

Christian Persecution in Islamic contexts

Dr Richard McCallum

Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford

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1. Background and diversity of Islamic tradition

1.1 It is important to note that persecution is a broad concept and ranges from: death or execution, the threat of death, physical violence and loss of home to restricted social status, lack of job opportunities and limitations on church building and repairs.

1.2 This paper specifically considers responses to the persecution of Christian communities. However, the persecution of Christians is always linked to freedom of religion and conscience more generally, especially as ensured by the UNDHR Article 18. Such freedoms should include the freedom to: worship publicly, change religion, promote one's own religion, talk publicly about one's faith, change one's identity card registration, respectfully criticise other faiths and points of view.

1.3 Islam is not the only context for the persecution of Christians, but it is one of the most significant and sensitive contexts.¹ It is also the context we are familiar with at CMCS.

1.4 Firstly, it is vital to remember that religion is always a political category in Islamic contexts. There is no separation between politics and religion. Religious actions and convictions always have political implications. So whilst the slogan "*din wa dawla*" (religion and state) is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, it is also an important consideration for all Muslim governments and society.

1.5 So it is always unhelpful to deny that a problem has anything to do with religion, to claim it is political, or to insist that all religions are essentially peaceful. The reality is always complex and depends on how different people and traditions interpret certain texts and laws in relation to political and social life.

1.6 There are certainly forms and traditions of Islam which support pluralism and minority rights. Not all Muslims are persecuting Christians (or other minorities). There are good news stories of Muslims protecting Christians. For instance, Muslim leaders with the Christian-Muslim Forum protested the assassination of the two Pakistani politicians who supported Asia Bibi's case; Muslims in Birmingham donated money for a church building project; others (reportedly) wrote to a Pakistani mayor supporting the building of a church in Pakistan; there were stories from Egypt of Muslims standing around churches to protect them from Salafi mobs; and after the 2013 bombing of All Saints Church in Peshawar, Pakistan, Muslims helped Christians to bury their dead.

1.7 However, certain other *interpretations* of Islam *are* a driver for the persecution of Christians and have historical precedent. This is particularly true of what are sometimes called 'extremist' traditions, although these actually have widespread support in some Muslim-majority contexts.

1.8 Salafism is a reformist movement within Islam that gained prominence in the early C20th. It seeks to renew Islam by returning to the priority of the texts and the example of the early generations of Muslims.

¹ See for example the Open Doors World Watch List 2019 <https://www.opendoorsuk.org/persecution/>

This can result in different emphases and practices. Some Salafis, however, have become intolerant of minorities, especially those deemed to be associated in any way with Western imperialism. For example, Salafis in Egypt were responsible for burning churches.²

1.9 Wahhabism is prevalent in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states and shares many characteristics with Salafism, although it has a different history. It arose as a reforming movement in the C18th and is intolerant of any weakening of its own understanding of the Islamic tradition. This includes a refusal to permit other faiths to worship freely in the lands of Islam's most holy shrines in Mecca and Medina.³ Wahhabism is believed to be funded by oil money and has been spread to many other places in Africa, Asia and even Europe, sometimes resulting in an intolerance of Christians and others in those places.⁴

1.10 The Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan is another group that have been intolerant of any Western influence in their homelands, including the practice or spreading of Christianity. This movement grew out of the Deoband movement in India, which was particularly concerned to prevent syncretism within Muslim communities and emphasised education of Muslims in traditional Islamic thought as the solution. The Islamic schools set up included those madrasas in Northwest Pakistan from which the Taliban (students) later emerged. Converts from Islam to Christianity have particularly suffered under the Taliban, such as the case of Abdul Rahman,⁵ and Christian development agencies have also been targeted.

1.11 Even more extreme examples of movements that claim to be acting within the Islamic tradition include Al-Qaeda, Al-Shabab, Boko Haram and Islamic State (ISIS). These groups have targeted Christians and other non-Muslim groups, although it should be noted that they have killed more Muslims whom they view as deviant than they have killed Westerners.

