

THE HUFFINGTON POST

Protect Religious Liberty: Christians and Other Minority Faiths Face Violent Attacks in Middle East and Beyond

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April 20, 2015

Religious persecution did not end with Nero and the Roman Empire. In fact, punishment of and hostility toward people of faith is increasing. The group Open Doors recently released its latest World Watch List, warning: "This year, the threshold was higher for a country to make the list, indicating that worldwide levels of persecution have increased." Persecution emerged "even in places where it has not been reported in the past." As a result, Bahrain, Morocco, and Niger fell off the list even though their mistreatment of religious believers remained largely unchanged. (Azerbaijan, Mexico, and Turkey replaced them.)

Last year the group Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity, released a report which concluded that in 81 of 196 countries, or 41 percent, religious liberty was substantially impaired or in decline. Another 35 percent, or 18 percent, had issues "of concern." Overall, conditions of religious liberty had deteriorated in 55 and improved in only six.

Twenty nations were particularly abusive. Fourteen were Muslim; the others were authoritarian. Aid to the Church in Need highlighted a dozen states as having high levels of persecution and deteriorating situations: Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Azerbaijan, Burma/Myanmar, Central African Republic, China, Egypt, and Uzbekistan. High with no change were Afghanistan, Eritrea, Maldives, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen. Iran was high but had improved.

Religious liberty is not something abstract, of value only in theory. Open Doors figured that 4344 Christians were "killed for faith-related reasons" last year, up from 2123 in 2013 and 1201 in 2012. (The bulk of the deaths were in Nigeria and the Central African Republic.) Worldwide 1062 churches were attacked, with China in the lead, followed by Vietnam, Nigeria, Syria, and the CAR.

Last December the group Human Rights Without Frontiers released a list of more than 600 prisoners of conscience who were punished for their religious beliefs. The group targeted 24 nations for punishing religious beliefs and another 9 for penalizing alleged blasphemers. It cited China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, and South Korea in particular (the latter because it does not recognize conscientious objection to military service). Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia were particularly abusive in prosecuting blasphemy.

Christianity is the most persecuted faith today. David Curry, president of Open Doors, told Christianity Today that "a staggering number of Christians are becoming victims of intolerance and violence because of their faith." The latest Pew Foundation report on both government persecution and social antagonism found that Christians suffered in 102 countries, the most of any faith. Reported Open Doors, "pressure on Christians increased in 29 countries, decreased in 11, and remained stable in 7." Explained Aid to the Church in Need: "Christians remain the most persecuted religious minority, due partly to their wide geographic spread and high relative numbers." In many nations, particularly the Middle East, where Christians have existed for two millennia, violent Islamic extremism has risen dramatically. (Hostility toward Jews actually has been increasing even faster, but the raw number of those suffering is lower since they make up just two percent of the world's population. This means Jews are at greater risk, however.)

Muslims are persecuted too, but, ironically, most at the hands of the same governments which also persecute Christians. Islamic states are the least tolerant and most brutalize any religious minority within their reach, whether Baha'i, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jew, or Christian. Authoritarian states, suspicious of any competing authority, rank second as persecutors. Alas, the malefactors are many. Open Doors listed the top 50 persecutors of Christians.

The top ten are a true Rogues' Row of brutal and criminal regimes, or lands torn apart by strife and conflict: North Korea, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, Eritrea, and Nigeria. Pyongyang has developed a curious system of monarchical Communism in which the leader is essentially treated as divine, so any other transcendent allegiance is apostasy. The next seven are majority Muslim states. Eritrea is totalitarian, and even has been called the North Korea of Africa. Nigeria is closely divided and suffers from active Islamic political and terrorist movements, most notably the murderous Boko Haram.

The next ten are Maldives, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Central African Republic, Qatar, Kenya, and Turkmenistan. The worst four are Muslim, while Uzbekistan is both Muslim and former Communist. Vietnam is authoritarian/former Communist. Over the last couple years CAR has suffered from a civil war turned into sectarian conflict, killing thousands and displacing perhaps a million people. Qatar is Muslim, Kenya is a religiously divided majority Christian state with sectarian conflict, while Turkmenistan is both Muslim and authoritarian (formerly part of the Soviet Union).

A more diverse group accounts for the next ten: India, Ethiopia, Egypt, Djibouti, Burma/Myanmar, Palestinian Territories, Brunei, Laos, China, and Jordan. India, of course, is majority Hindu, with a religious-nationalist party now in power. The next three are Muslim, Burma is Buddhist and authoritarian (though reforming), the next two are Muslim, Laos and China are Communist, and Jordan is Muslim.

The next 20 are largely Muslim: among them only Bhutan, Colombia, Mexico, Sri Lanka, and Tanzania are not. Bhutan is authoritarian and Buddhist, while organized corruption poses a violent problem in the next two. Sri Lanka sports a nationalistic and militaristic Buddhism while Tanzania is sharply divided between Christian and Muslim. The others are more idiosyncratic.

Of particular interest is the top ten "where Christians faced the most pressure and violence." North Korea tops this list as well, as it has for the last dozen years. Somalia moved up to number two. Following them were Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Maldives, Pakistan, Iran, and Yemen. Notably, only North Korea is not Muslim. However, Christians were threatened all over. World Watch Monitor reported that "pressure on Christians increased in 34 countries, decreased in five, and remained about the same in the remaining 14." Pressure jumped most in Syria, Iraq, Pakistan, Sudan, Libya, Egypt, Colombia, and Kazakhstan. Major reductions were far fewer, just two, in Mali and Tanzania.

