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State Dept. Commission cites religious freedom as 'foremost' among rights

The Commission on Unalienable Rights' first draft report has prompted backlash from organizations and religious representatives, who criticized the report's emphasis on religious liberty.

Lauretta Brown

National Catholic Register (07.08.2020) - The Commission on Unalienable Rights, an advisory committee formed last year to provide the U.S. State Department with advice that grounds an understanding of human rights in the nation's founding principles, released a draft report last month that highlighted religious liberty alongside property rights as being of fundamental importance.

However, the report has prompted backlash from an array of organizations and religious representatives that support progressive political agendas, who criticized the report's emphasis on religious liberty.

The report stated that "foremost among the unalienable rights that government is established to secure, from the founders' point of view, are property rights and religious liberty. A political society that destroys the possibility of either loses its legitimacy."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, in [remarks](#) announcing the report July 16, that it emphasized religious freedom because “no society can retain its legitimacy or a virtuous character without religious freedom,” and “our founders knew that faith was also essential to nurture the private virtue of our citizens.” He also said that “Americans have not only unalienable rights, but also positive rights, rights granted by governments, courts, multilateral bodies. Many are worth defending in light of our founding; others aren’t.”

When Pompeo announced the formation of the advisory commission in July 2019, he noted that “more than 70 years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, gross violations continue throughout the world, sometimes even in the name of human rights.” He argued that international institutions “designed and built to protect human rights have drifted from their original mission,” and “as human-rights claims have proliferated, some claims have come into tension with one another, provoking questions and clashes about which rights are entitled to gain respect. Nation-states and international institutions remain confused about their respective responsibilities concerning human rights.”

Last month he said that the July 16 draft report provided the State Department with “essential questions” to guide an understanding of human rights, like “Are our foreign-policy decisions rooted in our founding principles?” and “Does a new rights claim that’s being presented represent a clear consensus across different traditions and across different cultures, as the Universal Declaration [[1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)] did, or is it merely a narrower partisan or ideological interest?”

But a group of academics and religious leaders, including Sister of Social Service Simone Campbell, the executive director of the social-justice lobby NETWORK; Marianne Duddy-Burke of DignityUSA, a dissenting Catholic group that advocates for “LGBT rights”; Rev. Katey Zeh of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice; and several university professors, [wrote](#) in response to the report that the commission’s “approach — which seeks to elevate religious freedom above other human rights — will weaken religious freedom itself and undermine respect for and damage the protections of the universal values of human dignity.” They wrote that “human rights are mutually reinforcing; none is subordinate to another, nor should anyone be denied these rights because of who they are or whom they love.”

Mary Ann Glendon’s Response

Mary Ann Glendon, chairwoman of the Commission on Unalienable Rights and Harvard Law professor, told the Register, in an email speaking only on her own behalf, that the letter’s claim “that the Report of the Commission on Unalienable Rights seeks to elevate religious freedom above all other human rights, thus enabling governments in other parts of the world to ‘disregard religious freedom as a foreign or Western concept that they are not obliged to follow’” is “a puzzling complaint.”

“While the promotion of religious freedom is certainly an important element of American foreign policy, mandated in fact by Congress, so is the promotion of democracy, freedom, the equality principle, and the fight against the modern form of slavery, human trafficking,” said Glendon, a Catholic who served as the U.S. ambassador to the Holy See in 2008-2009.

She explained that while the report identifies religious freedom as one of several “fundamental principles,” it does not place it above these other principles. “The report outlines the historical and contemporary reasons why U.S. foreign policy places special emphasis on several fundamental principles, including religious liberty, but nowhere does

it suggest that religious freedom is or ought to be the top priority," she said. "Indeed, policy advice is specifically excluded by the Commission's Charter."

Glendon said that the report denounced "the promotion by Western groups of claims that have not achieved the status of internationally recognized human rights, a practice that threatens the great post-World War II human rights project and is deeply resented in the developing world."

As the State Department solicited comments on the document, more than 200 organizations and individuals wrote to Glendon in a July 23 letter to counter the report and express the opinion that "the validity of the human rights project is in no way imperiled by the increasing number of rights claims made by those whose rights have historically been denied them" and rejected "the report's recommendation that the United States adopt a foreign policy that identifies certain rights as more important than others. This effort to rank rights opens the door to any number of problematic actions by governments that seek to undermine their human rights obligations and violate individual liberties."

The organizations who signed the letter included the American Civil Liberties Union, the Human Rights Campaign, NARAL Pro-Choice America, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

A Hierarchy of Rights

Elyssa Koren, the director of U.N. advocacy at Alliance Defending Freedom International, told the Register that when the religious leaders stated in their letter that "we believe freedom of religion must never be used as a pretext to diminish other rights," it was not clear to her "that they're referencing the agreed set of fundamental human rights [of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights]. They potentially could be thinking of religious freedom trampling things that aren't in fact rights, such as the perceived right to abortion, which we know stems from a misconstrued conception of human dignity."

She praised the report's "back to basics" approach, which found that "in the absence of consensus over all of these new and emerging so-called rights, things that we just don't agree on, we have to go back to the approach that was used by the drafters of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights at the very start of the international human-rights project right after World War II."

According to Koren, "There's a whole history to that subdivision of rights. ... The Universal Declaration of Human Rights emerged in such a way that we do recognize that there is such a thing as fundamental human rights, ones that are truly tied to our inherent dignity as people."

"Their approach was informed by the fact that the world had just emerged from these two catastrophic wars, and they understood with total certainty that they had to come up with something," she said.

Koren said that the State Department "does pull out religious freedom as a right that particularly deserves protection and promotion" and recalled Pope St. John Paul II's address to the United Nations in 1979, which cited religious freedom as a prerequisite for peace.

John Paul II told the U.N. that in "the relationship between spiritual values and material or economic values," it is "the spiritual values that are preeminent, both on account of the nature of these values and also for reasons concerning the good of man. The preeminence of the values of the spirit defines the proper sense of earthly material goods and the way to use them. This preeminence is therefore at the basis of a just peace."

"To safeguard religious freedom is to safeguard peace," Koren said. "I think you can make the claim that elevating religious freedom, which, by the way, is under attack everywhere in the world right now, is going to enhance all other fundamental freedoms. You're not elevating this freedom at the expense of other freedoms; you're elevating religious freedom so that other freedoms can flourish."

Important Distinctions

Aaron Rhodes, president of the Forum for Religious Freedom-Europe, told the Register that "critics and members of the human-rights community have denied the legitimacy of even examining distinctions among the vast array of human rights that have amassed in the international system."

He said, "A large coalition of activists and others even claimed that making any distinction between unalienable or inherent rights and positive rights had no place in human-rights discourse at all."

He called that conclusion "a sad commentary on the establishment human-rights community, revealing an appalling ignorance about the philosophical and moral principles behind the rights they are trying to defend, because, at its very core, human rights rests on a distinction between moral rights that are inherent and universal — human rights — and those that are established by rulers and legislatures — between rights that have their basis in nature and those with a basis in positive law."

This modern ignorance of the distinction between universal rights that have a basis in nature and those based in law was perhaps on display when *The New York Times* reported on the commission's findings by calling natural law — the idea held by St. Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic Church that humans have a common, intrinsic moral sense of right and wrong — "a term that human rights scholars say is code for 'God-given rights' and is commonly deployed in fights to roll back rights for women and L.G.B.T.Q. people."

Rhodes said that "the commission's report, to its credit, unpacks and illuminates this distinction" between inherent, universal rights and those based in positive law, although he expressed concern with the report's "embrace of economic and social rights," including "freedom from fear and want" from the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights, which he said "are clearly positive rights that depend on the state."

