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# Present Day Persecution of Christians

Paul Marshall

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While touching on other religions, I will focus on providing a brief overview of the current persecution of Christians worldwide<sup>1</sup> Let me say at the outset that the suffering or death of any human being of any or no religious faith is equally as offensive to God and demeaning to us. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Bah'ai and others are also persecuted. However, apart from having become an issue in U.S. foreign policy, the current persecution of Christians worldwide is massive and still under-reported. Therefore I believe it deserves particular attention.

This claim about under-reporting may sound strange in Washington since there has been greatly increased political attention to this matter. However, this attention is of recent vintage, probably beginning at a conference held there in January 1996, and such knowledge and concern is still limited to relatively narrow circles. It is still not a feature on our news pages.<sup>2</sup> The coverage has focused on people in Washington concerned about this persecution rather than on the persecution itself. For all of the coverage of the debate on Most Favoured Nation trading status for China, there is very little attention to what actually goes on in that country.<sup>3</sup> While we have received news of courageous political dissidents such as Wei Jingsheng, the news of the arrests (and torture) of China's leading Protestant house church leaders, with several million followers, has been passed by, as has the current detention of ten Catholic Bishops, with more millions of followers.

## DEFINITIONS

Many terms, such as 'religious persecution,' 'religious freedom,' 'persecution' and 'Christian' are both ill-defined and controversial. The accuracy, precision and meaning of the numbers of those persecuted are equally ill-defined and controversial. There is no way here, and probably no way anywhere else, to resolve all of these questions. But what I would like to do is explain and give some justification for how I use them.

In the following I outline neither the suffering nor persecution of Christians or other religious believers per se. These are far more widespread than what is summarised here, since they, like all other human beings, also suffer through myriad other human failings and evils. Since most people in the world claim some sort of religious identity, then most

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Preliminary surveys are given in Nina Shea's *In the Lion's Den* (Broadman and Holman, 1997) and my *Their Blood Cries Out* (Word, 1997). Similar pictures are given in the U.S. State Department's July, 1997 report on religious persecution and its *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for 1997 (Feb., 1998). Some of the same material is covered in Kevin Boyle and Juliet Sheen, eds., *Freedom of Religion and Belief: A World Report* (Routledge, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> 2. See Nina Shea, 'Atrocities Not Fit to Print,' *First Things*, November, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> 3. *Newsweek's* June 9, 1997 story cast doubt on the whole matter and, using figures from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, said there were 2.4 million Christians in China. Even the Chinese government gives figures five times this large for the legal church alone. The *Wall Street Journal's* June 26, 1997 story is headlined 'China Shows New Tolerance for Religion'. Apart from A.M. Rosenthal's columns in the *New York Times*, the prestige media neglect the issue. The developing media spin seems to be that this is a 'Christian Right' matter.

human rights violations of any kind are presumably against religious believers. Hence a survey of such 'religious persecution' would be very close to a world survey of human rights violations. I am concerned not with all forms of persecution of religious people, but with persecution *on religious grounds*. I focus on situations only where a person's religion is a significant component of the persecution they suffer. Hence I do not cover situations such as, for example, Rwanda, whose genocide was ethnically based, nor Iraq, where Saddam Hussein persecutes all without regard to creed, nor Central America or Peru, where the focus is on political opposition to government or guerrillas per se. It must, of course, be added that there are few cases where religion is the only factor: religion is usually intertwined with ethnic, political, territorial and economic concerns. I demarcate religious persecution by asking whether some or all of the oppression and discrimination that people suffer would occur if they were of a different religion.

### **Religious Freedom and Persecution**

By religious freedom I mean what is contained in the United Nations 'Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief, 1981' These articles do not contain a clear internal definition of the right to *change* one's religion, only to *adopt* a religion. But, as an authoritative commentator, Natan Lerner, observes, 'There is no doubt, however, that the final text recognises the right to change one's religion or beliefs, to abandon a religion and to adopt a different one. This liberal interpretation is supported by the discussion during the preparation for the Covenant' <sup>4</sup> A new Article 8 was added to reinforce this point. This states that: 'Nothing in the present Declaration shall be construed as restricting or derogating from any right defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ...' The 1948 Universal Declaration, in turn, states in Article 18 that 'Everyone has the right to ... change his religion or belief ...'

