed constitute not only a legal obligation as a necessary implication of the constitutional right to freedom of religion, belief and conscience, but also a moral obligation of people enjoying the freedom of religion to safeguard the children entrusted to them. The religious communities, traditions and institutions in South Africa, and in other countries that are suffering from the problem of widespread child abuse, either possess both the freedom and the responsibility to cultivate moral formation, hospitality, compassion and safeguarding practices that protect children from abuse and exploitation, or, if not, they should seek such freedom. Genuine religious freedom cannot be separated from accountability where the dignity, safety and best interests of children are under threat.

7. Conclusion

Religious freedom in a constitutional democracy cannot be reduced to mere institutional autonomy or freedom from state interference. Properly understood, it also includes the freedom and responsibility of religious communities to cultivate moral conscience, protect human dignity, and safeguard children, despite prevailing circumstances. Faith traditions possess significant ethical resources capable of reinforcing compassion, hospitality, justice and accountability. At the same time, constitutional protections for religion cannot be invoked to justify practices that undermine the dignity, safety or best interests of children. A sustainable framework for child protection in South Africa therefore requires

constructive cooperation between constitutional law, religious freedom, moral formation and effective safeguarding mechanisms.

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Noteworthy

The noteworthy items described here are structured in three groups: annual reports and global surveys, regional and country reports, and specific issues. 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

CSW General briefings
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 8-11 September 2026
https://www.csw.org.uk/reports/
CSW updated its country briefing documents and policy recommendations to governments and international bodies on a wide variety of countries.

Global persecution index 2026
International Christian Concern, 7 July 2026
https://persecution.org/gpi/
The GPI examines ongoing trends reshaping the landscape of religious freedom, including the dramatic rise of religious nationalism, transnational repression, and state control over religious organizations.

Religious restrictions around the world
Pew Research Center, 15 June 2026
https://tinyurl.com/yhnnwtn6
Pew Research Center tracks global patterns in restrictions on religion – whether imposed by governments or by individuals or social groups. See the interactive website to explore restrictions in 198 countries and territories, and see how each country's restrictions have changed since 2007.

Regional and country reports
Algeria: Country update
USCIRF, April 2026
https://tinyurl.com/3bpxzswc
This country update assesses the interrelated challenges and underscores the systemic and ongoing nature of religious freedom restrictions in Algeria, with

particular attention to state limitations on access to religious materials and the wider legal environment shaping FoRB in that country.

Australia: Australian Christian freedom index 2025
ACFI, May 2026
https://australianchristianfreedomindex.org.au/
This inaugural annual report documents the erosion of freedom of religion in Australia. The report is sponsored by multiple Christian organisations in Australia and was written by a team of 11 experts.

China: China's codification and escalation of the "Sinicization of Religion"
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/2f33z3ha
This issue update provides an overview of some amendments and new laws that China's government passed or implemented in recent months, highlighting the systematic nature of its worsening subjugation and repression of ethnoreligious minorities such as Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and others.

Colombia: Religious freedom for whom?
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 25 September 2026
https://tinyurl.com/3hawh8yj
This report evaluates Colombia's Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Worship (PPRF), adopted in 2018. It identifies that the policy's institutional architecture tends to privilege legally registered religious entities.

Cuba: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/jxmk22cf
This report summarizes the country's restrictive legal framework; ongoing harassment, surveillance, and other intimidation of religious practitioners; and FoRB violations within the Cuban prison system.

Cuba's new normal: The situation of freedom of religion or belief five years after 11J
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 9 July 2026
https://www.csw.org.uk/cubareport
Between January 2025 and June 2026, CSW documented 667 separate cases involving attacks on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), almost of all of which involved multiple types of FoRB violations.

Egypt: Country update
USCIRF, April 2026
https://tinyurl.com/45phneav
This country update assesses the current state of religious freedom in Egypt, considering how this domestic and regional landscape affects the Egyptian government's efforts to protect FoRB for all.

Egypt: Erasure: Egypt's systemic campaign to eradicate its Baha'i community
Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, September 2026
https://eipr.org/sites/default/files/reports/pdf/erasure.pdf
This report documents the challenges faced by the Baha'i community in Egypt since a landmark court ruling (2009-2025). In this time period, Egypt's legislative, judicial, and executive structures, alongside its political and economic conditions, witnessed profound changes that impacted the exercise of freedom of religion and belief at both the individual and collective levels.

India: Country brief
USCIRF, August 2026
https://tinyurl.com/bddab6d7
This report examines the systematic, ongoing, and increasingly egregious violations of religious freedom across India, including efforts to crack down on faith-based organizations and continued acts of transnational repression targeting religious minorities abroad.

Latin America and the Caribbean: Global religious freedom index 2024-2026
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 16 June 2026
https://tinyurl.com/3dzv5ry3
This report presents detailed data on religious freedom in Latin America and the Caribbean, scored annually from 1990 to 2023 across 27 countries. The data includes measures on government restrictions on religion, societal discrimination against religious minorities, and physical violence against religious groups.

Mali: Policy brief
Open Doors, 31 August 2026
https://tinyurl.com/2s3ax5ex
This policy brief identifies the escalating violence and erosion of religious freedom in Mali due to protracted armed conflict. It concludes with several policy recommendations for the Malian government.

Mexico: Protection on paper: The situation of freedom of religion or belief in Mexico
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 29 May 2026
https://www.csw.org.uk/2026/05/29/report/6813/article.htm
This report documents two types of serious violations of FoRB in Mexico: those perpetrated by organized crime and those in villages under traditional law.

Morocco: Freedom of religion in Morocco
International Christian Concern and Regent University Center for Global Justice, 25 August 2026
https://tinyurl.com/jvmp4tr8
This report shows how Islam is constitutionally privileged, and how other provisions limit religious dissent. It also identifies three major areas of concern: the enforcement of Ramadan, restrictions on religious conversion from Islam, and burial practices.

Mozambique: The Islamic State-Mozambique and its local threats to religious freedom
USCIRF, April 2026
https://tinyurl.com/bdjtwcf8
This report examines armed violence by Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a (ASWJ), or Islamic State-Mozambique (IS-M), and its recent FoRB-related violations, assessing state responses and examining future challenges for protecting religious freedom in Mozambique.

Nicaragua: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/2e5b6m42
This country update provides an overview of recent key developments relating to religious freedom in Nicaragua and the international response to Nicaragua's FoRB and related human rights violations.

Nigeria: Briefing: Conflict-related sexual violence in Nigeria
Christian Solidarity Worldwide, 19 June 2026
https://www.csw.org.uk/2026/06/19/report/6821/article.htm
This briefing focuses on patterns of gender-based sexual violence in conflict-affected areas of Nigeria.

Nigeria: Disaggregating chaos: Analyzing Nigeria's four patterns of violence
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 1 September 2026
https://tinyurl.com/mst7m9uz
This report identifies that 2025 Nigeria data does not describe a single national emergency with regional variations. Rather, it describes four distinct systems of violence that differ in who carries them out, what they are trying to achieve, how they generate casualties, and who they affect.

Nigeria: Killings and abductions in Nigeria (2020-2025)
Observatory for Religious Freedom in Africa, June 2026
https://tinyurl.com/42skyxkz
This detailed report analyzes the religious conflicts, particularly violence against Christians, between 2020 and 2025.

Nigeria: Nonstate violators of religious freedom in Nigeria: Fulani militants
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/yk77myvr
This report examines Fulani militants' role in deteriorating religious freedom conditions in Nigeria by explaining Muslim and Christian communal dynamics and providing examples of recent and ongoing religious freedom violations by violent Fulani actors. It also describes efforts – and shortcomings – on the part of the Nigerian government and civil society actors to bolster social cohesion, improve security, and reduce patterns of violence.

Nigeria at the crossroads: Is there a future for Nigeria's displaced church?
Open Doors, September 2026
https://tinyurl.com/9bdd5jym
The brief explores violence trends and causes in Nigeria; the situation, experiences and prospects of return for IDPs since the 2024 "No Road Home" report, and what the future could look like. It also includes recommendations for the Nigerian government and the international community.