"The report is good in worrying about human-rights proliferation and inflation and in stating the obvious fact that some rights are more important to honoring human nature than others," he said, but added that "the report leaves us hemmed in by the contradictions in international human rights that have led to the mess we see in the U.N."

The Expansion of Rights

Emilie Kao, the director of the DeVos Center for Religion and Civil Society at the Heritage Foundation, said that the draft report showed the need for "a clear understanding of what positive law is and what human rights are; and, unfortunately, there's been this incredible expansion of what are called human rights from the original 30 rights in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights."

"If everything is a right, then rights cease to mean anything," she said. "That doesn't lead to more enforcement or better protection of human rights; that just creates a credibility problem." As for the critics, Kao said that "they never define what constitutes a

human right and what doesn't constitute a human right. They have no limiting principle, from what I've seen, so if there's such an infinite number of new rights that they can create, that's very problematic, and they should be addressing the problems that could be created by an inflation of human rights."

Kao also highlighted the problem at the United Nations of "special experts who are not elected officials and are always opining on these new human rights, and some of those are very, very controversial," including [claims](#) that "there's a universal human right to abortion" and "a universal human right to nondiscrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity."

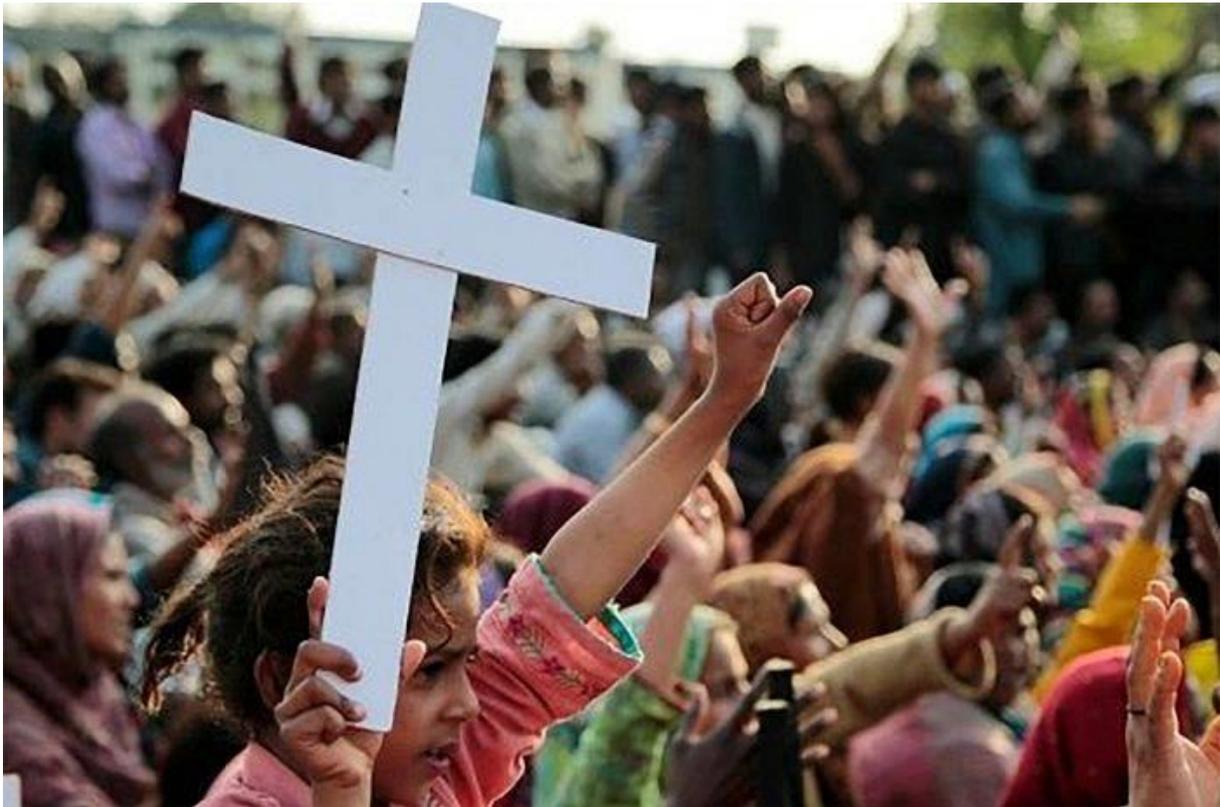
She called the commission's report "wise to point [out] that the United States should be very cautious about recognizing these new rights, because are they actually rights that have universal consensus? Are they rights that are going to conflict with other recognized, fundamental rights? These terms get thrown around so loosely, and the United States is trying to take a cautious approach so that there can be clarity so that there can be more enforcement."

Lauretta Brown is the Register's Washington-based staff writer.

Romania establishes national day of awareness of violence against Christians

Orthodox Christianity (26.06.2020) - <https://orthochristian.com/132166.html> - The plenum of the Romanian Chamber of Deputies adopted a law on Wednesday declaring August 16 the National Day of Awareness of Violence Against Christians.

On this day, the following buildings will be illuminated in red between 8:00 PM and 12:00 AM: the Romanian Parliament, the Government of Romania, the central and local public authorities, the Arc de Triumph and the Mogosoiaia Palace, reports the [Basilica News Agency](#).



This will be done “as a sign of awareness by Romanian citizens of the violence and persecution to which Christians in the world were and are subjected today,” the law states.

The day coincides with the feast of the holy Brancoveanu Martyrs, who were canonized by the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1992. Constantin Brancoveanu was ruler of Wallachia from August 15, 1654 to August 15, 1714, when he was dethroned and captured by the Ottomans and transported to Istanbul together with his four sons where he was tortured and eventually executed by decapitation together with his sons and his treasurer Ianache Vacarescu.

Their feast was established as August 16 so as not to coincide with the great feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God.

Public events and religious services can be held this day in places where authorized commemorative events are held. Events can be funded by central and local authorities, and interested NGOs can provide logistical and financial support for any events.

The Romanian Broadcasting Society, the Romanian Television Society, and the AGERPRES national press agency will give priority to broadcasts and informational materials on the persecution of Christians in the past and present.

The initiator, Deputy Daniel Gheorghe, says in the explanatory statement that he created the bill to inform the public, including young people, about the role of Christianity in the history of Romania and the nature and extent of Christian persecution, which continues today. He hopes the law will encourage Christians to defend their right to practice their faith without fear or obstruction.

Deputy Gheorghe [submitted a similar draft law](#) last July as well.

Atheists and humanists facing discrimination across the world, report finds

The report is largely based on testimony from 76 people in the eight countries surveyed

By Harriet Sherwood

The Guardian (25.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/31dB9Qq> - Atheists and humanists are facing discrimination and persecution in some countries because of their beliefs and values, according to a new report.

Non-religious people in Colombia, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Philippines and Sri Lanka are often ostracised, and some women are forced into marriages, says Humanists At Risk: Action Report 2020, published on Thursday by Humanists International.

Evidence is growing that humanist and atheist activists are being targeted on the basis of their rejection of a majority religion or their promotion of human rights, democratic values and critical thinking, it says.

Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, [was last month arrested after being accused of blasphemy](#), which carries the death penalty. Bala, the son of a widely regarded Islamic scholar, has been an outspoken religious critic in a staunchly conservative region of the country.

"To speak out and say you're an atheist or humanist in Nigeria can be dangerous, but Bala is very passionate about creating a space for those who do not subscribe to Islam or religion," said Leo Igwe, a fellow Nigerian humanist and human rights advocate.

