

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 16th 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 16th 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 18th and 19th 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 different cultures and the ‘self-defence’ ideology of states with a non-Christian majority population. 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 **China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Sudan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.**

Concerning **China**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented more than thirty individual cases of sentences to prison terms. 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

In addition, legislation on ‘evil cults’ is also used 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.

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in China, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/China-FBL-2017.pdf>

Concerning **Iran**, *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has documented approximately fifteen individual cases of sentences to prison terms.

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

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In **Eritrea**, between 2,500 and 3,000 Protestants are detained indefinitely, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide's submission to the United Nations UPR process in 2014.

Some were arrested between 2004 and 2005 for evangelizing activities, and even a decade later, their whereabouts remain unknown, these prisoners include: **Rev. Ogbamichael Teklehaimanot, Pastor Meron Gebreselasie, Pastor Dr Kiflu Gebremeskel, Haile Nayzgi** and **Pastor Kidane Weldou**. Other evangelists known by name are **Mussie Ezaz** and **Mussie Eyob**.

Although some are released after pledging to renounce their faith, none of those in prison have been formally charged or tried, and all are held pending denials of faith.

In May 2017, 122 Eritrean Christians were detained in a series of round-ups of members of unregistered denominations in various locations around the country. **Fikadu Debesay**, who was detained with her husband in May during raids targeting Evangelical Christians in Adi Quala town, died in incarceration in early August.¹

¹ <http://www.csw.org.uk/2017/06/15/press/3583/article.htm>

In **India**, seven Protestants were arrested in December 2017 and sentenced to fourteen days in judicial custody for alleged forcible conversion campaigns. Others were accused of unlawful assembly and released on bail after a week of deprivation of freedom. Seven Protestants were sentenced to life imprisonment in 2008 for allegedly killing the Hindu leader Laxamananda Saraswati, despite their denials and a statement of Maoists claiming the murder.

For further information about individual cases of arrest and imprisonment in India, see our Database of FORB Prisoners at <http://hrwf.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/India-FBL-2017.pdf>

In **Indonesia**, **Basuki Tjahaja PURNAMA (AHOK)**, the governor of Jakarta until the local elections in 2017 was accused of blasphemy for making reference to a Quranic verse to highlight political and religious discrimination. During the election campaign, he quoted a verse from the Quran in a political speech about voting. Some were offended and reported him to the police.

On 9th May 2017, he was sentenced to two years in prison by the North Jakarta District court on the basis of Article 156a of the criminal code which reads that “by a maximum imprisonment of five years shall be punished any person who deliberately in public gives expression to feelings or commits an act, a. which principally have the character of being at enmity with, abusing or staining a religion, adhered to in Indonesia”.

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

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. **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. 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. He was released on ‘sick bail’ on 9th August 2017. 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 **Nepal**, five Christians were arrested in 2016, reportedly for missionary activities. Four of them were sentenced to five years in prison but were released fifteen months later after a higher court overturned the previous judgment. As of 21st December 2017, the situation of **Pratik Sunar** remains unknown.

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. As of 31st December 2017, her situation remains unchanged.

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 4th April 2014, a court handed death sentence to the Christian couple. As of 31st December 2017, their situation remains unchanged.

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. As of 31st December 2017, his situation remains unchanged.

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.

The use of blasphemy laws has created an environment where some religious fanatics believe that they are entitled to take law into their own hands. There have been many instances where local administration and police have either colluded with perpetrators or have stood by and done nothing to assist the accused, fearing the crowd. The use of the blasphemy laws has become a quick way of resolving disputes arising from business rivalry, honor disputes, disputes over money and property. The accused are often lynched or languish for years in jail without trial, for lawyers are too afraid to defend them. Judges have previously been attacked in Pakistan for acquitting blasphemy defendants and two politicians who discussed reforming the law were shot dead.

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/2017/09/Pakistan-FBL-2017.pdf>

In **Sudan**, four Protestants arrested in 2015 were released in 2017: **Rev. Hassan Abduraheem, Rev. Kwa Shamal Abdulmonem, Issa Abdumawla and Petr Jasek.**

In **Tajikistan**, Pastor **Bakhrom Kholmatov** was sentenced to three years in prison in July 2017. He was accused of singing extremist songs in church and inciting 'religious hatred'. The National Security Committee (NSC) claimed that songs based on Biblical passages, such as "Praise God, oh the godless country", "God's army is marching", and "Our fight is not against flesh and blood" are "extremist and call on people to overthrow the government".

In **Uzbekistan**, five Christians were arrested in 2017 for holding religious meetings without prior authorization. Three of them were sentenced to 15-day administrative detention and two others to one week. As of 31st December 2017, no Christian remained imprisoned in Uzbekistan.

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.

In all *Human Rights Without Frontiers* documented thirty-five cases of Protestants sentenced to prison terms - most of them ranging from five to eighteen years in prison – on spurious charges, including: plotting to overthrow the government, activities aimed at overthrowing the People's Government, and undermining national unity, etc.

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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, claiming that they are 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.

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 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.