Pakistan: Religious minorities in Pakistan
National Commission for Justice and Peace, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/5847n2jy
This report is by a branch of the Pakistan Catholic Bishops Conference. It monitors violations of religious freedom against religious minorities in the country for the year 2025.

Pakistan: Stolen girls
Jubilee Campaign and Voices for Justice, 14 July 2026
https://tinyurl.com/4w3nnff
This report documents patterns of forced conversion, abduction, child marriage, and sexual violence affecting minority girls in Pakistan, and highlights the legal gaps and institutional failures that allow these abuses to continue.

Saudi Arabia: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/5cxkzmbh
This report examines key issues, including the evolving role of religion in shaping national identity; entrenched laws and policies that remain systematic barriers to FoRB; the use of the legal apparatus to restrict religious expression; and the targeting of religious minorities, women, and others – both in country and abroad – on the basis of religion.

Somalia: Factsheet: Religious freedom in Somalia
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/47p7kbb3
This publication outlines major religious freedom concerns in Somalia and assesses the significant religious freedom violations of insurgent nonstate actors, especially al-Shabaab.

Sri Lanka: Growing up believing: Exploring children's right to freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka
National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, 14 July 2026
https://tinyurl.com/mswk3pke
This research study is a qualitative and quantitative analysis, drawing upon primary and secondary sources of information examines many aspects of children's rights to freedom of religion or belief in Sri Lanka.

Syria: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/3bytmzft
This report provides an overview of the recent religious freedom conditions in Syria with a particular focus on rule of law issues. It notes that religious freedom has continued to deteriorate in 2026.

Tajikistan: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/2rpf3w57
This report outlines concerning religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan, including examining the government's ongoing efforts to control all aspects of Tajik religious life.

Türkiye: Country brief
USCIRF, August 2026
https://tinyurl.com/5dx39zz9
This report outlines the government's longstanding administrative restrictions on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and highlights recent developments and religious freedom violations.

Uzbekistan: Country update
USCIRF, May 2026
https://tinyurl.com/2s3n6nam
This report assesses Uzbekistan's negative religious freedom trajectory by summarizing its backsliding over the past decade and highlighting the damaging impact of its policies on religious communities through harassment, fines, detention, prison sentences, and physical abuse.

Vietnam: Freedom of worship – A false reality in Vietnam
International Christian Concern, 5 June 2026
https://tinyurl.com/jbma2wjm
This report examines the current state of religious freedom and Christian persecution under communism in Vietnam. It finds that churches that defy the regime's regulations are forced underground.

Specific issues

Christians: Top five countries for killings, abductions, arrests, and sentences of Christians, attacks on buildings and houses of worship, and forced displacement
International Institute for Religious Freedom, 18 August 2026
https://tinyurl.com/mrynjwd7
This report covers the calendar year 2025, from 1 January to 31 December. The figures are drawn from the IIRF Violent Incident Database. All incidents are those in which the victims were recorded as Christian.

Prisoners of conscience: Religious prisoners of conscience
Lantos Foundation, Bellwether International, Religious Liberty Clinic, July 2026
https://tinyurl.com/4fy8dw6a
This report analyzes global patterns and practices in religious prisoner of conscience cases. It was prepared for the IRF Summit.

Refugees: State of the Golden Door 2026
World Relief, Open Doors, 3 September 2026
https://worldrelief.org/goldendoor/
This is the fourth annual report on refugee resettlement and asylum in the US in light of global Christian persecution. It finds that this fiscal year will be the first on record that no refugees from the top 50 countries of concern for Christian persecution on Open Doors' World Watch List were resettled in the US.

Social hostilities: More countries had elevated levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023
Pew Research Center, 15 June 2026
https://tinyurl.com/kfd4ur5x
Fifty-five countries had high or very high levels of social hostilities involving religion in 2023, up from 45 the previous year. Among the countries with very high scores on the Social Hostilities Index in 2023 were Nigeria, India, Israel, Syria, Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Book Reviews

The new governance of religious diversity

Tariq Modood and Thomas Sealy

Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024, 205 pp., ISBN 978-0745653785, $32.95 US (paperback)

Everyone is trying to solve the global problem of religious persecution these days. This book is a very credible attempt to develop a framework for governance that respects religious diversity and can be contextualized for different countries and cultural contexts.

The authors are sociologists at the University of Bristol in Britain. Tariq Modood has focused his prodigious writing on secularism, religion and racism. Thomas Sealy was Modood's student and also focuses on ethnicity, religion and secularism. This book comes out of a multi-year European Union (EU)-funded global research project with the acronym GREASE, focusing on radicalisation, secularism and the governance of religion. There is therefore a solid research foundation for this book.

The book focuses on four countries in Europe and three in South and Southeast Asia. The European countries are Belgium, France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK). The Asian countries are India, Indonesia and Malaysia. All the countries are democracies but have very different religious histories and relationships between church and state.

In Part II, Modood and Sealy first articulate various models of secularism: majoritarian nationalism; secularist statism; liberal neutralism; moderate secularism; and pluralistic ("unity in diversity") nationalism (see the helpful table on page 39). This typology was developed after assessing 26 countries. The authors qualify the typology by noting that no country fits perfectly in any of the models.

Modood and Sealy identify two types of norms that are operative: DONs and QONs. DON stands for "dominant operative norms", which are constitutional and legal norms that are used in practice. QONs are "qualifying operative norms" that qualify the way DONs operate.

After explicating the models and norms, the authors have a chapter each applying them to the countries in Europe and in Asia. This is where the differences between seemingly similar countries become apparent. To illustrate the application of DONs and QONs, Modood and Sealy extend their analysis to six additional European countries. In Albania and Bulgaria, moderate secularism forms the DONs and secularist statism the QONs. Italy, Spain, Hungary and Slovakia similarly have moderate secularism forming the DONs but majoritarian nationalism the QONs.

In the three Asian countries, the authors identify DONs of pluralistic nationalism, although these are expressed in different ways in the three countries. All three also have QONs of majoritarian nationalism, which threatens pluralism. Modood and Sealy further analyse Bangladesh and Pakistan, which have majoritarian nationalism forming the DONs. They also briefly look at four countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) – Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia and Turkey – that also have majoritarian nationalism as the DONs. In these four states, religious minorities do not enjoy equal status and may not be tolerated at all.

Chapter 5 is the fulcrum of the book and sets out the authors' "normative mode of the governance of religious diversity" that they believe can be adapted for the countries they have analysed. They call their normative mode "multicultural secularism." In this chapter, Modood and Sealy engage with theorists in the liberal West as well as in India to identify points of agreement and disagreement with their model.

Multicultural secularism re-orients the ideal of equality to include respect for difference. This requires the state to include both symbolic acknowledgment of minorities and institutional accommodation and participation. Rather than majoritarian nationalism, the state should strive to enable citizens to identify with the state without having to erase other identities.

A particularly compelling aspect of the normative mode proposed is that the authors advocate "equalizing upwards." This concept was first proposed by Charles Taylor, the eminent Canadian philosopher. It requires the state to extend benefits enjoyed by the majority religion to minority religions rather than subtracting benefits from the majority.

The ensuing two chapters seek to apply multicultural secularism to the same European countries and Asian countries as above. The authors recognise that the term "secularism" may be anathema in Asia but the model itself can still be applied. The application concludes with another helpful table on page 159 that identifies how this can all work in practice in the variety of current regulatory norms found in the focus countries.

The original purpose behind the GREASE project was for European countries to draw lessons from non-Western countries on the governance of religious diversity. This book goes beyond that to also identify changes to regulatory structures in several Asian countries that can also be adapted to include religious diversity. Whether any national or local government has the will to adopt some of these norms remains to be seen.

As Modood and Sealy acknowledge, multicultural secularism is "thicker" than Western European secularism in including religious diversity, but it is "thinner" than Asian pluralistic nationalism. As the world is becoming more globalised and

more diverse, states should be encouraged to find common ground to "de-other" religious minorities and find ways to include them in the public square.

