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Religious Persecution And Hostility On The Rise: The First Freedom Is Under Global Siege

By Doug Bandow

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Americans take religious liberty for granted. It is the First Freedom, guaranteed by the First Amendment. But four of five people around the world lack the freedom to worship and live faithfully. And the percentage of the world's population lacking religious liberty recently edged upward. Attacks on Jews hit a recent peak. Even Americans cannot afford to 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. Many organizations address religious persecution, which occurs in virtually every Muslim and authoritarian state, plus a diverse mix of other nations. Pew also assesses equally threatening social antagonism, ranging from discrimination to hostility to violence.

In some nations governments take the lead in suppressing the faithful, imposing a range of restrictions backed by the state. Examples include bans on particular faiths, prohibitions on conversion, and restrictions on religious practice. In other countries the people make their societies unfriendly to minority beliefs, imposing a wide range of less formal sanctions. Such behavior includes harassment, intimidation, and violence, 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."

At the top of the list for failing on both fronts are Burma/Myanmar, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Russia, "where both the government and society at large impose numerous limits on

religious beliefs and practices.” Individually the global rise was led by the People’s Republic of China, with government persecution, and India, with high social antagonism.

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, ironically, far more grievously in Muslim than Christian nations. Particularly worrisome has been the increase in anti-Semitism. Noted Pew: “there has been a marked increase in the number of countries where Jews were harassed,” to 77, a recent peak. The problem is more social than government, and is evident in 34 of 45 European nations.

While a country theoretically could allow religious liberty generally while only punishing specific disfavored faiths, it rarely works that way. Explained Pew: “countries with restrictions or hostilities aimed primarily at a religious minority are more likely than the rest of the world to have widespread restrictions and hostilities beyond those that tend to target religious minorities.” Nearly three-quarters of nations targeting religious minorities scored high in overall persecution/hostility, while all countries inclined to restrict religious faith also punished minority faiths. The relationship of social hostility to religious minorities is similar: high private antagonism toward religious faith in general combines with hostility toward religious minorities in particular.

Pew ranked 198 countries, excepting North Korea. The latter undeniably brutalizes religious believers, but independent reporting is impossible. In 2013 18 nations were found to have “very high” levels of government restrictions. That’s far too many, but down from 24 the previous year. 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.

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; those with moderate restrictions increased from 44 to 46. The number with light restrictions edged up from 97 to 98. Most Muslim and authoritarian states ended up in the high category. Those with moderate restrictions included several European nations and the U.S. The bulk of those in the low category were a variety of smaller countries.

There is substantial overlap between persecuting states and those with significant social hostilities, but also some notable differences. Seventeen make the disreputable very high antagonism category. Nine are majority Muslim: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestinian territories, Somalia, and Syria. Eight are other confessional states

(Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish) and mixed (with bitter sectarian conflict): Central African Republic, India, Israel, Kenya, Nigeria, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania.

Joining the top tier in 2013 were CAR and Tanzania. Falling out were Burma, Thailand, Lebanon, Sudan, and Yemen. The number with high hostility levels dropped from 45 to 36. Those with moderate levels trended up from 55 to 57. The number with low levels rose from 76 to 90. The high category included many Muslim states, as well a potpourri of others, including Brazil, China, and, amazingly, the United Kingdom, where Christianity nominally remains the state religion. A wide variety of countries reflected moderate hostility, including the U.S. Those with low antagonism covered the globe, but included only a smattering of Muslim-majority nations.

Although many nations remain near the top or the bottom, there is substantial movement, usually from one category to another. From just 2012 to 2013 74 countries rose and 86 fell (37 percent and 43 percent) in terms of government restrictions imposed. The three moving the most were Burundi and South Sudan (up) and Somalia (down). Social attitudes also change—in this case more favorably. Over the same period 18 percent of nations rose while 60 percent fell, 35 countries up and 118 down. The biggest upward movers in social antagonism were CAR and Niger. Attitudes improved in a dozen states.

Overall, the numbers look better, with 25 percent of countries intensifying restrictions and 60 percent reducing them. That meant fifty increased while 119 fell. Two rose substantially; 11 dropped markedly.

The worst nations combine intrusive state restrictions with widespread social intolerance. Among the 25 most populous countries, with three-quarters of the world's population, which score high or very high in both categories are: Bangladesh, Burma, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia, and Turkey. Ethiopia, Germany, and Vietnam are borderline. As always, Islam's role is significant: Six of the top 11 are Muslim and another (Nigeria) has a slight Muslim preponderance.

