

# Persecution of Christians Today

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## Abstract

The majority of Christians live in a situation of religious freedom in democracies. Has Christianity become a major focus of persecution? Yes, approximately 10% of them live as minorities in an ever growing hostile environment. By exploring ten factors behind the persecution of Christians, the article shows that persecution is a complex phenomenon. The article discusses the major reasons for persecution of Christians and sees religious fundamentalism—defined as a militant truth claim—in the major world religions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, as the major reason for the growing number of Christians being killed and churches being destroyed. The four other reasons are religious nationalism, the displacement from Islamic countries of long-established Christian churches, limitations on freedom of religion, and the special price paid by converts from Islam and Hinduism. A take away from this article is that while individual Christians ought not to retaliate, Christians around the world should hold governments in which persecution occurs accountable.

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Parts of this article were delivered as the opening lecture of the “Congress on Persecution of Christians Today,” on October 23, 2011 under the title, “Current Developments Relating to the Persecution of Christians around the World: What Can Be Done in Politics, by the Media, and by Churches against Fundamentalist Violence.” Sections of this article were published in German: Thomas Schirmacher, “Religionsfreiheit und Christenverfolgung,” *Evangelische Verantwortung* 3+4 (2013): 6, 8–11. Online: [http://www.cdu-admin.de/image/magazine/pdf/23\\_2\\_4\\_201314\\_47\\_21ev\\_34\\_13\\_web.pdf](http://www.cdu-admin.de/image/magazine/pdf/23_2_4_201314_47_21ev_34_13_web.pdf).

## I. Christianity: The Most Persecuted Religion?

The German *Spiegel* magazine recently ran an article with the title “Merkel at the Church Assembly: ‘Christianity Is the Most Persecuted Religion,’” upon the occasion of the German Chancellor’s words of greeting at the Fall Synod of the Protestant Church in Germany.<sup>1</sup> Many newspapers and commentaries were indignant. And the indignation about Angela Merkel’s statement appeared for many to be greater than that about the persecution of Christians itself. I would have at least expected statements such as: “Indeed, the persecution of Christians is widespread around the world, and there are far too many Christians who die, but one should also think about ...” Further, one is left with the impression that the reaction would have been different if another religion besides Christianity had been mentioned.

Above all, I disagree with the argument that such a statement is not permissible because it disparages other religions or implies that their persecution is less serious. When we say that the abuse of women is more frequent than the abuse of men, we are not saying that the abuse of men is a good thing! Whoever observes that Jewish graves are more frequently desecrated does not thus find desecration of other graves to be a good thing or a less severe matter. And if there are rankings for democracy, freedom of the press, corruption, racism, hostility towards women and their victims, then why not for religious freedom and related victims? In my book *Racism*, I document that globally the most widespread forms of racism are forms of racism against Jews, Sinti and Roma, and against dark-skinned individuals.<sup>2</sup> However, in so doing I am not lessening expressions of racism towards others. “Every persecuted individual suffers regardless of which religion he belongs to,” stated Wenzel Michalski, the head of Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Germany.<sup>3</sup> And in the newspaper *Die Welt*, it was recently stated that the German Federal Government should work for the protection of all threatened minorities. But this German administration is doing that more than practically any other government in the world! At a recent German Federal Parliament debate (*Bundestag*), I sat in the official visitors’ gallery among Baha’i, Alevites, and Sufis who were thankful for the debate.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Angela Merkel, “Grusswort [5. November 2012],” *EKD Geschäftsstelle der Synode* 20.7 (2012): 2; [http://www.ekd.de/download/s12\\_grusswort\\_merkel.pdf](http://www.ekd.de/download/s12_grusswort_merkel.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *Rassismus alte Vorurteile und neue Erkenntnisse* (Holzgerlingen: Hänssler, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in “Befremdung über Merkels Äußerung zu verfolgten Christen,” *Die Welt* (11.06.2012), <http://www.welt.de/newsticker/news3/article110703364/Befremdung-ueber-Merkels-Aeusserung-zu-verfolgten-Christen.html>.

The German Chancellor Angela Merkel correctly stated in her welcoming words at the Synod that the global situation of religious freedom can generally be described as serious and also clearly stated that religious freedom is to be protected in Germany and around the world as an essential human right.<sup>4</sup> Whoever accuses the Chancellor of only wanting to protect Christians did not listen to her when she spoke at the Synod or any other time.

As far as I am able to tell, no one has said that her statements are generally untrue. A number of people have said—and that would come closer to the truth—that we do not have enough data and that we should be more cautious regarding the available data. For example, I myself have used scientific arguments to contradict the oft mentioned number of 100,000 Christian martyrs worldwide—this number is supposedly five to ten times too high. However, whoever doubts the statements made by the Chancellor should not critique her statement but rather the specialists and studies she references.

For instance, one could look at the new comprehensive study entitled *Christianophobia* by Rupert Shortt.<sup>5</sup> One could take the August 2011 report of the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life, “Rising Restrictions on Religion,” according to which no religion experiences more oppression in more countries than Christianity, namely in 130 countries; the updates for 2012 and 2013 give even higher numbers.<sup>6</sup> One could look at publications of the International Institute for Religious Freedom. While it is indeed Evangelical in its orientation, its accredited specialist journal, the *International Journal of Religious Freedom*, has authors from all religions as well as non-religious researchers who publish in it.

