

Table of Contents

- ***Prince Charles 'deeply troubled' by plight of Christians in Middle East***
- ***Believe or die: 4 Member States of the Human Rights Council where apostasy means death***
- ***Are there really 100,000 new Christian martyrs every year?***
- ***Christianity at risk of extinction in areas of persecution, says Warsi***
- ***7 countries that still kill "Witches"***
- ***Anti-Christian terror is everyone's concern***
- ***A conference on cultic studies open to all and promoting dialogue rather than confrontation***
- ***Thousands of believers of all faiths are in prison in the world***
- ***Blasphemy: Death penalty or prison terms for 95 people in 8 countries***
- ***Bigotry against Jews and Muslims on the rise, says US***
- ***A distressing map of religious freedom around the world***
- ***USCIRF's 2013 annual report on the state of international religious freedom identifies world's worst violators***
- ***Report points to worldwide rise in anti-Semitic incidents***
- ***Baroness Warsi addresses Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Summit***
- ***Blasphemy laws: Double standards from the European Commission***

Prince Charles 'deeply troubled' by plight of Christians in Middle East

The Guardian (18.12.2013) - Prince of Wales tells audience of religious leaders that divisions with Muslims have been achieved 'through intimidation and persecution'

Relations between Christians and Muslims in the Middle East have reached crisis point, according to [Prince Charles](#), who is "deeply troubled" by the plight of Christians in the region.

The heir to the British throne told a reception for Middle East Christians at Clarence House on Tuesday that the divisions have been "achieved through intimidation, false accusation and organised persecution, including to the Christian communities in the Middle East at the present time".

Charles, who spoke of his work to promote understanding between the two religions, said bridges between Christians and Muslims were being deliberately destroyed by people with a vested interest.

He said this affected Arab Christians in countries such as [Syria](#), [Iraq](#), Palestine and [Egypt](#), as well as those from other Arab countries.

"I have for some time now been deeply troubled by the growing difficulties faced by Christian communities in various parts of the Middle East," he said. "It seems to me that we cannot ignore the fact that Christians in the Middle East are increasingly being deliberately targeted by fundamentalist Islamist militants.

"[Christianity](#) was literally born in the Middle East and we must not forget our Middle Eastern brothers and sisters in Christ," he added. Charles said Christians now accounted for 4% of the population in the Middle East and North [Africa](#) – the lowest concentration in the world.

The archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, chief rabbi Ephraim Mirvis and archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols were all present at the reception.

Syria's minority Christian community has faced growing violence during the bloody civil war, which has claimed more than 100,000 lives and displaced millions from the country.

In an interview in October, the Melkite Greek Catholic patriarch Gregorios III said almost a third of Syria's Christians had fled their homes. A report by the charity Aid to the Church in Need, published in October, said there were now "grave questions" about the long term survival of Christianity in the Middle East.

Earlier, the prince visited the Coptic Orthodox church centre in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, where he was presented with an icon of St George for himself and his baby grandson Prince George.

Believe or die: 4 Member States of the Human Rights Council where apostasy means death

By Bob Churchill

Huff Post (17.12.2013) - I'm the editor of a [report](#) launched last Tuesday by the International Humanist and Ethical Union, to mark Human Rights Day. The report assesses every country in the world, [focusing](#) on the legal treatment of the non-religious.

We found that the great majority of countries exercise some form of religious privilege, such as seats in government reserved for religious leaders, or state-funding for exclusively religious institutions.

We also found 46 countries had what we called "Severe Discrimination." For example, laws restricting inter-religious marriages; laws which prohibit "blasphemy" or "insult to religion" punishable by prison (38 countries); laws taking children away from fathers who are "apostates."

A further 31 countries we classed as perpetrating "Grave Violations." For example, states that punish apostasy or blasphemy with death (13 countries); states restricting government office to members of one religion; and state complicity in violence against atheists.

Of course, most of these laws also impact on religious people.

What the report itself did not do was to compare these 77 countries posing "severe" or even "grave" problems, with the member states of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Let's do that now!

Nine states which "severely discriminate" and eight which commit "grave violations" are currently members of the 47-member Human Rights Council (HRC). That's 17 of the most problematic countries in the world for atheists.

The eight grave violators include: Indonesia (where atheism is essentially illegal under the state ideology of *Pancasila*); Morocco and the Maldives (two popular tourist destinations that can put their citizens to death for apostasy); United Arab Emirates (the global business gateway that can execute its ex-Muslim citizens); Pakistan (where the idea of criticizing blasphemy laws has itself been declared 'blasphemous'); Kuwait (whose parliament passed a death-for-blasphemy bill last year, still pending); Saudi Arabia (don't even get me started), and China (which found itself in the worst class for severely suppressing freedom of thought and expression and specifically religious belief).

So a total of 17 current members of the HRC have serious problems. In eight of those states the problems are among the most grave.

And in four of those states you can be put to death for leaving religion (Maldives, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and UAE).

It's nothing new to criticize the HRC for including members who abuse human rights. [We know already](#) that serial human rights abusers are elected because the regional groups rig "clean slate" elections, removing the incentive for states to actually uphold human rights. It's like playing a game for toddlers: if you break the rules, the adults just nod and smile, and everyone wins every time.

We also know already that many states on the Council have serious human rights issues on a huge range of topics. But I think the four states with death-for-apostasy inject a fatal dose of fresh hypocrisy. For three reasons:

First, it's pathetic. There is no self-defense justification for killing someone who holds a metaphysical belief that is contrary to a metaphysical belief that you hold. It is definitively wrong.

Second, it's indefensible. The ignorance and inhumanity of death-for-apostasy is matched only by its decisive arbitrariness. There are many fallacious rationalizations for why countries with terrible rights records pervade the HRC; "every state has problems", "that crackdown on protest was necessary for security", "you say this is censorship I say it's a firewall against immoral ideas..." But death for apostasy isn't like that. It has no rationalization other than to stubbornly and selectively cite the Koran or Hadith (all of the states that have death for apostasy are Islamic).

Third, free thought is a right. Death for apostasy targets people for something as deeply personal as the views they've arrived at about life, the universe and everything. Philosophical views are not 'intrinsic characteristics' like race or sex, but they may be deeply formative, meaningful, and moreover they should be fully protected under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

This, then, is the special contribution that the membership of death-for-apostasy states should add to the debate about the failures of the Human Rights Council: we are permitting the election of states who nakedly tell their population what not to think, in clear contravention of human rights, with no possible defense. Therefore they should be rejected from the Council.

Here is the argument, in five easy steps:

- 1) The mandate of the HRC decrees that "members elected to the Council shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights".
- 2) Freedom of thought and belief is a human right (Article 18, UDHR).
- 3) States which threaten or actually sentence people to death for thinking or believing, are violating that right, not by accident, not occasionally, but ingrained in the law of the land.
- 4) Other countries do not have capital punishment for thoughts or beliefs (i.e. they have *higher standards*).
- 5) Therefore, death-for-apostasy states are not upholding the highest standards, they are in fact making an infantile mockery of these standards, and they ought to be thrown off the Council.