The United Nations Human Rights Committee further emphasised this point in its authoritative 1993 clarification that article 18 (1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says 'the right to replace one's current religion' and emphasises 'the freedom to ... adopt a religion (is) ... protected unconditionally ...' and 'cannot be derogated from, even in time of public emergency ...' <sup>5</sup>

Even apart from specific rights of religion, we also need to refer to rights of free speech, since freedom of religion does not exist in a corner but manifests itself through, among other things, the rights of free speech, free expression and freedom of association. The right to propagate one's religion is a right of free expression.

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<sup>4</sup> 4. See Natan Lerner 'Religious Rights under the United Nations' pp. 79–134 of Johan D. van der Vyver and John Witte, Jr. eds., *Religious Human Rights In Global Perspective: Legal Perspectives* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1996) pp. 91f, 115f.

<sup>5</sup> 5. 'General Comment Adopted by the Human Rights Committee Under Article 40, paragraph 4, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Addendum, General comment No. 22 (48) (art. 18)' adopted at 1247th meeting (forty-eighth session, on 20 July, 1993). The 1950 European Convention on Human Rights says in Article 9, 'Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.' The 1969 American Convention on Human Rights says in Article 12,

'1. Everyone has the right to freedom of conscience and of religion. This includes freedom to maintain or to change one's religion or beliefs, and freedom to profess or disseminate one's religion or beliefs either individually or together with others, in public or in private.'

By religious persecution I mean, in general, the denial of any of the rights of religious freedom. There are also a series of other terms such as genocide, harassment, and discrimination. Except for genocide, none of these terms has any widely agreed meaning.<sup>6</sup>

By discrimination, I mean a situation where people may have basic freedom of worship and other forms of religious freedom, but where the law places them at a consistent civil and economic disadvantage for exercising such freedoms.

### **Christian**

The word Christian can also be used in a variety of ways which can grade into one another. Generally I will use the term to refer to what can be called 'census Christians' or 'nominal Christians.' These are people who, in answer to a question of what their religion is, would say 'Christian.' It says nothing at all about what they actually believe or whether they participate in any real way in the life of a Christian community. Within this group we can also refer to 'active Christians.' These are people for whom their Christian faith is a central aspect of their life and who are committed as much as possible to living out their faith and communicating it to others. It is usually this group which suffers the most intense persecution and who comprise members of 'underground' or 'house' churches. The less committed members are often given more lenient treatment as long as they keep quiet, but they can still suffer significant disabilities. It is usually only the most rigid regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, that make specific efforts to target Christians of all types.

When we turn our attention to those who are actually doing the persecuting, similar complexities may arise. When I speak, for example, of the persecution of Christians it does not necessarily imply, for example, that Buddhists who are persecuting Christians (such as in Burma and Sri Lanka) are doing so for specifically Buddhist reasons, but only that it is Christians that they are persecuting, in a situation where they would not be persecuting others.

### **Religion, Nationalism and Culture**

I have divided the sites of persecution into the Islamic world, the Communist World, Christian on Christian persecution, and then a set of countries situated on the southern flanks of Asia and largely comprising traditionally Hindu and Buddhist societies. There is also the problem of whether we should include persecution in the name of nationalism as a discrete category. However, such a category would take up nearly all of the countries that I discuss. With the exception of fervently Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia, most instances of persecution also involve a government or a community claiming it is defending a nation or a traditional culture from 'foreign religious influence.' This is true for countries as varied as Mexico, Egypt, India, and Vietnam.

Since almost every instance involves nationalism, we then would face the problem of dividing up types of nationalism. In one sense, this is what I have done. The categories of countries can, in most cases, be understood as referring to a symbiosis of particular religious forms with nationalism.<sup>7</sup> For example, the government of Egypt has treated Islam as part of its national character. The Bharatiya Janata Party treats Hinduism ('Hindutva') as the essence of what it means to be Indian. Mongolians treat Christianity as a threat to national traditions. Nearly all of the religious categories I use are interwoven with nationalism.