I highly recommend this book for those who are struggling to find more inclusive models of governance than they see in their own country. Of course, it is also valuable for academics in sociology, political studies and international relations to better understand current modes of governance of religious diversity and why they are not working. I found the proposed model compelling, particularly as it can be contextualized for many cultures.

Prof Dr Janet Epp Buckingham, Professor Emerita, Trinity Western University and Director, World Evangelical Alliance Geneva Office to the UN

Why religious freedom matters: Human rights and human flourishing

Allen D. Hertzke

Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 2026, 264 pp., ISBN: 978-0268211066, $45.00

Allen Hertzke offers a comprehensive and empirically grounded argument for the centrality of religious freedom in shaping democratic, peaceful, and prosperous societies. Drawing on a quarter-century of engagement with global scholarship and advocacy networks, he synthesizes historical, ethnographic, and quantitative evidence to demonstrate that the protection of religious liberty is not merely a normative ideal but a practical necessity for human flourishing. Hertzke situates the work within ongoing debates about the global rise in religious repression, presenting a timely and ambitious attempt to marshal interdisciplinary evidence in defence of religious freedom.

Among this book's many insights, one statement stands out as particularly profound: "If there is a common bond that can unite diverse religious traditions, it is *reverence*" (Hertzke 2026:167). In an era characterized by polarization, identity politics, and deep ideological divisions, Hertzke reminds readers of a simple but often forgotten truth. Reverence does not require agreement, conversion, or uniformity; rather, it entails recognizing that awe and wonder are universal human experiences. These emotions transcend religious affiliation, cultural background, and political ideology, arising from a shared human capacity to encounter something greater than oneself. In this sense, reverence exists independently of specific processes of indoctrination, socialization, or even formal religious belief. It offers a common ground for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

This book links religious liberty with a wide range of positive societal outcomes. Hertzke argues that societies that protect freedom of religion or belief

tend to demonstrate stronger democratic institutions, greater economic vitality, and enhanced social peace. He develops this argument through a comparative lens, drawing on global datasets and illustrative case studies. In doing so, Hertzke moves beyond abstract advocacy to present a broadly empirical case that is of interest to scholars in political science, international relations, and religious studies alike. His central claim is that religious freedom fosters the conditions under which individuals and communities can be who they are, thereby supporting both personal dignity and collective stability.

Hertzke engages with a wide body of literature, integrating insights from history, sociology, economics, and international relations. This breadth allows him to construct a multifaceted argument that situates religious freedom within larger patterns of governance and development. Particularly noteworthy is his emphasis on the interaction between religious liberty and other rights, including gender equality and socio-economic inclusion, and on how religious freedom enables women to overcome cultural and legal barriers that limit their autonomy and agency. In this respect, the book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that seeks to understand religious freedom not in isolation but as part of a broader human rights ecosystem.

The volume is also attentive to the global context in which debates over religious freedom unfold. Hertzke documents the persistence, and in some regions the intensification, of religious persecution and discrimination in the 21st century. By collecting evidence from diverse geographic contexts, he underscores the uneven and contested nature of religious liberty worldwide. Hertzke's analysis reinforces the importance of sustained scholarly and policy engagement with these challenges.

Perhaps a more explicit engagement with critiques of the religious freedom paradigm, particularly those emerging from postcolonial or critical human rights perspectives, would have strengthened the analytical balance of the work. Regardless of this limitation, however, Hertzke has produced a significant and timely contribution to the study of religious freedom. By combining empirical analysis with normative reflection, he demonstrates that religious liberty is integral to both individual dignity and societal flourishing. For readers seeking a comprehensive overview of the role of religious freedom in shaping global outcomes, this volume provides a valuable and persuasive resource. It will be of particular interest to those engaged in interdisciplinary research and policy work on religion and public life, and it underscores the ongoing need for scholarship that illuminates the complex dynamics of belief, freedom, and human well-being in a rapidly changing world.

Reverence may, indeed, be the missing ingredient in many contemporary debates about rights, religion, and democracy, as policymakers and scholars fre-

quently focus on legal protections, institutional arrangements, and political reforms. Hertzke concludes with a deceptively simple yet profoundly important insight. He poses the question of how we can live with our differences in a shrinking world, and he proposes the answer of investing in "enlightened strategies that protect freedom of conscience and religious practice" (170). The implications and positive impact of this argument are potentially far-reaching.

Prof Suzy Graham, Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Johannesburg

Secularization, social order, and world history: Toward a global perspective

Kevin N. Flatt

Milton Park: Routledge, 2025, 278 pp., ISBN 978-1041075325, €168.00 (hardcover)

In 240 pages of text, Kevin Flatt argues that secularization is not merely the decline of religion, where God and faith are gradually replaced by humans and reason. Rather, secularization is a revolution in all aspects and 'affects not only religion but all social domains.' Given that understanding, the book asks, how can we apply this idea in a global perspective?

Most Western scholars look at secularization through European and American historical glasses. They view history as a battle between religion and secularism or non-religion, in which religion is defended by one institution: the Church. This perspective is problematic, as belief systems of other cultures and historical ages can't necessarily be defined as religions and don't or didn't have a church-like institution to defend it. The word 'religion' itself did not even exist in many if not most languages up to the 19th century. After all, Jesuit missionaries to China struggled with the question of whether to define Buddhism and Confucianism as religions or non-religions. That's why talking about secularization as a decline of religion in a global perspective is problematic.

To bridge these epistemic gaps, Flatt introduces the concept of a sacred-social order. The sacred includes a divine aspect, which can be a concrete god as in Islam or a more abstract force like the Chinese idea of the Mandate of Heaven, by which emperors ruled the country for almost 3,000 years and which is obviously the opposite of a secular order. The social order, on the other hand, 'puts the stress on our shared or collective life,' including relationships, institutions, the ordering of time and space, family, sex, marriage, law and government. Combining the two, the sacred-social order thus becomes the overarching way in which societies are ordered and how they see the world. One could compare it with Michel Foucault's concept of episteme.

The shift from one episteme or sacred-social order to another constitutes what we can call a proper revolution. Flatt describes the well-known revolution from the Roman sacred-social order to a Christian one from the 3rd to the 5th century CE. Revolutions of this scale take place over an extended period of time, characterized by periodic relapses and attempts to reverse the tide. One famous example is the Roman emperor Julian, called the Apostate by Christians, who ruled from 361 to 363 and tried in vain to revive the pagan sacred-social order. Revolutions like the Christian one are (almost) unstoppable, just as is the secular revolution that has been overthrowing the Christian sacred-social order since the 18th century. In Europe, the church seemed successful in stopping this secularizing trend between 1815 and 1860 and again between 1930 and 1950, but it has had to admit its defeat in the subsequent decades.

The new secular order has been spreading from Europe to the rest of the world. The revolutionary proportions of this trend were most notable in the communist revolutions in Russia and China, but also in Turkey where Mustafa Kemal Ataturk imposed secularism in almost every aspect of life. Not surprisingly, new movements have sought to reverse this trend, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East, evangelicals in the United States, the AKP party in Turkey or the BJP party in India. However, just as the emperor Julian failed to stop the Christian revolution in the 4th century, these movements will fail to stop the rise of the secular order, Flatt argues. As we are in the middle of a paradigm shift, like that of the 4th century, different sacred-social orders will exist alongside each other for a time.

The strength of this interesting book is also its weakness: it aims to take a global perspective while simultaneously claiming that secularization is a Western concept that is spreading over the world. Secularization in the West has entailed a centuries-long battle against the overarching power of the church, in which the secular order has been taking ground step by step. One could argue that the secular revolution was nowhere as necessary as in Christian Europe, because in other sacred-social orders there was more room for other ways of thinking. Perhaps there never was a revolution against Confucianism before Mao because it wasn't seen as needed. Despite the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, one could argue that Confucianist China has always known some kind of secular order. It is not a coincidence that the Jesuit reports coming from China inspired the fathers of the Enlightenment and their ideas of secularism. Reflections such as this one on cross-cultural contrasts might have made this fascinating book even richer and more global.

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Faith in United Nations human rights treaties: Legal and religious commentaries for research and peer-learning

Michael Wiener, Ibrahim Salama and Britta Nicolmann (eds.)

