

Religious intolerance circles the globe – and Christians are suffering the most

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Religious intolerance is a global constant. The defeat of the Islamic State is good news, but widespread persecution remains.

All faiths endure persecution, but Christians suffer the most. The group Open Doors figures that 215 million Christians were subject to high levels of persecution. More than 3000 were killed for their faith.

Rising persecution in part reflects the spread of radical Islam, particularly through the Islamic State. But the Middle East is not the only source. Violent extremism is evident in Africa, most notably Egypt, Nigeria, and Somalia, and Asia, particularly Bangladesh and Philippines.

Open Doors issues the annual World Watch List, highlighting the 50 worst persecutors. North Korea continues to top the list, for the 16th time.

Barely trailing the North was Afghanistan, supposed U.S. military ally. Believers, and converts in particular, “are unable to express their faith, even in private,” noted Open Doors.

Next in line are Somalia, Sudan, and Pakistan. In Somalia the state has disintegrated. Sudanese persecution “is systematic and reminiscent of ethnic cleansing.” In Pakistan private violence is rising sharply.

Eritrea, known as the African North Korea, comes in at number six. Four more Muslim nations follow. Libya, Iraq, and Yemen all have been devastated by conflict which loosed Islamist furies on vulnerable religious minorities. In Iran persecution comes from the regime, not the population.

India comes in at number 11, the host of Hindu nationalist violence directed against Christians and Muslims. Following is Saudi Arabia, essentially a totalitarian state without a single church, synagogue, or temple. In Maldives all citizens must be Muslims. The divided nation of Nigeria comes in at number 14, ravaged by the violent Islamist movement Boko Haram.

Three more Islamic nations follow. The Islamic State and other Muslim radicals have murdered and brutalized Christians and other religious minorities living in Syria. Uzbekistan combines a Muslim culture and authoritarian state. In Egypt Christians face both social pressure and government discrimination. Vietnam comes in at number 18, mixing ethnic and rural hostility with a communist government which remains slow to reform its anti-religious practices.

Turkmenistan also mixes Islamic culture and political repression. Still communist Laos comes next, with house churches proscribed.

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Then another three Muslim-majority nations join the global parade: Jordan, Tajikistan, and Malaysia. Although relative peace has replaced most of the ethnic resistance to Burma's/Myanmar's central government, many Christians have been forced from their homes and aggressive Buddhist monks have led violent attacks on Christian churches. Hindu radicals are active in Nepal. Another three Muslim countries then follow on the list: Brunei, Qatar, and Kazakhstan.

Divided Ethiopia is number 29, suffering from government repression, Islamic radicalism, and Orthodox favoritism. Next come Muslim Tunisia and Turkey. Even in majority Christian Kenya believers face murder and abuse from Islamic militants, tribal leaders, and, intermittently, government officials.

Nationalism targets religious minorities in Buddhist Bhutan. Muslim Kuwait targets converts. The majority Christian Central African Republic has suffered through violence from Muslims and Christians. In the Palestinian Territories Christians suffer more from the Israeli occupation than the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, but their beliefs make them a greater target of more radical and violent Hamas in Gaza.

Next come Mali and Indonesia, where rising extremism now threatens Christians. In nominally Christian Mexico criminal gangs and indigenous leaders target Christians. United Arab Emirates comes in at 40, followed by Bangladesh and Algeria, majority Islamic states all, which are especially harsh in penalizing converts.

With more believers than Communist Party members in China, the authorities fear Christianity's expansion and especially the proliferation of unregulated home churches. Buddhist Sri Lanka joins many Muslim states in targeting converts.

In majority Muslim Azerbaijan, Oman, and Mauritania Christians also suffer. Columbia, like Mexico, is theoretically Christian, but believers suffer from attacks by criminals and indigenous peoples, as well as guerillas. Muslim Djibouti brings up the rear at number 50, where, reports Open Doors, "jihadists and radical Islamic ideas bleed over from volatile surrounding countries."

Freedom of conscience is the foundation of other liberties. And it operates as a sort of canary in the mine internationally, highlighting societies prone to intolerance and violence.

Even so, Washington's ability to intervene is limited. Indeed, there was no greater disaster for Middle Eastern Christians than the 2003 Iraq invasion.

But the U.S. government should include religious liberty in every conversation on human rights. And American people should support those under attack overseas. Ultimately, freedom of conscience is too important to leave to Washington.

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