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<sup>6</sup> 6. For an able discussion of these meanings, see David Rieff, 'An Age of Genocide,' *The New Republic*, Jan. 29, 1996, pp. 27-36.

<sup>7</sup> 7. For comments on this see David Little, 'Studying 'Religious Human Rights': Methodological Foundations,' pp. 45-77 of van der Vyver, op. cit., especially pp. 69f

One particular problem arises with the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. In many of these countries there is a chauvinism which tries to screen out foreign influences. The governments are often simply holdovers, at least in personnel, from the old Communist days. These functionaries, such as, for example, present leaders of the Bosnian Serbs, now use nationalism and religion as a rallying cry to shore up their faltering legitimacy and to install national loyalty. The Bosnian Serb example is a particularly striking case since thugs such as Milosovic in Serbia and Radovan Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic who were thorough-going Communist cadres, now wrap themselves in the cloak of the Orthodox church, though without any obvious manifestation of piety.

Obviously, there is an artificial quality to categorising these as 'Orthodox' instances of persecution. The problem is further exacerbated when we consider Albania, which has combined an authoritarian 'post-communist' government with attempts to use nationalism and Islam in an attempt to reject western, Greek and Orthodox influences. In any case, it should be understood that religious categories are often intertwined with forms of reactionary nationalism. Usually, my categories refer to the general religious identity of specific forms of nationalism.

## SPREADING THE FAITH

Many persecutors try to justify their actions by claiming to defend a tradition against 'foreign' or novel ideas. But even apart from the fact that this is no justification for denying human rights, it ignores the nature, geography and history of most religions. Religious beliefs spread and change. Over half of Europe was under Islamic rulers for centuries. We may have forgotten this, but, to the cost of many, the Serbs have not and nor have the Russians.

Changes in religion can be illustrated by Mongolia. According to tradition, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced into Mongolia over 2,000 years ago by Buddhists travelling along the Silk Road. Other religions, including Manichean Christianity, Nestorian Christianity, and Islam, travelled the same route and left their mark on the country. The present form of 'Yellow Hat' Tibetan Buddhism did not arrive until the 13th century, when Kublai Khan, then Emperor of China, named a Buddhist Lama from Beijing as the head of the faith for Tibet, Mongolia and China. The monasteries function in the Tibetan language, look to the Dalai Lama as a spiritual authority and, in the 1990's, have had the ambassador from India as a leading spiritual source.<sup>8</sup>

In short, the current leading religious forces have their seat of authority outside the country and are only the most recent of the successive religions which have had influence. This is not intended as any slight on their legitimacy; it is simply a fact about their history. Despite this, Mongolian governments in the 1990's have sought to prevent further changes and have given legal preeminence to Buddhism. A 1993 law asserted the 'predominant position of the Buddhist religion,' forbade the 'propagation of religion from outside' and 'banned religious activities alien to the religions and customs of the Mongolian people.'<sup>9</sup>

Even claims about 'outsiders,' illegitimate as they are, do not usually apply. Christianity has native adherents in almost every country and territory on the globe.

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<sup>8</sup> 8. Mark Juergensmeyer, *The New Cold War? Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State* (University of California Press, 1993), pp. 117-118.

<sup>9</sup> 9. Abdulfattah Amor, *Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, 1995 Report to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights* (Geneva, December, 1994) p. 62.

There is an almost comic quality in listening to people who assert that Christianity is being spread only by foreigners. This assertion is made even in India, where the indigenous Christian population outnumbers any foreign workers by a factor of some 12,000 to one (actually one of the higher percentages of foreign workers). Current American campaigns against religious persecution are not defences of foreign missionaries. Missionary activity, while certainly legitimate, is an almost irrelevant feature of current repressive trends.

The idea that Christian ideas are being 'imposed' on people is also faintly ludicrous, since in the situations we are discussing, Christians are usually minorities, are often poor and, invariably, the victims of coercion not its practitioners. It is also noteworthy that most of the regimes which repress 'foreign religions' are those governments which repress anything that might weaken their grasp on power.