San José, Cairo and Oslo: University for Peace, The British University in Egypt and Norwegian Centre for Human Rights, 2026, 650 pp., ISBN 978-9930542767, available online

The title *Faith in United Nations Human Rights Treaties* functions as a deliberate double entendre. On one level, the volume comprises a collection of essays examining faith-based perspectives on a wide range of United Nations (UN) human rights instruments. On another, it echoes the preamble to the United Nations Charter, which reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights." The book not only traces the contributions of religious actors to the drafting of these instruments but also explores how diverse religious traditions have promoted, interpreted, and appropriated human rights within their own theological and cultural frameworks.

Bringing together an impressive array of leading scholars in religion and international law, the volume reflects a broad spectrum of faith traditions and disciplinary perspectives. As such, it constitutes a valuable resource for both religious studies and legal scholarship, offering interdisciplinary insights of considerable depth and breadth.

For scholars of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), the most significant instruments examined are the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR). The chapter on the Rabat Plan of Action on the prohibition of advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred constituting incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence is also particularly relevant, given the vulnerability of many religious minorities to hatred and violence, increasingly amplified through social media. Other instruments discussed in the volume are more tangentially related to FoRB, although they remain important to many faith communities. One notable omission is the *Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*, a foundational document in the development of international religious freedom norms.

The opening chapter appropriately focuses on the development of the UDHR. Katharina Kunter and Rabbi Alex Goldberg offer a persuasive challenge to the common assertion that the UDHR is primarily a Western or Christian articulation of human rights. Instead, they demonstrate its pluralistic intellectual foundations, identifying contributions from Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Confucian traditions. The chapter also highlights the political and cultural complexities surrounding the Declaration's adoption, illuminating the careful negotiations and compromises required to produce language acceptable across diverse religious and cultural contexts.

The chapter on the ICCPR is equally instructive. Drawing upon the *travaux préparatoires*, it examines in detail the debates surrounding the wording of Article 18, the Covenant's central provision on freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The chapter also reviews significant jurisprudence of the Human Rights Committee, which hears individual communications against states party to the Optional Protocol. Gentian Zyberi and Ahmed Shaheed, together with Zeynep Baysar, bring substantial expertise to this analysis, resulting in a particularly authoritative treatment of the subject.

The chapters on the Rabat Plan of Action and the Beirut Declaration are similarly valuable. The Rabat Plan's emphasis on combating hate speech remains highly influential within UN circles, although its principles have too often failed to shape national legislation and policy to the degree intended. Likewise, the Beirut Declaration and the associated *Faith for Rights* commitments deserve wider recognition. Together, they provide an important framework for interfaith cooperation in the promotion of human rights, including FoRB.

The volume's chapters on the conventions addressing racism, torture, the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities, and enforced disappearances are all informative and engaging. Each examines the participation of religious actors in the drafting process as well as relevant treaty-body decisions concerning religion. Although the inclusion of a chapter on the *Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture*, without a corresponding chapter on the Convention itself, initially appears somewhat unusual, the discussion is nevertheless useful for readers interested in mechanisms aimed at preventing torture and other forms of ill-treatment.

The chapter on the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) is among the longest in the volume and at times includes more detail than necessary, particularly regarding individual state reservations. Nevertheless, it addresses an important and often contentious issue: the relationship between religious traditions and women's rights. While certain religiously grounded norms have been used to restrict women's roles and opportunities, faith-based actors have also been important advocates for gender equality. The chapter effectively illustrates how religion can function both as an obstacle to, and a resource for, advancing women's rights.

As is often the case in edited collections, some chapters appear less well integrated into the volume's central theme. One such example examines the absence of Dharmic perspectives in the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR). While the discussion is intellectually interesting and raises important questions about alternative normative traditions, focusing on influences that were absent from the drafting process seems somewhat tangen-

tial to the book's primary purpose. Similarly, the chapter on the draft *International Covenant on the Right to Development* feels premature. Given that the authors participated directly in drafting the text, their enthusiasm for the project is understandable. Although the chapter demonstrates how concepts of development resonate with a variety of religious traditions, its focus on a still-developing instrument somewhat weakens its fit within a volume otherwise centred on established human rights treaties. The chapter on the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* likewise offers relatively limited engagement with religious themes and could arguably have been omitted.

The two chapters devoted to the Geneva Conventions are also somewhat idiosyncratic in their focus. One examines the meaning of the phrase "dictates of public conscience" within international humanitarian law, while the other explores the relationship between Islamic law and the Additional Protocols to the 1949 Geneva Conventions. The latter provides a useful demonstration of the compatibility between key humanitarian protections and Islamic law. At the same time, the persistence of civilian targeting in armed conflicts involving actors from Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, and other religious backgrounds serves as a sobering reminder that religious traditions often exert limited restraining influence during war. The gap between religious ethical teachings and actual conduct in armed conflict remains a persistent challenge across traditions.

Faith in United Nations Human Rights Treaties is not a book that most readers will approach sequentially from cover to cover. Rather, it is best understood as a reference work. Its greatest strength lies in providing a comprehensive guide to the interactions between faith communities and specific UN human rights instruments. For researchers working on religion and international human rights law, the volume offers a rich repository of information and analysis. Its online availability further enhances its value, making the text both accessible and searchable for scholars and practitioners alike.

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Christ and covenant in global politics: A Christian introduction to International Relations

Robert J. Joustra

Lisle: IVP Academic, 2026, 256 pp., ISBN: 978-1514007860, $29.99 US

This book is a formidable summary of Robert Joustra's considered reflections on International Relations (IR) in academia and in practice. He notes that it

is the product of about a decade of thinking about these topics and teaching them to undergraduates. It is a thoroughgoing and engrossing book, broad in scope and in reference. As a text that serves both as a Christian critique of received IR theory and an articulation of Joustra's own broad musings on multiple topics, it is difficult to review. So much is packed in here that a short review may not do it justice.

In sum, *Christ and Covenant* is Joustra's attempt to bring a Reformed Christian commentary to instruction in the key topics of IR. That is a very important task to do for those of us who teach at Christian institutions where students must struggle systematically to apply a Christian worldview to their studies. It is a yeoman's task that Joustra takes on with gusto. This book ideally serves in tandem with a course on IR such as one that Joustra himself would teach.

Joustra begins by framing his book on the ideal of justice. Using justice as a frame of reasoning in IR is a bit of a tall order, at least in part because it is derivative of something earthier – power. As all students of IR are taught, Thucydides wrote that "the standard of justice depends upon the equality of power to compel." But Joustra argues that power's chief intent from God's standpoint is the achievement of justice – something that must be defined separately from the use of power. Joustra links it to what he calls a "Hebraic" notion of justice, rooted in the law as handed down by God as "something of a love letter to his lost creation". Joustra rightly points out that the Hebrew notion of law shares little with our contemporary use of the term, connoting a sort of philosophy or way of life – sometimes it might be better translated "instruction" – in this case, of a divine nature.

He moves on to comment on the normative claims that underpin the common theories of IR: realism, liberal internationalism (he uses the term "rationalism"), and Marxism. Here is where a student in an introductory course in IR theory will get the greatest use. As a heuristic device, Joustra draws on David Koyzis's book on ideologies, *Political Visions and Illusions*, interrogating each theory on the basis of five distinct questions about worldview.

Here is where I think there is a danger in Joustra's approach. A common affliction among undergraduates is the conflation of IR theories with ideologies. Theories are *not* ideologies, and though they may be prescriptive, a realist does not need to be a conservative, nor a liberal internationalist a member of the Democratic Party in the US. While IR theory is *based* on worldviews, I think it does a disservice to students to perpetuate the myth of ideological taint in IR theory. The distinction here remains a little bit blurry. For example, liberal internationalism does not need to be based on norms, prescriptions, or dreams about the international order. Its proponents do not need to presume a normative commitment

to global governance institutions. Liberal internationalism merely observes, for example, that the importance of non-state actors may come to overwhelm the potency of the state in certain circumstances. While many liberals might think that to be a normatively good thing, they may just as easily identify the problems that arise with it.