I may have made a contribution to this debate since in 2010 my keynote speech at the 47th Federal Annual Meeting of the Protestant Working Group of the CDU/CSU (the CDU is Mrs. Merkel’s party) was entitled “Persecution and Discrimination of Christians in the 21st Century.”<sup>7</sup> Before my presentation, the German Chancellor gave a clear indication of support for religious freedom and expressed opposition to the persecution of Christians. I made similar statements that I still stand by. Moreover, the

<sup>4</sup> Merkel, “Grusswort [5. November 2012],” 2.

<sup>5</sup> Rupert Shortt, *Christianophobia: A Faith under Attack* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). See also John L. Allen’s *The Global War on Christians: Dispatches from the Front Lines of Anti-Christian Persecution* (New York: Images, 2013) or Paul Marshall, Lela Gilbert, and Nina Shea, *Persecuted: The Global Assault on Christians* (Nashville: Nelson, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See “Rising Restrictions on Religion—One-Third of the World’s Population Experiences an Increase,” August 9, 2011; <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/08/09/rising-restrictions-on-religion2/>.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, “Verfolgung und Diskriminierung von Christen im 21. Jahrhundert,” *Evangelische Verantwortung* 11+12 (2010): 5–10; [http://www.cdu-admin.de/image/magazine/pdf/5\\_10\\_11\\_201013\\_54\\_16ev\\_11\\_12\\_web\\_281010.pdf](http://www.cdu-admin.de/image/magazine/pdf/5_10_11_201013_54_16ev_11_12_web_281010.pdf).

data that has been amassed on the state of religious freedom in the last three years reinforce my position. For that reason, I would like to briefly sketch the salient points.

## **II. *Christianity on the Sunny Side and on the Dark Side of Religious Freedom***

Christianity enjoys the sunny side of religious freedom more than the other major world religions, but the same applies to the dark side. No other major religious community has such a high percentage of members who live in a realm of religious freedom. That is natural, given that almost all earlier “Christian” nations, i.e., nations with a majority Christian population, now grant religious freedom and that most of them are functioning democracies. An exception to the rule is seen in a number of Orthodox countries that find themselves in midfield between democracy and an autocratic state. For that reason, religious freedom is partially limited even if no one dies there for his or her faith.

On the other hand, no other large religious community is continually affected by harassment, even to the degree of threats to life and limb. And even among the smaller religions there are only a few that have comparable percentages. For instance, there are the Baha’i, who largely owe their persecution to their location in Iran and their strong expansion within the Islamic world, or the Jehovah’s Witnesses, whose conscientious objection to military service has led to their imprisonment in many places. And even for them, the percentage of adherents *killed* does not seem to be higher than for Christianity at large.

Recently, the Pew Foundation, located in Washington, has brought together all available international surveys on religious freedom.<sup>8</sup> In the process, they came to results similar to that of the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom, likewise located in Washington, and our International Institute for Religious Freedom: In 64 countries around the world, i.e., one third of all countries, there is no religious freedom or only very limited religious freedom. Unfortunately, these 64 countries account for two-thirds or, more precisely, 70% of the world population. There were 24 countries involved where armed conflict resulted in more than 1,000 deaths and where religious affiliation played a central role. As a result, there have been 18 million refugees worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See “Restrictions on Religion,” in *PewResearchCenter: Religion & Public Life*; last update (February 26, 2015); <http://www.pewforum.org/topics/restrictions-on-religion/pages/3/>.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. <http://www.hudson.org/topics/51-religious-freedom> and the IIRF Reports, and <http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=436&L=0>.

Let us look more closely at the 64 countries with respect to the two largest world religions: Only in India is a large number of Muslims living in a non-Muslim country with limited religious freedom. Conversely, only in Russia does a large number of Christians live with a limited level of religious freedom in a country where the majority of the population is Russian Orthodox.

If we disregard India and Russia for a moment, the difference between the situation faced by Christians and Muslims quickly becomes apparent: the remaining 700 million Muslims who live in countries with limited religious freedom or no religious freedom live in Islamic countries.

In contrast, the remaining 200 million Christians living in countries with limited religious freedom or no religious freedom live as minorities in non-Christian countries, spread out predominantly over communist countries and Islamic countries (as well as in India).

This means that although Muslims enjoy much less religious freedom than Christians, since most of them live in Muslim countries, they only notice this in those rare cases where they seek to break out of their religion, for instance, if they wish to become atheists or Christians, or if they do not belong to religious orientations tolerated by the state, as was the case for Shiites recently slain in Pakistan.

### **III. *Christian Persecution without Parallel***

In which sense does the frequency and great extent of persecution of Christians justify our focusing especially on them? Is it true that the persecution of Christian minorities around the world has taken on such a magnitude that the sheer numbers involved foist them upon us as far as the question of religious freedom is concerned?

It is at the same time difficult to lump everything in the world together or to define the point at which an individual begins to be persecuted or to suffer discrimination. Does it already occur when an individual is concerned that his or her own church could be set on fire during a worship service, or does it only occur when the church is actually set on fire? Is an individual only persecuted if religion is the sole reason for harassment, or is it also the case when religion is only one factor among many?

Violence against Christians ranges from the murder of nuns in India to the torching of churches in Indonesia, the battering of priests in Egypt, and the torture of a recalcitrant pastor in Vietnam, all the way to children being cast out of their families in Turkey or Sri Lanka if they attend Christian worship services.

Hindu fundamentalism is also directed against Muslims. However, there is hardly a parallel to be found anywhere in the world to the 50,000 affected Christians from the Indian state of Orissa who were driven from their homes in 2008/2009, resulting in the death of 500 people and the displacement of the rest—still living in tents.

