

## Main Findings

Acts of violence, committed in the name of religion, continue to dominate the international news media. The inescapable impression is that religiously-inspired terror is not only widespread but is on the increase. This report sadly confirms this assessment to be correct.

In almost every country where we have recorded a change in the status and condition of religious minorities, that change has been for the worse. Sometimes the deterioration is caused by legal or constitutional discrimination; in others it is related to sectarian hostility, often linked to racial or tribal tensions. In some cases it involves one religious group oppressing – or even trying to eliminate – another. In others, an authoritarian state is trying to restrict the activities of a particular faith group. In Western countries, religious tension is rising, provoked by the recent phenomena of ‘aggressive atheism’, liberal secularism and the rapid influx of economic migrants and refugees with a faith and culture markedly different from the host country.

In the 196 countries covered by this report – effectively every country of the world – we have noted change in 61 countries. In only six countries have we recorded an improvement in the position of religious minorities. In the remainder – 55 countries – we have seen a change for the worse. This means that in almost 30 percent of the countries analysed, covering the period October 2012 and June 2014, the position of religious faith communities had either “significantly deteriorated” or “deteriorated”.

We have also identified 26 countries where restrictions on religious freedom are already “high” or “medium” but where no change has been noted in the past two years. If we add these 26 countries to the 55 countries that have experienced a deterioration, we find that in 81 of the world’s 196 countries – slightly over 40 percent – religious freedom is either impaired or is in decline.

The number of countries which are categorised as having “high” or “medium” religious freedom violations – regardless of whether they have improved, deteriorated or stayed the same during the period under review – comes to 56, or just below 30 percent of the total.

Where positive outcomes have been achieved, they have often come as a result of local initiatives rather than through progress at a national level.

Although the international news media naturally focus on headline reports of violence and cruelty linked to religious extremism, there is little subsequent analysis of what the implications and consequences of these actions might be. The media also largely fail to report the religious roots of these conflicts, which might at least provide a context for a better understanding. The audience is left with the sense that the events recorded are random acts of cruelty committed by deranged gunmen. It is hoped this report will rectify some of these failings.

Communities of religious believers are, according to this secular media interpretation, increasingly a problem to be managed, and even marginalised, rather than a tradition to be encouraged and supported. The view is gaining ground in the West that religion, rather than bringing out the best in humanity, engenders its worst aspects.

Linked to religiously-inspired violence is a decline in religious tolerance, religious pluralism and the right to religious self-determination. Although the right to freedom of religion is enshrined in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is almost everywhere under threat. Though hard to quantify, the trend away from religious pluralism, especially in the developing world, is clearly documented in this report.

Throughout parts of the Middle and Far East, the phenomenon of the mono-confessional state is emerging. Where once various Christian and Muslim groups managed to live together for centuries, there is now a growing tendency for the dominant religious group to insist, often through the imposition of *Shari'a* law or devices such as a “blasphemy law”, on universal conformity of religious practice.

The emergence of the Islamic State (formerly the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) is the most obvious example of this. In July 2014, the jihadists drove out all faith communities including non-Sunni Muslims from Mosul, the city in northern Iraq which they had seized the previous month. The Christians were forced to choose between converting to Islam or leaving. They were given a deadline and the Islamic State declared that if they failed to comply “there is nothing for them but the sword”. A city until recently home to 30,000 Christians suddenly had none and for the first time in 1,600 years there were no Sunday liturgies.

Extremism and persecution of this nature emerges as a significant factor in a growing phenomenon of mass migration. Minority faith communities in the Middle East had been in decline for many years, but in the period under review a pre-existing humanitarian crisis suddenly and dramatically worsened. For example Christians in Syria declined from 1.75 million in early 2011 to perhaps barely 1.2 million in the summer of 2014 – a decline of over 30 percent in three years. In Iraq the decline is even steeper. Clearly religion was not the only factor driving people out of their home country – economic factors and general security were prevailing concerns – but nonetheless religious hatred increasingly became a more obvious driving force for the growing refugee phenomenon. The rise in migration related to religious persecution can therefore be linked to the UNHCR announcement in June 2014 that the worldwide number of displaced people and refugees had topped 50 million for the first time in the post-World War II era. The creation of theocratic or mono-confessional states is having a profound impact not only on those countries where it is being put into practice but also in Western democracies.

