

## Protestants

The label 'Protestant' has been applied to a wide range of Christian groups. In Western countries it is popularly used for any Christian who is not Roman Catholic, in part because of the dominance of Roman Catholicism in the West, and also partly due to the complex array of non-Roman church bodies that have emerged in the modern world, precipitating a shorthand term for easy reference.

The word Protestant first came into use when referring to the 16<sup>th</sup> century movement in Europe that called for reforms in the Catholic Church. It was especially applied to Martin Luther, a German monk, who protested against corruption and abuses in the Church and publicly appealed for the reform of a number of beliefs and practices.

Other reform-minded theologians and Christian humanists preceded Luther, such as Erasmus, William Tyndale, and Jan Hus. These figures raised similar concerns from within the Church in the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation; however, it was specifically the reform movements of the 16<sup>th</sup> century which introduced the word 'Protestant' into the lexicon of Western religion.

Subsequently, the term has been used to reference any of the numerous Christian denominations in the West that do not accept the authority of Rome. They may call themselves Reformed, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Pentecostals or use some other appellation; however, most of these groups would self-identify as Protestant. The distinctions between them often reveal differences in theology, polity and practice.

For instance, John Calvin was a French humanist and doctor of law, who envisioned a system of church governance by elected office holders, pastors and elders (*presbyters*). This *presbyterian* structure was established in contrast to the traditional *episcopal* system of the Catholic Church where authority resided in a bishop (*episcopus*). Calvin's teachings had an enduring impact on Reformed theology, which became especially influential in Eastern Europe, Scotland and the Americas.

Another Reformed leader was Ulrich Zwingli of Switzerland, who pressed for even more radical changes to be made in church doctrine and practice. Zwingli supported the creation of a theocratic state, where the Bible would carry authority in civil as well as religious life.

The Protestant Reformation faced substantial opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and from European nobility that benefited from its favoured status with the Church. States and cities that sided with the Protestant movement became battlegrounds for increased religious and political autonomy, as some nobles perceived an opportunity for consolidating their influence in a time of rising nationalism while others supported the status quo.

After years of struggle and even civil war, many countries established state religions and afforded tolerance to minority religions. The Reformation period had produced a range of

denominations, each emphasizing particular doctrines, practices, or church governance. The influence of Lutheranism and Calvinism had left their mark. Later, the Evangelical movement would also establish itself, emphasising the importance of personal conversion, preaching of the Gospel, the centrality of the Bible and active evangelism. The Pentecostal wing of Evangelicals placed particular emphasis on the experience of faith as opposed to just an intellectual assent to certain doctrines.

Evangelical revivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries spurred a lively commitment to missionary work in foreign lands, often facilitated by colonial interests. The growth of European and American missions to influence ideologies of populations around the globe in the 19th century allowed for the most expansive period of Protestantism.

Today Protestantism has a worldwide presence, accounting for approximately one-third of the world's 2.18 billion Christians. Protestants are highly concentrated in the Americas and sub-Saharan Africa, with significant numbers throughout Europe, Asia, and the Pacific. They also constitute small minorities in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

## Teachings

Protestant teachings, as shared by Christianity in general, centre on Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world. The Reformation produced several defining characteristics of Protestant faith, including justification by faith (*sola fida*) through grace (*sola gratia*), the priesthood of all believers and the authority of the Bible over 'human' traditions.

Rejecting the authority of Rome, Protestants sought to establish the Bible as the ultimate source of authority. Many advocate the principle of *sola scriptura*, affirming the Bible's singular authority in all matters of faith and practice. Other Protestant traditions give the Bible priority as an authoritative source (*prima scriptura*), while acknowledging other influences that have shaped the interpretation of Christian beliefs. Prior to the Reformation, the Bible was available exclusively in Latin and therefore accessible only to an educated elite. Reformers worked to translate scriptural texts into the common vernacular and disseminate copies.