There is no parallel in the other world religions to the 100,000 Christians on the Maluka Islands of Indonesia who were displaced by force in 2000/2001 (whereby several thousand deaths occurred). In the Sudan and Nigeria, many Christians likewise died—as complicated as the particular situation might be in these countries at the border between Islam and Christianity in Africa.

There is no parallel in the religious world to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Christians from Iraq between the years 2007 and 2009. Above all, currently, this is continuing unfortunately in Syria. An incredible number of refugees are on the move in the Near East, and there is real danger that Iran and Lebanon will not be able to handle this large number of refugees. This is because this displacement is only one aspect of a larger development. Before our eyes, the share of long-established Oriental and Catholic churches in core Islamic countries is drastically shrinking. Every time I meet with the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church in Istanbul, the number of members of his church in Turkey is smaller, in a country where once millions of Christians lived. The Syrian-Orthodox patriarch reported something similar about Syria to me recently. Moreover, regardless of the outcome of the civil war, Christians in Syria are suffering tremendously, and their future looks dismal. The same is true, but to a lesser degree, about Lebanon. Even in Egypt, the sole core Islamic country in which an Oriental church counts millions of members, the most recent developments point to the end of the centuries long truce with Christians.

Furthermore, practically every day we receive reports from churches that have been set on fire or have been bombed, wherein Christians die. They are seldom from Nepal, Sri Lanka, and India but more frequently from Pakistan and Indonesia and continually, however, from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, or Nigeria. And quite frequently, the number of fatalities lies above 20, occasionally over 50. Such reports also increasingly make their way into the Western media. As far as I know, there is nothing comparable with respect to other religions. At most, the fatalities as a result of inner-Islamic conflicts could be mentioned.

Whoever wants to find comparable dramatic events in history would have to go back to the persecution of Jews in the Third Reich or the bloody turmoil between Hindus and Muslims during the time of the founding of India

and Pakistan or—again, as part of the persecution of Christians—the mass murders conducted by Stalin or Mao.

An additional example illustrates this. In many countries, it is dangerous to leave Islam, regardless of whether one converts to atheism, Baha’i, or forms of Islam that are viewed as sects. However, leaving Islam most frequently occurs in the direction of Christianity. The German magazine *Der Spiegel* has written: “Since the influence of fundamentalists has increased, the pressure on Christian minorities has intensified. The Protestant Church in Germany holds Christians to be the most frequently persecuted faith community in the world. ... Even more threatened than traditional Christians, however, are Muslims who convert to Christianity.” Further, “Apostasy, i.e., falling away from Islam, can be punishable by death according to Islamic law—and in Iran and Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, Mauretania, Pakistan, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia the death penalty still applies.” Remarkably, “The Egyptian Minister of Religion defends the lack of a death penalty for converts from Islam in Egyptian law—because apostasy from Islam is already the equivalent of high treason.”<sup>10</sup>

#### IV. *Why Are Christians So Persecuted?*

In the Sunday issue of the major German newspaper *Die Welt* (June 6, 2006), Till-R. Stoldt commented that “eighty percent of all people persecuted worldwide are Christians. Never before have they been more intensely persecuted. And nowhere are they more often discriminated against than in Islamic countries. Those are the findings of the International Society for Human Rights and the World Evangelical Alliance.” He continues,

No regime in the world wants to be caught shedding blood. Most of the time public critique from a Western government is sufficient to prevent the killing of converts in Iran, Afghanistan, or Nigeria. However, European politicians do not consistently exert their influence, about which promoters of human rights complain. Nevertheless, solidarity with Christians could aid in this clash of cultures, because Muslim and Hindu governments and aid organizations primarily help their own people. This selectivity toward those needing help forces the West to focus on those who are “not worthy” of help. This of course is not a reason to copy such selectivity. Rather, it means that in the future we need to be as deeply involved on behalf of Christians as for Islamic Kurds, Bosnians, Kosovans, or detainees in Guantánamo Bay. Tortured and threatened Christians also turn their hope to Europe because they are slandered and persecuted in Muslim countries as the Western world’s “fifth leg.” However, EU countries ignore this responsibility far more often than the USA does and often refrain from providing full assistance.

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<sup>10</sup> Juliane von Mittelstaedt, Christoph Schult, Daniel Steinvorth, Tholo Thielke, and Volkhard Windfuhr, “Religionen: Geduldeter Hass,” *Der Spiegel* 8 (2010): 96, 99; February 2, 2010; <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-69174713.html>.

We want to ask specifically why it is that Christians are most often affected by religious liberty violations. Reasons for the persecution of Christians are complex, and most often not purely religious. Political, cultural, nationalistic, economic, and personal motives can play an important role. This is even clear in the Old Testament. In the case of Queen Jezebel, hatred for God and his prophets was mixed with a desire for power as well as personal enrichment (1 Kgs 16–19). In John’s Revelation, hatred for the church is accompanied by political and economic reasons. Another example is the artisans, goldsmiths, and silversmiths in Ephesus (Acts 19:23–29), who felt that their welfare was endangered (v. 27) by Paul’s successful proclamation of the gospel and therefore instigated a riot. When the slave owners realized that they would lose revenues after a fortune-telling spirit was driven out of their slave, they had Paul and Silas taken into custody (Acts 16:16–24). Thus, we should be aware that the reasons behind the persecution of Christians or the restriction of religious liberty are often complex and that persecution is entangled with existing problems of the respective culture and society.

Please note that if an adherent of a hated religion and bearer of a hated skin color is tortured, one should not downplay the religious component or the racism involved. Racism and religious hatred are both detestable, and if they occur simultaneously, they have to be fought on both fronts.