Displaced members of religious groups are seeking refuge in the West, thereby creating a range of social and economic challenges. Ironically, as religious pluralism in areas such as the Middle East goes into decline, Western democracies, historically mainly Christian and themselves largely mono-confessional, are having to learn to live with religious pluralism, often for the first time.

The rise of social media has meant that fundamentalism and religious hatred is felt far beyond geographical boundaries. Extremism, popularised through Facebook, Twitter, chat rooms and other social media, is such that religious hatred preached in a distant country is quickly of local concern. The most obvious manifestation of this is the recruitment of people from the West to engage in conflicts in the Middle East. The Western media increasingly highlights concerns about the growing threat to the West of ‘Generation Jihad’ coming home. Sporadic attacks from radicalised individuals against particular faith communities in the West – often with social media playing an important part – confirm that this threat indeed already exists.

In general however, the degree of religious oppression in Western democracies remains low. That said, as this report records, there are genuinely worrying tendencies.

Chief among these developments is that while increasingly mainstream Western opinion rightly regards discrimination on the grounds of race, gender and sexuality as unacceptable, there is at the same time a declining consensus on the rights of conscience of religious believers.

Especially with regard to subjects such as faith schools, homosexual marriage and euthanasia, there is a growing conflict between traditional religious views and the “progressive” liberal consensus.

While mainstream opinion concedes that believers should, as a minimum, be free to practise their faith in private, there is less and less agreement on how far that faith should be permitted to manifest itself in the wider society.

This leads to an increasingly apparent tendency for the rights of some groups to trump the rights of other groups. In practice this “hierarchy of rights” means that where the rights of homosexual or gender equality campaigners conflict with the rights of conscience of religious believers, the former groups usually take precedence. In the UK, for example, Catholic adoption agencies that refuse to place children with homosexual couples have either been forced to change their rules or close. Other examples of this tendency across Western Europe are legion.

It is hoped that this report can prompt greater reflection on the core precepts of religious freedom, especially how far faith groups should be permitted to legally dissent from prevailing norms.

This report also highlights the need for the West to develop a fuller and more sophisticated understanding of religious motivation. The religious illiteracy of Western policy makers is creating a formidable barrier of understanding between the West and other parts of the world. The Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are two cases where this lack of sympathy, or religious understanding, is all too apparent.

It is beyond the scope of this report to account for the growth of this intolerance and religious violence. Historians in the future will no doubt discern the reasons. We can only recount some of today’s more popular explanations.

One common theory relates to the frustration that has grown out of the failure of the Islamic world to develop as rapidly as the West in recent centuries. This has led some Muslims to fight for the restoration of a “Golden Age” of the Caliphate when Islam was seen as emerging triumphant.

Another consideration is that globalisation and multiculturalism, far from engendering greater tolerance, have led religious and ethnic groups to feel under threat and thus withdraw into an intolerant bunker mentality.

A third is that Western democracy – once so admired and emulated – is no longer automatically seen as the preferred role model for developing countries. So the argument goes, if Western liberalism leads to abortion, contraception, immodesty, family breakdown, gay marriage and huge national and personal debt, then traditionally-minded religious groups want no part of it.

With justification, the media focus mainly on Islamic terrorism. But, as this report shows, this is not the whole story. Of the 20 countries we have identified as having a “high” problem regarding freedom of religion, six of them – Azerbaijan, Burma (Myanmar), China, Eritrea, North Korea and Uzbekistan – are ruled by authoritarian regimes where Muslims are prominent among the victims of religious persecution.

The report reinforces earlier research establishing that Christians are by far the most persecuted faith group. Christians’ susceptibility to oppression is directly related to the fact that they are historically widely dispersed, often in cultures very different from their own. Many of the countries where Christians have been established for generations or even millennia, have now become subject to extremism. In almost every one of the 20 most “high” countries we have identified, Muslim minority groups also face terrible and systematic persecution. It should be noted, however, that in most cases this is at the hands of other Muslims. The rising tension between Shi’a and Sunni Muslims is a constant theme of this report.

Jewish communities have also suffered increased threats and violence, notably in some parts of Western Europe, prompting record levels of migration to Israel.

Noting a decline in religious freedom affecting Jewish, Christian and other communities, former British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks stated in the British Parliament in July 2014 that a “new tribalism” was leading to “the use of religion as the robe of sanctity to disguise and legitimate the naked pursuit of power,” adding: “God himself weeps at the evils being committed in his name”.