This is theoretically possible. Member states can be suspended from the Council by a two-thirds majority vote.

However, the problem is that states with poor human rights records make up the majority of member states of the Council. Therefore one cannot attack another for fear of immediate reprisals. It's Mutually Assured Destruction, except instead of preserving us all from annihilation, it preserves all them from accountability.

This is not sustainable. There must be some issue, some clear and definitive human rights violation, that could set off the first glorious missile of criticism. So I'll ask this question: Would any delegate of any other HRC member state care to explain how "Believe or die!" is ever an acceptable way for a supposed paragon of human rights to behave?

The report "Freedom of Thought : A Global Report on the Rights, Legal Status, and Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Non-religious" can be found at freethoughtreport.com/download-the-report.

Are there really 100,000 new Christian martyrs every year?

BBC News (12.11.2013) - It's often claimed that 100,000 Christians are killed every year because of their religion. Earlier this year, the Vatican called it a credible number. But is it?

Gunmen on motorcycles [kill three people](#) when they open fire on a wedding outside a Coptic Christian church in Cairo. A twin-suicide bombing outside a church in Pakistan [kills at least 75 people](#).

These two recent headline-grabbing attacks occurred within just a month of each other. Horrific, but by no means isolated incidents.

So how widespread is anti-Christian violence?

"Credible research has reached the shocking conclusion that every year an estimate of more than 100,000 Christians are killed because of some relation to their faith," Vatican spokesman Archbishop Silvano Maria Tomasi [announced in a radio address](#) to the United Nations Human Rights Council in May.

On the internet, the statistic has taken on a life of its own, popping up all over the place, sometimes with an additional detail - that these 100,000 lives are taken by Muslims.

The number comes originally from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity (CSGC) at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in the US state of Massachusetts, which publishes such a figure each year in its [Status of Global Mission](#) (see line 28).

Its researchers started by estimating the number of Christians who died as martyrs between 2000 and 2010 - about one million by their reckoning - and divided that number by 10 to get an annual number, 100,000.

But how do they reach that figure of one million?

When you dig down, you see that the majority died in the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

More than four million are estimated to have been killed in that war between 2000 and 2010, and CSGC counts 900,000 of them - or 20% - as martyrs.

Over 10 years, that averages out at 90,000 per year.

So when you hear that 100,000 Christians are dying for their faith, you need to keep in mind that the vast majority - 90,000 - are people who were killed in DR Congo.

This means we can say right away that the internet rumours of Muslims being behind the killing of 100,000 Christian martyrs are nonsense. The DRC is a Christian country. In the civil war, Christians were killing Christians.

In earlier estimates of martyrs, CSGC included killings that occurred in the Rwandan genocide. Again this is puzzling. It was not a conflict about religion - it was a case of Hutus killing Tutsis, and both sides were Christian.

"The genocide in Rwanda was based on the systematic killing of an ethnic group in an attempt to completely wipe them out and it had nothing to do with the beliefs or the worship or the people who were killed," says Ian Linden, author of *Church and Revolution in Rwanda*, and associate professor in the study of religion at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

"The civil wars in the DRC were the consequences of a failed state, disintegrated military force so that militias had almost full power because of the weapons they had. They were indiscriminately killing and raping and plundering and it's very difficult to describe any of that killing as creating martyrdom."

But Vatican reporter and author of *The Global War on Christians*, John Allen, outlines an example of how someone caught up in the civil war in DR Congo could be martyred.

"A female catechist in Congo, who is having success persuading young people in her area not to sign up with the militias, and she is killed by one of those forces because they don't want to see the sources of recruits dry up. Now is that anti-Christian violence, or isn't it?" he asks.

Ian Linden also makes the point that there were Hutus in Rwanda who wouldn't leave their Tutsi colleagues because of their Christian faith, and who were therefore killed and could be called martyrs.

So let's agree that some people were killed because of their Christian faith in DR Congo. Is it plausible that 20% were?

Todd Johnson, director of CSGC, told the BBC this figure was drawn from the 1982 edition of the World Christian Encyclopedia, which estimated that on average 20% of African nations were actively practising Christians.

But surely it's not the case that all actively practising Christians who are killed in a civil war, are killed because of their faith?

Johnson says his centre has abandoned this statistic in its more recent work. The 100,000 figure still appears in its 2013 Status of Global Mission, though.

And this brings us to another problem - while violence continues in DR Congo, it's less extreme today than it was at its height.

"That's a weakness of this approach," Johnson concedes.

"Even in the DRC things are not as intense as they were 10 years ago. Every year now it probably should go down. So it's probably decreasing year by year right now, but the method is not exact enough to [make those adjustments], so I've just kept it at 100,000 the last couple of years but I'm likely going to have to lower it unless something comes to our attention."

If you were to take away the 90,000 deaths in DR Congo from the CSGC's figure of 100,000, that would leave 10,000 martyrs per year.

And the number of Christians who are killed each year because they are Christians is more likely to be in that order of magnitude, according to Professor Thomas Schirrmacher from the International Society for Human Rights.

"One has to see that there is no scientific number at the moment. It has not been researched and all experts in this area are very hesitant to give a figure," he says.

"We are starting a research project with several universities worldwide on this topic and there we start with a guess of 7-8,000 Christians killed as martyrs each year."

But to some extent this number crunching is besides the point for author John Allen.

"I think it would be good to have reliable figures on this issue, but I don't think it ultimately matters in terms of the point of my book, which is to break through the narrative that tends to dominate discussion in the West - that Christians can't be persecuted because they belong to the world's most powerful church.

"The truth is two thirds of the 2.3 billion Christians in the world today live... in dangerous neighbourhoods. They are often poor. They often belong to ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities. And they are often at risk.

"And ultimately I think making that point is more important than being precise about the death toll."

Christianity at risk of extinction in areas of persecution, says Warsi

UK government minister Lady Warsi says Christians are being driven out of regions around the world where they are a minority

The Guardian (15.11.2013) - [Christianity](#) is in danger of extinction in some countries because of persecution in areas where its followers are in the minority, a British government minister has said.

Christians were being driven out of regions in countries such as [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#), where the [religion](#) first took root, said Lady Warsi, who has responsibility for faith communities.

She raised her concerns in a speech at Georgetown University in Washington DC in which she called on politicians in countries such as [Pakistan](#) to "set the tone" for tolerance of religious minorities.

Lady Warsi told the BBC Radio 4 Today programme: "I'm concerned that the birthplace of Christianity, the parts of the world where Christianity first spread, is now seeing large sections of the Christian community leaving, and those that are remaining feeling persecuted.

"There are huge advantages to having pluralistic societies – everything from the economy to the way people develop educationally, and therefore we all have an interest in making sure that Christian communities do continue to feel that they belong and are not persecuted in the places where this religion was born.

"One in 10 Christians live in a minority situation and large numbers of those who live in a minority situation around the world are persecuted."

In some cases, Christians were targeted for "collective punishment" by majority groups in retaliation for what they perceived as the injustices committed by western powers, she said.

