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Globally, religious freedom is under siege

By Doug Bandow

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Americans take religious liberty for granted. But 4 of 5 people around the world lack the freedom to worship and live faithfully. Even Americans cannot take their freedoms for granted.

The Pew Research Center, with Peter Henne as lead researcher, recently issued its latest study on religious liberty. The report makes for a sad read.

In some nations governments suppress the faithful. In other countries people make their societies unfriendly to minority beliefs, imposing a wide range of less formal sanctions, including murder.

The overall global environment to religious faith is hostile. Concluded the study: “Restrictions on religion were high or very high in 39 percent of countries. Because some of these countries (like China and India) are very populous, about 5.5 billion people (77 percent of the world’s population) were living in countries with a high or very high overall level of restrictions on religion in 2013, up from 76 percent in 2012 and 68 percent as of 2007.”

Christians and Muslims, who make up the largest share of the world’s population, are the most widely harassed faiths (in 102 and 99 countries, respectively) — in both cases, far more grievously in Muslim than Christian nations.

In 2013 18 nations were found to have “very high” levels of government restrictions. A baker’s dozen of the chief miscreants were Muslim states: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Brunei, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkey and Uzbekistan.

Four were classically authoritarian and/or Communist/post-Communist (so were the three Central Asia nations listed previously): Burma, China, Eritrea and Russia. The surprising outlier was Singapore, which bans particular sects, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses. (North Korea could not be ranked due to a lack of data.)

Two countries moved up into the top category, Singapore and Turkey. Eight dropped out: Algeria, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Somalia and Vietnam. The number of nations with high levels of persecution rose from 33 to 36.

Religious liberty is the canary in the mine for civil and personal liberties. Lands filled with people willing to persecute, harass, discriminate, kill, denigrate and more those with whom they disagree spiritually and even more people willing to overlook or excuse such crimes are potential hothouses for the most virulent forms of violence.

Saving religious liberty requires greater efforts in the U.S. and around the world. Only if we lose it are we likely to understand how very much we miss it.

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