



This Christmas, Remember the Persecuted Around the World

Offer a prayer, thought, or other support to those denied the freedom to worship freely.

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December 24, 2022

When Christmas approaches, many of us reflexively intone peace on Earth. Sadly, many people instead are suffering through conflict, strife, and war. Especially worth remembering are those persecuted for their faith at the very moment that the world's largest religion is celebrating its holiest day.

Faiths big and small are regularly attacked by government officials, violent mobs, and everything in between. Jews remain the go-to scapegoat. Small, unorthodox faiths, such as Yazidis, Baha'is, and Jehovah's Witnesses, are uniquely vulnerable. Muslims often suffer at the hands of other Muslims. And Christians, though the most numerous religious people worldwide, are the most persecuted.

We obviously should stand by our brothers and sisters in faith. However, it also is essential to defend the life, liberty, and dignity of those who believe differently, including not at all. Faith is real only when it is offered freely without coercion. The most fundamental decision of conscience for anyone is to assess and address the transcendent, responding to the call beyond.

So, this Christmas, whether one celebrates it or not, is a good time to offer a prayer, thought, or other support to those around the world denied a similar freedom to worship freely. Despite some worrisome attacks on religious liberty at home, Americans remain blessed compared to so many people in the world. Of the world's 10 most populous nations, the U.S. is just one of three, alongside Brazil and Mexico, to be free of substantial and systematic persecution.

Where to start? Open Doors publishes the annual World Watch list of the 50 worst persecutors. This year, Afghanistan was No. 1, displacing North Korea. Afghanistan was bad even when hosting U.S. troops. Today, the Taliban is free to enforce Sunni Islam. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has its own deities, the Kim family members. The DPRK is currently ruled by the third generation of what amounts to a communist monarchy.

Following in quick succession are Somalia, Libya, and Yemen. All are Muslim. All are being or have been shredded by domestic conflict, civil war, and/or outside aggression. Religious minorities are always among the most vulnerable to abuse and violence. Eritrea, often known as

the North Korea of Africa — not meant as a compliment, alas! — suffers under homegrown totalitarianism. Next come Nigeria and Pakistan. The first is almost evenly divided by faith and the second is overwhelmingly Muslim, but both are riven by internal strife and host violent attacks by Islamic jihadists and thugs on non-Muslims and moderate Muslims.

On to Iran, one of only three majority-Shia Muslim states. Ironically, the dominance of the abusive Mullocracy, now desperately seeking to crush popular protests triggered by the murder of a young woman arrested over her dress, has sparked a dramatic increase in both atheism and Christianity, fueling persecution. India is an increasingly authoritarian democracy in which Hindu nationalism employs both law and violence against Muslims and Christians. Next is Saudi Arabia, a brutal authoritarian state engaged in a murderous war in Yemen. Riyadh allows not one synagogue, temple, or church to operate, despite regime efforts to co-opt evangelical leaders. Myanmar/Burma disproves the meme of gentle Buddhists, with the military junta appealing to Buddhist nationalism to buttress its rule.

Sudan long was ruled by the worst sort of Islamic fundamentalism. Conditions have improved but reform remains stalled as civilian and military factions struggle for control after the ouster of the previous dictatorship. Iraq was liberated after a fashion, but among those freed by the ouster of Saddam Hussein's secular regime were radical jihadists and terrorists. For Syria, the story is much the same: many religious minorities, including Christians who fled the catastrophe in Iraq, were horrified by Washington's indirect support for radical insurgents, including Al-Qaida's local affiliate. Then the Maldives slips in, mostly known as a vacation spot in the Indian Ocean, but also a Muslim tyranny.

Next is China, in which religious persecution has dramatically worsened under Xi Jinping. Qatar and Vietnam follow, illustrating the two great lodestars for persecution: fundamentalist Islam and equally serious communism. Egypt hosts the region's largest Christian population as a share of the population outside of Lebanon but still provides an inhospitable home for Christians, despite dictator Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's attempt to pretend otherwise. Uzbekistan is one of the Central Asian tyrannies, Muslim-majority and former communist.

Algeria, Mauritania, and Mali follow, three oppressive majority-Muslim African states. Then Turkmenistan, one of the worst Central Asian (and majority-Muslim) nations. Followed by Laos, a small, sleepy, communist afterthought in Southeast Asia. Then comes a cavalcade of majority-Islamic countries: Morocco, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Next is Colombia, unusually a majority-Christian nation, but one suffering from corruption and violence.

Central African Republic is another Christian-majority country but with substantial Islamic violence. Two Muslim-majority African nations follow, Burkina Faso and Niger. Bhutan is a small majority-Buddhist state nestled in the Himalayan Mountains. Muslim-majority Tunisia and Oman are next. Then Cuba, a seemingly forever communist state off America's coast. Ethiopia is a majority-Christian nation mentioned in the Bible, but it suffers from violent conflict, government repression, and denominational battles.

Up next is majority Muslim Jordan, yet another undemocratic U.S. ally. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a majority-Christian nation with violence affecting all religious communities, Christians the most. Mozambique is similar, with violence by Islamic groups directed at the Christian majority. Turkey, yet another ally and Muslim-majority country, follows, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan using religion for political advantage. Then

Mexico, a largely Christian nation where corruption and crime, as well as rural adherence to traditional beliefs, turn believers into victims.

In Cameroon, though a majority-Christian nation, Christians face persecution in Muslim-dominated areas. Next are Tajikistan, another Central Asian and majority-Muslim dictatorship, and Brunei, an overwhelmingly Muslim monarchy. Kazakhstan is yet another former Soviet republic in Central Asia with a Muslim majority. Nepal is the second majority-Hindu nation and suffers from violent Hindu nationalism akin to India. As elsewhere, converts come under the heaviest pressure. Kuwait, a majority-Muslim Gulf state, allows Christian churches to operate but is inhospitable to converts. Malaysia, a majority-Muslim state in Southeast Asia, completes the list.

Persecution varies widely. In some countries, the culture is friendly, but the government is hostile. In others, the reverse is true, with the public being antagonistic. In some places, believers face bans and imprisonment. In others, they suffer prosecution for apostasy and blasphemy, usually used by Muslim fundamentalists against liberal Muslims and members of other faiths. Sometimes mob violence and social discrimination are the principal weapons of persecution. In many Muslim nations, anyone other than the dominant Islamic strain faces both public and private opprobrium and oppression.

Americans do not. Whatever the storm clouds on our horizons, we enjoy protections and opportunities that elude so many peoples around the world. For that, we should be thankful, while doing what we can do to help others enjoy similar protections for their right to seek the transcendent and respond to their understanding of God's calling. This Christmas, we should celebrate our freedoms while remembering those who are fighting for those same liberties.

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