"Tragically, what's happening is they are being seen as newcomers, being portrayed as an 'other' within that society, even though they have existed there for many, many centuries.

"What we are seeing, sadly, is a sense of collective punishment meted out by local groups – sometimes states, sometimes extremists. [Christians] are seen as legitimate targets for what they perceive as actions of their co-religionists. This concept of collective punishment and them being seen as agents of the west or agents of regimes is wrong. We need to speak out and raise this with the countries where this is happening."

The Foreign Office minister said she had already had "very frank conversations" with ministers in Pakistan, telling them that senior politicians had a duty to speak out against persecution and set a standard for tolerance.

She said 83% of countries had constitutions guaranteeing freedom of religion, but did not implement those provisions.

"There's an international consensus, in the form of a Human Rights Council resolution on the treatment of minorities and tolerance towards other faiths. But we need to build political will behind that.

"There was some interesting research in the US which said that the way in which a minority community is treated after an extremist incident is very much dependent on the tone that politicians set. Politicians do have a responsibility to set the tone, to mark out legal parameters as to what will and will not be tolerated."

Asked whether Lady Warsi's warning of the possible extinction of some Christian communities was correct, the leader of Catholics in England and Wales, the archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, told Today: "I think in some parts of the Middle East that is probably true.

"There are real challenges for Christians in this part of the world to support and get alongside them and also for politicians to understand that the presence of Christians is a great mediating factor, often for example between different segments of Islam.

"It's a mix that has lasted for 1,000 years and no western government should promote a course of action in the Middle East which would end with a new government which was intolerant to its historical neighbours and colleagues within the territory."

7 countries that still kill "Witches"

Care2 (26.10.2013) - You know how the long-ago witch hunts were stupid and hateful? What a relief those days are over.

Except they're not. In many countries, people are still killed on suspicion of witchcraft. United Nations experts cautioned in 2009 that murders of women and children accused of sorcery were on the rise. Following are just a few of many examples from around the world.

1. Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's religious police department has an official Anti-Witchcraft Unit that it dispatches to catch sorcerers and break their spells. In 2007, the Saudis executed an accused sorcerer. A woman awaiting the death penalty for alleged witchcraft died in prison.

Like the New England witch hunters of yore, those in Saudi Arabia use magic as a convenient excuse to silence inconvenient people. Accusations of sorcery have been leveled against foreign women working as domestics for Saudi families who charge their employers with sexual assault, according to Saudi Arabia expert Christoph Wilcke.

2. Tanzania

This east African country killed approximately 600 elderly women on charges of witchcraft just two years ago. The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life found a strong and pervasive belief in magic among Tanzanians. It sometimes leads to reverence rather than murder. One woman who claims to be a witch charges between \$20 and \$120 for services including medical cures and exorcisms — in a country where the average income is under two dollars a day.

3. Gambia

Gambia's dictator Yahya Jammeh rounds up, tortures and kills his citizens under the pretext of hunting for witches. Amnesty International estimates that at least six people died after Jammeh's minions forced them to drink a mixture of unknown substances. Dozens more hallucinated and suffered severe and lingering pain. Those who survived suffered shame from the accusation in a country where people believe in and condemn witches.

4. Nepal

Last year a mob burned an accused witch alive after a shaman said she killed a boy. Their faith in the shaman suggests that Nepalis believe that sorcery can be used for good, but the punishment for black magic is death. This year another mob beat a 45-year-old woman to death based on accusations that she cast a spell on a neighbor's daughter. The Nepali government is not on board with killing witches: police arrested three women suspected of participating in the murder. In the past it sentenced men to 20 years in prison for killing a woman suspected of practicing black magic.

5. India

Last June, a primarily female crowd killed two women believed to have murdered several children through witchcraft. As in Nepal, police arrested people suspected of participating in the mob. Some Indian states have adopted laws banning violence against people suspected of witchcraft.

6. Papua New Guinea

A crowd tortured and murdered a young mother accused of killing a boy through sorcery. They burned her alive before a large audience, some of whom broke off to chase police away before they could intervene. The prime minister lamented that violence against women is increasing because of the popular "belief that sorcery kills," despite a law that specifically prohibits burning suspected witches.

7. Uganda

After burning a man's house down and driving him from his village, locals tied him up and beheaded him for alleged witchcraft. While Ugandans kill some suspected witches, they pay others to help them with things like ensuring job security.

This is a small sampling of countries where natives believe in witchcraft and kill people for it. While the governments of some nations, including Saudi Arabia and Gambia, embrace this belief and use it to their own ends, others are working to end it. Either way, accusations of black magic empower people to eliminate individuals they dislike and to terrify others into conformity.

Anti-Christian terror is everyone's concern

Washington Post (24.10.2013) - The persecution of any religious minority anywhere by anyone is an evil injustice. It requires all persons of conscience to speak out and, when possible, take action.

The upcoming 75th anniversary of [Kristallnacht](#) makes this an auspicious time to raise awareness about the contemporary violence targeting religious minorities and their places of worship. Of particular concern are attacks against Christian minorities that have

occurred with alarming frequency from Syria to Egypt, from Iraq to Pakistan, and from Kenya to Sudan.

November 9 marks 75 years since the pogrom against Jews committed by mobs throughout the Nazi Reich. Often called Kristallnacht, or the "Night of Broken Glass," when rioters killed or injured hundreds of Jews; burned over 1,000 synagogues; destroyed 7,000 Jewish-owned shops and businesses; vandalized cemeteries and schools, and; sent 30,000 Jews to German concentration camps. It marked a turning point in the escalating campaign of persecution culminating in the Holocaust.

These events, seared into Jewish collective memory, make us doubly aware—and duty bound—to raise our voices when the deadly brew of religious bigotry and wanton violence are mixed.

Today in Syria, a once thriving Christian population—a community nearly as ancient as that country's once great Jewish community—has been depopulated by 25 percent, [according an estimate the Patriarch Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch Gregorios III Laham](#) shared with the BBC.

In September, [The Associated Press reported that Syrian Christians in Maaloula](#)—a community dating to the birth of Christianity and that still speaks Aramaic—were driven out or forcibly converted to Islam by rebels aligned with al-Qaeda.

["It is chaos, it is violence, it is blood, it is death. Life has been paralyzed. We have lost everything,"](#) said Archbishop Theophile Georges Kassab of Homs.

In Egypt, some supporters of ousted President Mohammed Morsi last summer unleashed their rage against that nation's Christians, a historic community constituting 20 percent of the country's population. [Mobs burned dozens](#) of Christian schools, convents, monasteries, institutions, and churches of any, and all Christian denominations. And just days ago, [gunmen on a motorcycle opened fire outside a Coptic Christian](#) church during a wedding, murdering four, including an 8-year-old girl.

"It never happened before in history that such a big number of churches were attacked on one day," [Bishop Thomas, a Coptic Orthodox bishop in Assiut told Al Jazeera.](#) "We normally used to have attacks once a month or so."