A range of tactics is used against humanists, atheists and non-religious people, says the report, which was funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office. They include the criminalisation of blasphemy and apostasy, impunity for attacks, social isolation and discrimination.

The report is largely based on testimony from 76 people in the eight countries surveyed. One Malaysian respondent said: "Humanists and non-religious people are regularly attacked by zealous Muslims." Another said people who expressed a lack of religious belief were "shunned and frowned upon".

In Pakistan, the legal environment was "notably repressive; it has brutal [blasphemy laws](#), systemic and legislative religious discrimination and often allows vigilante violence on religious grounds to occur with impunity", according to the report.

One respondent said: "To be a humanist ... [in Pakistan] you must have courage to lose everything."

An issue of concern was "the practice of forced conversions in Pakistan. Girls and women from minority belief groups are often forced to marry into Muslim families," the report says.

It cites the case of Fauzia Ilyas, founder of the Atheist and Agnostic Alliance Pakistan, whose ex-husband, a devout Muslim, was granted custody of their daughter "apparently

on the basis of Fauzia having left Islam". After a court in Lahore issued a warrant for Ilyas's arrest in 2015, she fled to the Netherlands where she is seeking asylum.

Gary McLelland, the chief executive of Humanists International, said: "This report shines a light on the targeted violence, continued harassment and social discrimination faced by humanists in many countries and opens the door to conversations on how best to protect humanists worldwide. What is clear is that all laws and policies which criminalise 'blasphemy' should be repealed."

Missed opportunities for religious freedom in the time of Corona

Zsuzsa Anna Ferenczy, PhD, is an affiliated scholar at Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She is also a China and Korean Peninsula consultant at Human Rights Without Frontiers and was a political advisor at the European Parliament, Brussels (2008–20). She tweets at @zsuzsette.

Providence (18.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fEvR4E> - After the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in China in December 2019, the world has been turned on its head, as former Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd recently wrote. As of the writing of this essay, the pandemic has caused over 430,000 deaths worldwide, infected close to eight million, and deepened already impossible economic conditions for millions. It worsened hunger and the spread of other infectious diseases while postponing indefinitely the realization of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The pandemic is also putting at risk basic civil liberties for populations around the world. For religious minorities, the future is more uncertain than for most: it can be truly an existential crisis. As a consequence of authoritarianism advancing on a global scale, public policies failing to address development needs across the world, rising extremist violence by non-state actors, and growing social hostilities—religious minorities are now more exposed and vulnerable. In what follows, I argue that freedom of religion and the freedom to enjoy material wellbeing are linked to economic empowerment.

Uncertainty Ahead

As the pandemic forced economies into lockdowns globally, the world has become anxious and fragmented, leaving the global order's future uncertain. The pandemic will likely have a devastating impact on not only the developing nations but also developed Western countries, who will struggle to maintain the social safety net. A fracture in traditional alliances will likely lead to a global realignment, with implications for the distribution of global power and the projection of influence. This will challenge efforts to safeguard Western liberalism, at the core of the post-war world order. Fundamental freedoms, including freedom of religion or belief, risk fading into irrelevance.

How relations among established powers like the United States or the European Union on one hand, and emerging actors like China and developing countries like India will change remains to be seen. These actors' ability to shape one another will be crucial in shaping the global order. So will the future unfold along liberal values of political and economic openness, democracy, rule of law, and multilateralism? Or will the global order reject open economies and societies that respect fundamental freedoms, and instead stress sovereignty and non-interference?

Living on the Edge

In times of crisis, the most vulnerable are most at risk: the poor, the homeless, the unemployed, the economically marginalized. The most vulnerable are not a homogenous group, but diverge by age, gender, ethnicity, or location, which suggests that equity-sensitive economic policies are indispensable to break down the barriers of their exclusion. Yet the politically marginalized religious minorities, a significant part of numerous countries, are often at an even higher risk. Religious minorities also face discrimination, social stigma, hostility, or extreme violence in both free and authoritarian societies.

So politically marginalized religious minorities will likely continue facing a “double-layered discrimination.” Their access to economic growth will remain restricted. Pushed into the informal and unregulated sectors of the economy, they will live in uncertainty while dependent on social safety nets if they exist, or outside any social protection, including access to essential healthcare services. In low-income countries, around one in five of the poor lacks a safety net. With the global health crisis, the future for the most vulnerable looks rather bleak. Therefore, as victims of the pandemic, both the economically impoverished and the religiously oppressed need protection and support.

Freedom of Religion under Threat

Freedom of religion or belief was in peril globally for decades. Research by the Religious Freedom and Business Foundation shows religious restrictions and hostilities adversely affect business activity and investment, indicating a positive correlation between religious freedom and economic growth. The 2020 report of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended that Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan be re-designated as countries of particular concern (CPC). The report further recommended that India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam be designated, too. These CPCs are where the government engages in or tolerates “particularly severe” violations of religious freedom. Except for democratic India, the list of CPCs includes authoritarian governments that consider minorities a threat to their rule.

Some authoritarian regimes demonstrate growing readiness to promote their domestic policies abroad, shaping the international human rights discourse. The Chinese leadership, for example, claims it developed better solutions for mankind’s problems, including its model of fighting terrorism, separatism, and extremism at home. Beijing’s attempt to build a community of common destiny for mankind presents more a challenge than a viable alternative in the eyes of democratic leaders. Moreover, Beijing tried to shift the international narrative by claiming that strong centralized leadership, rather than democratic governance, performs better in a pandemic. Amid these developments, there is only one certainty: more hardship for religious minorities looms on the horizon.

Hostility on the Rise

During the pandemic, religious discrimination has to be viewed in conjunction with three elements: (1) the nature of the political system, (2) the extent of social and cultural harmony in the given society, and (3) the level of influence non-state actors have to shape social harmony, particularly entities committing extremist acts against religious minorities. These factors influence the authorities’ capacity to address the pandemic and discriminated groups’ readiness to cooperate. Finally, religious minorities’ trust of the government, or lack thereof, plays a central role in dealing with the pandemic.

As authoritarian governments become increasingly repressive at home and more assertive abroad, political freedoms face limitations, often in violation of constitutional guarantees. Non-state actors, such as Boko Haram or Islamic State (ISIS), continue to commit violent extremism and terrorism, targeting religious and ethnic minorities and

forcing governments to strengthen national security. In some cases, this has led to a competition between religious freedom and national security, increasing discriminatory practices that target particular faiths perceived to be linked to terrorism, to the detriment of a mutually reinforcing relationship between the two.

The pandemic, portrayed as both a public health and security threat, brings a new excuse to increase control. Socially, authoritarian regimes' restrictive policies increase discrimination. Yet hostilities have increased in non-authoritarian regimes, too. Often embracing racism, nationalism has risen and affected democratic states. Interreligious tension, such as sectarian clashes between Hindus and Muslims, has occurred in India, the world's largest democracy.

Lives at Stake

In China, the Uighur religious ethnic community in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR) remains vulnerable under the pandemic. One to two million Uighurs remain in detention camps, undergoing communist patriotic education and suffering conditions that make them especially vulnerable to the virus. President Xi Jinping reportedly uses the pandemic to increase persecution, with reports that the authorities have used Uighur slave labor to keep factories running in other Chinese provinces, because "Uighur lives don't matter."

