



**Submission
to the
Hunt Review of Global Christian Persecution
on behalf of the
Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture (OCCC),
Regents Park College,
University of Oxford**

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This submission is focussed upon two areas of expertise within the OCCC which, it was felt, could offer some insights that would be valuable for the review. These two areas of expertise are Middle Eastern Christianity and Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) Human Rights engagement.
- 2.2. What follows is a series of observations in each of those fields, beginning with Middle Eastern Christianity, which will then be followed with a brief summary and some recommendations for concrete actions that could be undertaken by the FCO in the short to medium term.

2 Christians in the Middle East

- 2.1 The concerns raised and observations made in this section are made by Canon Dr. Robin Gibbons, the Alexander Schmemmann Professor of Eastern Christianity at the Graduate Theological Foundation. He was installed as the International Ecumenical Canon of All Saints' Anglican Cathedral in Edmonton, Canada in 2012. He is also Ecumenical Canon to All Saints' Cathedral College in Edmonton. Canon Gibbons is a member of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Oxford. He is also the Department's Director of Studies for Theology and Religion and a Departmental Lecturer. He is a member of Regents Park College in the University of Oxford. Canon Robin is also Assistant Pastor for the Greek Catholic Melkite Church in London and Great Britain but also helps in looking after Eastern Catholic members of Oxford University as well as being one of the Ecumenical Partners in the Benefice of Steeple Aston, North Aston and Tackley in the Anglican Diocese of Oxford.
- 2.2. Notwithstanding the events of the Arab Spring and the impact of DAESH, Christians in the Middle East have long lived as second class citizens, dependent upon the good will of neighbours and officials for their basic human rights including equal access to the jobs market and utilities.¹ This second class status, defined constitutionally in all of the states of the MENA region, has been in place for so long that it has become the

¹ See Anon, *Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians oppressed for their Faith 2013-2015*. Surrey: Aid to the Church in Need UK, 2016.

presumed norm for Christians in the region.² Whilst this second-class status cannot be construed as 'persecution' insofar as it does not include intimidation, or acts of violence because of their Christian faith, it is symptomatic of an endemic discrimination which is nevertheless unacceptable in states which have all signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

- 2.3. The events of the Arab Spring have increased rather than decreased this normative societal discrimination of Christians to 'persecution' levels. A fact recognised by Mustafa Akyol in an article for the *New York Times* in May 2017.³
- 2.4. DAESH's well-publicised acts of persecution against Christians (as well as Yazidis, Shi'as, Sufis and homosexuals) whilst disgusting and worthy of the attention given to them, should not distract from the more normative discrimination suffered by Christians in the Middle East. Moreover, the persecution inflicted by DAESH has been only one aspect of the recent experiences of persecution by Christians in the Levant region. For example, in the refugee camps set up to assist those fleeing from the Civil War in Syria, Christians have been routinely excluded from entering (even UN camps) and have been forced to make their own arrangements. Christians who have managed to get to the UK from Iraq and Syria all tell the same story of exclusion and discrimination from refugee camps.

3 FCO's Response to Christian Persecution

- 3.1. The observations made and concerns raised in this section are made by Professor Roger Trigg. Professor Trigg is the Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Warwick. From 2007-11 he was co-Director of a project, jointly with the Faculty of Anthropology, on the cognitive science of religion, based in the Ian Ramsey Centre. He was Founding President of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion (1993-6), and more recently President of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion (2008-10). He was the first President of the British Philosophical Association in 2003-4, (representing all British Philosophy), having chaired its predecessor, the National Committee for Philosophy. Professor Trigg is the joint editor, with Wentzel van Huyssteen of Princeton, of an international series of monographs on science and religion, published by Ashgate. He is a Senior Research Fellow at the Ian Ramsey Centre for Science and Religion and was until recently Associate Scholar of the Religious Freedom project at the Berkley Center, of Georgetown University, Washington D.C.
- 3.2. The FCO has such a horror of 'discrimination' that it is reluctant to give any 'special' treatment to Christians - particularly in the Middle East. Yet, as Lord Sachs has pointed (alongside Baroness Warsi and others) what is happening in some parts e.g. Syria is getting near genocide.⁴
- 3.3. The British Government only takes refugees, with U.N. help, from the camps. Christians are suffering just because they are Christian, but the F.C.O. does not regard the fact that they are Christian as a relevant factor. Even churches (e.g. Taunton) who

² B. Katulis, R. deLeon and J. Craig, *The Plight of Christians in the Middle East Supporting Religious Freedom, Pluralism, and Tolerance During a Time of Turmoil*. Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2015.

³ Mustafa Akyol, 'Why the Middle East's Christians are under attack.' *The New York Times* 26th May 2017.

