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Religious liberty again lags worldwide

Doug Bandow

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Religious persecution is on the rise worldwide. Real persecution, including death and prison for people of faith.

American Christians fear that they are glimpsing their future. Activists hostile to religion are using control of cultural institutions, businesses, and government bureaucracies to punish believers.

Still, what happens overseas is different in kind. Every year hundreds or thousands of people are martyred for their faith.

The latest Pew Forum report on international religious restrictions details the bad news for 2016. For the second year in a row the number of nations with significant limits on believers rose.

Pew looks at both government restrictions and private actions. The number of nations with significant limits overall rose from 80 to 83, accounting for 42 percent of countries.

The increased persecution largely reflected government controls. The percentage of states doing the latter rose from 50 to 55 nations, or 28 percent. Those with significant social hostility rose from 53 to 54, or 27 percent.

Persecution remained generally steady in many nations, particularly Muslim states, around the world. However, in Europe and elsewhere “restrictions on religion resulted from actions taken by government officials, social groups or individuals espousing nationalist positions.”

Unsurprisingly, the worst government persecution occurred in the Middle East and North Africa. The attacks were mostly Muslim on Christian/other and majority Muslim on minority Muslim (usually Sunni on Shia). Next came the Asia-Pacific. Europe followed, with Sub-Saharan Africa and the Americas lagging—in a good sense.

Social hostility shows a similar relationship. The Middle-East/North Africa again is well in the lead. The Americas again are far behind.

The other three regions are more closely bunched together. More significantly, in the last couple years Europe has edged ahead of the Asia-Pacific.

Obviously, people of faith are most at risk where they face both state persecution and private abuse. Muslim nations are famous for combining both. Among the worst are Egypt, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, and Indonesia.

In other cases public and private treatment diverge greatly. For instance, government restrictions on religion are rising in China, but there is little public concern about believers. In contrast, India, especially at the national level, imposes few controls on religious believers. However, social hostility is very high.

Overall, Christians faced discrimination and persecution in 144 nations, a jump of 16 over 2015, the largest increase in the last decade. Muslims suffered in 142 countries, an increase of 17. Jews were harassed in 87, up 13. The antagonism toward Jews is particularly notable since they constitute only .2 percent of the world population.

In general, there are three sources of mistreatment/hostility. One is communist/former communist/authoritarian regimes. China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam all purport to carry on Marx's and Lenin's legacies. There are even more former communist states, most notably once part of the Soviet Union or among its Eastern European satellites.

There also is a potpourri of nations—Buddhist and Hindu nationalist, secularist (once Christian Europe), secular-Jewish (Israel), Christian oddities (Fiji, Mexico)—which rank badly on at least one of the two scales. They matter particularly because of India's size.

However, the most consistent measure of both government restrictions and social hostility is Islam. Of course, not all Muslims treat other people of faith as well as atheists badly. But virtually every Muslim nation does so.

Indeed, 18 of the 25 worst states in terms of government restrictions were Muslim. Six of the nine with the highest social hostility were Muslim. There are few Muslim nations where the state is anything close to neutral and the people are fully accepting.

What to do? The U.S. government can highlight abuses with its annual report and prod foreign nations to do better with its special ambassador. Washington should make religious liberty part of any human rights dialogue and push for greater respect for freedom of conscience.

However, religious liberty is never likely to be a lead priority for the U.S. government. Geopolitics inevitably takes the lead position.

The responsibility for acting therefore must fall on average people. Acting as individuals and through churches, activist organizations, and more we should embarrass persecuting regimes and encourage other peoples to treat religious minorities with decency and tolerance.

We should do the same in America. The more we practice our own values at home the more persuasive we will be as advocates for them abroad.

Religious persecution is a reality throughout much of the world. Now is the moment for vigilance and action.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of *Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics*.*