As Kristallnacht teaches, the burning of houses of worship can be a red alert that worse is yet to come. September saw the horrific Taliban bombing of Anglican worshippers in Pakistan, which took 85 lives, and, [according to accounts shared by witnesses,](#) the targeting for murder of Kenyan Christians—deliberately separated from others in a chilling reminder of Nazi "selections"—by al Shabaab terrorists in a Nairobi shopping mall.

Attacks like these have contributed to a decline in the Christian population in the Middle East and North Africa from 9.5 percent to 3.8 percent of the total population from 1910 to 2010, [according to a Pew Forum report on Global Christianity.](#)

Tellingly, Israel is the only Middle East country where the [Christian population has grown in the last half century,](#) from 34,000 to 158,000, in large measure, according to many observers, because of the religious freedoms enjoyed there.

As a Jew, I'm proud of the status of religious minorities in the Jewish state. As an American, I'm especially proud to live in a society where people of different faiths (and no faith) share the values of tolerance and coexistence. Despite isolated though

sometimes deadly instances of religiously-inspired terror during the past few decades, ours is a nation where no Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, or person of any other faith must live in fear because of who they are.

It is time to sound the alarm about the religious persecutions of Christians and others. Let us raise our voices, and call on our elected representatives to take action. People of all faiths should support passage of [H.R.301](#), legislation that would direct our President to appoint a State Department Special Envoy to Promote Religious Freedom of Religious Minorities in the Near East and South Central Asia.

The bill will facilitate U.S government responses to human rights violations, combat acts of religious intolerance and incitement targeting religious minorities, and help address the needs of religious minorities.

Further, we must demand that international institutions designed to protect human rights, especially the United Nations, must actually do so without prejudice.

For people of conscience, for people of all faiths, now is not the time to be silent.

A conference on cultic studies open to all and promoting dialogue rather than confrontation

HRWF (09.07.2013) - Dialogue and mediation between conflicting parties rather than promoting anti-cult laws, demonizing some groups and confrontation is the option of the US-based International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) which held its annual conference from 3 to 7 July on the topic in Trieste (Italy) "Manipulation, Abuse and Maltreatment in Groups" with the collaboration of the Canada-based Info-Cult/ Info-Secte. Its local partners were the International SOS Psychological Abuse and Exit Social Cooperative Society (Exit scs Onlus).

One of the conference's goals was to encourage dialogue and openness to diverse points of view. As recommended by the organizers, speakers and attendees showed mutual respect during the sometimes lively and provocative discussions.

The conference included sessions on problematic groups, including 'cultic groups' in mainstream and mainstream religions. In all, 140 speakers from a wide range of backgrounds took the floor in more than 40 workshops. The sessions were geared towards different audiences: parents of current or former members of groups; former members of religious groups; academic researchers; mental health professionals.

ICSA boasts to provide a safe place where people can disagree and can be heard, and rightly so.

Among the titles of the sessions, it is worth mentioning:

Are there cultic aberrations in the Catholic Church?

Human rights, the law and new religious movements: Finding a balance

Mental health sessions

Research sessions

Education sessions

Personal accounts

Clinical issues

Changes in the cult scene

Developments in Japan

Helping sessions

The various workshops dealt with various forms of abuses in mainstream and non-mainstream religions as well as in non-religious groups such as the White Power Movement or terrorist groups.

A representative of the Unification Church exposed the difficult transition of the movement since the death of Rev. Moon and Martin Gurvich on the name of Hare Krishna. Hare Krishna spoke about well-warranted criticism against his movement but also discrimination and undue misrepresentation of it by some governments, media and social organizations.

Human Rights Without Frontiers presented a paper entitled **"The European Court of Human Rights and the Accusations of Mental Manipulation or Mind Control"**. The paper is available on request (Email: international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net).

ICSA was founded in 1979. It is a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic groups, alternative movements and other environments. ICSA supports civil liberties, and is not affiliated with any religious or commercial organizations. ICSA is not funded by the state but its budget is mainly coming from membership fees. In 2012, its annual conference took place in Montreal. The next one will be held in Washington from 3 to 5 July 2014.

More about the conference in Trieste:

Abstracts:

http://icsahome.com/infoserv_respond/event_conferences_workshops_abs.asp

Speakers' Profiles:

http://icsahome.com/infoserv_respond/event_conferences_workshops_speaker.asp

Programme:

http://icsahome.com/infoserv_respond/event_conferences_workshops_speaker.asp

Thousands of believers of all faiths are in prison in the world

A detailed six-month report of the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers* has identified by name 1450 victims of arrests and detention

HRWF (01.07.2013) - Thousands of believers of all faiths - Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, Ahmadyyas, Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners, Hare Krishna devotees, Zoroastrians and even an atheist - were arrested, detained, kept in custody or serving prison terms of various durations in 2013, according to a report published at mid-2013 by the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers International* (HRWF Int'l) and accessible on its website <http://www.hrwf.org>

Throughout the first semester of 2013, HRWF Int'l has compiled a list of prisoners that have been detained or jailed on grounds that constitute an infringement of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FORB). The cases listed in this report relate incidents of violations on the basis of: (1) freedom to change religion or belief, (2) freedom of expression, (3) freedom of association, (4) freedom of worship and assembly, or (5) in respect to specific obligations imposed by the state on believers in such a way as to conflict with their conscience.

In this report, HRWF Int'l defines FORB prisoners as persons who have been arrested and detained for reasons primarily connected to their faith as practised individually or in community.

HRWF has identified **22 countries with such FORB prisoners in 2013: Armenia, Azerbaijan, China, Eritrea, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Libya, Malaysia, Nagorno-Karabakh, North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam.**

This Prisoners' List which comprises 1450 names filed country by country and by religious affiliation has been elaborated on the basis of available information collected from a wide range of public and private sources: birth year or age, family status, place of residence, date and place of arrest, official charges, statement of the defendant, place of detention, first and final court decision, article of the criminal/civil/administrative code used and other relevant information.

Eritrea is on top of the list but it should arguably concede its first place ranking to **North Korea** if access to information about possible FORB prisoners in **North Korea** was not almost inexistent. In practice, there is no religious freedom in this country, yet no data is made available about arrests, detention and imprisonment of North Koreans on the ground of freedom of religion or belief.

Also, conscientious objectors to military service are often forgotten in reports on religious freedom and as prisoners of conscience. This report intends to correct this oversight by highlighting the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in two countries: **South Korea and Armenia.**

Each year the number of Jehovah's Witnesses that are imprisoned in **South Korea** for their conscientious objection to military service varies between 600 and 800. **Since 1950, the government has sentenced 17,107 Jehovah's Witness objectors, making a combined total of 32,413 years of imprisonment.** However, this problem could be resolved by introducing some form of alternative civilian service, an action that South Korean authorities have refused to take, despite repeated condemnations by the United Nations. **Armenia**, with over 30 FORB prisoners, is in a similar position in respect to military conscription.

The main purpose of the Prisoners' List is to stimulate advocacy in favour of the release of FORB prisoners.