But, beyond all these considerations, is the simple fact that the people being persecuted are simply exercising their human rights as outlined in any genuine democratic constitution and as defined in international human rights law. These are fundamental human freedoms. There is no law or valid norm that forbids people from believing that their beliefs are true and from trying to share those beliefs with others. This is precisely what democracy and human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, environmentalists, democrats, and feminists of all stripes do—committedly, persistently and continually. The freedom to express views and to attempt to persuade in the religious field is the same. As Michael Roan puts it, 'the right to hold and assert truth claims is precisely what the freedom of religion or belief is about.'<sup>10</sup> The fact that most of us encounter Jehovah's Witnesses only when they knock on our door at the most inconvenient time is no excuse for failing to realise that they are simply exercising religious freedom and, worldwide, are amongst the most persecuted people.

It is true that many religious efforts can be insensitive and/or intensely annoying to the objects of their attention. Many observers, including Russian and western evangelicals, found the rapid influx of some American organisations into the former Soviet bloc after its political collapse to be both stupid and insensitive. But this is no ground for the legal repression of organisations that upset others. There are no laws against being annoying. Journalists are frequently annoying; often it is part of their job. Human rights activists are annoying. Political opponents, especially radical ones, are annoying. In fact, anyone who challenges a given situation usually annoys people happy with that situation. In any instance where we are tempted to advocate repression of an unpopular religious group, we should ask ourselves whether we would accept similar controls if the group were journalists or were advocating the defence of other human rights. We should be as reluctant to control groups in the religious sphere as we are in any other sphere.

The right to free speech includes a right to be annoying, since if the speech in question never upset or challenged anybody, then the issue of restricting it would never even arise. In the religious sphere as in other spheres, the proper response to annoying people is to criticise them, argue against them, ignore them - or be reconciled to them. But not to imprison or kill them.

There are, of course, instances where attempts to assert beliefs involve coercion or manipulation. But such events involve a minuscule proportion of what is described here. These instances should not lead to any blanket condemnation of, or restriction on, freedom of expression in the religious field. As the U.N. Special Rapporteur notes, 'these instances properly fall under the strictures of good criminal law.' This covers 'respectful

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<sup>10</sup> 10. 'Briefing' on 'Report on Global Freedom of Religion or Belief,' prepared for the U.S. Commission on Cooperation and Security in Europe by Michael Roan, W. Cole Durham and Craig Mousin (The Tandem Project), Minneapolis, September 27, 1995, p. 3.

public order, trickery, fraud, non-assistance, prostitution, illegal practice of medicine, etc. Genuine hazards posed by religious sects are adequately covered by such laws; laws which specifically target smaller religious groups are not needed, and raise dangers of their own.' He adds, 'in the last analysis it is not up to the state or any community to assume the guardianship of the conscience of people or to censure religious beliefs.'<sup>11</sup>

## THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS IN THE MODERN WORLD

### Numbers

It is important, at the outset, to say who Christians are since, in North America, there often seems to be an implicit assumption that Christians are white people from Orange County or else dead, white European males. The Christian church is not a European or American phenomenon. From its beginnings, Christianity spread into Africa and Asia. It was in Africa before Europe, India before England, and China before America. Currently, more Christians are engaged in Sunday worship in China than are in all of Western Europe combined. The same is true in Nigeria and Brazil, and probably of India, the Philippines and the country with the world's largest Muslim population, Indonesia.

David B. Barrett gives the following figures (for mid-1998): 1, 970 million 'Christians ... of all kinds'; 1, 850 million 'affiliated church members'; 1, 340 million 'church attenders'; 650 million 'Great Commission Christians' (i.e., 'active Christians'). The first and last of these categories roughly parallel the two meanings of 'Christian' that I described above. Breakdown by continents of 'affiliated church members' (a slightly more restrictive category than 'Christians ... of all kinds') is as follows: Africa—330 million; Asia—290 million; Europe—530 million; Latin America—460 million; North America—220 million; Oceania—20 million.<sup>12</sup>