Whatever the possible reasons for the decline of religious pluralism and tolerance – whether motivated by hatred of another religion or hatred of any religion – the damage to the human condition at its deepest level is apparent.

As Pope Francis said at a speech on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2014: “Reason recognises that religious freedom is a fundamental right of man, reflecting his highest dignity”.

Even an avowedly secular body, such as the European Union, acknowledges the fundamental importance of the freedom of religious belief. In a set of guidelines it adopted in June 2013, it said: “As a universal human right, freedom of religion or belief safeguards respect for diversity. Its free exercise directly contributes to democracy, development, rule of law, peace and stability”.

This report, which sets out to describe the conditions faced by every religious minority in every country of the world, is published by Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity which, as a Pontifical Foundation, comes directly under the responsibility of the Holy See.

It is reasonable to ask whether it is possible for a Christian charity to describe objectively the sufferings of all religious believers, sometimes at the hands of other Christians. Readers can, of course, judge the success or failure of this report for themselves. But our response is that such a report on all religious minorities from a Christian charity is not only possible but necessary. Religious organisations have a duty to object vociferously when any faith community is being unfairly attacked. As underlined in Vatican documents, notably *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), religious freedom guarantees self-expression to all faith groups on condition that each respects the inalienable rights of the others.

But to broaden the spectrum of analysis of our individual country reports, Aid to the Church in Need has commissioned experts in religious freedom to spot emerging trends in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, North America, Western Europe, Russia and central Asia, and Latin America.

The reports from these experts are published in full electronically and can be accessed at: [www.religion-freedom-report.org](http://www.religion-freedom-report.org)

In summary, some of their findings are reported here:

The analysis of the state of religious freedom in Africa is made by former missionary **José Carlos Rodríguez Soto**. He is generally optimistic about the future of religious freedom in Africa, claiming that the problems “should not overshadow the reality that in most African countries their citizens enjoy the right to religious freedom, which is exercised against the background of a favourable culture of tolerance and mutual respect among different religious denominations”.

He also highlights the growth of inter-denominational groups for dialogue and social action in Cameroon, Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa and Kenya, among others, as a hopeful trend.

**Rodríguez Soto** also identifies the most worrying trend in Africa in the past two years as the growth of Islamic fundamentalism spearheaded by groups such as Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (in north-west Africa), Boko Haram (in Nigeria and surrounding areas) and Al Shabaab (with its stronghold in Somalia). He says the military response to these terror groups has so far been ineffective and other policies, including religious dialogue, should be pursued.

Concerning the Islamic world, **Father Paul Stenhouse**, editor of the monthly Catholic journal, *Annals Australasia* and a frequent visitor to the Middle East, appeals for the West to exercise patience and restraint in the region while developing a more sophisticated understanding of the diversity of belief concerning human rights within Islam.

He cites instances in which attempts at liberal reform in countries with little or no experience of democracy have led to widespread violence and upheaval, making the point that “Rome was not built in a day”. He gives a “special mention” to Iran. He writes: “By its constitution, Zoroastrians, Christians and Jews enjoy freedom of religion. Desecration and destruction of churches or synagogues – a feature of Islamist extremism in many Sunni states – is notably absent from Shi’a communities and societies”.

In Asia **Father Bernardo Cervellera**, Editor of Asia News, claims that, over the past two years, “Asia continues to be the continent where religious freedom is violated the most”. He writes: “Except for countries like Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, the Philippines (apart from some episodes in Mindanao) and Cambodia, all other countries report varying degrees of violations to the religious freedom of Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities, not to mention groups deemed ‘heretical’ by local majorities like Ahmadis and Sufis”.

He makes special mention of North Korea, where “professing any faith other than that of the ruling demi-gods from the Kim dynasty is banned” and China, about which he writes: “China...is the country where controls over religion are the most methodical and virtually complete, as evidenced by the violent campaign against unofficial Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and Muslim communities”.

The two specialist authors writing about North America – **Eric Rassbach** and **Adèle Keim** – from the Becket Fund have focused on the June 2014 decision of the United States Supreme Court *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Inc.* This involved a federal regulation that requires many employers to pay for health insurance packages that includes mandatory contraceptive coverage. The Supreme Court held in a 5-4 vote that the Green family, owners of Hobby Lobby, could exclude the abortifacient contraceptives without government penalty. Another dispute concerning how far believers may put their faith into practice involves an executive order issued by President Obama (July 2014) prohibiting federal contractors from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identification. Despite the request of many religious organisations, the order included no exception for religious practice, putting a question mark over some services provided by churches to the poor and the homeless.