For more information, contact Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l:

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Blasphemy: Death penalty or prison terms for 95 people in 8 countries

Human Rights Without Frontiers has just released a list of prisoners accused of blasphemy, defamation of religions and insulting religious feelings in 8 countries

HRWF (01.07.2013) - "Charges of 'blasphemy', 'defamation of a religion' and 'insulting religious beliefs' must be removed from the criminal code of countries which sentence to

death or send to prison persons using their freedom of expression about religious issues," says the Brussels-based NGO *Human Rights Without Frontiers* in its report "Freedom of Expression Related to Religious Issues" released on 1 July and accessible on its website <http://www.hrwf.org>

The targeted countries are **Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Tunisia and Turkey.**

In **Pakistan**, 79 people, both Muslims and Christians, have been arrested/sentenced for alleged activities considered blasphemous or religiously insulting. A number of them have death sentences pending or are in the process of appeal and others have been sentenced to life in prison for violation of Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

Egypt is another country of particular concern. Eight Copts have been arrested, deprived of their freedom or sentenced to heavy prison terms. Makram Diab and Bishoy Kamel have been sentenced to 6 years in prison; Ayman Youssef Mansour, Gamal Abdu Massoud and Alber Saber to 3 years. Demyana Ebeid Abd El Nour has been released after 19 days of detention after paying a fine of more than 10,000 EUR. Last but not least, two minors aged 9 and 10 are currently in a juvenile detention center.

In **Indonesia**, three people charged of blasphemy are in prison. Andreas Guntur and Tajul Muluk, both Shia Muslims, have respectively been sentenced to 4 and 2 years in prison. Antonius Richmond Bawengean, a Christian sentenced in 2011, is serving a five-year prison term.

In **Iran**, a Zoroastrian named Pouria Shahpari is serving a 2 ½ prison term but he had previously received 74 lashes.

In **Saudi Arabia**, Hamza Kashgari, a Muslim, was accused of blasphemy because of a tweet deemed insulting to the Prophet. In February 2012, he fled to Malaysia but after a few days he was deported back to his country.

In **Tanzania**, Eva Abdallah was sentenced to 2 years in prison for allegedly urinating on a Quran.

In **Tunisia**, Jabeur Mejri is serving a 7 ½ year prison term for publishing caricatures of the Prophet.

In **Turkey**, Sevan Nisanyan, a writer and philologist, has received a 13-month prison sentence in a legal case initiated against him. If this verdict is confirmed by the Court of Appeals, he will go to jail. In 2004, Sevan Nisanyan received the Freedom of Thought Award from Turkey's Human Rights Association.

On 24 June 2013, the Council of the European Union adopted the Guidelines on the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Religion or Belief and said the EU will

- recall at all appropriate occasions that laws that criminalize blasphemy restrict expression concerning religious or other beliefs; that they are often applied so as to persecute, mistreat, or intimidate persons belonging to religious or other minorities, and that they can have a serious inhibiting effect on freedom of expression and on freedom of religion or belief; and recommend the decriminalisation of such offences.
- forcefully advocate against the use of the death penalty, physical punishment, or deprivation of liberty as penalties for blasphemy.

HRWF Int'l director, Willy Fautré, said: "Throughout 2013, HRWF will use and update this list of 'blasphemy prisoners' in its contributions to the EU Human Rights Dialogues with the concerned countries."

For more information, contact Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l:
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Bigotry against Jews and Muslims on the rise, says US

BBC News (20.05.2013) - Discrimination against Jews and Muslims is on the rise around the world, according to an annual US Department of State report.

The findings for 2012 spoke of an increase in anti-Islamic sentiment in Europe and Asia.

It also said there was growing anti-Semitism, especially in Venezuela, Egypt and Iran.

As he unveiled the report, US Secretary of State John Kerry appointed a new special envoy on anti-Semitism.

Ira Foreman was named to replace Michael Kozak in the role, which was first created in 2004.

Mr Foreman was in charge of appealing to Jewish voters on behalf of President Barack Obama ahead of last November's election.

Apostasy laws

The [International Religious Freedom Report](#), released on Monday, noted that in Egypt, anti-Semitic sentiment in the media sometimes included Holocaust denial or glorification.

It also mentioned an incident on 19 October when Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi said "amen" to a religious leader's call upon Allah to "destroy the Jews and their supporters".

Government-controlled media in Venezuela, meanwhile, had published numerous anti-Semitic statements, including in opposition to a Catholic presidential candidate with Jewish ancestors.

The report also noted the Iranian government's frequent denunciations of Judaism.

"Even well into the 21st Century, traditional forms of anti-Semitism, such as conspiracy theories, use of the discredited myth of 'blood libel' and cartoons demonizing Jews continued to flourish," the report said.

It found that Muslims faced new restrictions in Belgium, which had banned face-covering religious attire in classrooms.

The report also raised concern at the restricting of headscarves in schools in Mangalore, India.

A section on Burma highlighted sustained violence and discrimination against Rohingya Muslims. The report was released as Burmese President Thein Sein met Mr Obama in the White House.

It also highlighted the targeting of Islamic minorities in majority Muslim countries.

There had been rising violence against Shia and Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan, discrimination against non-Sunni Muslims in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and the arrest and harassment of Sunni Muslims in Iran, the report said.

Mr Kerry said the findings also pointed to a rise in apostasy laws, which he said were frequently used to repress dissent or settle personal vendettas.

The report cites the example of a mentally disabled Christian girl who was jailed for over a month in Pakistan on blasphemy charges until she was freed amid domestic and international condemnation.

The report also found:

- Russia brought extremism charges against members of minority religious groups in order to restrict their right to assembly
- Two credible reports from Sudan that the authorities had razed churches
- Maldives officials had been pressuring citizens to conform to a stricter interpretation of Islamic practice

As he unveiled the report in Washington DC, Mr Kerry acknowledged that America's own record was not perfect, but said religious freedom was a "universal value".

"The freedom to profess and practise one's faith - to believe or not to believe, or to change one's beliefs - that is a birthright of every human being," he said.

"I urge all countries, especially those identified in this report, to take action now to safeguard this fundamental freedom."

A distressing map of religious freedom around the world

Washington Post (03.05.2013) - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has [issued a report](#) highlighting those it calls the worst violators of religious freedom in the world. Among them are many Asian and Middle Eastern governments, although some Western European countries are also included.

The report from the bipartisan advisory body divides violators into three categories. Fifteen "tier 1" nations, marked red on the above map, have committed "particularly severe" violations that are "systemic, ongoing and egregious." That includes all the countries you'd expect, as well as a few worsening problem areas, such as Egypt and Nigeria. The "tier 2" countries are said to be "on the threshold" of meeting tier 1 status and include states that might have serious problems but, often, are at least making an effort to address them. A small third category of nations under "monitoring" for violations includes, among other states, some in Western Europe.

The report isn't just about documenting abuses: The tier 1 countries can be officially designated as "countries of particular concern" by the U.S. State Department, at which

point the president is legally required to follow up with some sort of action, recommended by the report. It might suggest, for example, engaging with Burmese civil society groups to promote tolerance or working with Pakistani lawmakers to improve legislation.