Since 'Europe' here includes much of Russia, the figures for non-western Christians is somewhat higher. The number of Christians in the 'west'—Western Europe, North America and Australasia—would be about 25–30% of total 'affiliated church members.' The category of 'Christians ... of all kinds' inflates the proportion of Christians in the west compared to the figures for 'active Christians.' 'Member Christians' includes those for whom membership is a formal matter, perhaps simply denoting baptism as a child. While there are people like this in many countries, including the Middle East, Latin America, Africa and Asia, they form a conspicuously large proportion of the European population, where the number of 'active Christians' is sometimes less than 5% of the 'Christians ... of all kinds.' In the rest of the world, where being Christian can create problems, there is less likelihood that anyone who claims a Christian commitment would do so in a purely formal way. If it meant little to them, they are more likely to abandon it rather than face discrimination. This also implies that church attendance and active Christian commitment involve a higher proportion of third world people. Consequently, it is likely that the west contains a fifth or less of the world's 'active Christians.' Even in North America the percentage of churchgoers is highest amongst African-Americans.

In addressing the persecution of Christians, we are not focusing on a peculiarly western or North American matter, but on perhaps the largest and widest manifestation

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<sup>11</sup> 11. Summary of Special Rapporteur's presentation to 'Conference on Freedom of Religion and Belief and the U.N. Year for Tolerance,' London, Sept. 18–20, 1995, given in Michael Roan et al., op. cit. p. 5

<sup>12</sup> 12. David B. Barrett, 'Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission, 1998,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan, 1998. I have rounded out Barrett's figures to the nearest 10 million.

of religious persecution in the world today. The sites of this persecution are many and varied, but we can group the main trends in four categories.

### **Trends in Persecution**

#### *1. The Islamic Countries*

Many Muslims in North America and elsewhere have legitimate concern that raising the question of Islamic persecution can contribute to already present anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice. They are also properly concerned that the widespread persecution of *Muslims* should not be neglected or slighted. I wish to avoid contributing to either of these dangers and I should point out that most of the Islamic regimes and groups that I cite also persecute moderate Muslims and Muslim minorities. This is also why, in *Their Blood Cries Out*, in more than fifty places, I explicitly point out instances, both historical and contemporary, of Islamic tolerance or where Muslims themselves are persecuted.

But while Islam has in its history often shown far greater tolerance than its Christian counterparts, there are now intensifying attacks on religious minorities, mostly Christians, throughout the Islamic belt from Morocco on the Atlantic eastward through to the Southern Philippines, and this requires systematic attention. This wave of persecution is not limited to but has worsened because of the activities of radical Islamicists. The persecution is of three overlapping types.

The *first* of these is direct state persecution. This takes place in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where any non-Islamic or dissident Islamic religious expression is forbidden. Christian meetings are outlawed and worship services held anywhere other than in the embassies of powerful countries will be cracked down on by the *mutawa*, the religious police, and their members imprisoned. Any Saudi who seeks to leave Islam faces the real prospect of death. This is also true in other gulf states and in North Africa. In countries such as Mauritania, the Comorros Islands and Sudan, this is a threat not only from vigilantes, but is part of the legal code itself.

In Sudan, a major component of the complex civil war is an effort by the Khartoum regime to impose its form of Islam on the largely Christian and animist South and on the Beja Muslims in the East. Over a million and a half are dead. *Shari'a* law is imposed, Christians in refugee camps have been denied food and water unless they convert, children are kidnapped to be raised as Muslim, and there is widespread enslavement of children. There are probably several tens of thousands of slaves in the Sudan. There are slave markets, and a current practice of seeking to sell child slaves back to their parents in order to get better prices.

In other countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, the threat comes from vigilantes or mob violence with greater or lesser complicity by the government. In Iran there are strong indications that, apart from the persecution of the Bah'ai, government death squads have abetted the torture and assassination of Protestant leaders in recent years.