After this qualification, let us return to the question of why Christians are so often affected, and in reality affected far above the average, by restrictions of religious liberty.

### **1. Christianity is by far the largest religion in the world.**

For that reason, human rights violations relating to religious affiliation are most common among Christians.

### **2. Christianity is experiencing phenomenal growth around the world, in particular in its evangelical form.**

This increasingly threatens the position of leading religions in numerous countries. There is increasing competition between the two largest world religions, Christianity and Islam, and this is occurring at the expense of other religions.<sup>11</sup> However, regarding content, Islam has historically been oriented against Christianity. This is a confrontation that never occurred

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<sup>11</sup> All the following numbers are from David Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), and from updates in the ecumenical *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, available at [www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/IBMR2006.pdf](http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/IBMR2006.pdf). Numbers from other researchers are similar. Numbers referring solely to Evangelicals are the most conservative, as most estimates reflect significantly higher numbers.

between Islam and Buddhism. Christianity has adapted to this challenge over the past 1,400 years, and in this respect, the confrontation carries a considerable amount of unnecessary baggage.

Only the three largest world religions are presently growing faster than the world population. The world population is expanding at a rate of 1.22%. Hinduism is growing at a rate of 1.38%, primarily because births are exceeding deaths. Islam is growing at 1.9% for the same reason, as well as because of economic and political measures, and missionary activities. Christianity is growing at a rate of 1.25%, whereas missionally active evangelical Christianity is growing at an enormous rate of 2.11%. This development is making up for the shrinking of Christianity in the Western world. A net increase of 5.4 million evangelicals is being added yearly to the currently estimated total of 255 million evangelicals. This translates to a daily increase of 14,800.

The point is not to take sides, but rather to make the observation that growth in non-Western Christianity is producing a tension worldwide. Christianity has tripled in size in Africa and Asia since 1970. In each of the non-Christian countries of China, India, and Indonesia, considerably more people go to church on Sundays than in all of Western Europe combined.

That, of course, leads to all sorts of tensions. In India, for example, Christians have for more than a century made casteless education possible. Millions of casteless people have become Christians, because otherwise no one looks after them. According to the constitution, there is to be a certain percentage of casteless people in all state occupations and state authorities. Suddenly, there are Christians in influential positions everywhere, far in excess of their proportion to the overall population in the country. A host of other such examples could be mentioned.

### ***3. Most non-Christian religions have little success to show in missions or do very little in the way of missions.***

Moreover, they often employ political, economic, or social pressure instead of, or in addition to, peaceful attempts at conversion. In recent decades, Christianity has made significant progress toward renouncing violence and political and social pressure, while at the same time turning toward more content-oriented conversion work and peaceful missionary efforts.

The situation in Northern Ireland, until recently, illustrates what the rule was up to 400 years ago in Christianity. Today this leaves Christians aghast and is completely rejected. In the meantime, peaceful missions work and selfless social involvement have become the trademarks of Christianity. The number of foreign full-time Christian missionaries is estimated at 420,000, the number of full-time church workers at 5.1 million.

**4. Countries with a colonial history are looking to regain their own identity by recovering traditional religions, and they increasingly use legal means and/or force against “foreign” religions.**

In India, for instance, Hinduism is promoted against Islam and Christianity; in Indonesia, Islam is set against Christianity and Hindu-Buddhism; and, in Sri Lanka and Nepal, Buddhism is advanced against Christianity and Islam.

**5. In many countries, there is a growing connection made between nationalism and religion.**

When one thinks of India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan alone, one-third of the world population is affected. In Turkey, Turks are expected to be Muslims. Turks who become Christians fight in courts for years in order to have their religious affiliation changed on their passports. Christianity in Turkey, as well as in other places, stands in the way of nationalism. After a difficult path, the Christian faith itself has hopefully taken final leave of the connection between nationalism and Christianity. There are exceptions such as Northern Ireland, again, until recently, or a few national orthodox churches, but they confirm the rule.

**6. Christianity and certain of its representatives have in many places become distinct and clear voices on behalf of human rights and democracy.**

Christian involvement for the cause of the weak and of minorities, which has not always or in all places been very pronounced, has in many locations become the trademark of Christianity. This is so much the case that Christians have become the prime targets of human rights opponents and tyrants in Latin America and North Korea, mostly because they are just seen as organized opponents. Moreover, Christians increasingly have global networks at their disposal, which can often be activated against human rights violations and can produce worldwide reactions in the press.

**7. Closely related is the fact that Christianity often endangers well-established connections between religion and industry.**

Drug bosses in Latin America that have Catholic priests or Baptist pastors killed, for instance, surely do not do this because they are interested in an opposing religion. Rather, it is because the church leaders are often the only ones who stand up for native farmers or indigenous people groups and therefore stand in the way of Mafia bosses.

**8. *The peacefulness of Christian churches, which often appears as true pacifism, invites the use of force since no resistance is feared. On a global stage, Muslims fear American retaliation but not a reaction of indigenous Christians.***

Christians who believe in the separation of church and state often demonstrate this in the form of pacifism. Since no resistance is anticipated, Christians become fair game. For instance, I have discussed with church leaders in Indonesia whether or not they should defend their homes and families against marauding, heavily armed gangs of Jihad militia. Individual Christians have in certain cases defended their families with the use of force. Who in the security of the West can criticize them? Still, Christian churches have in the end agreed on non-violence, but sometimes at a price. In Indonesia, incidentally, violence is, for the most part, directed not against Christian missionary activities but rather against “Christian” (in Indonesia, mainly Catholic) islands on which Christians have for centuries lived undisturbed in their own settlements and are suddenly raided by heavily armed militia.