1.12 More moderate Muslims, of course, want to distance themselves from these last examples but cannot claim that they have *nothing* to do with Islam. However misguided or however flawed their interpretation of the texts and traditions, they claim to act according to their understanding of Islam and should be taken seriously and should be rigorously refuted by Muslim scholars.

1.13 Given this diversity, it follows that just because leaders or scholars say that something is not happening or has nothing to do with a religion this does not mean to say that the grassroots do not believe and behave as though it *does* have something to do with religion. This can often lead to mob action, sometimes at the cynical instigation of leaders with certain agendas connected with the above orientations, as evidenced by riots in response to the Danish cartoons, Charlie Hebdo and most recently the acquittal of Asia Bibi.

1.14 It is also important to recognise that it is not only Christians who may be persecuted in Islamic contexts. Muslims groups viewed as being heterodox or heretical may also be victimised. This may be true of the Shi'a under Sunni majority rule, the Sunnis under Shi'a majority rule, Sufis at the hands of Wahhabis, and especially the Ahmadiyya in Pakistan.

² 'Egypt: Mass Attacks on Churches', <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/21/egypt-mass-attacks-churches> accessed 20 August 2018

³ This is in accordance with *ahadith* such as: 'the Messenger of Allah said: "If I live - if Allah wills - I will expel the Jews and the Christians from the Arabian Peninsula".' Jami' at-Tirmidhi (sahih) Vol. 3, Book 19, Hadith 1606; 'Umar b. al-Khattib heard the Messenger of Allah say: I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim.' Sahih Muslim Book 19, Hadith 4366; 'Narrated Ibn `Umar: `Umar expelled the Jews and the Christians from Hijaz.' Sahih Bukhari Vol. 3, Book 39, Hadith 531.

⁴ See for instance, Christopher Blanchard, 2008, 'The Islamic Traditions of Wahhabism and Salafiyya', CRS Report RS21695, and Michael Farquhar, 2015, 'Saudi Petrodollars, Spiritual Capital, and the Islamic University of Medina: A Wahhabi missionary project in transnational perspective', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 47/4: 701-721.

⁵ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/4841334.stm accessed 17 May 2017.

2. Religious texts

2.1 The Qur'an labels Christians and Jews as *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book). As such they are traditionally supposed to be protected and respected but also come under certain regulations and restrictions.

2.2 According to the Quran they are supposed to pay a tax (*jizya*) although this is not formally applied in any Muslim country today. It was briefly and controversially re-introduced by Islamic State.

2.3 Although they will be variously interpreted, there are texts in the Qur'an and Hadith which support pluralism and freedom but also problematic texts condoning intolerance and separation.

2.4 Examples of texts which support pluralism include the following verses. These will often be quoted by Muslims, and Christians and Western governments should insist that Muslims live up to these ideals, particularly as far as protecting Christian minorities is concerned:

- "We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about." (Q 5:48)
- "If God so willed, He would have made you all one people, but He leaves to stray whoever He will and guides whoever He will. You will be questioned about your deeds." (Q 16:93)
- "There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest hand-hold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing." (Q 2:256)
- "You [Prophet] are sure to find that the most hostile to the believers are the Jews and those who associate other deities with God; you are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who say, 'We are Christians,' for there are among them people devoted to learning and ascetics. These people are not given to arrogance." (Q 5:82 – clearly problematic for Jews)

2.5 There are other verses in the Qur'an and Hadith that are not so amenable to pluralism and tolerance. These cannot be ignored and are often emphasised by those listed above who are less tolerant of Christians:

- "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as allies: they are allies only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them- God does not guide such wrongdoers" (Q 5:51)
- "Fight those of the People of the Book who do not [truly] believe in God and the Last Day, who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden, who do not obey the rule of justice, until they pay the tax and agree to submit." (Q 9:29)
- "Those who wage war against God and His Messenger and strive to spread corruption in the land should be punished by death, crucifixion, the amputation of an alternate hand and foot, or banishment from the land: a disgrace for them in this world, and then a terrible punishment in the Hereafter" (Q 5:33)
- "[Believers], you are the best community singled out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God. If the People of the Book had also believed, it would have been better for them. For although some of them do believe, most of them are lawbreakers" (Q 3:110)
- "I will expel the Jews and Christians from the Arabian Peninsula and will not leave any but Muslim." (in the Hadith of *Sahih Muslim Book 32, Hadith 75*)

3. Religious laws

3.1 There has been something of a revival of shariah around the world and it now plays a significant role in many Muslim majority states including Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Pakistan, Mauretania, some states of North Nigeria and Sulawesi in Indonesia. In other countries it plays a significant role in lower courts, particularly family courts, which often continued to operate during the colonial period.