A *second* major category in the Islamic world, and the most widespread, is communal violence. Minorities in the Islamic world are often victimised not by the agents of government per se, but by mob violence, often prompted by radical Islamicist leaders. This is true in Egypt, where the Coptic Church is increasingly subject to church burnings and local massacres. It is widespread in Nigeria, in Liberia, Ghana and the Philippines. One of the most alarming developments is that this violence is increasing. In Pakistan in 1997, one Christian town, Shantinagar, was virtually razed to the ground. Ahmadiya Muslims suffer similar treatment. In Indonesia, which has long been a place of toleration between Muslims, Christians and other minorities, there has been an epidemic of church burnings. In some cases, as in Indonesia, the government (and major Muslim groups) has sharply



opposed such attacks. In others, such as Egypt or Pakistan, *local* authorities have been complicit or quiescent.

A *third* category in the Islamic world is direct attacks by radical Islamic terrorists. In Algeria, Islamicist guerillas opposed to the government have targeted, amongst others, moderate Muslims and Christians, especially priests, monks and nuns. Bishops have been assassinated. This is also true in the Philippines, in Pakistan, in Turkey and in Egypt.

## *2. Communist Countries*

Communism has not disappeared. In China, Vietnam, North Korea, Laos and Cuba it embraces nearly a quarter of the world's population. While the situation in Cuba has eased somewhat in the last couple of years, the situation in the other countries has been worsening. In these countries there may be relative freedom to worship in the state controlled religious bodies, but any religious expression outside these bodies is ruthlessly suppressed. In Vietnam the government continues its crackdown on Buddhists and Christians, especially amongst tribal peoples. In China, Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims are persecuted, and priests and bishops of the Roman Catholic Church have been imprisoned in the past year in an intensifying crackdown, while several hundred leaders of the Protestant underground church have been jailed, and many have been tortured. The pattern in these countries is that any religious believer who refuses to submit to state control on the choice of religious leaders, seminarians, pastors, priests, bishops, sermon topics, religious organisations and membership lists will suffer discrimination, harassment, persecution and perhaps imprisonment, torture and death.

## *3. Persecution Due to Religious/ethnic Nationalism*

Christians, like other minority groups, suffer at the hands of combined religious/ethnic nationalism, sometimes at the hands of the state, more commonly by communal violence. Violence and discrimination against minority religious groups is present in Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, India, Bhutan and Kampuchea and in the central Asian republics which were formerly part of the Soviet Union, especially Uzbekistan. It is a growing phenomenon in Burma/Myanmar. There the SLORC regime, lacking popular support and legitimacy, is trying to wrap itself in a cloak of Buddhism as part of its war against tribal minorities, especially the Rohingya Muslims in the west and the Karen and other tribes in the eastern part of the country, where Christians constitute a large proportion of the minorities.

## *4. Persecution of Christians by Christians*

This fourth category is less a distinct area of religious persecution than it is a collection of persecutions worldwide. But I mention it separately, also to emphasise the point that persecution is not done simply by 'other' religions. In Ethiopia, Protestants and Muslims have been attacked and sometimes killed by mobs urged on by local clergy of the Coptic Church. In the Mexican state of Chiapas, apart from conflicts with the Zapatista rebels, protestant tribespeople (40% of the population) have been driven off their land and killed by local renegade 'Catholic' leaders. In most other cases, the phenomenon is more one of discrimination.

## *5. Discrimination*

Apart from what I have called persecution, there is also widespread, non-trivial discrimination and legal control. For example, India has 'affirmative action' laws to ease the plight of the *dalit*, or 'untouchables.' While groups such as Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists are included, Christian untouchables (a majority of the 28 million Christians in India) are

explicitly excluded. Similarly, in Malaysia, the 'affirmative action' program for *bumiputras* (ethnic Malays) explicitly excludes non-Muslims, the majority of whom are Christians, but also including Hindus, Buddhists and minority Muslim groups. Sometimes this discrimination can border on the absurd. In Egypt, the permission of the State President (now the Provincial Governor) was required before a church can be built or even repaired. One church, having failed to obtain such permission after one year of trying, went ahead and repaired its toilet. They were fined heavily and the repaired toilet was demolished.

