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An  
overview

10 points  
on Religious  
Persecution



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# Religious freedom: a question of survival

“In the Central African Republic, religious freedom is not a concept; it is a question of survival. The idea is not whether one is more or less comfortable with the ideological foundations underpinning religious freedom; rather, the issue is how to avoid a bloodbath!” For Cardinal Dieudonné Nzapalainga, the Archbishop of Bangui in the Central African Republic, this is a sad and harsh reality; a reality that is faced by millions of people on a global scale today.

When religious freedom is undervalued, ignored, discouraged or targeted, religious persecution sometimes follows.

Current views on the importance and relevance of religious freedom as a human right are varied and complex, however what can be agreed upon is that persecution is never the right course of action, regardless of the reason.

Many instances of religious persecution have been underreported or neglected completely, especially in Western media.

*10 points on Religious Persecution* is intended to draw attention to the issue and raise awareness on the plight faced by many, most often minority religious groups.

At a time when advocacy for minority groups is increasing, it would be encouraging to see similar support for religious minority groups who face persecution because of their faith and beliefs.

Cover image: Original iron cross from the grave of St. Mary MacKillop 1909, late-19th century, iron and timber.

Australian Catholic University Art Collection

Overleaf: John Coburn, *The First Day: The Spirit of God brooded over the waters*, 1977. Colour lithograph.

Australian Catholic University Art Collection

# What is religious persecution?

## 1. IT IS VIOLENT AND OPPRESSIVE

Defined as an active program or campaign to exterminate, drive away, or subjugate people based on membership of a religious group, acts of religious persecution can include: murder (mass or individual), kidnapping, detention, enslavement, forced exile, expropriation of buildings, assets and funds and damage to property, physical assault including mutilations and battery, harsh sentences or punishments, and intimidation and threats.

## 2. IT HAPPENS ALL AROUND THE WORLD

In 2018, at least 25 countries were identified where significant religious persecution was taking place. These countries include: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Central African Republic, China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar (Burma), Niger, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Yemen.

## 3. IT IS PERPETRATED BY GOVERNMENTS, EXTREMISTS AND EVEN OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS

State and non-state bodies are usually responsible for religious persecution. In places like China, Myanmar, North Korea and Saudi Arabia, to name a few, religious minorities are predominantly targeted by their governments.

In Afghanistan, Iraq, Niger, Nigeria and Somalia religious minorities are targeted by non-state groups such as extremists.

In some countries like India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen groups are targeted not only by extremists but also by the government. Interestingly, it is not just non-religious groups targeting religious

minorities, as in China or North Korea. In many countries including Myanmar, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Syria, religious majorities in certain regions are responsible for persecuting religious minorities.

## 4. IT IS NOT ONLY DRIVEN BY RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

It is important to highlight that difference in faith is not the only driver of religious persecution. The historical background of a particular region, and its relationship with the State, is often vital to understanding how religious persecution comes about. The legal and social restrictions that are placed on religious freedom within a country are also important factors. These are shaped both by governments and social groupings, and are informed by a broader range of socio-political factors including religious regulations, nationalism and fundamentalism. This can often take the shape of ethnic subjugation and discrimination.

Ethnic cleansing and genocide has also taken place in recent history: in Myanmar with the state persecution of Rohingyas; in Iraq through the persecution of Yazidis by Islamic State Group; and in Nigeria with the persecution of Christians by Boko Haram and Fulani jihadis.

## 5. IT AFFECTS CHRISTIANS

Conservative estimates suggest that 260 million Christians were subjected to religious persecution in 2017-18; the largest group by number targeted by religious persecution.

Christian minority groups face persecution in many countries, but some of the worst places include: Afghanistan, India, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, North Korea, the Palestinian Territories and Syria. Of these,

North Korea is considered to be one of the worst countries in the world for violations of human rights and perpetrating religious persecution. While the North Korean constitution protects people's freedom of religion in principle, this only extends to a handful of state-controlled houses of worship permitted to exist. All other religious activities outside of this domain are heavily regulated.

The North Korean regime actively seeks out Christians practising their religion in secret and imprisons those that they apprehend, along with their families, in political prison camps. There they endure forced labour, in violation of international law, on minimal rations, causing extreme fatigue and sickness or even death. Estimates suggest that 25 per cent of Christians in North Korea are held in these prison camps where they are heavily persecuted, even more so than other prisoners.

## **6. IT AFFECTS MUSLIMS**

Many Muslim communities also face persecution, not only because of their religious beliefs but because of their ethnic and cultural origins as well.

In China, estimates suggest between one and two million Uyghurs and members of other Turkic Muslim minorities have disappeared into a vast network of re-education camps in the far west region of Xinjiang since 2017. Inside the camps detainees are subjected to political indoctrination, forced to renounce their religion and culture and, in some instances, reportedly subjected to torture.

In the name of combating religious extremism Chinese authorities have been actively remoulding the Muslim population in the image of China's Han ethnic majority. A recent report suggests that trainees who

have 'graduated' from these re-education camps are being forced to work in factories which are in the supply chain of at least 83 well-known companies including: Amazon, Apple, BMW, Dell, General Motors, Google, H&M, Land Rover, Microsoft, Nike, Puma, Sony, Toshiba, Volkswagen and Zara.