Similar questions of conscience are highlighted in their analysis concerning Canada. The authors describe the case of Trinity Western University, an evangelical Protestant college, which limits its faculty members to those who share its faith. Opponents claim it should be barred from opening a law faculty as its belief in the traditional definition of marriage prevents it from offering legal education. “The outcome of this dispute will affect all religious institutions that demonstrate a preference for co-religionists,” they write.

Regarding Western Europe, **Dr John Newton** – an author on religious freedom who works for Aid to the Church in Need in the UK and Vienna-based **Dr Martin Kugler** of the Observatory on Intolerance

and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe – paint a worrying picture of the gradual marginalisation of those trying to maintain traditional moral values. Though religious believers have full freedom to practise their faith in private, the authors identify “a hard-line imposition of relativistic positions” which is inhibiting reasonable accommodation of religious beliefs.

Worse still, this clash of values is growing to the extent that religious believers fear they may be forced by the state to conform to societal norms to which they conscientiously object.

The authors also highlight the rising occurrence of violence against Jews and Muslims across Western Europe which, though deeply concerning, remains for the time being largely the exception. They draw particular attention to Jewish emigration from France where, in the first three months of 2014, some 400 French Jews left for Israel, a fourfold increase on the same period in 2013 and 2012.

**Peter Humeniuk**, a specialist on Russia and Central Asia, is a member of Aid to the Church in Need’s international project team. He invites readers to view religious liberty in Russia through the lens of its recent, tumultuous, past. He says that, while traditional religious groups are treated in general with respect, the experience – from the mid-1990s onwards – of well-funded religious sects flooding into the country has coloured the degree of religious liberty that is now permissible. Although these sects were largely unsuccessful, the authorities sometimes find it difficult to draw the line between legitimate and illegitimate religious activity.

He says Russia is striving to develop its own, home-grown, form of Islam, though the line between “an exotic religious community and an active terrorist cell can be a very thin one”. He also says the large groups of service workers in Moscow and St Petersburg, mainly Muslim migrants from Central Asia, represent a “potential for ethnic and religious unrest”.

Turning to the countries of Central Asia, he says many fear that the withdrawal of Western military forces from Afghanistan may lead to the spread of radical Islam within the region. “This is a frightening prospect for the authoritarian regimes in which Islam is State-controlled.” The leaders of these Central Asian states have, he says, seen the results of the “Arab Spring” and while these bloody revolutions do not necessarily justify the restrictions imposed on religious communities, they go some way towards explaining them.

Author **Dr Austen Ivereigh** says that while Latin America has half the world’s Catholics, a much greater diversity of religious belief and practice exists than is popularly imagined. In Brazil more than 20 per cent of the population is Evangelical Christian while in some Central American states this rises to one third. Argentina has significant communities of both Jews and Muslims and in the English-speaking Caribbean Islands Protestant Churches dominate. There are also, in Cuba and Brazil for example, significant numbers practising Spiritism or Santería.

He explains that the barriers to full religious freedom, where they exist, are usually the result of officially secularist and atheist regimes and generally apply equally to all religious groups. The challenge for the future, he says, is for the lifting of the remaining sanctions, both legal and unofficial, on religious bodies and for greater acceptance by the region’s governments of religious voices in national life.

As several of the case studies in this Executive Summary highlight, there are signs of hope as well as reasons for grave concern. We demonstrate examples of religious leaders holding out the hand of friendship to one another. We report that even in the Arabian Gulf, home of some states that are most hostile to religious pluralism, a Muslim ruler has donated land for a Christian cathedral. In

Africa we show how Christian leaders and a Muslim Imam are working together to reduce violence. Though we report on the ominous growth of religious intolerance in parts of Western Europe, there is clearly a contrary tendency where religious and community leaders are joining together to warmly welcome refugees.

The clear lesson from this research is that the urgent call to reverse the violence and oppression directed towards religious minorities must come, first and foremost, from within religious communities themselves. Though this report highlights the many legal and constitutional impediments to religious liberty imposed by governments, the precondition for improvement is harmony and mutual respect between religious groups.

The necessity for all religious leaders to use their pulpits and the media to loudly proclaim their opposition to religiously-inspired violence, and to re-affirm their support for religious tolerance, is becoming – in the present climate – ever more urgent.

Peter Sefton-Williams

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