As the report itself notes, though, "in practice, the flexibility provided in IRFA has been underutilized. Generally, no new Presidential actions pursuant to CPC designations have been levied, with the State Department instead relying on pre-existing sanctions." In other words, the red countries are usually already under some kind of trade restriction or sanction, which the president can use to say that he's already meeting the commission's requirements. In some cases, the president uses a waiver to avoid punishing countries that are important to U.S. foreign policy, such as Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan.

The tier 1 countries are typically cited for state-sponsored or state-enforced religious discrimination, such as China's suppression of Tibetan Buddhists or Iran's "prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accuse." In the case of some countries, such as Egypt, the sins were those of omission: "In many cases, the government failed or was slow to protect religious minorities from violence. This violence and the failure to convict those responsible continued to foster a climate of impunity."

The report explains, in excruciating detail, the larger trends and worst incidents that motivated its categorizations. In Burma, for example, it finds, "In the past year, over 1,000 Rohingya [Muslims] have been killed, their villages and religious structures destroyed, and women raped during attacks." It also notes: "It is almost impossible for Muslims to obtain building permits for either mosques or schools and unlicensed venues are regularly closed or destroyed. The government has, in recent years, ordered the destructions of mosques, religious centers, and schools."

Tier 2 countries are cited for less systemic but still serious violations, or for systemic refusals to improve religious freedoms. Russia, for example, is cited for exploiting "anti-extremism" laws to restrict groups, such as Jehovah's Witness and some Muslim groups, that do not have any record of advocating or using violence. The report praises India for curtailing large-scale communal violence against religious minorities, but chides Indian officials for refusing to further investigate past incidents.

The third category of countries being "monitored" also lists, somewhat vaguely, "Western Europe." The section explaining its inclusion, though, overwhelmingly focuses on three countries: France, Belgium and the Netherlands, all of which are cited for "increasing restrictions on, and efforts to restrict, various forms of religious expression." In practice, this often seems to mean the religious expression of Muslims. Laws against traditional Muslim clothing or circumcision, for example, or over-broad hate speech laws are "creating a growing atmosphere of intimidation against certain forms of religious activity in Western Europe. These restrictions also seriously limit social integration and educational and employment opportunities for the individuals affected."

The report also discusses a trend in Japan it calls "kidnapping and forced religious de-conversion." Although Japan is not included in any of the watch-list categories, and this section praises the Japanese government in general for its religious freedom, the trend is about as alarming as its name implies:

Over the past several decades, thousands of individuals belonging to the Unification Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and other new religious movements (NRMs) have been kidnapped by their families in an effort to force them to renounce their chosen beliefs. In some extreme cases, as with Unification Church member Toro Goto, individuals were confined against their will for a decade or more. Those abducted describe psychological

harassment and physical abuse by both family members and “professional deprogrammers.” Police and judicial authorities have neither investigated nor indicted those responsible for these acts, often citing lack of evidence.

Some readers, particularly those from countries highlighted in the map above, may wonder why the report includes nothing on the United States, which has seen some local and state-level movements to expel or suppress mosques or other forms of public worship by Muslims. And it’s a fair question. Alas, the commission exists to make recommendations to the U.S. State Department, which of course does not have oversight over the United States. Still, fairly or not, U.S. representatives who seek to promote religious freedom abroad risk having their advice deflected because some Tennessee officials [tried to block](#) construction of a mosque. If nothing else, it’s a reminder that religious freedom is an ongoing process as well as a state of being.

Update: Irony of ironies, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was itself accused of bias in 2010. [As the Washington Post’s Michelle Boorstein reported at the time:](#)

Some past commissioners, staff and former staff of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom say the agency charged with advising the president and Congress is rife, behind-the-scenes, with ideology and tribalism, with commissioners focusing on pet projects that are often based on their own religious background. In particular, they say an anti-Muslim bias runs through the commission’s work– a charge denied by its chairman, Leonard Leo.

“I don’t know of any other organization who defends as many Muslims in the world as we do,” said Leo, who was appointed to the commission by President George W. Bush in 2007.

Nevertheless, the commission was hit this fall with an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint filed by a former policy analyst, Safiya Ghori-Ahmad, who alleges that her contract was canceled because of her Muslim faith and her affiliation with a Muslim advocacy group.

Boorstein’s story also notes, “From the start, critics say, the commission has disproportionately focused its efforts on the persecution of Christians, while too often ignoring other religious communities and downplaying their claims of persecution.”

USCIRF’s 2013 annual report on the state of international religious freedom identifies world’s worst violators

USCIRF (30.04.2013) - The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), an independent federal advisory body created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) to monitor religious freedom abuses abroad, today released its [2013 Annual Report](#). The Report highlights the status of religious freedom globally and identifies those governments that are the most egregious violators.

“The state of international religious freedom is increasingly dire due to the presence of forces that fuel instability. These forces include the rise of violent religious extremism coupled with the actions and inactions of governments. Extremists target religious minorities and dissenters from majority religious communities for violence, including

physical assaults and even murder. Authoritarian governments also repress religious freedom through intricate webs of discriminatory rules, arbitrary requirements and draconian edicts," said Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, USCIRF's Chair.

The 2013 Annual Report recommends that the Secretary of State re-designate the following eight nations as "countries of particular concern" or CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF finds that seven other countries meet the CPC threshold and should be so designated: Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

"The Annual Report ultimately is about people and how their governments treat them. Violations affect members of diverse religious communities around the world, be they Rohingya Muslims in Burma, Coptic Christians in Egypt, Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong in China, Baha'is in Iran, Ahmadis and Christians in Pakistan, or Muslims in Islamic countries such as Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan and in non-Muslim nations like Russia. We recommend that the White House adopt a whole-of-government strategy to guide U.S. religious freedom promotion and that Secretary of State Kerry promptly designate CPCs, before currently designated actions expire later this year," said Lantos Swett.

In Burma, ongoing political reforms have yet to significantly improve the situation for freedom of religion and belief. Sectarian violence and severe abuses of religious freedom and human dignity targeting ethnic minority Christians and Muslims continue to occur with impunity.

In Egypt, despite some progress during a turbulent political transition, the government has failed or been slow to protect from violence religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians. The government continues to prosecute, convict, and imprison individuals for "contempt" or "defamation" of religion, and the new constitution includes several problematic provisions relevant to religious freedom.

In both Pakistan and Nigeria, religious extremism and impunity have factored into unprecedented levels of violence that threaten the long-term viability of both nations. Targeted violence against Shi'i Muslims in Pakistan is pervasive, while repeated Boko Haram attacks in Nigeria exacerbate sectarian tensions.

"Many of these countries top the U.S. foreign policy agenda, and religion is a core component in their makeup. Successful U.S. foreign policy recognizes the critical role religious freedom plays in each of these nations and prioritizes accordingly. Religious freedom is both a pivotal human right under international law and a key factor that helps determine whether a nation experiences stability or chaos," said Lantos Swett.