Tracing a middle way (*via media*) between Catholicism and Protestantism, the Anglican tradition has sought to forge a path that is authentically Catholic while adopting many of the changes brought about by the Reformation. Like Roman Catholics, Anglicans point to the visible and historic succession of the apostles as the source of authority. In regard to doctrines and liturgy, Anglicanism, in many aspects, more closely resembles Roman Catholicism than 'Protestant' denominations. The case is frequently made that Anglicanism is not adequately defined as a 'Protestant' faith.

Protestant liturgies vary widely by denomination. Lutheranism and Anglicanism have maintained liturgy most similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. Along the spectrum of more Protestant-minded denominations there is a greater emphasis on preaching and a persistent reaction to Roman Catholic beliefs and practices.

## Controversies

Protestant Christians, mostly Evangelicals and Pentecostal groups, face a number of restrictions on their activities in many countries today. At the heart of the challenges they face are often their evangelistic activities. In many Muslim-majority countries, apostasy laws impose harsh penalties on converts from Islam to other faiths. Strict prohibitions of proselytising are similarly forbidden by law. In **Iran**, for instance, those found guilty of such crimes can receive lashings, up to eight years imprisonment, or even the death penalty. In **Saudi Arabia**, where missionary activities and proselytising are forbidden, apostasy and blasphemy are likewise punishable by death.

In the **former Soviet republics of Eurasia**, religious practice can be systematically oppressed. Rigid conditions for the registration of religious activities have made it impossible for many churches to operate legally. The impact of functioning as a non-registered entity is more readily felt by smaller religious minorities. State-sponsored discrimination often parallels that of society, falling hardest on ‘new Christians’: predominantly Protestant groups, missionaries and converts whose evangelisation efforts are perceived as a threat.

The generally decentralised and simple church structure of Presbyterian and Congregationalist Protestant churches have contributed to their persistence – and even growth at times – in adverse environments. Such was the case for Baptist churches in the USSR. However, the same decentralisation can also place members of these churches in precarious situations.

In countries like **China** and **Vietnam**, where religious organisations are strictly regulated by the government, Evangelical and Pentecostal house churches can be forced to meet in secret or become subject to raids, arrests and detention. They are charged with dubious offenses such as disruption of public order, undermining state security, illegally operating a business or leaking state secrets. A Chinese government campaign to ‘expose and remove illegal structures’ led to the demolition or defacement of an estimated 1,700 churches.

In **Iran**, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have been indicted for membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security, propaganda against the system, organising a group to overthrow the regime and even enmity against God.

In addition to official government-sanctioned repression, Evangelicals and Pentecostals have suffered persecution by non-state actors who are opposed to their missionary activities on various grounds. In some regions of **India**, discrimination and violence against Protestants have been on the rise, spurred by a wave of nationalist rhetoric calling for a return to an India unified in Hinduism. Those who belong to religious minorities have been misrepresented as having been converted forcibly. Coercive tactics have been increasingly employed to ‘reconvert’ Christians, along with members of other faiths. Anti-conversion laws, which are supposedly in place to protect religious minorities, have instead been applied against them in a discriminatory manner.

## Protestants in Prison

Very few believers belonging to the historic Protestant denominations are in prison. The main victims of state repression are believers and groups that are part of the Evangelical and Pentecostal families involved in missionary activities, such as in **Bhutan, China, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Laos, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.**

Concerning **China**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented more than seventy individual cases and several mass arrests. The charges which are mainly related to freedom of worship and assembly are routinely phrased as follows:

- Organising a religious service in a private home (house church)
- Illegal assembly
- Participation in demonstrations and illegal assembly
- Engaging in illegal religious activity
- Disturbing public order
- Using religion to disturb social order
- Gathering a crowd to disturb public order

Sentences were typically ten to fifteen days of administrative detention.

In China people are also sentenced for printing and distributing religious material for the purpose of converting to Christianity.

