



Christianity is the world's most persecuted religion, confirms new report

A list of the world's worst state actors when it comes to religious persecution is out, and Christians are suffering terribly for their faith around the world. Christians in the West should be concerned but also grateful that what they put up with from secularists is nothing like persecution on this scale.

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The group Open Doors USA figures that 360 million Christians last year lived in countries where persecution was “significant.” Roughly 5,600 Christians were murdered, more than 6,000 were detained or imprisoned, and another 4,000-plus were kidnapped. In addition, more than 5,000 churches and other religious facilities were destroyed.

American Christians talk of persecution, but *that* is what real persecution looks like.

Every year Open Doors USA releases its World Watch report of the 50 states most likely to punish Christians for their faith. Last year 11 nations were guilty of “extreme persecution.”

Afghanistan took over the top spot from North Korea this year. Open Doors explains that it long was “impossible to live openly as a Christian in Afghanistan. Leaving Islam is considered shameful, and Christian converts face dire consequences if their new faith is discovered. Either they have to flee the country or they will be killed.”

Unfortunately, the August collapse of the U.S.-backed Kabul government made the situation immeasurably worse. According to Open Doors: “Christian persecution is extreme in all spheres of public and private life. The risk of discovery has only increased, since the Taliban controls every aspect of government—including paperwork from international troops that may help identify Christians.”

No. 2 on the list of the worst persecutors was North Korea, usually in the news for its nuclear weapons program and missile launches. Christianity was strong in Korea before the Soviet occupation after World War II of what became the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The Kim dynasty—Kim Jong-un represents the third generation—then created a personality cult that treats its members as semi-divine. Consequently, the North views Christianity, which claims a higher loyalty, as particularly threatening.

Indeed, Kim is currently waging war on foreign influences. Very little detail is available on the North's Christian community, but defectors have helped open a window into the "Hermit Kingdom." Relates Open Doors: "Any North Korean caught following Jesus is at immediate risk of imprisonment, brutal torture and death."

No. 3 on the list is Somalia, which three decades ago disintegrated into a civil war that persists. It suffers from the malign activities of al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab. "The small number of believers in Somalia are largely Christians who have converted from Islam," reports Open Doors. "Christians are viewed as high-value targets by Islamic radical groups. Even when Christian converts are not targeted by extremists, they are intensely pressured by their family and community."

Next is Libya, which suffered from a decade of intermittent civil war, in which the Islamic State was active. Indeed, in 2015 the group infamously beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts. "When a person in Libya leaves Islam to follow Christ, they face immense pressure from their families to renounce their faith," writes Open Doors. "Their neighbors and the rest of the community ostracize them, and they can be left homeless, jobless and alone. Targeted kidnappings and executions are always a possibility for believers."

In Yemen's civil war, Saudi Arabia (No. 11 on the list) and United Arab Emirates, backed by Washington, intervened militarily, creating a humanitarian crisis. Christians are few and mostly converts, which places them at the greatest risk in areas controlled both by the Saudi-backed official government and Iranian-backed insurgents. Open Doors observes simply: "Pressure on converts from Islam is at the highest levels in every part of life."

Eritrea is a viciously totalitarian state that broke away from Ethiopia in a bitter civil war. Asmara recently backed Ethiopia's central government in another civil war. Like North Korea, Eritrea's ruling authorities refuse to allow their people to have any gods before the state. Open Doors reports that, "despite almost half the population identifying as Christian, believers in Eritrea continue to suffer extreme persecution, making it one of the hardest places in the world to follow Jesus. Christians not part of recognized denominations are at risk of severe persecution. Gatherings are raided and believers arrested. The conditions facing Christians in prison can be inhumane."

Another closely divided state is Nigeria, where Christians are explicitly targeted for their faith by Boko Haram and other extremists. Unfortunately, Christians receive little protection from the government. "Persecution in Nigeria is, simply put, brutally violent," writes Open Doors. "In much of northern Nigeria, Christians live their lives under the constant threat of attack from Boko Haram, the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), Fulani militants and criminals who kidnap and murder with few consequences. The violence is so bad it has begun to travel south, as well."

Next comes American ally Pakistan, long a sanctuary for the Afghan Taliban and host of domestic Islamic radicals. Threats and violence have caused some Pakistanis to use tourist visas to flee abroad in search of asylum. "In Pakistan, Christians are considered second-class citizens and are discriminated against in every aspect of life," Open Doors explains. "Church

leaders can be arrested if they don't abide by the authorities' wishes. These arrests act as warnings to the Christian minority and intimidates them further. Violence against Christians continues to happen at extreme levels."

Like North Korea, Iran, No. 9 on the list of worst persecutors, is infamous due to activities other than religious persecution. Unsurprisingly, however, Christians suffer greatly. "The severity of persecution facing Christians in Iran remains largely unchanged," writes Open Doors. "Converts from Islam are most at risk of persecution, especially by the government, and to a lesser extent, by society and their own families. Sadly, things may get worse following changes to the country's penal code, which further strangles religious freedom." Alas, the situation almost certainly will worsen since hardliners have taken full political control.

Also treating Christians and other religious minorities badly is India. One of only two majority Hindu states (the other is Nepal, No. 48 on the World Watch list), India is notable for private violence against non-Hindus, increasingly promoted by the ruling party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. "The persecution of Christians in India has intensified, as Hindu extremists aim to cleanse the country of their presence and influence," explains Open Doors. "The extremists disregard Indian Christians and other religious minorities as true Indians, and think the country should be purified of non-Hindus. This has led to a systemic—and often violent—targeting of Christians and other religious minorities, including use of social media to spread disinformation and stir up hatred."

Rounding out the almost Dirty Dozen is Saudi Arabia. Despite hinting of liberalization to credulous evangelical visitors, Riyadh continues to formally ban Christianity. "Christian foreign workers can be targeted for their faith, and all foreign Christians are heavily restricted from sharing their faith or gathering for worship—and any actions outside of the norm can lead to detention and deportation," observes Open Doors. "There are converts from Islam in Saudi Arabia. Foreigners who came from majority Muslim countries likely live and work in communities that reflect the cultural norms of their home—so they can be at risk if their social context is opposed to conversion. The few converts who are Saudi Arabian are usually forced to live out their faith in secrecy, risking violence, divorce and more."

According to Open Doors, another 39 countries are guilty of "very high persecution." Christianity is the most persecuted faith, but most religions face persecution somewhere, and some religious believers, such as Jews, Baha'is, and Ahmadis, are targeted with special virulence. Open Doors has done a great service by publicizing the continuing crime of religious persecution around the world.

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