**9. *Christians are often equated with the hated West.***

To be sure, the West has for a while no longer been predominantly Christian. McWorld or pornography, which evokes images of the enemy for many, has actually nothing to do with Christianity. Churches in the Third World nowadays, practically without exception, operate independently and are under indigenous leadership. Still, native Christians are unable to escape suspicion. Turkish Christians are suspected of conducting espionage for the CIA. Chinese Christians are viewed as underlings of the USA or of the “Western” pope, and despite all the Western monetary support, “Christians” in Palestine are still considered underlings of Zionism.

**10. *The international nature of Christianity is regarded as a danger.***

As Paul wrote, Christians ultimately see themselves as people who, beyond having their national citizenship, are bound above all to other heavenly citizens (Phil 3:20). According to Jesus, the church understands herself to be multicultural and extending beyond national borders (Matt 28:18). This can be seen as a threat because of the enormous international personal, idealistic, and financial interconnections. Christian theology has for a long time been internationally oriented, with Christian theologians pursuing an ongoing dialogue with their peers from around the world. Christians view this situation as an enrichment; non-Christians, however, often view it as an incalculable power factor.

The Chinese government “cannot” and does not want to believe that no one is directing the millions of evangelicals in house churches in China.

Nor can it believe that, unfortunately, these churches often break away from each other and go separate ways. It cannot believe either that the pope only appoints indigenous bishops and does not seek to interfere in China's political affairs. This is in spite of the fact that in Poland the pope recently prohibited the operation of an overly political Catholic radio station. The Chinese government says yes to a Chinese Catholic church, but no to a church subordinated to the pope.

The Chinese government is anxious that an influential organization in China could be run from a foreign country. China has this in common with many countries. It would therefore be beneficial for politicians to suggest that Asian church leaders meet with Chinese politicians and party members and let them know that the West does not run the large Asian churches, for instance in India, but that these churches are completely under indigenous leadership.

As a point of criticism, some American Christian missions work, and occasionally that of other countries, can give the false impression that there is a worldwide US conquest strategy. Since American Christian television reaches the entire world, this can intimidate others. Also, the use of the previously common word "crusade" may be taken literally by many.

## **V. Five Negative Global Developments**

In what follows, we consider the five most frightful developments limiting religious freedom. In particular, we look at restrictions on Christians' freedom and what restrictions are currently increasing.

### **1. Religious Fundamentalism**

The first place belongs indisputably to fundamentalism, in particular, militant fundamentalist movements in Islam, in Hinduism (above all in India), and in Buddhism (above all in Sri Lanka). The term "fundamentalism" should not be defined by its usage in the 1960s and 1970s in its association with a particular view of the Holy Scriptures. Also, journalists who have no specialized knowledge about religion often hurl wrong notions in newspapers and television broadcasting programs. Rather, "fundamentalism" should be defined as a socio-religious and academic term. Here, I can only briefly sketch out what I have presented in my book *Fundamentalism: When Religion Becomes Dangerous*.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Schirrmacher, *Fundamentalism: When Religion Becomes Dangerous*, trans. Richard McClary, The WEA Global Issues Series 14 (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2013).

Fundamentalism does not mean one has a truth claim. If that were the case, most people on earth would be fundamentalists, and only the good people, above all Western Europeans who are proud of *not* knowing the truth and of always being skeptical, would not be fundamentalists. If the term was used in this sense, you would have to look hard to find a non-fundamentalist in Africa. Instead, fundamentalism is what we are all fearful of. Or, according to my definition, fundamentalism means “to assert a truth claim with violence,” that is, a “militant truth claim.” The term fundamentalism, which became prominent in 1979, was the term coined for the Ayatollah Khomeini, who imposed a certain Islamic direction on all the people in Iran and which remains to this day in that country.

To consider something to be absolutely true or false does not as such make an individual dangerous. This becomes a problem for society when this individual derives from that the assumption that he may enforce his belief in thought and practice on others and the entire society. And this sort of fundamentalism has appeared in all world religions and is responsible for the large number of Christian martyrs, as well as victims in other religions. If you reduce the persecution of Christians to people who die, then you would quickly observe that the main culprits are actually not governments or population groups, but above all militant fundamentalist movements that in most cases are waging war against their own countries—Iran and Sri Lanka are here as much the exception as Islamist movements in other countries, tolerated or even supported by Saudi Arabia or Pakistan.

We need to differentiate between majority Islam and Islamism, between majority Hinduism and that which one calls Hindutva in India—fundamentalist Hinduism, responsible, for instance, for the dead in Orissa; and between majority Buddhism—for instance, the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama, and fundamentalist Buddhism as one finds in Sri Lanka where the government acts against Christians and Hindus. All of these fundamentalist movements in the world religions stem from the last century, in the 1920s and 1930s, and emerged in the final phase of colonialism, above all in India (then Pakistan) and Egypt. They all represent new forms of their respective religions, which before this were not in existence.

Islamism asserts the following: An Islamic country can only be ruled by the Sharia and inhabited by Muslims. Everybody else is out of place there. By the way, the first who were affected by this in Pakistan were the Ahmadiyya, who from the viewpoint of Muslims are a Muslim “sect.” Many of them were killed as apostates and had no place in the new post World War II Pakistan.