USCIRF also announced the placement of eight nations on its Tier 2 List for 2013. The Tier 2 category replaces the Watch List designation USCIRF previously used. These nations are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos and Russia. USCIRF found the violations these governments engage in or tolerate are particularly severe, and meet at least one criterion, but not all, of IRFA's three-fold "systematic, ongoing, egregious" CPC standard.

In Russia, religious freedom conditions suffered major setbacks in the context of growing human rights abuses. In Indonesia, the country's rich tradition of religious tolerance and pluralism is seriously threatened by arrests of individuals the government considers religiously deviant and violence perpetrated by extremist groups. Federal and provincial officials, police, courts, and religious leaders often tolerate and abet the conduct of religious freedom abusers.

The USCIRF report also highlights the status of religious freedom in countries/regions that do not meet the Tier 1 (CPC) or Tier 2 threshold. These include: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Ethiopia, Turkey, Venezuela and Western Europe. The Annual Report also addresses in-depth thematic issues: Constitutional Changes; Severe Religious Freedom Violations by Non-State Actors; Laws against Blasphemy and Defamation of Religions; Imprisonment of Conscientious Objectors; Legal Retreat from Religious Freedom in Post-Communist Countries; Kidnapping and Forced Religious De-Conversion in Japan; and Religious Freedom Issues in International Organizations.

About USCRIF

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government advisory body with its commissioners appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in Congress. The 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) requires that the United States annually designate as CPCs countries whose governments have engaged in or tolerated systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of the universal right to freedom of religion or belief. IRFA also tasks USCIRF with assessing conditions in these and other countries and making recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress.

In accordance with IRFA, USCIRF uses international standards, as found in UN conventions and declarations, for assessing religious freedom conditions.

Report points to worldwide rise in anti-Semitic incidents

AP (07.04.2013) - Israeli researchers and Jewish leaders on Sunday reported a 30 percent jump in anti-Semitic violence and vandalism last year, topped by a deadly school shooting in France, and expressed alarm about the rise of far-right parties in Hungary, Greece and other countries.

Following a two-year decline in the figures, the annual report on worldwide anti-Semitic incidents recorded 686 attacks in 34 countries, ranging from physical violence to vandalism of synagogues and cemeteries, compared to 526 in 2011. The report was issued at Tel Aviv University, in cooperation with the European Jewish Congress, an umbrella group representing Jewish communities across Europe.

The report linked the March 2012 shooting at a Jewish school in Toulouse, where an extremist Muslim gunman killed four, to a series of copycat attacks, particularly in France, where physical assaults on Jews almost doubled.

RECOMMENDED: How much do you know about Israel? Take the quiz

Researchers who presented the report at the university on Sunday said they had also found a direct correlation between the strengthening of extreme right-wing parties in some European countries and high levels of anti-Semitic incidents, as well as attacks on other minorities and immigrants.

They said Europe's economic crisis was fueling the success of parties like Jobbik in Hungary, Golden Dawn in Greece and Svoboda in Ukraine.

Moshe Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress, called for strong action by the European Union, charging that governments — particularly Hungary — were not doing enough to curb these parties' activities and protect minorities.

"Neo-Nazis have been once again legalized in Europe, they are openly sitting in parliaments," said Moshe Kantor, the president of the European Jewish Congress.

Golden Dawn swept into Greece's parliament for the first time in June on an anti-immigrant platform. The party rejects the neo-Nazi label but is fond of Nazi literature and references. In Hungary, a Jobbik lawmaker has called for Jews to be screened as potential security risks. The leader of Ukraine's Svoboda denies his party is anti-Semitic but has repeatedly used derogatory terms to refer to Jews.

The report by the university's Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry found little correlation between the increase of anti-Semitic attacks and Israel's military operation in Gaza in November. While there was a spike in incidents at the time, it was much smaller in number and intensity than the one that followed the Toulouse attack, said Roni Stauber, the chief researcher on the project.

"This shows that the desire to harm Jews is deeply rooted among extremist Muslims and right-wingers, regardless of events in the Middle East," he said.

The release of the report was timed to coincide with Israel's Holocaust Remembrance Day, which was starting Sunday at sundown.

Baroness Warsi addresses Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Summit

Baroness Warsi speaks about freedom of religion or belief and the hope for honest, open and frank dialogue between countries. Originally given at Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Summit in Cairo. This is the text of the speech as drafted, which may differ slightly from the delivered version.

UK FCO (07.02.2013) - Speaking at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation Summit in Cairo Foreign Office Minister Baroness Warsi said:

"Your Majesties, your excellencies, it is a pleasure to speak at this OIC Heads of State meeting – and a privilege that I'm the first British Government Minister to do so.

I am delighted to be here in Egypt, which among many other things is the home of Al Azhar, the 'Manaratul 'Ilm' for many Muslims across the world. I was deeply honoured to have met his Eminence the Shaykh Al Azhar yesterday and His Holiness Pope Tawadros II today.

The invitation to speak here is a clear demonstration of the strengthening bonds between the OIC and the UK. I am grateful to our hosts, Egypt, who have of course taken over the OIC's presidency this year.

I said at the meeting of OIC Foreign Ministers in Kazakhstan in 2011 that we in Britain are deeply committed to building our relationships with the Muslim world.

I am particularly pleased that we were able to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with the OIC at the UN General Assembly in September.

This would not have been possible without the tireless efforts of His Excellency Secretary-General Ihsanoglu – whom I am sure you will agree has steered the OIC

towards being a relevant and important player on international issues, and whom I personally consider to be a friend.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

We have heard today about many important issues. But I want to focus on one. One which threads into so much of what we have discussed. One which is in itself a challenge, but that if we get right, will unlock solutions to so many other challenges we face.

That issue is Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Islamophobia

Now, I know that the OIC has for many years been concerned about the scourge of Islamophobia, or anti-Muslim hatred, and other hate speech.

As a practising British Muslim, as a proud member of a minority faith in a majority Christian nation, and as a Government Minister, I am also deeply concerned about this issue. But concern alone will not bridge divides.

The question is, how do we address this scourge? How do we defeat it?

I believe that the answer is to tackle religious intolerance head-on where and when it occurs, and to protect the rights of all in society.

UK experience

In the UK we have sought to do exactly that. We legislate against incitement to hatred on the basis of religion or belief, be it behaviour that is anti-Muslim or intolerant of any other religion or belief. But legislation is not the only answer. While incitement to religious hatred remains an offence in Britain, a blasphemy law once on our statute book was abolished in 2008 – in part because we felt it was incompatible with the freedom of speech.

To truly achieve societies that are founded on tolerance and acceptance, on love and understanding, we need more than just legislation. We need to nurture these values, to engrain them into the way we look at the world.

There are no short-cuts here. It requires patience and time, sometimes a generation or two.

So in the UK we are seeking to combat negative media stereotypes...

To develop resources for teachers [...] to support victims [...] and to improve hate crime reporting.

Building a pluralistic society

But it's not just about dealing with incidents when they arise. If we want to truly defeat this scourge we must put in place the building blocks that support a pluralistic society based on tolerance and inclusion.