In addition, legislation on 'evil cults' can be leveraged to put believers behind bars for several years. Accusations are usually phrased as follows:

- Belonging to a forbidden cult
- Organising cult activities
- Spreading cult teachings
- Using a cult organization to undermine law enforcement
- Organising and using a religious cult to break laws

Finally, security concerns are frequently cited in charges such as:

- Inciting subversion of state power and leaking state secrets
- Engaging in illegal religious infiltration, including preaching Christianity among the Uyghur ethnic group
- Gathering, stealing, buying or illegally providing state secrets and espionage

These are serious offences for which sentences up to fifteen years in prison were imposed.

Concerning **Iran**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately twenty-five individual cases and several mass arrests.

Leaders and members of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities as well as from the Church of Iran, a non-Trinitarian Christian movement, have been particularly targeted.

The usual charges for missionary activities are very serious and entail very heavy prison sentences (generally three to six years):

- Conspiring against the Islamic regime and evangelism
- Collusion against national security
- Undermining national security
- Membership in organisations that aim to disrupt national security
- Propaganda against the regime
- Organising a group to overthrow the regime
- Promoting Christianity
- Encouraging conversion from Islam to Christianity
- Evangelism
- Proselytising Farsi-speaking citizens
- Organising house church meetings

In **Bhutan**, evangelist **Tandin Wangyal**, was sentenced to four years in prison in 2014 for conducting a religious meeting without prior official approval and collecting 'illegal funds.' He was released on bail in January 2015.

In **Eritrea**, three Pentecostal pastors of the Full Gospel Church - **Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel**, **Haile Nayzgi** and **Kidane Weldou** - were arrested between 2004 and 2005 because of their evangelizing activities; as of 2015, more than ten years later, their whereabouts are still unknown.

In **Indonesia**, **Antonius Richmond Bawengean** was arrested in 2010 while distributing leaflets. He was accused of blasphemy and in February 2011 sentenced to five years in prison. Protesters demanded that he be handed over to the police, chanting 'Kill, kill, kill' outside the court as he was led away under heavy security. The angry mob then trashed the courtroom before targeting Christian sites, burning down a number of churches and schools.

In **Kazakhstan**, **Yklas Kabduakasov** was sentenced on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2015 to two years imprisonment in a labour camp. He had been arrested on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2015 while discussing his faith and offering Christian books. He was officially convicted of inciting religious hatred, a charge that he denies.

In **Laos**, several pastors - **Kaithong, Muk, Tiang, Puphet** and **Hasadee** – who had prayed for the healing of a convert, were held responsible for her death. In February 2015, a court found them guilty of illegal practice of medicine and sentenced them to nine months detention.

In **North Korea**, four foreign Christians (one Canadian and three South Korean pastors) were serving prison terms for attempting to carry out missionary activities in North Korea. In December 2015, **Hyeon Soo Lim** from Toronto was sentenced to life imprisonment for harming the dignity of the supreme leadership and trying to use religion to destroy the North Korean system. **Kim Jeong-Wook** was condemned to hard labour for life for attempting to overthrow the government by spying and setting up underground churches. South Korean pastors **Kim Kuk Gi** and **Choe Chun Gil** were accused of espionage. According to the 400-page report of the UN Commission of Inquiry into Human Rights in North Korea, ‘Countless numbers of persons in North Korea who attempt to practice their religious beliefs have been severely punished, even unto death.’

In **Pakistan**, **Asia Bibi**, was arrested in 2009 for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad during an argument with some Muslim neighbours after she drank water from a well with an allegedly ‘unclean’ cup used by Muslim women. She was sentenced to death one year later. Three politicians took up her case to call for reform of the country’s rigid blasphemy code. Two of them were assassinated, and the third one is in hiding.

**Shafqat** and **Shagufta Emmanuel** (husband and wife) were arrested in July 2013 in the city of Gojra for allegedly sending a text message in English deemed insulting to the Prophet Mohammed to an imam. Shagufta told the police that her cell phone had been lost for a month and that she did not know who could have sent the messages. The couple are uneducated and do not speak English. On 4<sup>th</sup> April 2014, a court handed death sentence to the Christian couple. As Pakistan has a de facto moratorium on the death penalty, it is unlikely that they will be executed. They remain in prison throughout 2015.