It is similar in India. However, it took much longer before the ideology of the Hindutva gained favor. In a democracy, this came in the form of a party

that rose to power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). It is the political wing of the largest voluntary corps in the world, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Every place where this party co-governs as a coalition party or even forms the government, laws are passed against other religions. Christians and Muslims are slaughtered, as was the case in the state of Orissa, where more than 500 individuals were bloodily mishandled and killed in broad daylight, and tens of thousands were driven out. As the new prime minister of India is not only the head of BJP, but a former active member of RSS, Christians expect things to become worse.

The party was born out of the idea, from the 1920s and 1930s, that India solely belongs to the God Rama. Indeed, since the term “Hinduism” was first used by the English for purposes of census taking in order to consolidate the innumerable Indian religions, this is of course not simply a radical form of classical Hinduism. The idea that the country belongs to a single god is a completely new theory and is borrowed from monotheistic religions. There are still members of the media and scholars who disseminate the idea that fundamentalism is anti-modern and always points to an earlier golden age. But in fact, fundamentalism supports highly modern movements by shifting theological elements into the center, elements which had never been present in the history of the respective religions. Rama being the most important god is an example of that. In the process, a considerable deviation from the classical embodiment of the religion occurs. Also, whoever argues that Osama Bin Laden can only be understood as a “medieval die-hard” overlooks that al Qaeda is an ultramodern movement. For example, the office of suicide attackers is found neither in the Koran, nor in the hadith, nor in the course of Islamic history. As this office has being further expanded, in a completely un-Islamic manner women and children have been able to become suicide bombers.

In addition to its direct influence, fundamentalism has caused a devastating development. Thus, particularly in heavily populated countries such as India, Indonesia, and Nigeria, in which the great world religions used to co-exist peacefully, now unrest and violence are stirred. If the state does not move against this in an uncompromising fashion, as has often been the case with Hinduism in India or with Islam in Indonesia, the minority of a religion—the followers mostly range between 1% and 5%—can destabilize entire countries and trouble the peaceful relationships of tens of millions of people. For instance, in Indonesia more than 200 million Muslims live peacefully with 23 million Christians and want to continue that way. Yet there is also a minority of one million sympathizers—primarily sponsored by Saudi Arabia—that is responsible for the killing of many Christians and members of unconventional Islamic groups.

Fundamentalists also theologically justify forcing others to live as they do. From a Christian point of view, only the state can act against their militancy. Only the state has the monopoly on power in order to fight, prevent, or punish violence. In Iraq, one cannot ask Christians to take care of themselves. For Christians have unlearned—partly for theological reasons—how to defend themselves. They cannot employ karate, far less use a machine gun. If they or Coptics in Egypt are suddenly threatened by deadly violence, they will either be defended by the state or be at the mercy of their enemies. Indeed, Christians are convinced that it is not their task and their right to shoot back and to solve problems in this way. Rather, only the state can and may see to it that there is peace and justice. For that reason, we again and again turn to governments here on earth, even if we repeatedly hear that this is one-sided. To whom should we otherwise turn?

Since fundamentalism is the number one factor worldwide that triggers the persecution of Christians (and is also responsible for the persecution of other religions), we do not have another choice than to become involved politically and to move the state to stem this type of fundamentalist religion.

The same is the case in the German speaking realm. The Swiss Evangelical Alliance, to the astonishment of many others, spoke out firmly against the ban on minarets prior to the referendum. Indeed, we want religious freedom for everyone among us, also for Muslims. And we want to do everything possible to coexist peacefully with them. Furthermore, we are glad about the great majority of Muslims who want the same. However, we also have to act with all the means at one's disposal according to the rule of law against Muslim groups that have weapons, terrorist funding, or literature promoting violence in the basements of their mosques. We act so not primarily because they are Muslims but rather because they have weapons in their basements. If churches had weapons in their basements, they should also be searched. German constitutional protection on the federal and state levels is very effective, such that practically every mosque that is searched is one where a find is made. The freedom of religion does not protect people and fundamentalist movements who want to act violently against other people or the state. A democracy capable of defending itself has to act against people who call for violence in the name of religion, regardless of which religion.

According to our Christian convictions, the state correctly holds a monopoly on the use of force. We want to proclaim the gospel in peace and therefore can do nothing but turn to the state against violent people who want to kill our friends in the name of a religion. And if the relevant state does not react, then we have nothing to do other than to turn to other states with the plea to exercise their influence.

## **2. Religious Nationalism**

Second place—in a very similar manner—belongs to nationalism. Because of the shifting of masses of people around the world, there are more and more countries in which it is very difficult to link nationalism to common lineage, a common history, a common language, or the like. There are more and more countries and parties which, in order to save nationalism or to incite popular support among the public, play the “religion” card. A Turk is Muslim, a resident of Sri Lanka is Buddhist, and an Indian is Hindu.

This is not the fundamentalist variety that directly advocates violence. However, it is a worldwide political development in more and more countries. Affiliation to a country is tied to religion, i.e., naturally the majority religion. By this I do not want to say that we can completely remove ourselves from this. Hungary has just been inundated by Christian nationalism. When several years ago the independent American televangelist Pat Robertson called for all Muslims to leave the United States since the United States only belongs to Christians, I protested loudly in the name of the World Evangelical Alliance. The next day the daily newspapers in India were full of text statements like this: “We have always said that all the Christians should get out of India.” Fortunately, the reaction of the World Evangelical Alliance was mentioned as well.

As a German, self-criticism is also in order: Indeed, the emphasis on Christianity in German politics can sometimes sound dangerously like it actually does not refer to the content of the Christian faith but more to the sentiment, “I am not a Muslim.” Accordingly, Germany belongs to the Christians, not the Muslims. As a politically involved and committed Christian, I quite certainly believe that we have central values to present to our society. But please, let it be for the benefit of everyone!