3.2 Although they will be variously interpreted, there are laws and inequalities within the traditional shariah codes and *fiqh* (legal) understanding which may be problematic for minorities concerning testimony in court, marriage, divorce, inheritance, apostasy and blasphemy.

3.3 Assessment of such texts and laws requires specialist knowledge and consultancy. This should be of a high academic standard and should not be presumed to be best coming either from within the Muslim community or from its fiercest critics. Multiple opinions may need to be sought.

3.4 The blasphemy law is a particular problem and can be broadly interpreted and abused. It is sometimes further complicated by the history of colonial laws. Pakistan has a poor track record and Basuki Purnama (otherwise known as Ahok), a Christian politician, was a victim in Indonesia.

3.5 The shariah can also put women at a disadvantage. Certain interpretations and historical precedents have even been used to legitimate the capture and forced marriage of Christian girls to Muslim men.

3.6 A final shariah rule which causes acute suffering is the forbidding of a Muslim from leaving the faith (apostasy). All the major law schools – Sunni and Shi'i – prescribe death for male apostates, which is an acute problem for those who freely choose to leave Islam for Christianity (or any other faith or none).⁶ Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Afghanistan are just a few of the places where this has been an issue. In most countries it is impossible for a convert to change the religion on their identity card to Christian from Muslim (although perfectly possible from Christian to Muslim).

3.7 Despite modern attempts to either call for a moratorium or to reinterpret apostasy law as applying only in cases of 'treason' there is still a widespread belief that apostates should be punished as shown by a Pew Forum poll of attitudes, which found that in the Middle East-North Africa region 56% of the populace support the execution of those who convert from Islam to another faith.⁷ Such views place a considerable pressure on governments to maintain traditional punishments.

3.8 According to *fiqh* (Islamic legal reasoning), such a punishment should only ever be passed down or applied by an authorised shariah authority. In reality, people sometimes take the law into their own hands, often for cultural reasons.

4. Cultural mores

4.1 Cultural mores and traditions are often as important as religious rules. For instance, cultures which place a high emphasis on honour will often react violently against any appearance of shame. Issues that typically cause a loss of honour or face include: being publicly humiliated by an outsider (even at a perceived offence); marriage or relationship of a Muslim girl with a non-Muslim or unsuitable man; pregnancy outside of marriage; and apostasy (i.e. someone leaving the religion of the family).

4.2 It should be noted that these cultural concerns are also in evidence in other ethnic and religious groups. Cultural Christians are also likely to act to protect their honour in some parts of the world.

4.3 It should be noted that politicians and governments on occasion act to protect the national honour. This is an important factor when addressing issues of persecution diplomatically. Governments do not like to be publicly shamed.

⁶ The rulings are slightly modified for female apostates

⁷ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. 2013. 'The World's Muslims: religion, politics and society' (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life,)

4.4 Persecution of religious minorities is often political. Governments are under pressure from extremists to act strongly to prevent the growth or prominence of non-Muslim communities. They are particularly expected to act against proselytism or mission work. It is often popular to scapegoat minorities and others, such as the Ahmadiyya or Yazidis, suffer alongside Christians.

4.5 Western governments are often seen as being “Christian” and their policies and actions are sometimes judged as “Christian”. This can reflect badly on Christian minorities who sometimes need to distance themselves from Western powers.

