

SPECIAL REPORT

Interfaith Dialogue: The Great Unmentionable

By [Doug Bandow](#) on 5.19.09 @ 6:08AM

President Barack Obama has called for an improved dialogue with Islam and is planning a major speech in Egypt. He is not alone in his efforts to reach out. Pope Benedict recently visited Jordan, where he acknowledged "the burden of our common history so often marked by misunderstanding."

Certainly all faiths would benefit from greater understanding. Yet no conversation will have any meaning if it does not address Islam's brutal reality: the consistent persecution of Christians, Jews, and members of other minority faiths.

Indeed, Islamic governments long ago learned that a good offense is the best defense. For instance, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan held hostage the appointment of Anders Fogh Rasmussen as NATO Secretary General because as Denmark's prime minister the latter had defended a newspaper's legal right to run cartoons critical of the Prophet Mohammed. To win Ankara's acquiescence, Rasmussen abased himself, affirming his "respect" for Islam and explaining how "distressed" he was that many Muslims saw the cartoons as an effort to "insult" their faith.

Moreover, the Organization of the Islamic Conference, made up of 56 Muslim-majority nations, led the UN campaign to denounce the "defamation" of religions. Last November the General Assembly approved a resolution targeting speech criticizing Islam, in particular, explaining that "Islam is frequently and wrongly associated with human rights violations and terrorism." All governments were enjoined "to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs."

Let us specify that some U.S. government actions offend many Muslims (in fact, I have criticized a number of those policies). Let us also specify that most Muslims neither engage in nor support terrorism.

Nevertheless, past Western dialogue with Islam has consistently missed the elephant in the room: Pervasive religious persecution.

Who persecutes religious minorities around the world? Communist and former communist states are big offenders: China, Cuba, Vietnam, and North Korea. There's a motley mixed group, including India, Sri Lanka, and Burma. Then there are Islamic states.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently released its latest report. Of 13 states named Countries of Particular Concern, seven have overwhelming Muslim majorities: Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Two, Eritrea and Nigeria, have narrow Muslims majorities. Of 11 countries on the Commission's Watch List, six have majority Islamic populations: Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia, Somalia, Tajikistan, and Turkey. Of three countries being "closely monitored," two, Bangladesh and Kazakhstan, are majority Muslim. That is 17 of 27.

International Christian Concern publishes a "Hall of Shame" naming the ten worst persecutors. Six of them -- Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia -- have Muslim majorities.

In fact, it is unusual to find an Islamic nation where religious minorities are not discriminated against, both legally and socially. One of the best predictors that a government persecutes, or fails to protect religious minorities from persecution, is that the majority faith is Islam.

Obviously, there is a range within the Islamic world. Some of persecutors, such as Eritrea and the Central Asian countries, for instance, seem driven more by ideology than theology. Moreover, not all Islamic states imprison or kill dissenters. But even the good isn't very good.

Of Morocco, reported the State Department last year: "The Government places certain restrictions on non-Islamic religious materials and proselytizing." State added that "There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination toward those with different religious beliefs, and converts from Islam to other religions." Although foreign Christians generally worship freely, missionaries "whose religious activities become public face expulsion" and the regime "generally confiscates Arabic-language Bibles and refuses licenses for their importation and sale despite the absence of any law banning such books."

Consider Jordan, the site of the Pope's recent visit. State observed: "The status of respect of religious freedom by the government declined during the period covered by this report. The government's handling of apostasy cases, expulsion of approximately thirty foreign Christian religious workers, and instances of individual and organizational harassment based on religious affiliation all contributed to the decline. Members of unrecognized religious groups and converts from Islam face legal discrimination and risk the loss of civil rights, including threats to their person and/or family."

Last month President Obama visited Turkey where he declared: "Let me say this as clearly as I can: The United States is not at war with Islam." Worthy sentiments, but not all Turks agree. Two years ago a gang of Islamic extremists tortured and murdered three Christians in the city of Malatya. The State Department pointed to "reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Violent attacks and continued threats against non-Muslims during the reporting period created an atmosphere of pressure and diminished freedom for some non-Muslim communities." Moreover, converts from Islam "sometimes experienced social harassment and violence from relatives and neighbors." USCIRF says "the Turkish state's interpretation of secularism has resulted in religious freedom violations for many of Turkey's citizens, including members of majority and, especially, for minority religious communities."

Far worse is Egypt, where the president will be speaking. ICC places the country in its Hall of

Shame, noting pervasive legal discrimination and violent harassment against Christians: "Coptic Christians, a native group of Egyptian Christians that traces its existence back to the beginning of Christianity, are widely discriminated against as a result of the discriminatory policies of the country and the bias of Muslim officials. There have been many instances in which, in some localities, Muslim extremists looted and burned down Christian owned businesses and homes, maiming and killing Christians." State warned that "respect for religious freedom by the government declined overall."

In Afghanistan discrimination and persecution are increasing. USCIRF warns that "Conditions for freedom of religion or belief in Afghanistan have become increasingly problematic." Three years ago a Muslim convert to Christianity, Abdul Rahman, barely avoided execution and had to flee abroad.

ICC warns that "Pakistan has increasingly cut away at the rights of the Christian minority, treating them as second-class citizens and largely relegating them to a life of poverty." State offered a similar assessment: "Law enforcement personnel abused religious minorities in custody. Security forces and other government agencies did not adequately prevent or address societal abuse against minorities. Discriminatory legislation and the Government's failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different religious belief fostered religious intolerance, acts of violence, and intimidation against religious minorities."

In Iraq, explains the USCIRF, "there have been alarming numbers of religiously-motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, intimidation, forced resettlements, and attacks on religious leaders, pilgrims, and holy sites." Although members of all religious groups have suffered, the Commission notes that "those from Iraq's smallest religious minorities have been among the most vulnerable." As many as half of Iraq's Christians have been driven from their homes. The State Department reported that Iranian "government rhetoric and actions created a threatening atmosphere for nearly all non-She's religious groups, most notably for Baja's, as well as Sufi Muslims, evangelical Christians, and members of the Jewish community." The USCIRF reports that Tehran's "poor religious freedom record has deteriorated," with "intensified physical attacks, harassment, detention, arrest, and imprisonment.

State observed that in Saudi Arabia "There is no legal recognition of, or protection under the law for, freedom of religion, and it is severely restricted in practice." The USCIRF says that Riyadh has been "engaging in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief." The Saudi monarchy "persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and even interferes with private religious practice." Indeed, Saudi Arabia, which ranks high in ICC's Hall of Shame because of the intensity of persecution, "does not acknowledge the presence of any Christians in the country." The list goes on.

Although Islamic states are not monolithic, many of them routinely and sometimes savagely repress religious minorities. In contrast, there is a dearth of Christian states which persecute. Cuba and Venezuela are repressive, but their depredations are political, not theological. Only in Russia does official discrimination -- bothersome but not deadly -- seemingly reflect a religious bias, in this case in favor of the Orthodox Church.

Obviously the president cannot center U.S. foreign policy on the issue of religious liberty. But the freedoms of conscience and of religious faith are basic human rights, the promotion of which is

an important objective of American policy. Moreover, no genuine dialogue with the Islamic world can overlook the Muslim record on religious persecution. If Islamic governments expect the Western states "to take all possible measures to promote tolerance and respect for all religions and beliefs," then the former need to do so as well. And that means protecting the liberty of those who believe and worship differently in their own countries.

By all means, let's encourage dialogue with Muslim nations. But let's put all issues on the table, including religious persecution.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics (Crossway)*.