Joustra goes on to comment on some of the chief concerns of IR theory – the prominence of the state, the lessons of anarchy in IR, and the significance of national communities – each of which is questioned by the Christian for very good reasons. The last few chapters move on to the application of the problem of Christian justice to IR. First is the dominant strategy of self-help amid the tragedy of the commons, which Joustra applies to the global environmental crisis. Second is the drive of capitalism to succeed without consideration of the underlying virtue of the common good. Third is the use of violence to achieve our ends, which leads Joustra to contemplate the justice of military intervention.

Joustra's book is the product of an intelligent and well-read individual. The book presumes a very well-informed reader with a mind awake to the many contributions of modern political thought. It also presumes a strong foundation in IR theory. Joustra clearly expects that readers will know some of the basics of IR theory going in – but he also expects them to be familiar with a wide variety of sources. The Melian Dialogue (quoted above) is referenced without being placed in context. He makes airy reference to Davos, which might not immediately alert the reader to its relationship with the World Economic Forum. He brandishes the term "Fordism", which was not commonly used at an introductory level when I was an undergraduate, without providing an explanation. As someone used to all of these references, I had no trouble following, but I fear that a second-year undergraduate might struggle. The book therefore stands as a provocative way to explore IR theory at the advanced undergraduate or (more likely) graduate level, in my view.

Joustra writes this book in a very approachable way, as long as one has some background in the vast number of references that he makes to philosophers, theorists, and the media. It reads in as entertaining and convivial a way as would a conversation with its author, whose voice is clear throughout. It reveals the density of the author's knowledge of Reformed theology and related political themes, of much of IR theory, of philosophy and of pop culture. As to the latter, the references occasionally come fast and furious, from zombies to *Settlers of Catan*. *The Mandalorian* and *MacGyver* are each referenced within a couple of pages of one another. Viewers of the one may be hard put to be aware of the other, given the years between them. So the book has a bit of a parochial feel, winking at an audience that will really understand the author – maybe some of the students in

his own classes – but which might be a little confusing to those outside. There is a feeling of, "If you know, you know."

As a fellow professor of IR, I salute the pedagogical organization of the book, starting with an assessment of the prominent theories of IR. However, there are a few odd gaps: no mention of Kenneth Waltz or Hedley Bull in the chapter on realism; no references to Antonio Gramsci or Robert Cox as nods to neo-Marxism. The chapter on Marxism meanders toward a discussion of constructivism: it struck me as odd that the same chapter deals with the work of Karl Marx and Alexander Wendt.

Joustra's conclusion suggests that the global need to understand and accommodate multiple worldviews commends our respect for differences among nations. In response to the demand for a normative answer to this diversity, he cites the concept of covenantal pluralism, explored elsewhere in his own work and that of Chris Seiple and Dennis Hoover. While it may be more difficult to apply a covenantal relationship to the international system than to a nation-state, it is a laudable way to frame Christian responses to the intricate differences we deal with at the global level.

Readers outside the realist or Reformed schools might be taken aback by the occasional assertions about authority or (more notably) the use of violence. Joustra deals judiciously with critiques of the state but remains of the opinion that it is the single most important actor in world politics, one which the Christian must respect at some level. He also makes a strong case for the application of Just War theory to questions surrounding military intervention, arguing that war is "not a necessary evil but the work of love and justice" (197). This point should not be read out of context, but one must always guard against the possible spiritualization of what are ultimately mundane earthly conflicts.

What lessons are there here for religious freedom? Human rights are not a focal point of Joustra's book, though they do get a few mentions. But his placement of justice at the heart of IR makes the case for humanitarian concern to be a central point of reference for IR. Justice, law, and principle are therefore appropriate concerns for the state in international affairs. What is more, his embrace of covenantal pluralism, with its recognition that spirituality and the search for meaning are universal (139), commits the Christian to the promotion of freedom of religion and belief as an extension of our respect for the differences among human beings. These commitments to biblical justice are central to his account of the Christian worldview, underpinning any faithful analytical theory of international politics and action in favour of the common good.

Dr Paul S. Rowe, Professor of Political and International Studies, Trinity Western University

Religious freedom in Colombia and Mexico: An approach to broadening categories and public policy actions from a comparative public policy approach

Camila Andrea Sánchez Sandoval

Bonn: VKW, 2025, 170 pp., ISBN: 978-3862693016, free download at https://iirf.global/

Taking religious freedom out of abstraction

The contribution of this work lies in its point of departure: giving content to religious freedom from the standpoint of public policy, beyond mere declaration, through a comparison of Mexico and Colombia. This review argues that the move is sound but incomplete because of the author's own decision: by excluding laicity from her framework, the book cannot distinguish religious freedom as a right of persons from religious freedom as a prerogative of organizations, and that conflation runs through its findings.

Much of the regional literature states that religious freedom is a recognized human right and takes for granted that the statement produces effects. Sánchez Sandoval reverses the order, asking *which categories of expansion of religious freedom in Mexico and Colombia have an impact on the generation of public policy actions*, and shifts the problem from the declarative plane to that of state decisions. The right becomes a policy objective dependent on identifiable triggers: constitutional change, the ruler's religious affiliation, religious sectors' demands, violations, religious tradition, and international influence.

The problematization starts from a diagnosis drawn from Fox (2015:1), for whom there is "no agreement whatsoever on how we should define, understand, or even name" religious freedom. On that basis, Sánchez Sandoval treats it as a concept that has not yet been conceptualized: no declaration defines what it covers or who holds it, and that indeterminacy passes to states, whose documents mention the right without specifying components or limits; where the concept is undefined, violation finds room. She further finds that the documents analyzed do not identify the public problem they claim to address, reducing much of both countries' religious policy to "actions without a specific purpose" – perhaps her most transferable finding.

Two instruments and their limits: The curtain and expansion

To organize the literature, the author proposes a two-sided curtain: a conventional perspective that defines and promotes the right, and a skeptical one that questions its Western matrix, its bias toward recognized religions, and its conflict with other rights. Presenting the two as complementary is apt, but a curtain opens

symmetrically and the field does not. In Latin America the discussion has tilted toward the skeptical line under empirical pressure: de-institutionalized religion, unregistered cults, spiritualities without church form, and non-Christian communities render inoperative a notion of religious freedom designed for confessions with doctrine, clergy, and territory (Gaytán Alcalá 2018). The author notices this – Colombia's Law 133 of 1994 excludes santería and occultism – but the metaphor keeps her from the consequence: here the skeptical side does not complement the conventional one; it overflows it.

The operative concept is *expansion*, grounded in the progressivity of human rights and defined as any normative increase produced by state actors. Yet progressivity has a reverse side the book does not explore: the prohibition of regression. Measured by normative accumulation alone, expansion misses de facto setbacks – conscientious objection that obstructs recognized rights, electoral participation by ministers of worship that the law forbids – which in both countries occur while legislation grows. The author senses it – legal development "does not automatically translate into a full expansion and guarantee" – but her instrument measures only half the equation.

Comparison, method, and history

The methodology is qualitative – coding of 34 documents in a comparative case design – adopted after statistical models failed for lack of variance, itself a finding: no comparable data exist. Case selection is the most productive decision: Mexico and Colombia share a Catholic matrix and extensive legislation, but their regimes differ: a radical laicity of anticlerical origin that bars the clergy from politics, versus a pluri-confessional laicity in which the state never adhered to separation and churches participate continuously in politics. The comparison holds belief constant and varies the regime: not how much religion there is, but how the state processes it.

The historical trajectories confirm the difference. Mexico moves from anticlericalism and the 1917 Constitution to the 1992 Law on Religious Associations and later jurisprudential expansion; Colombia, from the 1991 Constituent Assembly, where evangelical minorities enter as political actors, to Law 133 of 1994 and the 2018 Comprehensive Public Policy, the right becoming electoral currency between rulers and megachurches. Both share three policy changes – the 19th century, the 1990s laws, the 2010s turn toward concrete action – and one underlying difference: Mexico guarantees the right to every belief; Colombia, only to what its law recognizes as religion.