Christians continue to be the most persecuted faith, though the gap has dropped over time. In 2007 Christians were penalized or harassed in various ways in 107 countries. That peaked at 111 in 2010, dropped and then rose again to 110 in 2012, and dropped to 102 in 2013. Muslims were mistreated in the second most number of countries. They were at 96 in 2007, peaked at 109 in 2012, and dropped to 99 in 2013. Jews suffered in 51 nations in 2007 and have steadily increased, with a large jump from 71 in 2012 to 77 in 2013. Persecution of others stood at 38 in 2013; Buddhists were at 12 and Hindus at 9. The second group facing persecution in more countries in 2013 than 2012 was folk religions, rising from 26 to 34. What makes Jewish persecution numbers so striking and frightening is that Jews make up just .2 percent of the world's population.

Government mistreatment is most pervasive against Christians, evident in 85 nations, compared to 73 for Muslims and 39 for Jews. Social antagonism is broader against Muslims, 84 nations to 71 for Christians. Most striking is that popular hostility against Jews is evident in 72 countries, more than against Christians. Such anti-Semitism afflicted only 46 states in 2007.

Regionally it should come as no surprise that the Middle East, dominated by Muslim states, shows the greatest tendency toward persecution and intolerance. The median score globally was 2.4 for government restrictions and 1.6 for social antagonism. The Middle East scored 6.0 and 5.8, respectively. Amazingly, those ratings actually were lower than for the previous year. The Asia-Pacific came in at 4.2 and 2.2, respectively. Alas, Europe no longer is a fount of religious liberty: its scores were 2.5 and 2.3, respectively. That's well above the median and second place in terms of social antagonism. Sub-Saharan Africa fell slightly below the median, 1.9 and 1.3, respectively. The Americas did best, rating 1.5 and .01, respectively.

Pew included a special section directed at Europe. Of 45 nations, 34 saw mistreatment of Jews, making the highest percentage of any region, and 32 of Muslims. In 30 countries groups are trying to impose their religious vision the public; in 19 individual have been assaulted or displaced for their faith and women have been harassed over their dress. In 15 attempts have been made to block some faiths from operating. By the first three standards Europe is the worst region on earth.

The rise of anti-Semitism is particularly worrisome. While there is no incipient Holocaust, that monstrous crime is but seven decades in the past. And Jews always have been convenient scapegoats for demagogues and criminals of all sorts. That such forces could rise again in Europe demonstrates a frightening deterioration in the continent's social ethos.

Religious minorities obviously are the most vulnerable. Pew found that "government at some level used physical violence against minority or disfavored religious groups in 47 of the 198 countries (24 percent)." Bans against certain faiths were employed in 37 nations (19 percent). Governments attempted to eliminate a group's existence in 24 nations (12 percent).

Social antagonism against minorities is far more pervasive. In 88 countries, 44 percent, majority groups use coercion and force—including deadly violence—"to dominate public life with their perspective on religion," according to Pew. Organized majorities attempted to prevent other faiths from operating in 60 nations (30 percent). Physical attacks and other assaults were employed in 78 countries (39 percent).

As noted earlier, states which imposed high restrictions, government and social, on religious practice also proved particularly inhospitable to religious minorities: "all of the countries with very high overall government restrictions had at least one of the restrictions aimed at religious minorities." But Pew found that social hostility was the most important factor, with attacks on religious minorities rising in "all 12 countries whose scores on the Social Hostilities Index went

up by one point of more.” Unsurprisingly, religious minorities need a system based on liberty of faith and tolerance of diversity to prosper.

Particularly disturbing for Americans is Pew’s rating for the U.S. America was 1.6 and 1.9 in government restrictions and social hostility in 2007. The first jumped to 3.7 in 2012 before falling back a bit to 3.0 in 2013. The latter remained unchanged in 2012 but then jumped to 3.1, second only to Brazil in the Americas. Obviously, one can argue methodology. But Americans committed to religious liberty should take note and seek to reverse the dangerous slide away from vigorous freedom of faith.

Religious liberty is the canary in the mine for civil and personal liberties. Governments which will not protect and people who will not respect the most basic freedom of conscience in addressing their understanding of the transcendent and man’s relationship to it will not protect human life and dignity elsewhere. While religious intolerance at home does not automatically yield terrorism abroad, the Charlie Hebdo killings demonstrate how extremists can logically apply violent principles well beyond their own societies. 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, and the broader freedom of conscience, requires greater efforts in the U.S. and around the world. The latest Pew report on the state of religious liberty should trigger a renewed commitment to reinvigorate the First Freedom. Only if we lose it are we likely to understand how very much we miss it.

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