The situation of the forcibly displaced Rohingya has become more difficult, adding to the persecution they began facing in 2016 from the Myanmar government, described as a textbook example of ethnic cleansing. Hundreds remain stranded at sea without access to food, water, and medical assistance, reminding us why the world must fight the root cause of their stateless situation, which is on religious grounds. Afghanistan's already dwindling Sikh and Hindu minority communities, part of the country's multicultural tapestry, continue living between terrorist violence and an exodus, intensified under the pandemic. In Iran, up to 100 imprisoned Baha'is have become more vulnerable under the threat of the virus, having their human rights already violated by being wrongfully imprisoned for practicing their beliefs. The regime considers the nation's estimated 300,000 Bahai's heretics with no religion.

Longstanding Islamophobia exacerbates anxiety over the virus in India. The Tablighi Jamaat Muslim group faces increased violence from nationalist Hindu groups, who accuse them of spreading the virus. Islamophobic hashtags, such as #CoronaJihad, proliferated across social media, further dividing an already fragile society. In Sri Lanka, the pandemic fuels ethno-religious tensions, linked to antipathy toward minority Muslims, who are accused of spreading the virus. The Christians of Ethiopia, Sudan, and Cameroon are vulnerable and face new forms of persecution because of their faith and the pandemic. In Uganda, extremists even blame Christians for the pandemic, and in Nigeria's Middle Belt, Christians live in a survival culture. In South Korea, a healthy democracy, resentment against members of the Shincheonji church challenged the authorities' efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic. Fearing social stigma, members of the religious group hesitated to identify themselves, revealing the fragility of democracies.

The Missing Link – Economic Growth and Freedom of Religion

Addressing the root cause of the double-layered discrimination that religious minorities endure is vital to ensuring inclusive economic growth. Any reflection on exit strategies must consider the relationship between economic growth that benefits all, and freedom of religion. For sure, the economic costs of COVID-19 are very high. The macroeconomic impact is believed to be larger than any other catastrophic event in the past four decades. But the human cost might just be higher. The time is now to link economic growth for all and freedom of religion.

Research demonstrates that respect for religious freedom has positive social and economic outcomes, including economic growth. Putting freedom of religion or belief into practice reduces corruption and increases peace and growth because normal economic activities are not vulnerable to disruption and foreign direct investment can contribute to sustainable growth. As religious populations play an increasing role in public life, government and social initiatives to integrate them are vital, as well as corporate engagement that promotes their inclusion. Research shows a robust connection between the lack of government respect for religious freedom and higher levels of social hostilities involving religious freedom.

Fighting religious discrimination during the pandemic requires an economic and socio-political focus at once. The objective should be an equitable distribution of economic opportunities, which guarantees that everyone can sustain an acceptable level of basic human development. Economic assistance that reduces poverty is vital to help both the economically and politically marginalized. Such assistance must also contribute to long-term sustainable goals, coupled with public policies aimed at promoting food security, eliminating preventable diseases, or ensuring basic education for all. To maximize the impact of sustainable growth on poverty, however, containing inequality must be a policy objective. This means introducing economic relief measures that benefit all, irrespective of religious beliefs. Investing in social protection programs for all will allow embracing the economically and politically marginalized at once. Fighting religious persecution also means addressing Islamophobia in India, ending the persecution of Uighurs in China, releasing the unlawfully imprisoned Bahai's of Iran, welcoming the forcibly displaced Rohingya, accepting the Christians in Nigeria, and embracing members of the Shincheonji church. It means ending the persecution of all religious minorities.

In a blink of an eye, the pandemic upended everything. But the crisis is an opportunity to reconsider everything that was upended. The pandemic must not be used to further curb freedom of religion. It must be used to embrace, integrate, and educate. The responsibility falls as much on governments that restrict freedoms as on societies that reject "the other." Most importantly, the biggest responsibility lies with democratic governments and societies, who must resist the authoritarian advance and champion freedom of religion while investing in global health security for all. Leaders must acknowledge that what's good for public health and human dignity is not only good but also vital for the economy. The world needs an economy that promotes public health and the ability of all to flourish.

[Read on HRWF](#)

Will COVID-19 increase religious hostilities and discrimination?

By Marie Juul Petersen & Claire Thomas & Sajjad Hassan
Open Global Rights (04.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/37mt39l> - COVID-19 and its impacts may hit some religious minorities disproportionately hard, exacerbating economic inequalities, social hostilities and discrimination.

"The virus doesn't discriminate—but its impacts do." These are the words of the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, at the presentation of his recent report, *We are all in this together*, on human rights responses to COVID-19. Those who are already

vulnerable and marginalised are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, and this includes many religious minorities.

Throughout the world, religious minorities often—although far from always—belong to the poorest segments of the population; they have less access to education and healthcare, their housing situation is inadequate, their job situation is more insecure and their income lower than the majority population. In relation to COVID-19, this means that they, together with other vulnerable and marginalised groups, have fewer possibilities for prevention and less access to treatment if they get sick. In Pakistan, for instance, sanitation workers are largely from the country's Christian and Hindu minorities. Cleaning hospitals, streets and sewers, they have long faced appalling working conditions, and in the current situation [they are not being provided with personal protective equipment](#).

Displaced religious minority groups living in refugee camps are particularly vulnerable. Cox' Bazar in Bangladesh, for instance, houses more than a million Rohingyas who have fled military crackdowns in Myanmar. The population density of the camp, the unhygienic conditions, the lack of clean water and the severely limited number of health facilities makes this [a "tinderbox" for the spread of the virus](#). States have a human rights obligation to ensure everybody's right to health and access to basic healthcare. This also, and perhaps especially, applies in situations of crisis such as this.

But COVID-19 is not only a health crisis. It is also a crisis "[that exacerbates xenophobia, hate and exclusion](#)," as the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Fernand de Varennes, recently said. Crises often lead to an increase in harassment, discrimination and stigmatisation, and the COVID-19 pandemic is no exception. Economic insecurity, health concerns, fear and frustration are fertile grounds for scapegoating—and it is often those who are already marginalised or vilified who are targeted. In more than half of the world's countries, religious minorities are already experiencing [different kinds of social hostilities](#). In these contexts, they can come under special risks of what some have referred to as "[coronavirus-stigma](#)". Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, [recently expressed his deep concern](#) over "the upsurge in incitement to hatred, scapegoating religious or belief communities, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, for the spread of virus."

In Turkey anti-Semitic conspiracy theories circulate on social media; in the UK, far-right groups [blame Muslim immigrants for the virus](#); in Somalia, militant Islamists claim it is spread by "[\[Christian\] crusader forces](#)". Developments in India are particularly worrisome. After Indian authorities traced several cases of COVID-19 to a Muslim missionary organisation, fake news began circulating on social media, claiming that members of the organisation, as well as other Muslims, engaged in deliberate spread of the virus by, for example, spitting on people. Under the hashtag "corona jihad" Muslims are accused of using COVID-19 as a weapon against the Hindu population. Even members of the ruling Hindu-nationalist party BJP have contributed to spreading such mis-information. Throughout India, reports speak to violent attacks on Muslims and vandalism against mosques; boycotts of small businesses; and [sick people being denied treatment in hospital](#).

COVID-19 can also result in heightened government discrimination against religious minorities. Crises will often accord greater leverage to governments, justifying actions that would otherwise be unthinkable. To prevent spread of COVID-19, governments around the world have introduced a range of drastic measures, including isolation and curfews, restrictions on larger gatherings, and travel bans. Such initiatives have severe economic consequences for all. But poverty and job insecurity mean that some religious minorities, along with other vulnerable and marginalised groups, are hit

disproportionately hard. The COVID-19 emergency thus accentuates existing social and economic inequalities.

There are also worrying signs that some states use precautionary measures as a pretext for more direct discrimination against certain groups. Government restrictions on religion are everyday occurrences for many religious minorities. More than half of the world's religious [minorities experience restrictions](#) on e.g. legal recognition, establishment of places of worship, or religious practices. In countries where minorities' right to freedom of religion or belief is already under pressure, there is a risk that COVID-19-related measures will further limit this right.