**Muhammad Asghar**, a seventy-year-old British Protestant from Edinburgh, was sentenced to death in 2014 for allegedly writing letters to several people claiming to be a prophet. His lawyers claimed that he had a history of mental illness but the court did not accept UK medical reports.

Muslims, Christians and others have all been victimised by Pakistan’s blasphemy laws. Contravening these laws can result in death or life imprisonment as stipulated in Section 295-A, B, C and 298-A, B, C of the Penal Code. In practice people are sentenced to death are not put to death but incarcerated indefinitely.

*Human Rights Without Frontiers* has identified a series of cases concerning Christians who were sentenced to life imprisonment in blasphemy cases; however, the sources of information often fail to mention if they were Roman Catholic, Anglican or Protestant Christians. See details at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Pakistan-FBL-2015.pdf>

In **Sudan**, several pastors were arrested in 2015 in two different cases. **Hassan Abduraheem, Hafiz Mengisto, Talahon Nigosi Kassa Ratta** and **Kwa Shamal** were detained by National Intelligence and Security Service agents for obstructing them from destroying a part of their church building. **Pastors Peter Lein Reith** and **Yat Michael** faced six charges: undermining the constitutional system (article 50), espionage (article 53), promoting hatred among sects (article 64), breach of public peace (article 69) and offences relating to insulting religious beliefs (article 125). Pastor Reith was released on 5th August. Pastor Mengisto was released on 29th December 2015.

In **Uzbekistan**, **Doniyor Akhmedov** was sentenced to fifteen days in prison and a heavy fine (the equivalent of three years minimum wage) in 2015 for distributing religious leaflets to people on the street. **Tohar Haydarov**, a Muslim who converted to Christianity, was arrested in 2010 and sentenced to ten years in prison for ‘illegal production purchase, storage and other operations with narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances.’ The charges are believed to have been fabricated and came after relatives asked local police to help them force Tohar to return to Islam.

In **Vietnam**, a number of members of the Montagnard ethnic group were sentenced to heavy prison terms on the grounds of undermining the unity policy: **Am Ilnh** (eight years in 2009), **Kpa Sinh** (eight years of house arrest in 2011) and **Ksor Y Du** (three years of house arrest also in 2011). In 2012, four members of the Hmongs ethnic group were arrested and sentenced to prison terms for alleged activities aimed at overthrowing the government: seven years for **Trang A Cho** and three years for **Giang A Long, LiA Di, and Hau A Giang**. The Vietnamese authorities perceive these ethnic groups, which were evangelized by Protestant missionaries, as a potential threat to the territorial integrity and the security of the country, in which the majority religion is Buddhism.

## Conclusions

It would be much too simplistic to relegate all repression of Evangelical-Pentecostal Protestants to government resistance to proselytising activities such as public preaching and the distribution of literature. Other elements are also present that have deeper roots in the culture, history and politics of the country. For instance, the fact that many of these groups hail from America and Europe makes it difficult to separate the message from the messenger.

It is not surprising that some governments resist the ‘foreign influence’ that comes with missionary activities that originate in countries that they consider to be corrupt or immoral. Especially in countries where there is already a prominent ethno-religious identity, evangelising activities from abroad can be perceived as invasive or disruptive to national unity. This is also the case for many Communist and post-Communist societies, where religion is sometimes considered divisive and retrograde.

Or if missionaries come from a former coloniser or from countries that promote policies in the receiving country that are deemed harmful, this too can provoke hostilities on the part of governments.

For these reasons and more, several States have decided to ban all foreign missionary activities altogether. Sometimes such policies reflect more paranoia than good sense. There is an enormous difference between distributing a religious tract and 'conspiring to overthrow the regime.' Even still, it is clear that governments are charged with looking after the general welfare of society and to protect their citizens from harmful influences. It is equally clear that not all religion is harmless in nature.

However, any resistance to proselytising must also be viewed within the framework of international norms of freedom of religion or belief. These norms include 'the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his [or her] religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance' (UDHR, Article 18). States must find ways to balance the need for societal stability with their commitment to ensure democratic freedoms for all its citizens.