The World Watch List noted several dangerous trends. The first point is the most obvious-- Islamic extremism is the most important single source of persecution. Noted Open Doors, "No less than 18 of the top 20 countries have 'Islamic extremism' as a primary persecution engine." That also applies to an astounding 40 of the 50 nations cited. Islamist sentiments often join with what Open Doors calls "tribal antagonism," "dictatorial paranoia," and "organized corruption." The next most important source of intolerance and violence is authoritarianism, or "dictatorial paranoia" in the lead role. This afflicts 13 nations, starting with North Korea, "and shows up as a secondary engine in nine more countries." Although organized corruption is the primary force only in Columbia and Mexico, it is a secondary cause in another 23 countries, accounting for nearly half of the list.

With the rise of violent extremists, and especially the Islamic State, the situation for Christians continues to worsen. The presence or presumed presence of ISIL operatives has caused unease for Christians in a number of states, including Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. Moreover, explained Open Doors, "former 'moderate' Muslims have become stricter as they do not want to give the impression they are heretics." It seems unlikely that this trend will reverse any time soon.

Surprisingly, persecution has been growing fastest in Africa. Eight of twelve states with the highest increases were in Africa, with Kenya at the top. Noted Open Doors, "For the third time in a row then, an African country has been the highest riser, following Mali in the 2013 list and CAR in the 2014 list." Oddly, Kenya is a Christian country. Explained the group, "even Christian majority states are experiencing unprecedented levels of exclusion, discrimination and even violence."

Latin America, with the least religious hostility, has emerged with growing problems. Mexico joined the list, which already contained Colombia. Moreover, warned Open Doors, "Cuba, Bolivia and Venezuela remain causes for concern and may well enter a future top 50." The group blamed weak states which allowed drug gangs to act with impunity: "when Christians stand up and stand out they are targeted with merciless violence."

Of course, the problem is not just violent persecution. Overall, persecution has risen more from "increased cultural marginalization" than violence, said Open Doors. In most of the listed states life for Christians is growing more difficult. Violence is horrid, of course, "but often the experience of family exclusion, or the loss of a job, or even rejection from a church community, is more devastating to a Christian and especially to a new convert."

In the West there has been an explosion of "rights" alongside a diminution of respect for freedom of conscience of religious people who seek to live out less popular social beliefs. Aid to the Church noted that "Especially with regard to subjects such as faith schools, homosexual marriage and euthanasia, there is a growing conflict between traditional religious views and the 'progressive' liberal consensus."

Thankfully, not all news is bad. The pressure of persecution has helped erase ancient divisions and hatreds within the church. Noted Open Doors: "on the ground, especially in Syria, the historic faiths and the newer denominations have drawn together in a remarkable new unity under the onslaught."

Moreover, Christians and Muslims increasingly are cooperating. In the past, Islamic persecutors would leave their co-religionists alone while victimizing religious minorities. Now, however, anyone but the most strict is viewed as worthy of slaughter. Non-compliant Muslims increasingly realize they also need allies.

Western governments are doing better in confronting Islamic extremism. Open Doors believed that "there is a new openness and thirst for the information and wisdom of Christians working in these regions among those who are tasked with ensuring national security." However, Western policies, particularly prolific war-making, have generated widespread blowback, especially terrorism in the West and persecution in Muslim nations.

Finally, China may be reaching a turning point in church-state relations, something [I've seen myself](#). Open Doors noted that ongoing persecution does not demonstrate a new wave of repression. Rather, "there is a surprising weight of counter-evidence that suggests a vigorous debate is going on in the Chinese government over whether it should restrict or free the church." A number of party members appeared to recognize that Beijing cannot put the genie back into the bottle, with more Christians today than Communist Party members.

Religious liberty obviously matters to people of faith. "Soul freedom," as it has been called, is fundamental to the human person. There is no more basic manifestation of the freedom of conscience. But religious freedom also is important for everyone else, since it helps create a liberal society in which all people are free to pursue their own understanding of the transcendent.

Respect for soul freedom also is the proverbial canary in the mine for violent extremism. Societies which punish religious minorities and disfavored faiths are more likely to generate hostility against those with different beliefs, which then radiates outward toward other societies. Although most Muslims obviously do not commit terrorism, most high profile terrorism today emanates from Muslim societies--which is where government persecution and social hostility are the highest.

Aid to the Church also argues that murderous extremism and persecution "emerges as a significant factor in a growing phenomenon of mass migration," especially in the Middle East. That has become particularly obvious with the rise of the Islamic State, which brutalizes Shiites, Christians, and other faiths wherever found. ISIL's violent wave has exacerbated refugee flows already at flood tide due to conflict, especially in Syria.

Religious persecution remains a tragic aspect of modern life. Aid to the Church concluded that "responsibility for combatting violence and persecution rests, first and foremost, within religious communities themselves. The necessity for all religious leaders to loudly proclaim their opposition to religiously-inspired violence, and to re-affirm their support for religious tolerance, is becoming ever more urgent."

However, everyone else also has a stake in creating more liberal, tolerant societies. Never was there a clearer case for Benjamin Franklin's old adage, "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately." Every good and free society must embrace religious liberty and soul freedom.