For example, at the end of worship services for fallen German soldiers in Afghanistan, it is often difficult to differentiate clearly between taking a final farewell from fellow soldiers in a church ceremony and a ceremony where a final farewell is taken from the German armed forces. While traditionally there was a pause between these two ceremonies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two. Further, it can even happen that the minister of defense preaches in the church service! The impression should not be given that Christians have died in Afghanistan in the battle against Islamists or that the state and the church have fused in matters relating to the army. I acknowledge that some provisions should be made to respect our ecclesiastical and military traditions, but we should remain vigilant.

Religious nationalism is also the great danger in the Arab rebellion throughout a number of Arab countries. Nothing actually unites Arab societies any

longer, as they have completely ruptured. In this context, someone can quickly take advantage of the religion card and say: “There is only a future for the country under a religious flag” and exclude all non-Muslims.

### ***3. The Displacement of Long-Established Christian Denominations from Islamic Countries***

The third considerable development, which is not completely independent from the first two, is the displacement of long-established Christian denominations from core countries in the Islamic world. If you look at a world map showing the suppression of religious freedom or a map indicating Christian persecution, you will be able to identify the entire core regions of Islam as a tight-knit problematic zone.

I am suspicious of most conspiracy theories, and as an academic I only want to state something when “hard facts” can be cited as evidence. However, whoever looks long enough at this question sometimes has to ask whether, in addition to the general development in the Islamic world, there is not also a corporately acting, central “string puller,” systematically seeing to it that in one country after the other long-established Christians are driven out of the Islamic countries. This can occur through the use of direct violence, or it can occur through unbearable living conditions and gradual emigration. In the meantime, the Islamic world is—apart from Southeast Asia—almost completely “Jew-free,” and if the development seen in recent years continues, it will be “Christian-free”—apart from Southeast Asia.

In the case of Turkey, for example, seldom is a Christian killed there. Over the past few years, three Protestants, two Orthodox, and one Catholic were killed. However, if you visit Greek Orthodox churches, you will notice that predominantly older people, mostly women, attend. Either they can no longer move away, or they do not want to move away. The families, i.e., the children, have long since made their way to the West due to everyday discrimination. This Christian migration out of core Islamic countries is a dramatic development—especially if you know the following: Because this type of Christianity is often connected with ancient languages (among them the language Jesus used) and preserves ancient cultural assets, the fading away of these churches implies not only the loss of churches but also of cultures. What Copts pass on is predominantly Egyptian culture from a time before Islam conquered Egypt. The Copts pass on Christian culture prior to the time of Islam and Arabization and even elements of pre-Christian Egyptian culture.

One cannot simply say: “What’s the difference? If these Christians are able to live in Canada in peace and prosperity, aren’t things better for

them?” We are talking about peoples and cultures whose culture and religion are bound to a homeland, to a particular language and region which can only be taken to and maintained in another country in a very limited fashion. Even when we as Christians in Germany endeavor to at least settle Syrian Orthodox Christians near a Syrian Orthodox Church—so that on Sundays they can at least go to their own church—it seldom works. Indeed, the state decides according to completely different criteria, and refugees are simply divided up and “poured from the watering can” into different political municipalities. Thus, it can happen that Christians coming to Germany are immediately threatened again by similar fundamentalist Muslims in their new residential environment. And the nearest Christian of their type, who speaks their language, is so far away that, as asylum seekers, they cannot even visit him or her.

This observation also applies in a very similar way to all religious minorities in the Islamic world, including Muslim minorities. For instance, it is estimated that the predominant Turkish Alevites make up 13% of the population. However, they are not tolerated in Turkey. In the past, they were severely persecuted and are nowadays severely discriminated against. Germany is their number one refuge and destination country. They integrate themselves well here since Sharia is not part of their type of Islam and, for example, they have extended a freer role to women. Almost all German politicians of Turkish descent are Alevites or of Alevite descent. Another example are the Bahá'í from Iran. They encounter more problems than Christians in the core Islamic countries but live freely in Israel, the USA, and Germany.

It remains that the overall threat to religious freedom hits Christians hardest since they are numerically so strong. Furthermore, they make up longstanding people groups that have lived locally for 1,700 to 1,900 years, not to mention during the early days of Christendom prior to the majority conversion to Christianity.

I do not know anyone who at the moment knows how this process should be halted. For that to happen, one would have to challenge the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which is a group of 57 states claiming to speak for 1.5 billion Muslims.<sup>13</sup> In their charter, they state that they only campaign for Islamic minorities—indeed only for those in non-Islamic countries. On the one hand, and in no uncertain terms, they say that they only stand up for their own people. Efforts are not undertaken for Islamic

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<sup>13</sup> For all that follows, see the website, [www.oic-oci.org](http://www.oic-oci.org); see also, [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation\\_für\\_Islamische\\_Zusammenarbeit](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Organisation_für_Islamische_Zusammenarbeit).

minorities in their own countries. At the International Institute for Religious Freedom, we have conducted a small research project to determine whom the OIC actually represents. One quarter of the alleged 1.5 billion people whom the OIC represents are not Muslims. They are people who live in Islamic countries, who are used in order to establish a high number of Muslims, but who are in fact not Muslims. Thus, 80% of those people who are not Muslims are Christians. That means about one-fifth, namely 300 million people. When the OIC again becomes active for its cause at the UN, one would have to ask about the status of the hundreds of millions of non-Muslims in their own countries.