In some places, what seem to be proportionate measures are enforced discriminatorily. In Nepal, there are reports that the [police have reacted more severely](#) against minority Christians who have broken the ban on larger gatherings, than on [illegal gatherings among the Hindu majority population](#). In South Korea, local authorities have asked prosecutors to begin a murder investigation of the leadership in the Chincheonji Church, to which [many of the country's first COVID-19 cases](#) have been traced. Elsewhere, the measures in themselves appear discriminatory. In Sri Lanka, health authorities have ruled that people who have died from COVID-19 must be cremated, even though WHO guidelines explicitly state that burial is acceptable. This has consequences for the country's Muslim minority in particular, insofar as Islamic traditions do not allow for cremation. So far, three Muslim victims of COVID-19 [have been cremated against their families' will](#).

COVID-19 has also given authorities, social media and technology companies *carte blanche* to monitor populations' movements, health, and contacts—often without any form of consent. The pandemic has justified the abandonment of many or all [privacy rights](#) in the interest of beating the virus. This will make any persecuted or vulnerable members of society at increased risk of state or other harassment or attack if data exists which can be misused over the longer term. Only time will tell if these measures are reversed and the collected data destroyed when the emergency is over.

Fighting COVID-19 must also be about fighting the inequalities, stigmatisation, and discrimination that it exposes and exacerbates. This requires a strong human rights approach. As [noted by the UN Secretary General](#): "Responses that are shaped by and respect human rights result in better outcomes in beating the pandemic, ensuring healthcare for everyone and preserving human dignity."

In his recent statement, the [Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief](#) urged not only states but also faith leaders, civil society, media, and the general public "to reject hate and exclusion and provide support and solidarity to those who could be victimised at this difficult time". And there are many examples of people doing exactly that. Clerics are calling out hate speech by members of their own religious community. Social media companies are taking down fake news. Local communities are seeing that whatever differences exist are less important than meeting the test of common humanity and solidarity that this virus sets for us.

We all need to guard against the virus being used to divide, scapegoat, and discriminate. We must join together to protect as many people as possible from both the disease and the effects of containment measures, no matter how stressed and afraid we may all feel.

USCIRF releases 2020 Annual Report with recommendations for U.S. policy

USCIRF (28.04.2020) - <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/2020-annual-report> - The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today released its [2020 Annual Report](#), documenting significant developments during 2019, including remarkable progress in Sudan and a sharp downward turn in India, and making recommendations to enhance the U.S. government's promotion of freedom of religion or belief abroad in 2020.

"We are encouraged by the positive steps some governments took in 2019 – particularly two that engaged closely with USCIRF – to establish a safer environment for freedom of religion or belief," USCIRF Chair [Tony Perkins](#) said. *"Sudan stands out, demonstrating that new leadership with the will to change can quickly bring tangible improvements. Uzbekistan also made important progress in 2019 toward fulfilling the commitments it made to allow religious groups greater freedom. Though other countries deteriorated, particularly India, we see international religious freedom on an upward trajectory overall."*

USCIRF's independence and bipartisanship enables it to unflinchingly identify threats to religious freedom around the world. In the 2020 Annual Report, USCIRF recommends 14 countries to the State Department for designation as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) because their governments engage in or tolerate "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations." These include nine that the State Department designated as CPCs in December 2019—Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—as well as five others—India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

Instead of using its own "Tier 2" category, as in past reports, the 2020 Annual Report also recommends 15 countries for placement on the State Department's Special Watch List (SWL) for severe violations. These include four that the State Department placed on that list in December 2019—Cuba, Nicaragua, Sudan, and Uzbekistan—as well as 11 others—Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic (CAR), Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, and Turkey. USCIRF had recommended Sudan, Uzbekistan, and CAR for CPC designation in its 2019 Annual Report; the SWL recommendations this year are based on improved conditions in those countries.

The 2020 Annual Report further recommends to the State Department six non-state actors for designation as "entities of particular concern" (EPCs) for systematic, ongoing, egregious violations. These consist of five groups that the State Department designated in December 2019—al-Shabaab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Houthis in Yemen, Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP) in Afghanistan, and the Taliban in Afghanistan—plus one other—Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria.

"We commend the Administration for continuing to prioritize international religious freedom in 2019, including dedicating a significant amount of U.S. funding to protect places of worship and religious sites globally, a key recommendation in USCIRF's 2019 Annual Report. We were also encouraged that in early 2020, the Administration established for the first time a senior staff position at the White House focused solely on international religious freedom, a long-standing USCIRF recommendation," USCIRF Vice Chair [Gayle Manchin](#) stated. *"While we welcome these efforts, we also urge the Administration to discontinue the repeated imposition of preexisting sanctions or waivers*

for CPC-designated countries, and instead, take a unique action for each country to provide accountability for religious freedom abuses.”

In addition to chapters with key findings and U.S. policy recommendations for these 29 countries, the Annual Report describes and assesses U.S. international religious freedom policy overall. The report also includes a new section highlighting key developments and trends around the world in 2019, including in countries not recommended for CPC designation or SWL placement. Examples include the Chinese government’s harassment of human rights advocates outside its borders; the adoption of new blasphemy laws in Brunei and Singapore; increased anti-Semitism in Europe, and a spike in attacks on places of worship or holy sites.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a Commissioner, please contact USCIRF at Media@USCIRF.gov or Danielle Ashbahian at dashbahian@uscirf.gov or +1-202-702-2778.

USCIRF condemns the stigmatization of religious minorities during COVID-19 pandemic

USCIRF (08.04.2020) – The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](https://www.uscirf.gov/)) today expressed its concern over reports that religious minority groups from around the world have faced discrimination because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious communities have been harassed and accused of bringing COVID-19 to their countries.

“COVID-19 does not discriminate based on religion or creed,” noted USCIRF Chair [Tony Perkins](#). *“Around the world, individuals of every faith and every denomination have been infected. It is time to stop scapegoating religious minorities - as we have witnessed by the Chinese Communist Party - and instead unite against this pandemic.”*

In many countries, governments have failed to protect vulnerable religious communities. In particular, Muslims in [India](#) and [Cambodia](#) as well as Shi’a Muslims in [Pakistan](#) have faced increased stigmatization in recent weeks because some of the earliest patients to test positive for COVID-19 in those countries came from these communities. In addition, local authorities in South Korea have filed lawsuit against the Shincheonji Church, alleging that it undermined public health measures, even though the Ministry of Health and Welfare [stated publicly](#) that the church has cooperated with the government’s efforts.

“Governments around the world are undoubtedly busy responding to the public health crisis, but they still have an obligation to respect and protect religious freedom, especially for minority communities during and following this crisis,” USCIRF Vice Chair [Gayle Manchin](#) added.

In its [2019 Annual Report](#), USCIRF noted an increase in discrimination against certain religious minority groups, and recently released a [factsheet](#) about the effect of COVID-19

on religious freedom. USCIRF has called on all governments to release religious prisoners of conscience during the pandemic because of the heightened risk of infection in prisons.
###

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on threats to religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief. To interview a Commissioner, please contact USCIRF at media@uscirf.gov or Danielle Ashbahian at dashbahian@uscirf.gov.

Too little, too late? Religions slow to react to Covid-19

Vatican's move to hold Holy Week services without worshipers has seen Asian churches follow suit, but other faiths are recalcitrant

By Michael Sainsbury

UCA News (19.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/33wE6uG> - China has been something of a benchmark in using harsh measures to prevent mass gatherings to contain the spread of the deadly Covid-19 coronavirus.

