

The Imperative of Protecting Religious Liberty

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Religious liberty long has been called the first freedom. This essential liberty is under attack around the world.

Every faith suffers. Jews are the chief historic victim, the favored scapegoat of failed regimes everywhere, and the target of the most monstrous persecution ever, the Nazi Holocaust. Christians and Muslims suffer too, sometimes at the hands of their coreligionists. And smaller faiths seen as out of the mainstream, including Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unificationists, and Yazidis, also are often targeted.

Moreover, for officials charged with the conduct of nations and governments, religious liberty is like the famed "canary in the mine," the violation of which warns us of impending danger elsewhere.

Governments which refuse to protect us as we seek God -- or otherwise address the transcendent -- are unlikely to protect us as we exercise our conscience in other ways.

Although we rightly think of persecution in terms of government action -- closing churches, arresting believers, banning faiths -- that is only the most visible enemy of religious liberty. Hateful, intolerant, and violent cultures often reinforce political oppression, with believers facing personal discrimination, legal attack, family breakup, and even mob assaults.

A wide variety of states trample upon this most important form of freedom of conscience. Open Doors lists 11 nations as perpetrating "extreme" persecution. For instance, this year the tally is led by Afghanistan. After the allied departure, the Taliban took full control. Among the chief victims have been Ahmadis and Christians.

Next comes the long-time persecution leader, North Korea. What amounts to a communist monarchy has demanded that its citizens worship a succession of leaders, variously termed "great," "dear," or "supreme."

Somalia and Libya come next, two Muslim nations in which governments have effectively dissolved and terrorists are active. Number five is Yemen, a country suffering from years of war between intolerant insurgents and invaders, the latter from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Next is Eritrea, a totalitarian state oft-called the North Korea of Africa. Which is not meant as a compliment.

Nigeria, an African nation evenly divided by religion, follows, with extremist Muslim groups attacking Christians and moderate Muslims. At number eight is Pakistan, a Taliban refuge where infamous blasphemy laws have often been used against Christians. Iran follows, where anyone other than a Shiite Muslim is at risk. Bahais suffer particularly badly.

Next is India, soon to have the world's largest population. Its government is driven by Hindu nationalism, with Muslims and Christians suffering persecution around the country. Majority Sunni Saudi Arabia brings up the rear. Shia Muslims are barely tolerated. No temple, synagogue, or church for any other faith is allowed.

The list of serious oppressors extends well beyond these 11. Myanmar/Burma, Sudan, Iraq, Syria, Maldives, China, Qatar, Vietnam, and Egypt fill out the worst 20. And there are more, many more after them. Exact circumstances vary, but in all religious minorities at least, and in some cases all people of faith, suffer. Their shared crime is looking beyond politics and political leaders for meaning and purpose.

There have been incidents in the United States, despite its welcome role in standing against persecution worldwide. Attacks on religious liberty also have occurred in Australia, Canada, and across Europe, as well as recently in Japan. Even supposedly liberal societies sometimes demonstrate hostility and intolerance toward faith, and especially toward beliefs seen as different and out of the mainstream.

The latter are the religions that most need to be protected. A majority faith whose adherents dominate society and government faces little danger. Outliers and outcasts are far more vulnerable, victims of ignorance and bias as well as general antipathy toward religion.

Governments which proclaim their commitment to respect the lives and dignity of all must respect the religious faith and commitment of all. They have an obligation to model the behavior which they demand of others. Protecting everyone, including the most vulnerable, is essential for believers and unbelievers alike. Religious liberty is the bedrock upon which all our other liberties rest.