Discrimination is an increasing pattern in Russia, where repressive religion laws, backed by the Russian Orthodox Church, have been instituted at the federal level. Such laws are also widespread, and usually even more repressive, at the local level and there is increasing violence against religious minorities, including Jews, Protestants, Catholics and dissident Orthodox groups. Similar patterns of discrimination against minority religious groups is pervasive in Ukraine, Bulgaria and Romania, present in many parts of eastern Europe, including the Baltics, and growing in many of the C.I.S. states. Meanwhile, several western European countries, including Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Belgium and France are becoming more controlling of what the majority regard as 'sects' or 'cults.'

The categories of state persecution, communal persecution, terrorist persecution, legal control and discrimination can grade into one another, in that those countries which have communal violence are often ones in which there is systemic discrimination, such as in Egypt, Pakistan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka and India.

## OVERVIEW

In the last five years, this persecution has taken place in approximately forty countries, and legal repression and discrimination in approximately thirty countries. Reliable estimates of the number of religious believers in various countries are hard to achieve, and even then are subject to wide variation depending on definition. My best estimate of the overall situation is that, very approximately, 200 million Christians in the world are members of persecuted groups in countries where religious persecution is present involving imprisonment, beatings, torture, mob violence and death. An additional 400 million live in situations of non-trivial repression and legal discrimination. And this persecution is increasing in China, Vietnam, Uzbekistan and parts of the Islamic world, especially Pakistan, Egypt and Indonesia.

Currently there is debate about as to whether this persecution is increasing overall. This question too is subject to statistical and definitional problems. One is whether we mean the percentage of people affected or the numeric total of those affected. Another is which baseline we use for comparison. If we take 1970 as the comparison point then the percentage of Christians being persecuted now is probably less. If we take 1980 it is probably about the same.<sup>13</sup> If we take 1990 it is higher.

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<sup>13</sup> 13. For the year 1980, Barrett gave the figure of 605,000,000 for Christians 'living under political restrictions on religious liberty,' and the figure of 225,000,000 for Christians 'experiencing severe state interference in religion, obstruction or harassment.' These would correspond roughly to what I have called 'discrimination' and 'persecution' respectively. The current numbers would be similar, reflecting both the decrease of persecution with the collapse of many Communist countries and the corresponding expansion of the church and rise of increased persecution in the rest of the world. For 1998, Barrett suggests that the average rate of martyrdom is about 163,000 Christians per year (He defines a martyr as 'a believer in Christ who loses his or her life prematurely in a situation of witness as a result of human hostility.') This figure strikes me as too high, but I have no alternative one to suggest.

If we focus on current trends in the 1990's two things are clear: the current persecution of Christians is both growing both in its worldwide spread and in the number of people affected.

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# **Persecution: Interpreting the Information on the Internet**

**John Roxborough**

**Keywords:** Persecution, access, reliability, State, context, freedom

## **1 INTRODUCTION AND ISSUES**

The advent of email, the internet and then the development of the World Wide Web have enabled minority groups to tell their stories to a global audience. While governments may interfere with the flow of information, close down sites, and present alternative views, it is difficult for them to prevent access to dossiers and evidence located outside their boundaries. Material on the Web can speak when the subjects of the story themselves may be silenced.

Access to the Web enables minority groups to tell their stories and researchers to locate that information. While there can be no guarantees about the quality of the information, or the critical skills of the researcher, today there is unprecedented access to information about persecution and the responses of concerned groups in other countries. The ability to further disseminate information into the hands of media, politicians and praying Christians is enormous. The challenge remains to seek for quality in what is reported, and exercise discretion in making information public, judgement in analysis and wisdom in determining strategies to ameliorate suffering.

Material on the Web about persecution raises the same questions that have long existed with print media: is this sensationalist, reliable, self-critical, capable of influencing governments, friendly or hostile? What are the assumptions and viewpoints of the writers and those who make their material available? Is there a concern for accuracy about events, people, places and dates? Is the detail more or less specific than the sensitivities of the situation require? As with print, the facility that gets information out also makes it available to those who may use it against minority groups, except that the scope is vastly greater. Concerns about the uncontrolled nature of material on the Web relative to print