A society where respect for the right to Freedom of Religion or Belief is universal.

One in which people are free to make the basic choices of how they decide to live their daily lives.

Those choices might include whether to be guided by one faith or another, or no faith at all...Whether to go to a church, a mosque or a temple...Whether to wear a cross around their neck, or to cover their head with a hijab or a kippah...Whether to read the Bible, the Torah or the Quran [...] or to send their child to a religious school or keep a religiously-proscribed diet.

In short, this is all about real life. It is about the choices that people across the world, myself included, make every day.

Over the past two years, people across this region have taken to the streets calling for dignity, for freedom, for jobs [...] demand for basic rights.

And of these, the Freedom of Religion or Belief is absolutely fundamental; a universal right for all.

And yet people across the world are still denied this basic freedom. They can be victimised or unfairly imprisoned simply for having a religion or belief, and some pay with their lives. For me, being a Muslim is about humanity.

I believe that human rights underpin Islamic values, and that those rights are not limited to a specific religious belief or ethnic grouping.

This is what motivates me to speak as passionately as I do about the rights of Christians, Jews and others of faith, or indeed of no faith – as I do about the rights of fellow Muslims. The basic duty of governments is to provide security for their people. That responsibility can have no exceptions.

So if there is just one message that I hope you will take back from my contribution, it is the universality of Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Your Excellencies, some peddle the notion that people of different faiths and beliefs cannot co-exist peacefully, with respect for each other's views.

This misguided notion is held in the West, as it is in the East. Some use political ideology to justify this viewpoint...others use extremist religious views.

But I reject that notion. I reject it because history tells us otherwise, and I reject it because of my own experience.

The UK's culture of tolerance

The UK is by no means perfect. But I am proud of its culture of religious tolerance; of its position as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious state.

It is a country in which people have traditionally been confident of their nation's Christian heritage and cultural identity. That confidence, together with a history of freedom of speech, has I believe made Britons open to the identities and religions of others.

So yes, I accept that there are challenges in tackling this problem, and that overcoming them is not easy. But I have seen through my own experience that in Britain we are rising to them.

Consider this simple question: in how many other countries could someone like me, the daughter of a poor Muslim immigrant, rise to a seat at the Government Cabinet table?

I believe that we can build consensus and lead efforts to influence cultural norms in our countries in support of religious tolerance. Tolerance between religions, but also tolerance within religions.

UNHRC Resolution 16/18 and the January Ministerial

And the foundation has already been laid.

UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18 on combating religious intolerance, now under the umbrella of the Istanbul process, provides a strong basis from which to work. UN member states have all jointly signed up to a call to action to implement the resolution.

But what we need is greater political will.

Since the meeting in Istanbul in 2011, the discussions and debates on this agenda had only taken place within UN fora or among experts. I felt that we needed to go further.

Two weeks ago I hosted a high-level meeting in London on this very issue. I was delighted that His Excellency Secretary-General Ihsanoglu was able to join us, along with Ministers from Canada, Pakistan, the United States and representatives from a wide spread of other countries.

I hope that the discussions we had in London will be the beginning of this dialogue. A dialogue in which we speak with confidence and openness, learning from one another and sharing best practice about how we have tackled these issues in our own countries.

I am grateful that His Excellency the Secretary-General has agreed to host the next meeting as part of the Istanbul process.

This is important, because an honest, open and frank dialogue on Freedom of Religion or Belief and tackling religious intolerance is something we must sustain.

Conclusion

Your Excellencies, we live in an interconnected world; one in which we can communicate more quickly and over greater distances than we have ever been able to in our history.

I believe that it is outdated to view this world through the prism of Christians in the West and Muslims in the East. This is simplistic and historically untrue.

Solutions that accept the reality of the pluralistic nature of our nations – long-term solutions – may well be led by Christians in the East and Muslims in the West. By people of faith across the world. Because, like the OIC, I don't accept that religion is constrained by national boundaries.

We need to continue to span these boundaries, to build a better future for our people.

It is why as a Muslim from the West, representing the United Kingdom, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be invited to speak and be allowed to play a small part in reaching out to better understanding."

Blasphemy laws: Double standards from the European Commission

EU Commissioner Reding responsible for justice, fundamental rights and citizenship, answered Parliamentary Questions on blasphemy laws within the European Union

European Humanist Federation (10.01.2013) -

Questions:

By MEPS Sophia in 't Veld (ALDE) , Joanna Senyszyn (S&D) , Cornelis de Jong (GUE/NGL) , Marietje Schaake (ALDE)

"The recent wave of violence in the Muslim world following the online posting of a video depicting Mohammed has led numerous EU leaders to defend freedom of expression and opinion against accusations of blasphemy. At the same time, in the EU, some Member States still have and implement blasphemy laws, as demonstrated by the recent arrest of a 27-year-old man by the Greek authorities(1) and the prosecution of an artist by the Spanish authorities for a work he produced decades ago(2).

The Venice Commission, in its report of 23 October 2010, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, in its Recommendation 1805 (2007) of 29 June 2007, pointed out that blasphemy laws are still in place in a minority of EU Member States (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Italy, Ireland and the Netherlands) and are rarely implemented, and that something similar to blasphemy — 'religious insult' — is still an offence in a large number of Member States (Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia). Both the Venice Commission and the Parliamentary Assembly recommended abolishing the offences of blasphemy and of insult to religious feelings, in view of Articles 10 (freedom of expression) and 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion) of the ECHR(3), which are also mirrored in Articles 11 and 10 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Article 20(2) of the ICCPR stipulates that 'any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law'.

1. Does the Commission consider that laws against blasphemy and religious insult are contrary to freedom of expression?
2. Does the Commission consider that the arrest and conviction of EU citizens on charges of blasphemy is compatible with the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights?
3. Does the Commission call for the abolition of blasphemy laws in its external policies?
4. Will the Commission advocate a worldwide ban on blasphemy laws within international organisations such as the UN?
5. How will the Commission ensure that freedom of expression cannot be restricted by laws against blasphemy and religious insult both within and outside the EU?

Answer by Ms Reding on behalf of the European Commission:

"The Commission refers to its answer to Written Questions E-001542/2008 and E-003725/2009[1]. **Freedom of expression constitutes one of the essential foundations of our democratic societies**, enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and the European Convention on Human Rights. However, according to Article 51 (1) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, its provisions are addressed to the Member States only when they are implementing Union law. **When enacting or maintaining national blasphemy laws the Member States concerned do not act in the course of implementation of EU law. In that matter it is thus for these Member States alone to ensure that their obligations regarding fundamental rights – as resulting from international agreements and from their internal legislation – are respected.**

As regards the **EU's external policy**, the Council expressed in its November 2009 conclusions its deep concern that in countries that have legislation on defamation of religions, such legislation has often been used to mistreat religious minorities and to limit freedom of expression and freedom of religion or belief. The Council furthermore underlined that **no restrictions in the name of religion may be placed on those rights and that religion may never be used to justify or condone the restriction or violation of individual rights.**"

[1] <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/plenary/en/parliamentary-questions.html>