One of its early measures was closing all places of worship where hundreds, often thousands, pass through, potentially leaving traces of the disease for others to unwittingly collect and pass on.

In South Korea, which has also been an exemplar in containing the disease, the Catholic Church cancelled Mass at more than 1,700 churches for the first time in its 236-year history. Buddhist temples also called off events, while Protestant churches held online services.

Yet religions across Asia have taken weeks to heed this valuable lesson. But now is the time, with most of the world's major religions due for major celebrations in April. Easter is on April 12, the end of Holy Week celebrations that begin with Palm Sunday on April 5. Eastern Orthodox churches celebrate Easter a week later. Rama Navami, an important Hindu festival, is on April 2. The Sikh festival of Vaisakhi is on April 13. The Islamic holy month of Ramadan begins on April 23 or 24 depending on the country, while the Jewish Passover begins on April 8.

Governments and religions have been slow to act. On March 10 and 11, seven weeks after the seriousness of Covid-19 had become apparent, Indians and other Hindus across South and Southeast Asia held the annual Holi festival to celebrate the beginning of spring. It's a celebration renowned for its color, people smear each other with bright dyes and, as with most celebrations, they embrace.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced he would not attend the festival and many did not turn out due to advice to avoid large gatherings because of fears they would spread the virus.

Yet it was only advice; there was no official ban on Holi celebrations and countless millions of people across India celebrated. Like other countries in South and Southeast

Asia, India has moved to block flights from countries where there are apparently more infections — due to far more widespread testing — but the government has been slow to restrict its majority religion.

India is far from alone. Indeed, this pattern that has been seen across the region, whether the majority religion is Hindu, Buddhist or Islam. Even Catholicism has continued to hold ceremonies or be open for worship despite increasing the danger from the disease to the entire population.

Yet where Catholicism is the minority religion, some clerics have been quicker to act.

Myanmar, where the Church's most senior cleric Cardinal Charles Maung Bo is also president of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, was one of the first to take decisive action by shifting the country's annual Marian celebration from early February, then on Feb. 29 canceling it altogether. It was a prescient move. Yet the country's largest Buddhist stupa, the Shwedagon Pagoda in Yangon, has remained open.

On March 15, the Vatican sent a pointed message to churches around the world when it announced that Holy Week celebrations in Rome will be closed to the public because of the "current global public health emergency." Pope Francis' weekly public audiences have been suspended until April 12 but will be livestreamed by Vatican News.

This saw rapid responses from churches in the region including Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India to follow suit and cancel all Lenten Masses. This was not a moment too soon as cases of infection across South and Southeast Asia are starting to rise despite low levels of testing.

But like the Holi festival in India, regular celebrations, often daily, of attending a temple or a mosque by followers of majority religions have largely gone unchanged until this week.

Now many Hindu temples across India are closed or restricting entry to visitors. Siddhivinayak Temple, one of the most visited shrines in Mumbai, has closed until further notice. Tuljabhavani Temple in Osmanabad has also been closed, while Mahakaleshwar Temple in Ujjain will not allow devotees to attend its Bhasmarti event until the end of this month.

In Malaysia, where religion comes under the purview of the country's 13 states, only Perlis state canceled prayers on March 13. But after a meeting of religious leaders and the sultans who are titular rulers of nine states, a decision was made to close mosques for 10 days from March 17, covering the next two Fridays.

In all likelihood, this suspension will be extended after a Muslim convention proved to be a local epicenter of Covid-19. In some states the traditional call to prayer has already been tweaked to include the phrase "pray at home" instead of "come to prayers."

In Indonesia, Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto, a devout Christian, attended a major Islamic conference on Feb. 27 to ask Muslim clerics to pray for an end to the lethal virus.

As virus infections started mounting, the Indonesian Ulema Council on March 16 issued a fatwa on compulsory Muslim prayers during the pandemic.

Council chairman Hasanuddin said Muslims were not permitted to perform Friday prayers in those areas where the virus had spread uncontrollably until the situation returns to normal. Unfortunately, this has let much off the country of the hook for now and

underscores the hopeless response of the Indonesian government, which should have acted on this by now.

While measures now being taken by religions across the region will undoubtedly have a positive effect of slowing or halting the spread of Covid-19, it's also true that most could have moved earlier if they had been paying heed to medical experts. Many of their responses have probably been enacted too late. Only time will tell. While prayers are surely worthwhile, it's tough action from governments that is needed.

International Religious Freedom Alliance Launched – 27 Countries

Poland will host the next IRF ministerial in Warsaw this summer

By Adelle Banks

Religion News Service (07.02.2020) — <https://bit.ly/2wd2tRy> - The United States has been joined by 26 other countries in a new International Religious Freedom Alliance that seeks to reduce religious persecution across the globe.

"Together, we say that freedom of religion or belief is not a Western ideal, but truly the bedrock of societies," said Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday at a dinner at the US State Department launching the alliance that will involve senior representatives of each government.

The alliance's first meeting fell on the eve of the National Prayer Breakfast, which gathers international religious and diplomatic figures once a year to an event chaired by members of Congress and organized by the International Foundation, a Christian organization also known as The Family or The Fellowship.

Poland, one country in the alliance, announced in a joint statement with the State Department that the next Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom will be held July 14–16 in Warsaw.

"Building on the successes of the 2018 and 2019 ministerials hosted by the United States, the 2020 ministerial will allow countries to share different approaches, debate varying perspectives in the spirit of coherence and complementarity, and address challenges threatening the freedom of religion or belief," the statement [reads](#).

The two countries said participants at the Warsaw meeting will address "promoting inclusive dialogue to mobilize action and increase awareness regarding the scale of persecution against religion or belief worldwide."

Besides Poland and the United States, the other founding countries of the International Religious Freedom Alliance are: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Gambia, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Israel, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Senegal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Togo, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

The State Department issued a list of [principles](#) for the alliance that included a commitment to "the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and the freedom to change faith." The new organization's priorities include challenging blasphemy laws and

the denial of registration to nonreligious and religious groups and advocating for people who are imprisoned or otherwise persecuted due to their religion or beliefs.

The principles did not cite specific countries, but Pompeo mentioned the targeting of religious minorities in Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Myanmar.

He singled out “the Chinese Communist Party’s hostility to all faiths,” adding, “We know several of you courageously pushed back against Chinese pressure by agreeing to be part of this alliance, and we thank you for that.”

Pompeo **announced** plans for the creation of the alliance at the conclusion of the State Department’s second Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in July. He and Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback have called it a “first-ever” global group to focus on religious freedom.

President Donald Trump also cited the alliance at a September event on religious freedom at the United Nations, where he **described** it as “an alliance of likeminded nations devoted to confronting religious persecution all around the world.”

Brownback told reporters on a Jan. 29 conference call that there is “a pretty high bar” for countries included in the group. As of that call, he said 17 had committed to the alliance. Ten more joined over the next week.

“We want nations that respect religious freedom in their own country, obviously act that way, and then are willing to push religious freedom in international venues,” he said. “So this is the activist club of countries.”

Declaration of Principles for the International Religious Freedom Alliance

U.S. Department of State (05.02.2020) - <http://bit.ly/2SIHLrk> - ***The Alliance is a network of likeminded countries fully committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief around the world.***

The Alliance is predicated on the idea more must be done to protect members of religious minority groups and combat discrimination and persecution based on religion or belief. The Alliance intends to advocate for freedom of religion or belief for all, which includes the right of individuals to hold any belief or none, to change religion or belief and to manifest religion or belief, either alone or in community with others, in worship, observance, practice and teaching. The Alliance is intended to bring together senior government representatives to discuss actions their nations can take together to promote respect for freedom of religion or belief and protect members of religious minority groups worldwide. Alliance members should be committed to the following principles and commitments and be willing to publicly and privately object to abuses, wherever they might occur.