Transfer and counter-transfer

The most original proposal is *counter-transfer*, drawn from Porto de Oliveira and Pal (2018), to name resistance to policy transfer: between 1990 and 2012 both coun-

tries combined abundant legislation with "a certain legal complacency and lack of political will." The intuition is valuable, but the concept has an identification problem: in its source literature it presupposes a model that circulates and actors who block it, and the author acknowledges identifying no leading country. Without a model to resist, she describes inertia. Making the notion a tool requires naming what was transferred and who stopped it: the 1997 Colombian "evangelical concordat," which the book documents, is a better candidate than generic political will.

The absence: Laicity and the two religious freedoms

Here lies the central point. The book announces at the outset that it will not discuss laicity or secularization, deeming them conceptually independent. The delimitation is legitimate but costly: in Latin America religious freedom cannot be understood outside laicity, which, as an instrument for legitimizing the state against a politically ambitious religious authority, defined what could be claimed as religious freedom and by whom (Gaytán Alcalá, 2018). The findings show it: the Mexico-Colombia difference is one between regimes of laicity, and the coding yields a code labeled "Church-State separation" that conditions all subsequent Mexican legislation. Laicity is not absent from the evidence; it is absent from the framework.

That absence conceals the distinction the material demands: religious freedom operates in two registers the book treats as one. In the first it is an individual right – to believe, not to believe, to change and manifest one's conviction; in the second, a prerogative of organizations, claimed not as a guarantee for their faithful but as an entitlement to speak in their name and exercise guardianship over their voice in public (Vaggione 2017). Much of what the book records as expansion – registration of associations, ministers' rights, agreements, consultation tables – belongs to the second register, and the Colombian politicization it criticizes is its consequence. Distinguishing the two would have allowed the question that laicity raises and the book does not reach: whether organizational expansion widens or narrows individual freedom.

Strengths, weaknesses, and avenues

Strengths: a question that moves the right toward public policy; the public-problem deficit identified; a sound comparison; methodological candor. Weaknesses: the exclusion of laicity and the conflation of individual and organizational freedom; a measure of expansion blind to regression; a counter-transfer without a model; incomplete references and a corpus of 34 documents in the abstract but 36 in the introduction.

Of the five research avenues proposed, two are viable and engage this critique: the right's entry into the legislative agenda, its actors and lobbying – connected

with the documented politicization and the individual/organizational distinction – and the subnational level, where in Mexico the municipality is the terrain on which the right is in fact expanded or violated. Advocacy coalition frameworks applied to the same corpus would correct the weakness of counter-transfer, since they require naming actors. The quantitative and impact-evaluation avenues run up against what the book itself documents: neither the database nor the budgetary information they need exists.

Assessment

The work delivers what it promises: it opens a field – religious freedom as an object of comparative public policy – with a precise question and a well-chosen comparison. Its limit lies in what it decides not to do: by dispensing with laicity it leaves out the concept that would explain why one and the same majority belief produces two such different regimes, and why the expansion it documents so often benefits organizations before persons. The research that follows should begin there.

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Religious persecution: Perspectives from theology and missiology

Christof Sauer and Robert Lilleaasen (eds.)

Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2025, 460 pp., ISBN 978-3862693252, €30.00, free download from https://iirf.global/

This comprehensive anthology, comprising 17 contributions from nine countries, is the result of the research project 'Religious Freedom and Religious Persecution' at Fjellhaug International University College, carried out between 2019 and 2025. Lilleaasen, an associate professor at the college, coordinated this project together with Christof Sauer, IIRF founder and a part-time professor of religious studies and missiology there who served as a consultant on the project.

The project aimed to explore the theological and missiological dimensions of persecution, based on the conviction that the phenomenon of persecution must be understood not only as a socio-political phenomenon but also as a spiritual and ecclesial one (21). This anthology thus provides an important contribution to the discourse on religious freedom, which understandably, given its high practical relevance, tends to focus primarily on practical policies in advocacy work. This project takes a step back and sheds light on underlying premises, established traditions and valuable resources drawn from the Christian tradition. In doing so, it provides a critical counterbalance to the all-too-rapid co-optation of religious issues by the civil sphere or the functional exploitation of religious persecution in advocacy work.

The anthology organises the contributions according to the classical disciplines of theology (five contributions in biblical studies, five in church history and systematic theology, four in practical theology, four in missiology and religious studies, and finally two in applied theology in the form of personal reflections and practical application). This arrangement establishes from the outset the ambition to understand the topic of religious persecution as a theme spanning the entire theological encyclopaedia. Given the scope and breadth of the contributions, this review focuses on two of them: the opening foundational essay by Sauer and Werner Nel on 'Definitions, scales, and spectra reflected in the context of theology and missiology' and Sara Afshari's systematic-theological exploration of Holy Saturday as a lens for a theology of persecution.

Sauer and Nel provide a comprehensive interdisciplinary discussion of definitions of persecution from the fields of psychology, sociology and law before proposing a theological definition. They then analyse selected definitions from Christian sources (Open Doors World Watch List, Voice of the Martyrs Canada and Aid to the Church in Need), ultimately grouping the various definitions according to their strengths and limitations. This analysis leads to the development of a model that aims to encompass the broad spectrum of definitions as comprehensively as possible. The task arises from the fact that the term 'persecution' is used in both a broad and a narrow sense, with different interests and perspectives playing a role, leading to dissatisfaction and calls for more nuanced terminology (34).

The strength of Sauer and Nel's article lies in its opening up of this interdisciplinary discourse to theology. Its relevance is heightened, above all, by the grow-

ing religious illiteracy amongst key stakeholders and political decision-makers in the West. This becomes clear at the start of the third section, where the authors refer to the Lutheran theologian Michael Knippa, who holds the view "that it is not the task of the Christian church to *define* persecution, but to *discern* it" (47). Here, the question of the definition of persecution is regarded not as a static determination but as a spiritual practice which must prove itself anew in ever-changing contexts and must be viewed "as a virtue to be maintained rather than a deficiency to be corrected" (48).

On one hand, such a theological approach resists any reductionist, static definition or determination of what persecution must be; on the other hand, it opens itself up to the transcendent dimension of this phenomenon, which – despite the currently dominant post-metaphysical, modern conditions of knowledge – highlights a fact that has been unjustly underemphasised. Were this line of argument pursued consistently, the essay could end here, but the authors also wish to develop overarching defining characteristics of religious persecution drawn from the New Testament. A critical reading would see this attempt to align with other academic disciplines as the subordination of theology to extra-theological epistemologies (in this case, those of the empirical social sciences), which, due to this framework, run the risk of reductionism. It is therefore only logical to conclude that "it seems unattainable to achieve a universal interdisciplinary understanding" (69). A more favourable interpretation recognizes the tension in the authors' endeavour to translate theological perspectives into a discursive context that operates unquestioningly with functional logics (e.g. in advocacy work).

Sauer and Nel conclude by suggesting that it is better to speak of 'spectra' rather than 'scales', spectra being "a multi-dimensional model, e.g. a pyramid with multiple facets […], that exceeds the approach of scales" (63), as these potentially mutually exclusive definitions can be viewed as coexisting and complementary. They provide a nuanced, encyclopaedic overview of the issue of defining persecution. In doing so, they assist researchers and practitioners in avoiding the tendency to promote their own particular perspective in an overly dominant and unquestioning manner. Instead, Sauer and Nel encourage the judicious application of various perspectives, whilst being mindful of their contingencies and limitations. Their research thus serves the interests of Christians facing discrimination and persecution, as well as the cause of religious freedom for all, thereby realigning the focus from a mere end in itself to serving the community of reference within theology.

Sara Afshari is herself a victim of religious persecution, having been forced to flee Iran and now living in exile in the UK. As an Anglican Christian, she bases her theology of persecution on a conceptual framework that is more

commonly found in the Roman Catholic tradition, one borrowed from the Roman Catholic theologian and priest Hans Urs von Balthasar. Afshari explores Holy Saturday as an appropriate lens through which to gain a more nuanced understanding of persecution from the perspective of the affected part of the Church. She declares boldly, "If our theology cannot hold space for the long, uncertain Saturday, then it cannot speak truthfully to the reality of persecution" (254).