## **7. IT AFFECTS JEWS AND OTHER RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

Evidence suggests that anti-Semitism is increasing around the world, which has led to a rise in Jewish migrants to Israel. This rise in anti-Semitism has been documented in countries including France, Germany, Iran, Norway, Sweden, the United States of America and Yemen.

After the 2015 Hyper Cacher attack in France, where four Jewish people were killed and a number were taken hostage at a kosher supermarket, a record 7,900 Jewish people emigrated to Israel, with many of them citing increased fears of anti-Semitism as their reason.

While attacks on the Jewish population today rarely fall into the category of persecution, discrimination and growing hatred towards Jewish populations is on the rise leading in some instances to Jewish people concealing their faith in public to avoid harassment.

While religious persecution aimed at other religious minorities like the Rohingya in Myanmar and the Yazidis in Iraq has been well-documented, religious persecution of other minority groups often go unnoticed, such as the suppression of Buddhists in Tibet and Hindus in Yemen.

## **8. IT TARGETS WOMEN WITH SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Sexual violence towards women and young girls is a growing concern around the world. Rape is often used as a means of punishment, humiliation and degradation, and women of faith are often targeted. Where there is religious persecution, there is often rape.

Sources indicate that countries of particular concern include: India, Iraq, Libya, Myanmar, Nigeria, North Korea and Pakistan. In some instances, women are also forced into sexual slavery. If they are fortunate enough to escape, shame and stigma from within their own communities often follows.

In 2014, 17 year old Esther was kidnapped from her village in Nigeria's Borno State by members of Boko Haram. When she would not renounce her Christian faith she was repeatedly raped and eventually conceived and gave birth to her daughter in captivity. When she and her daughter were rescued a year later, she was not prepared for the persecution that she faced from within her own community. Even family members were reluctant to welcome her back. Sadly, what Esther endured at the hands of her captors and from her own community is not an isolated incident.

## **9. IT DRIVES PEOPLE FROM THEIR HOMELANDS**

The world is witnessing the highest levels of displacement of peoples on record. Estimates suggest that at the end of 2018 approximately 70 million people were forced from their homes by conflict and persecution. Further estimates suggest that 20-30 million were refugees, 3.9 million were stateless and 3.5 million were asylum seekers.

While religious persecution is not the only factor driving people from their homelands, it is often a factor that is rarely discussed or acknowledged. Religious persecution has forced Christians from China, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, North Korea, the Palestinian Territories, Sudan and Syria, Yazidis from Iraq and Rohingya from Myanmar.

While these people often struggle to access basic rights in their new homelands, and often face racism, hatred and other hostilities, the greater issue here is the destruction of communities.

Communities and traditions that span generations are being destroyed and traditional ways of life annihilated. This in turn devastates a person's sense of belonging; something that is of great importance to all of us.

## **10. IT CAN BE RESISTED**

While the situation is dire for many, jurisdictions and organisations around the world continuously monitor religious persecution and offer recommendations for a better way forward, including Aid to the Church in Need, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the United Kingdom, Open Doors and many others.

In Australia, for example, Aid to the Church in Need has organised Red Wednesday in November, when places of worship and other public buildings are lit up in red to remember the victims of religious persecution.

On 22 August 2019, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution proclaiming the *International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief*. It strongly condemned continuing violence

and acts of terrorism targeting individuals, including persons belonging to religious minorities, on the basis of or in the name of religion or belief.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres declared that the day was an opportunity to reaffirm support for the victims of violence based on religion and belief, adding that “We demonstrate that support by doing all in our power to prevent such attacks and demanding that those responsible are held accountable”.

### **RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION: A THREAT TO OUR SHARED HUMANITY**

At the beginning of 2018, Pope Francis offered his monthly prayer intention for persecuted religious minorities in Asia. He noted that the persecution which Catholics face is a danger which also confronts other minority religions. The different religious traditions share a desire for “Wisdom, truth and holiness” Pope Francis said. “When we think of those who are persecuted for their religion, we go beyond differences of rite or confession; we place ourselves on the side of the men and women who fight to avoid renouncing their religious identity.”

Religious persecution is not a problem just for those who have faith. It is a threat to our shared humanity. In the face of this threat, not only justice but also solidarity appeal to us to stand on the side of the persecuted. It is an appeal which should not go unanswered.

### **Notes**

The information in *10 points on Religious Persecution* has been gathered from the following sources:

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5. Xiuzhong Xu, Vicky *et al.*, “Uyghurs for sale: ‘re-education’, forced labour and surveillance beyond Xinjiang”, *International Policy Cyber Centre Report* No. 26/2020 (2020).
6. Mu Xuequan, ‘China Focus: Xinjiang determined in counter-terrorism, deradicalization, maintaining development’, *Xinhua Net* (December, 2019), <http://archive.ph/NkNJU>
7. Joint Public Issues Team, “Religious Persecution” (2020), <http://www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/issues/religious-persecution/>
8. UNHCR, *Global Report* (2018).
9. United Nations, “International Day Commemorating the Victims of Acts of Violence Based on Religion or Belief”, (22 August, 2019), <https://www.un.org/en/events/victimsofreligiousviolenceday/>
10. United Nations News, “World must stamp out persecution of religious groups, Guterres declares on new UN Day” (22 August, 2019), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/08/1044751>

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