Principles of Action by the Alliance

The Alliance is founded upon the international principle of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), drawn from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981 UN Declaration), and other documents like the EU Guidelines on FoRB and the OSCE Guidelines on FoRB and Security. Therefore, action to promote freedom of religion or belief is based on the principle that human rights are universal, interdependent and interrelated. The actions of the Alliance are intended to complement existing work to promote freedom of religion or belief within the United Nations and other competent multilateral and regional organizations.

Alliance Commitments

1. Members are committed to upholding their state obligations under international law in general and the ICCPR specifically relating to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief, including the right to hold any faith or belief, or none at all, and the freedom to change faith.
2. Members are committed to pursuing an inclusive approach, including cross-regional engagement.
3. Members are committed to being consultative, co-ordinated, and voluntary.
4. Members are committed to pursuing internal-external coherence on matters relating to freedom of religion or belief.
5. Members are committed to taking a human rights-based approach to advancing FoRB, and to promoting other human rights indispensable for the full enjoyment of the freedom of religion or belief.

Priority Areas of Action

I. Reactive Measures

- a. Alliance members are committed to condemning violence (and incitement of violence) against persons based on religion or belief and against religious sites, either by state or by non-state actors, and demanding perpetrators be held to account.
- b. Alliance members are committed to challenging persistent violations and abuses of the right to manifest one's religion or belief, including abuses of the rights listed in the 1981 UN Declaration, the use of blasphemy laws and the denial of registration to religious or non-religious groups, and are committed to seeking to persuade states to conform to international obligations and commitments.
- c. Alliance members are committed to opposing restrictions on the freedom to change one's religion or belief, or to hold no belief, and to demonstrating solidarity with person or persons victimised by such restrictions.
- d. Alliance members are committed to advocating on behalf of individuals who are imprisoned or in other ways persecuted on account of their religion or belief and promoting accountability against perpetrators.
- e. Alliance members are committed to rejecting discrimination on account of religion or belief in access to justice, education, housing, or employment, and to promoting measures to address such discrimination.

II. Proactive Measures

- a. Alliance members are committed to promoting respect for diversity, tolerance and inclusion consistent with the Istanbul Process.
- b. Alliance members are committed to supporting protection for religious or belief sites from violence.
- c. Alliance members are committed to supporting and engaging with civil society, including religious and belief communities, and religious leaders, and to promoting cross-boundary and multi-disciplinary networking of those groups and individuals.
- d. Alliance members are committed to promoting literacy on freedom of religion or belief and relevant human rights frameworks.
- e. Alliance members are committed to promoting freedom of religion or belief together with other human rights, such as freedom of expression.

III. Potential Instruments of Action

- a. Regular monitoring, reporting, information-sharing and outreach to impacted individuals and faith communities.
- b. Joint or co-ordinated bilateral demarches and public diplomacy.
- c. Promotion of interfaith dialogue to solve problems and promote greater inter- and intra-religious understanding.
- d. Support for victims, such as through redress, resettlement, or other actions as appropriate.
- e. Targeted sanctions against perpetrators as appropriate.
- f. Co-ordinated action using multilateral fora (e.g. joint statements, UN country resolutions, and UN mechanisms like the Universal Periodic Review) and support for the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief.
- g. Cooperating with civil society organizations, religious communities, and parliamentary networks committed to advancing freedom of religion or belief.
- h. Training of law enforcement officials, building the capacity of national human rights institutions, and cooperating with civil society.
- i. Investment in projects to protect space for civic engagement by assisting human rights defenders and victims of persecution, as well as to build societal resilience (e.g. education on the benefits of diversity and religious tolerance, as well as cross-faith development projects).

Are Christians the most persecuted religion? Pew report on religious harassment by L. Arik Greenberg, PhD

By WRN Guest

World Religion News (18.01.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2tIoeaQ> - In the summer of 2018, the Pew Research Center released a report on the state of religious persecution, restriction and harassment in the world; it was immediately coopted and misconstrued to advance certain agendas which unfortunately miss the point of the report. The report demonstrated that there was a measurable uptick in governmental restrictions on religions globally, along with acknowledging the growing presence of nationalist movements in countries that are repressive toward religious minorities. Additionally, there has been a relatively stable, but sizeable level of social harassment (from non-governmental sources) of religious minorities.

As part of their report, summaries were posted which provide key findings in easily readable format. One of the key findings is that in 2016, Christians experienced harassment by governments or social groups in the largest number of countries (144 countries), just slightly ahead of Muslims (142 countries). Many conservative Christian commentators and news sources were quick to interpret these results to their advantage, as if giving them arguably solid data to support their long-standing claim to be the most persecuted religion in the world. Headlines such as “Religious freedom getting worse around the world; Christians remain most persecuted group: Pew” from the Christian Post appeared immediately, bolstered by “Christians most persecuted religious group in the world” in the ADF International newsletter, and “Pew: Christian, Muslim persecution most widespread” from the Baptist Press.¹ Even one of my favorite students, an evangelical Christian himself, was quick to ask me this fall, “But aren’t Christians the most persecuted religion in the world?” confidently citing the Pew Forum report as evidence. But this is not what the Pew study concluded, despite misguided interpretations of their data.

In fact, the report deliberately avoids the term, persecution.

“[T]his study provides data on the number of countries in which different religious groups are harassed or intimidated. But the study does not assess either the severity or the frequency of the harassment in each country. Therefore, the results should not be interpreted as gauging which religious group faces the most harassment or persecution around the world.”²

Were one to include persecution within the methodology of such a report, would one define it as merely harassment or socio-economic repression, or must it include real and lethal physical violence in order to be called persecution? And in terms of comparing differing intensities of persecution, what would be the parameters and rubric of such a comparison?

The aforementioned spate of articles most commonly cited only one particular set of numbers from the report, reproducing one chart that focused exclusively on the number of countries in which a religion experienced harassment (defined broadly, as stated above, and not specifically any type of persecution). Such a rubric for the most persecuted, which takes the number of countries in which the demographic experiences persecution as the primary determinant, is fundamentally flawed. By the mangled logic used by certain Christians to define their religion as the most persecuted in light of these data released by Pew, it would be hypothetically possible for there to be one Christian in each of the 144 countries reported, for a total of 144 Christians in the world, and still be considered the most highly persecuted religion in the world. This one number has been grossly misinterpreted and trotted out as a prized horse in the contest of whose religion is the most persecuted, a game which provides bragging rights that under some circumstances will be used to justify greater military involvement in global regions where Christianity is the minority, as well as justify domestic legislation and policy changes which further establish Christianity as the dominant and most favored religion — a status which is still in effect, but rapidly changing.³

An interesting article in the Friendly Atheist, called “Are Christians Really the Most Persecuted Religious Group in the World?” by Hemant Mehta, challenged some of these misinterpretations of the data and made reference to a parallel, but separate report simultaneously released by Pew, which included data for 2017 as well and emphasized some of the increased effects on the religiously unaffiliated.⁴ In the article, he addresses the problematic nature of some of the claims by evangelical Christians, pointing out that the methodology used in the report does not support grand and spurious claims that the Christian religion is universally and perennially under attack. Firstly, he points out that

harassment (the primary term used in the report) can include anything, from “verbal hate to government oppression” and the chart cannot accurately indicate how many of these instances were life-threatening. Secondly, he points out the lack of persecution of Christianity by the U.S. Government, in light of the so-called “Muslim Bans” enacted under the Trump administration, which do severely affect the lives of many Muslims in the U.S. Mehta writes:

“Remember, also, that the United States isn’t a country where Christians are persecuted by the government. Muslims certainly are. It’s almost insulting for U.S. Christians to say they’re being persecuted when there are Christians who literally can’t practice their faith out in the open in some other countries. The U.S. is actually listed as “moderate” on the survey’s “Government Restrictions” index, which shows how oppressive different countries are to all religions.... Our nation needs to do better to defend religious freedom. When we do it, other nations inevitably follow suit. When we’re passing Muslim bans for the hell of it, it gives other countries license to discriminate against people on the basis of faith, too.”