Afshari laments that Holy Saturday is often unjustly neglected in theological discussions of persecution (243). However, Holy Saturday provides the church with theological vocabulary for its suffering. For it acknowledges the church's experience that it does not yet live in victory (*ecclesia triumphans)*, but that it also, as *ecclesia patiens*, remains on this earth amidst fear and uncertainty. She seeks to develop a 'framework of descent': "Here, descent does not mean theological collapse, but sacred solidarity with Christ, who also descended" (238). Afshari does this by interweaving three narratives from the Passion story. First, the disciples in hiding embody the existential question of the persecuted Church: 'Who are we now?' (238). Second, Christ descends into the realm of the dead and bears the full burden of sin, abandonment and silence, becoming the theological and spiritual centre of endurance in persecution (238). Third, drawing on Balthasar, she takes up the Trinitarian triad of communal perseverance, holy waiting and divine descent, which calls the global church to solidarity (238).

Afshari elaborates on these theological themes by using the example of her own experience in her home parish in Iran, the Episcopal Church of Kerman, St Andrew's, founded in the early 20th century by the Church Mission Society (CMS). In this way, she brings to light a blind spot in the academic debate on a theology of persecution. Her perspective as someone directly affected provides an important corrective to an academic discourse that is, for the most part, led by people in privileged circumstances (myself included). This tendency is again evident if Afshari's second contribution, in the applied section of the anthology, where she takes a critical look at the fourth Lausanne Congress held in South Korea in 2024. In that article, she notes that persecution is reduced to emotional appeals for evangelism or support, which undermines the deeper spiritual dimension of this suffering experienced within the church. Moreover, by reducing persecution to a problem that needs to be solved, the church misses the opportunity to regard this suffering as a sacred witness, in which Christians learn to bear their cross together (440-441).

However, in her efforts to further develop Balthasar's concept of the triune God's solidarity with humanity, Afshari confronts a theological dilemma. In his

work, Balthasar connects solidarity exclusively to God's relation to humankind, because God, in his sovereignty, has the freedom to choose whether to enter into a relationship with humankind. Afshari concludes from this observation that the global church too should now stand in solidarity with the persecuted part of the body (238, 255). Here, then, this bond of solidarity stems from a decision. In common parlance, however, solidarity is a deliberate act between separate parties: 'I declare my solidarity with X.' The logic behind this commitment is that we were initially separate and that I am now choosing to stand by you. But in this way, the ontological foundation is lost. According to 1 Corinthians 12:27, the Church is already the body of Christ, and our action follows from this identity. We support fellow Christians because they are e.g. our foot; if you sever them, you sever yourself. But for Afshari, 'We are already one in Christ' seems to be replaced by 'We should stand together.' This shift weakens the urgency of the author's argument. If it is merely a decision, it can also be reversed.

Moreover, the valuable contribution of Afshari's essay lies in its proposition that the unpersecuted part of the body can learn from the persecuted part. However, the concept of solidarity is usually used one-sidedly: 'The West stands in solidarity with the persecuted church.' Rarely do we hear the reverse: 'The persecuted church stands in solidarity with us.' It sounds like help flowing from the strong to the weak, which is precisely not Afshari's concern, and which loses the benefit of reciprocity and the reversal of perspective. In the New Testament, the persecuted church is often the spiritually strong part that corrects the whole body (Rev 2-3). The image of the body prevents anyone from becoming a mere recipient. Ultimately, this terminology makes Afshari's message more accessible as outsiders immediately understand what is meant. 'Koinonia' needs to be explained, whereas 'solidarity' is a powerful term in public and interdisciplinary discourse and creates a sense of urgency for action. Presumably, the church fathers would have classified the meaning of the term under 'philanthropia' or 'koinonia.' The danger here, however, is that the term 'solidarity' could replace the biblical foundation rather than translating it.

The three essays discussed here demonstrate the wealth of starting points in the anthology, and of its considerable resources for further discussion. I would not be surprised if this work becomes a central theological reference work for the next phase of research on religious freedom. The field of theology and religious freedom should be grateful to now have such a resource at its disposal.

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The first right: Freedom to religion. Freedom from religion

Jacob Rudenstrand

Freedom of religion series Vol. 10. Bonn: Culture and science Publ (VKW), 2026. 221 pp. ISBN 978-3862693351, free download from https://iirf.global/

Original title in Swedish: "Den första rättigheten: Frihet till Religion, frihet från Religion", Timbro Förlag, 2022.

If one doesn't count academic articles or government-commissioned committee investigations, only a handful of Swedish books focus on freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in Sweden. About half of these are technical academic literature, leaving about three titles which are easily accessible to the general public. Rudenstrand's *The First Right* definitely made it onto this exclusive list when it was first published in Swedish in 2022, and with it, Rudenstrand also entered the rather small group of currently published FoRB experts in Sweden.

When the Swedish version appeared in 2022, it dealt with a number of highly relevant themes concerning FoRB, not only in Sweden but also in the broader contexts of Europe and the USA. Additionally, the book provides general background on FoRB as a human right and its development within Christianity. Even though Rudenstrand draws primarily on an American religious liberty tradition, these contributions carry relevance at a global level. In a balanced way, he portrays his own Christian faith and how it affects his perspective on FoRB, thus also contributing to a deepened theological reflection on FoRB from an evangelical perspective. All this was done in concise and readable yet nuanced Swedish. Combined with his thorough journalistic research, these traits made the book both highly relevant and accessible to the general public without becoming overly simplistic. While there were some minor blind spots – and I personally remain unconvinced by descriptions of FoRB as a first right – *Den första rättigheten* was a highly competent and balanced contribution on FoRB in Sweden, as well as on Sweden's tense relationship with religion and religious practice in general.

The translation of Rudenstrand's book thus offers a welcome contribution toward greater understanding of the Swedish and perhaps also the Scandinavian FoRB context. To many foreigners, our individualistic and sometimes "religiophobic" society may seem hard to interpret. *The First Right* helps to explain why things are as they are while also challenging the status quo. My major concern when picking up the English version was therefore whether a translation published in 2026 would remain on point.

In the last four years, the general and political debate on FoRB in Sweden, and perhaps also in Europe and the US, has changed radically and not in ways

that are necessarily constructive. Whereas Rudenstrand described FoRB in Sweden as a sidelined interest as of 2022, it has since entered the political centre stage with drama, high emotions and increased radicalization on several sides. During the 2026 election campaign, we have seen serious political suggestions regarding the banning of burqas and hijabs, as well as prohibitions on foreign funding coming from "extremist" religious actors for religious denominations in Sweden. From 2024 to 2026, the UN's special rapporteurs for FoRB, freedom of association, freedom of assembly, and human rights defenders, as well as the Swedish Human Rights Institute, have raised concerns about the increased vulnerability of Swedish religious and indigenous minorities and the country's shrinking civic space.[1]

The story of establishing democratic criteria to govern state funding of religious denominations and civil society, which Rudenstrand starts to tell in *The First Right*, has now been completed. The democratic criteria have been implemented despite strong criticism over risks of legal uncertainty and an actual undermining of FoRB and freedom of association from both religious denominations and secular civil society. According to Civil Rights Defenders, a Swedish human rights organization, similar criteria on private educational institutions have meant that since 2019 the majority of Muslim confessional schools in Sweden have been closed on opaque grounds.[2] Furthermore, an increasing body of academic research points towards a structural problem of defunding and deplatforming Swedish Muslim civil society organizations on grounds which raise questions of legal justification and proportionality.[3]

In 2026, Sweden, for the first time, showed up on the Pew Research Center list of countries with high social hostilities related to FoRB. To an even larger extent than in 2022, it can be argued that the term "Islamism" has lost its real meaning in the Swedish public debate, apart from the political and nationalistic purpose of creating a general association between Muslims and Islam as threats to Swedish national security and identity. Meanwhile, antisemitism is rising and cul-

1 UN Human Rights Council. Visit to Sweden – Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief. A/HRC/55/47/Add.2, 2 April 2024; Institutet för Mänsklaga Rättigheer, Årsrapport 2025, 3.1.1-465/2024, available at: https://tinyurl.com/4uwyk6np; Institutet för Mänsklaga Rättigheer, Årsrapport 2026, Årsrapport, 3.1.1-661/2025, available at: https://tinyurl.com/ys29us2a; "Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association," AL SWE 3/2026, public letter, 25 February 2026.