4.6 Western nations are also variously called “Crusader”, “Imperialist” and supporters of “Zionism” or “neo-colonialism” by those of an anti-Western disposition. This language was particularly used by Usama Bin Laden but is also in common parlance. It, of course, ignores the fact the Muslims too have an imperialist history which is the very reason why Christians are a minority in Middle Eastern countries today.

4.7 For these reasons, Christian minorities come under particular pressure at times of confrontation between the West and Middle Eastern or Muslim-majority nations. They are suspected of being a fifth column or at least supporting Western “Christian” policies. This happened historically during the Ottoman empire and has happened more recently in Iraq and Syria.

4.8 Therefore, western diplomatic intervention can on occasion make the plight of indigenous Christians more difficult as it confirms suspicions that local Christians are being supported or even paid by western powers to be a subversive influence. Low-key, non-public intervention may be the best approach.

4.9 Christian minorities in the Middle East have sometimes supported dictatorial regimes that have protected them. For instance, the Alawite regime in Syria and the military governments in Egypt have protected the Christian minorities. However, this has led to the fear of and even experience of an Islamist backlash when the regime has fallen as witnessed by attacks on churches in Egypt during the brief rule of the Muslim Brotherhood.

4.10 There are many Christian organisations that exist to advocate for Christians and churches who are being persecuted around the world. Their approaches should be carefully weighed, and information checked against independent sources and verified where possible. They include groups such as: Aid to the Church in Need, Barnabas Fund, Christian Solidarity Worldwide, Open Doors, Release International and Voice of the Martyrs.

4.11 There are also many Christian mission agencies, NGOs and development organisations working in Muslim contexts. On occasion governments crack down on them, personnel are expelled, and offices closed.

4.12 The public animosity towards Christian mission work in Muslim contexts should not be underestimated. Missionaries are often seen as a harmful, malign influence on society, despite their well-meaning, self-professed altruism. At best they are seen as agents of secularization, undermining social morals and at worst are believed to be spies working to overthrow governments as part of a neo-colonial conspiracy.

5. Reciprocity

5.1 In all of these incidents above it is important that the need for reciprocity is stressed. Christianity teaches that we should treat others as we would have them treat us – sometimes called the Golden Rule. This should hold true regardless of how others act, meaning that reciprocity is not necessarily a Christian condition. However, there is no reason why governments cannot reasonably insist on reciprocal treatment of Christian minorities.

5.2 Muslims have great freedom in the West and many of them acknowledge that they have greater freedom to practice their religion than they would do in many Muslim-majority countries. Indeed, that is the reason that some of them have chosen to live in Western countries.

5.3 This includes freedom to build and maintain mosques, freedom to gather for worship, freedom to engage in proselytization (*da'wa*) and freedom (in the UK at least) to wear religious clothing.

5.4 It is not unreasonable therefore to insist that Christians and others should be given equal freedom in Muslim contexts. This should include the right to build and repair churches, to share their faith, to convert from Islam, to wear religious clothing and to gather for public worship.

6. Key recommendations for the FCO

6.1 Do not ignore the persecution of Christians in Muslim-majority contexts, even if it is taking place in countries with which Britain has important economic or political links.

6.2 Treat all nations equally and expect them all to maintain high standards of rights and freedoms.

6.3 Insist on and raise the issue of freedom of religion and conscience for *all* Christians and for *all other minorities* equally. Do not be seen to be favouring Christians. Other groups suffer including Muslim minority groups.

6.4 Act to protect Christian minorities in their home countries. But in cases of extreme persecution be prepared to offer sanctuary recognising that Christians, and especially converts, suffer particular discrimination in many Islamic contexts.

6.5 Recognise that this discrimination may have religious causes.

6.6 Call Muslims to account on the basis of the Qur'an verses and traditions which they use to demonstrate that Islam is peaceable and pluralist.

6.7 Insist on reciprocity. Freedom of minorities in other countries should at least match the freedom enjoyed by religious minorities in this country.

6.8 However, be aware that intervention can have negative impact. Many Christians working in Muslim contexts believe that UK diplomatic intervention can be unhelpful

6.9 Local advice should be sought in addition to information provided by advocacy groups before initiating diplomatic intervention.