There are no longer any states that are Christian on the basis of conviction. And even if there were any, they would have the Christian conviction to speak for and care for every citizen and not only for Christians. Thus, it is only the free countries on earth—e.g., the religiously neutral and once Christian Germany, as well as the religiously neutral and once Muslim Mali, which can counter the OIC.

#### ***4. Limitations on Freedom of Religion Due to Compulsory Registration***

The fourth global development to mention is the limitation on religious freedom due to compulsory registration. Around the world in many countries, we have the increasing problem of more and more complicated registration processes. Above all, smaller religions are exposed to the continued suspicion that they are being controlled remotely from outside the country, that they are conducting money laundering, or that they are dangerous for the domestic freedom of the country. One may often want to understand this as a reaction to terrorism. However, laws are mostly passed that affect everyone and lead to a situation where a growing number of Christians around the globe suddenly land in the realm of illegality—and I am not only speaking of Evangelical Christians who already had house churches and already had lived underground in many countries. Rather, this impacts an increasing number of Christians of all denominations. This illegal status brings about severe consequences. For instance, one may not own a building, theological training cannot be conducted, it might be difficult to enter certain professions, or an individual may not work for the state or study, and the like.

There are Christian minorities in Turkey that have existed since before the Ottoman Empire but are just as affected as Evangelical churches that have been founded only recently. The Catholic Church celebrates its worship services in the capital city of Ankara in a building belonging to the embassy

of France, i.e., a location that is extraterritorial since it is not allowed to do so on Turkish soil. The representative of the Protestant Church of Germany to the Greek Orthodox Patriarch is formally employed by the German embassy. Otherwise, he would not be allowed to be there. The old seminary building of the oriental church on the half islands of Halki is empty since theological training is forbidden. Christians have to file suit to receive placement in higher education—with uncertain outcomes. Being employed by the police or becoming an officer in the army is unthinkable.

This is a very large and complex topic, so we could only point to it briefly. In short, mostly Christian minorities have to suffer around the world, even if, depending on the country, other religions and their minorities are involved.

### ***5. The Highest Price Has to Be Paid by Converts from Islam and Hinduism***

In this final point, I want briefly to address a development that is not necessarily in line with the other four, that is, I want to speak about a numerically small group that, however, pays the highest price for their being Christian. They are mostly “converts,” are called “apostates” by Islamists and Hindutvas, and come out of certain world religions to embrace the Christian faith. This entire issue is closely tied to the first development.

The highest price paid around the world is paid by people who convert to the Christian faith from religions that either on the whole or according to their fundamentalist wing have no provision for leaving. Alternatively, leaving the religion is punished. This is true in countries in which converts are killed, as in Pakistan, as well as in countries where individuals cannot be sure about their lives and in most cases have to be smuggled out of their country, e.g., Egypt (and it is here that the Coptic Church in particular is active). However, it also applies to countries where reconversion is compulsory, as is the case in a number of states in India where reconversion to Hinduism is involved, or in Sri Lanka where reconversion to Buddhism is involved.

Unfortunately, long-standing churches—remotely controlled from the USA—are all too ready to vilify these converts. These limitations to religious freedom even occur where there are no anti-conversion laws, as in Greece, even within the European Union. I could fill volumes with sad examples, whereby the statements do not withstand closer examination. People in the West would rather believe the representatives of the large churches than let those involved speak for themselves. Even if there are black sheep everywhere, and some criticism might be justified, Christian ecumenism still has a lot to learn at this point.

The many anti-conversion laws around the world have precisely this

background. For them, it is not at all a matter of preventing conversion brought about through coercion, force, brainwashing, or financial promises. Otherwise, Christians would seldom come into view. It is truly a matter of preventing and punishing such religious conversion. Or, even as violence in the Indian state of Orissa has clearly shown, it is a matter of compulsory reconversion with state support. In Orissa, it appears that those involved are hauled by mobs into Hindu temples where they have to endure Hindu rituals. If they nevertheless refuse to become Hindus after these events, they are trampled to death.

Just how insane the anti-conversion laws are is demonstrated by the example where giving a Bible is viewed to be bribery, although Bibles are found on the market at ridiculously low prices all over the world.

Combating converts has come into fashion. It is often traceable back to a fanatic mob, whereby the state allows a mob to do as it likes, without officially being a participant. This is the rule in Pakistan or in Sri Lanka. And even where there is massive persecution of Christians, the following applies: Things are even worse for converts.

And all too often converts are also not safe when they flee to free countries. Even if, as a general rule, German security officials fortunately respond immediately to calls for assistance from converts—which is not the case, for instance, in Great Britain or Austria and for which reason converts willingly relocate to Germany—their situation is not ideal in Germany. Converts from Islam, who have received asylum in Germany, often still live at an unknown location with fake names. Fortunately, an official name change is allowed. Perpetrators can be relatives, but perpetrators can also be the foreign countries' secret service agencies. There have been harrowing reports on this in various large daily newspapers and magazines, and on television and in books (e.g., *Sabatina*).

Thanks to globalization, the plight of converts is placed directly before our eyes. I can only call upon us all: Wherever you have the opportunity and as far as it relates to people who have come to the Christian faith from other religions—regardless of their denomination—and who now are experiencing threats from their relatives, or from fundamentalists prepared to use violence, or who would be coerced to reconvert: Have an open heart, an open house, an open purse, and an open church. Speak with politicians and pastors about these people. There are not many of them, but they are the ones who pay the highest price for believing in our Lord Jesus Christ. They are the ones among us who in fact directly embody the cross. If only one member of the body of Christ suffers, then all the members of the body of Christ suffer.