2 Kerstin Gustafsson Figueroa, "På Fem År Har 22 Muslimska Friskolor Stängts," Nyhetsbyrån Järva (Stockholdm Sweden), n.d., available at: https://tinyurl.com/53u2cybu. For an academic analysis, see also Abdi Hassan and Emin Poljarević, "Adjudicating Muslimness: Islamophobia and the Limits of Swedish Law," Islamophobic Studies Journal (Berkeley) 9, no. 2 (March 2026): 200-218. Available at: https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.9.2.0005.

3 Emin Poljarević and Amanj Azia, "Introduction: Sweden's Governance of Suspicion: Islamophobia and Conditional Belonging," Islamophobic Studies Journal (Berkeley) 9, No. 2 (March 2026): 138-141. Available at: https://doi.org/10.13169/islastudj.9.2.0001.

tural Christianity is increasingly wielded as a weapon by nationalist politicians. Unfortunately, similar developments can also be seen in other Western countries.

Consequently, while the themes dealt with in *The First Right* remain highly relevant and the book gives international readers valuable insight into FoRB's historical development in Sweden, as well as appreciated theological reflection, the English version would have greatly benefitted from an author's foreword to help readers situate the text in the present context. Without such guidance, some chapters are clearly outdated; more importantly, some of Rudenstrand's arguments and editorial choices may be interpreted by international readers in ways he never originally intended. Certain blind spots, such as failing to provide his own definition of Islamism, which could be seen as minor in 2022, could easily make the text appear more biased in today's political climate than Rudenstrand would have wanted.

Lastly, the machine translation of the book deserves comment. As noted above, Rudenstrand writes in a concise yet nuanced way in Swedish. He has an admirable talent for saying much with a few words, while still communicating nuance. Therefore, the use of a machine translation, unfortunately, does not do him justice. There are several annoying translation mistakes, and the English version remains heavy and technically complicated throughout. More extensive involvement of the skills of a human translator would have prevented important nuances from being lost in translation.

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The call to Islam (da'wa islamiyya): A brief history and contemporary approaches

Henning Wrogemann

Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2024, 228 pp., ISBN:†978-3374076260, €68

In this book, Henning Wrogemann, professor of religious studies and intercultural theology at the Protestant University Wuppertal, analyzes the historical evolution and current diversity of the concept of daʿwa and the associated ideas and trends of individual and social (re)Islamization.

As Wrogemann shows in the first chapter, daʿwa appears in the Qur'an primarily as an invitation or call from Allah, transmitted through prophets and messengers, to the exclusive worship of Allah and complete submission to His will. This internal daʿwa is justified above all by an instruction to the Islamic community to "enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong" (Sura 3:104). For

this reason, verse 110 of the same sura describes the Islamic *umma* as "the best community that has been raised up for mankind." The distinction between Muhammad's Meccan daʿwa (carried out in the context of an oppressed minority) and his Medinan daʿwa (carried out in the context of a ruling majority) seems particularly central to me. The related concept of phases and stages of Islamization established by legalistic Islamists has far-reaching implications when it comes to dealing with non-Muslims and the short- and long-term stance on issues of religious freedom and violence.

The significantly increased interest in the revival and systematization of daʿwa since the late 19th century is closely linked to the upheavals of the colonial era and competing reform movements (see chapter 2). For the 20th century, the author identifies defining trends via five key terms: politicization, internationalization, institutionalization, internalization, and universalization (79-81).

In Part III, on Sunni daʿwa theologies, the author contrasts the "reformist-organizational" approach of the Pakistani Muhammad Shafiq with the significantly more radical "revolutionary-procedural" model of the Pakistani-Indian activist Shamim Siddiqui, as well as the "purifying-individualistic" approach of the Saudi hadith scholar Rabi al-Madkhali and the "liberative-cooperative" (192) model of the South African theologian Farid Esack. In this way, the reader obtains a clear understanding of the spectrum of calls for "true" Islam, ranging from Islamist power-oriented approaches to Salafi purification and liberation theology hermeneutics.

Given its strong influence (also felt in Europe), it is not surprising that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB), with its aim of permeating society in the most comprehensive manner possible, receives particular attention in the analysis (chapters 3 and 12). Among the reasons for its success, the author cites not only the mosque building but also the establishment of an independent social sector (including hospitals, schools, and public service facilities) and the targeted influence on professional associations and educational institutions, and later also on the banking and financial sectors.

Concerning is the ambivalent relationship still persisting today toward non-Muslims and violence, as well as the blurred historical transitions to militant groups that later split off from the Muslim Brotherhood. Wrogemann describes how they deliberately formulate vague goals and the great flexibility and adaptability of groups affiliated with the MB when it comes to the necessary adaptation to local political and social conditions (cf. 161-162). In my opinion, greater consideration could have been given here to the daʿwa and jihad approaches of Yusuf al-Qaradawi (1926-2022), who, for many, was the MB's unofficial chief ideologue for decades. He anticipated the peaceful, ideological conquest of a Europe

trapped in materialism and selfishness and called on Muslims to gradually infuse the diverse fields of Western education and science with an Islamic spirit.

With regard to jihadist groups, Wrogemann distinguishes between two strategies: those that, like the Tunisian Ansar al-Sharia, emphasize daʿwa more in the run-up to military conquest, and those that, like ISIS/IS, employ daʿwa after seizing military power. Since, in their thinking, the formation of a community and purification are followed by a withdrawal – rooted in Muhammad's emigration (Hijra) from Mecca to Medina – from societies deemed unbelieving, and ultimately by armed struggle to establish an Islamic state, they fundamentally rule out long-term "peaceful coexistence in a plural society" (176).

Wrogemann also analyzes how Saudi Arabia uses daʿwa as an instrument of global "soft power." He considers the current social reforms to be "quite reversible" (154) due to the continuing centralization of power and Wahhabi authority structures. Furthermore, he observes a wide gap between official announcements and actual practice – for example, when it comes to restricting foreign funding of mosques. The author also provides insight into the various orientations of so-called "star preachers" of a popular form of Salafism. He classifies television and internet preachers and apologists such as Amr Khaled, Zakir Naik, and Abdullah Gymnastiar as having a "neoliberal religious orientation" (190).

The concluding chapter leaves no doubt that Islamist and jihadist variants, in particular, pose a threat to human rights, minority rights, and the future of Western democracies. The author attributes their dominance primarily to a lack of historical-critical scholarship regarding their own sources and history. Following Majid Daneshgar and Aaron W. Hughes, he also sees a danger at Western universities of intimidation and defamation of voices critical of Islam, as well as the displacement of historical-critical Islamic studies by Islamic apologetics and "religiously inspired activism" (199) – for example, through chairs sponsored by Gulf states.

For Wrogemann, one of the necessary prerequisites for scholarly, historical-critical research is that even religious texts be viewed "exclusively as a product of human communication" and with an "attitude of religious and ideological neutrality" (197). This strikes me as highly unlikely, and not just for the broad spectrum of Islamic theology. After all, even Christian theologians and secular scholars do not approach biblical and Qur'anic texts without any presuppositions. In my view, scholarly integrity and the capacity for dialogue should be demonstrated above all through the disclosure of and methodological reflection on one's own presuppositions and through a peaceful, objective and reasoned engagement with those who raise critical questions – whether intra- or interreligiously – regarding religious texts and traditions. However, prevailing Islamic

discourses on apostasy and blasphemy continue to pose a formidable obstacle to such an open discourse.

One can only hope that political, social, and church leaders will adopt a nuanced understanding of the complex world of da'wa and speak out with well-founded arguments whenever interpretations of Islam are disseminated in the name of religious freedom that, in the medium or long term, delegitimize that very religious freedom (and numerous other human rights). With his analysis, Wrogemann provides an important and highly timely guide in this regard.

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- **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, and the author's ORCID.

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.

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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.

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