6.10 CMCS would also concur with recommendations and warnings in the two reports/articles below.

18 recommendations

Under Caesar's sword Project. 2018. 'In response to persecution: Findings of the Under Caesar's Sword Project on Global Christian Communities' (University of Notre Dame)

Recommendations for External Governments and Multilateral Institutions

1. Do not succumb to the temptation to consider advocacy for human rights and religious freedom detrimental to the pursuit of "good relations"—something that governments like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, China, Vietnam, and Laos would like Western democracies to believe. Instead, insist that human rights and "good relations" are interdependent. For instance, use human rights and religious freedom as a means to bargain for political and economic gains.
2. Stress the distinct importance of "religious freedom" and do not allow it to be swallowed up or watered down by broader terms like "religious engagement" in the planning, articulating, and carrying out of policy. While engagement with religious leaders and communities is valuable, what is at stake most centrally for persecuted Christians—and the societies in which they live—is religious freedom.

3. Consistently raise religious freedom in discussions with violator countries to ensure they understand that outside governments see both human rights and religious freedom as basic to a harmonious international order and correlated with stability and prosperity.
4. Be prepared to use both human rights language and appeals to self-interest (promoting peace and stability) when engaging with other states that are suspicious of or hostile to international human rights norms.
5. With key economic powers such as China, always include human rights and religious freedom on the agenda for discussion and avoid the temptation to sacrifice them for the sake of furthering political or economic interests.
6. Use approaches that are well suited to particular circumstances and to the interests of the target society. These “smart” interventions, ideally supported with a clear local mandate, are often the most effective.
7. Make sure the impact on local persecuted churches is addressed in foreign policy or security decisions.
8. Continue to put pressure on governments for better protection of religious freedom in countries such as Russia, where such pressure is widely felt among top officials.
9. Governments and international organizations should make religious freedom a central theme in human rights evaluations of regions.
10. Seize upon opportunities to build coalitions among religious minorities of different faiths who are the subjects of persecution and heavy discrimination, such as Ahmadis and other non-conformist Muslims in Indonesia, Muslims in China and India, or Jews in Europe.
11. Determine if there are locally available social and ethical resources that can enhance local initiatives and also make international human rights norms more culturally relevant and thus effective—for instance, building bridges in Indonesia to the many Muslims who adhere to its tradition of plurality and multi-confessional citizenship.
12. Provide training to ensure that officials handling relevant geographical areas and functional issues are “religiously literate” and specifically aware of how religious freedom is closely correlated with the achievement of key policy aims relating to stability, security, and prosperity.
13. Lobbying by international coalitions and networks (for example, of legislators or religious freedom officials) often can have a much greater impact than lobbying by individual countries, especially if Global South countries are included.
14. Governments can improve their credibility by “attending to their own backyard,” that is, improving religious freedom at home and acknowledging their own efforts to build religious freedom for minorities.
15. Governments should create conditions that will allow Christians to stay in their homelands and provide help for Christians wanting to return to their homelands, but also accord them an appropriate proportion of slots for asylum if their desire is to emigrate.
16. Governments should recognize that violations of religious freedom are a root cause of migrant crises, as is the case in Syria, Iraq, Eritrea, Nigeria, and elsewhere, and integrate religious freedom into their advocacy on behalf of migrants.

17. Governments should devote greater resources to helping their own citizens among migrant workers who face harassment on account of their faith, for instance, Filipinos in countries like Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.
18. Governments should only participate in inter-faith and similar initiatives, such as those promoted by Gulf princes and foundations, if the issue of persecution will be addressed as well.

7 pitfalls to avoid:

Birdsall, Judd. 2018. 'Pitfalls in combatting persecution', *Cambridge Papers*, 27/4: 1-6

Pitfall 1: Ignoring the problem of persecution

Pitfall 2: Exaggerating the problem

Pitfall 3: Uncritical partiality

Pitfall 4: Neglecting the persecution of non-Christians

Pitfall 5: Mimicking the persecutors of Christians

Pitfall 6: 'Persecution complex' in the West

Pitfall 7: Employing language that alienates