Some other problems with the standard, adversarial approach to these numbers must be addressed. Christians are highly divided. The unity of Christians is often only trotted out as a rhetorical argument by conservative Christians to highlight their overall persecution. Many of the evangelical Christians propagating these claims rarely if ever acknowledge the validity of Catholics and Orthodox Christians until it serves their arguments, conveniently choosing to enumerate them among global Christianity in order to include them in persecution statistics. But often, Orthodox Christians of the Middle East will complain of evangelicals trying to convert them to “real” Christianity during primary interactions with them, as if their brand of Christianity was not sufficient. In an ironic turn of events, in most places where Christians face persecution, Christians are the majority religion, such as in Nicaragua, where the government is openly antagonistic to and oppressive of the Catholic majority in that country.⁵

This constant one-upmanship to decide who is more oppressed, as if it were a game, leads us further from the most important lesson to take from the Pew report, which is to prevent further atrocities and religious repression. There are horrendous human rights abuses happening all over the world. Some of them are perpetrated by religious and ethnic extremists, while others are perpetrated by corporate and national interests that run roughshod over the very lives and bodies of unprotected ethno-religious groups, some numerical minorities, and others in a disenfranchised and disempowered majority. I would draw the reader’s attention to at least two major instances of religious and ethnic persecution: that of the Uighurs and of the Rohingya.

In the last several years, it has become more highly reported that the Buddhist majority government of Myanmar (formerly Burma) has engaged in systematic displacement and elimination of the indigenous minority grouping, known as the Rohingya, most of whom are Muslim and live in the Rakhine State. For decades, this government has attempted to delegitimize the Rohingya through repressive legislation and policy and to challenge their identity as the indigenous people of Burma, and ultimately to justify the large-scale relocation of nearly one million Rohingya since 2015. Many have been murdered, their homes destroyed, with widespread reports of punitive rape and other atrocities. The government of Myanmar, led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, has been complicit in the genocide of the Rohingya, perpetrated by a military junta out of control, bolstered and justified by nationalist and extremist attitudes expressed by hardline Buddhist monks, such as Ashin Wirathu.⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi has been extensively criticized for her inaction, but has expressed that there is nothing she can do in the face of military opposition.⁷

In China, on the other hand, the very nation that invaded and subjugated Tibet in 1950 on the grounds of reclaiming former territory, we now see widespread concentration camps that intern not only religious and ideological factions such as the Falun Gong, but also ethnic minorities like the predominantly Muslim Uighurs. Since 2017, over 1 million Uighurs have been interned in 85 different rapidly built "reeducation camps". Initially the Chinese government denied the existence of these camps but since their discovery by international sources, the government has acknowledged their existence, but downplayed their purpose. The 11 million Muslim-majority Uighurs that live in the Province of Xinjiang, formerly known as East Turkistan, have been the victims of governmental repression, ostensibly because of the actions of a few Uighur militants in 2013 and 2014. While China claims that its attempts to control and reeducate the Uighurs are to ensure their compliance and docility and to counteract potential terrorism, some suspect that the region's wealth of natural gas provides ample motive for China to repress and silence the region's inhabitants. Since 2017, the Xinjiang government has destroyed mosques and prohibited Uighurs from maintaining traditional forms of dress and facial hair. Many Uighurs report brutal and violent treatment inside of these camps, including systematic rape.

While it is tempting to enumerate these two instances as examples of larger patterns of persecution against Muslims, thus canceling out the spurious and tendentious claims by conservative Christians, even this would be to miss the bigger picture, which is that of oppressive regimes punishing and committing genocide against minority communities, and the international community either helpless to mitigate, or deliberately turning a blind eye to their suffering. But we are not in fact helpless in our desire to see justice be carried out. In a recent episode of "1A" on National Public Radio, which featured Salih Hudayar, founder of the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement and Louisa Greve, director of global advocacy for the Uyghur Human Rights Project, both guests encouraged people to contact their representatives and the White House alike to urge sanctions against China and the recognition of these actions as genocide. Similar attempts to gain the attention of government have at least helped bring awareness to the Rohingya crisis. We may often feel helpless in such situations, but the power of the purse is a power worth noting. Oppressive regimes will often respond when funding is on the line. Each person must do their part to ensure that their voices are heard, so that the voiceless across the world can be given a voice.

Footnotes:

- 1) These augmented earlier headlines reporting previous years' versions of the report, including "Data: Christians Are the Most Persecuted Religious Group in the World" from Townhall (<https://townhall.com/tipsheet/katiepavlich/2019/04/23/pew-poll-christians-are-the-most-persecuted-religious-group-in-the-world-n2545153>), "Christians are MOST persecuted religion in the world – reveals new report" from Express (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/978361/christianity-persecution-religious-freedom-christian-muslim-persecuted-china>), and "Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, says Pew report" from Church Times (<https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/29-june/news/world/christians-are-the-most-persecuted-religious-group-in-the-world-says-report>), among others.
- 2) Global Uptick in Government Restrictions on Religion in 2016, page 54.
- 3) For the decline in numbers of Christians in the U.S. and abroad, see <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/> and <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/> which point to the fact that while numbers of Christians are still by far the majority religion globally.
- 4) Interestingly, the parallel report released by Pew indicated that the 2017 numbers were similar, but showed a slight downtick, with Christians and Muslims experiencing harassment in 143 and 140 countries, respectively, but with religiously unaffiliated people experiencing a dramatic increase in such harassment, in 23 countries in 2017, up from 14 in 2015 and 2016, in keeping with the larger trend of increased harassment of religions globally.

- 5) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/09/christians-faced-widespread-harassment-in-2015-but-mostly-in-christian-majority-countries/>
 - 6) See <http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,2146000,00.html>, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-21/buddhist-extremism-meet-the-religions-violent-followers/10360288>, and <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/25/asia/myanmar-buddhist-nationalism-mabatha/index.html>.
 - 7) At the time of this article's writing, a party official under her administration has been killed by rebels in what can only be called a confusing turn of events in the grand scheme of Myanmar's politics. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/aung-san-suu-kyi-party-official-killed-rakhine>
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29 Catholic missionaries killed in 2019

Vatican (01.01.2020) - According to information gathered by Agenzia Fides, in 2019 29 missionaries were killed throughout the world, mostly priests: 18 priests, 1 permanent deacon, 2 religious men, 2 nuns, 6 lay people. After eight consecutive years in which the highest number of missionaries killed was recorded in America, since 2018 it is Africa that has taken the first place in this tragic category. In Africa in 2019 12 priests were killed, 1 religious man, 1 religious woman, 1 lay woman (15). In America 6 priests were killed, 1 permanent deacon, 1 religious man, 4 lay people (12). In Asia, 1 lay woman was killed. In Europe, 1 nun was killed.

See 14-page report at: <http://bit.ly/2QVIM7B>