⁴ Chief Rabbi, Lord Jonathan Sacks, 'Christians are being ethnically cleansed in the Middle East' www.catholicerald.co.uk dated 30th March 2013. Accessed 25th January 2019.

offer to receive refugee families never get Christian ones, but only Muslim. This might seem very compassionate were it not for the suspicion that the Christians' plight is more desperate. The systematic driving out of Christians from ancestral Biblical lands by Islamists of various descriptions has been going on for many years but has gained momentum because of their apparent guilt by association with 'Christian;' countries and their actions in the Middle East (i.e. us and the U.S.). Coptic Christians in Egypt are regularly told they should get out back to the West where they belong, even though they have of course been there since New Testament times and long predate Islam (as in Syria and Iraq).

- 3.4. British Government policy in relation to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 bears some responsibility for this but we take no specific action to help. In fact the policy of no discrimination on grounds of religion leads to indirect discrimination against Christians, because their sometimes greater need is ignored even when their lives are in danger.
- 3.5. The FCO often seems reluctant to give any special prominence to the right to religious freedom, letting it be submerged by other rights. Yet religion is often of its nature picked out for particular oppression by totalitarian governments, who will not accept an alternative authority to their power. The State should then be paramount, and an appeal to religious obligations to God is a threat. Even democracies do not like conscientious objection to policies that are accepted by majorities. Again authority is being challenged, this time that of 'the people'. Yet human rights in general, and the right to freedom of religion in particular, were intended to protect minorities, specifically from being coerced to do what they believed to be wrong.
- 3.6. A temptation for governments is to water down the right to freedom of religion - which protects institutions as well as individuals and make it 'freedom of conscience'. That is important, but without the concept of religion to give a focus and a standard, it can become so wide and diffuse as to be impossible to define or protect. This was illustrated in an institutional form, when the *Advisory Group on Freedom of Religion or Belief* (AGFRB) in the FCO was brought to an end after a short existence, and subsumed under a wider group on human rights. Although the AGFRB was set up under Baroness Warsi (then Minister of State), within two years it had ceased to exist. I was a member and thought it had increasing potential, and, we were told it was beginning to be listened to, even in Cabinet. The clear message, (whether intentional or not) through the AGFRB's disappearance was that freedom of religion was not a special human right and did not deserve special attention. This was certainly the view of the new Canadian Government when they abolished the post of Ambassador for Religious Freedom - the holder of which had a striking impact. It is likely that there were various administrative and political considerations about which I knew nothing that weighed on the decision to close the group, yet, be that as it may, the impression created by the close of the group was that which I outlined above: that religious freedom was not important.
- 3.7. Countless people are dying through the world because of their religion, and persecution is increasing (e.g. now in China).⁵ We must all be able to live in accordance with what we believe most important in life and, by definition, that must

⁵ It was encouraging to hear the Foreign Secretary quote statistics on Christian persecution from the Open Doors Watch List annual reports at the launch event for this review.

include religious belief. A state without freedom of religion (including the freedom to deny religion) is not free.⁶ Encroachments on such freedom are the 'canary in the mine'. The E.U. itself is beginning to recognise this, with the appointment of Jan Figel as Special Envoy for Religious Freedom, but his post is not permanent nor securely funded, so its future is itself in doubt.⁷ One should not need to be religious to see that religious beliefs (and indeed their denial) can be the source of great persecution and cruelty towards them. Religion as a fact in the world cannot be ignored, and is often of crucial relevance to our foreign policy.⁸

4 Summary and Recommendations

- 4.1. The activities of DAESH in the Levant are simply the extreme outworking of a narrative of persecutions and discrimination against Christians in the region which has stretched back more than a millennium.
- 4.2. Far from increasing freedom across the MENA region, the Arab Spring has increased levels of persecution against Christians.
- 4.3. The FCO response thus far has appeared to deliberately refuse to acknowledge the special persecution being meted out to Christians in the MENA region.
- 4.4. The closure of the AGFRB group at the FCO signalled a lack of interest in the FCO about Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) issues at the FCO whatever public statements might have been made by the FCO about the issue.
- 4.5. As the NIC and MoD reports cited (fn 8) show that religious issues and networks are only going to be growing in importance over future decades. Failure to deal appropriately with the issue of Christian persecution will therefore not only be seen as dereliction of duty from a country which seeks to trumpet its human rights achievements on the world stage, but will also potentially diminish its diplomatic strength as Christian religious networks will see little value in seeking to court British diplomats. Addressing FCO responses to Christian persecution is therefore not simply a question of being seen to be doing the 'right thing', it is also about maintaining Britain's diplomatic leverage into the future.

5 About the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture⁹

- 5.1. The Centre was established in 2005 to focus the mission of the College as a whole, fostering 'the formation of a Christian mind' through critical engagement between faith and culture.

⁶ In her ministry blog, the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallstrom highlights the connection between religious freedom abuses and wider human rights abuses. See 'Religious freedom is a fundamental human right' dated 3rd October 2014 – 20th January 2019. <https://www.government.se/opinion-pieces/2018/07/religious-freedom-is-a-fundamental-human-right/> accessed 19th February 2019.

⁷ See Danka Jaceckova, 'EU Special Envoy for religious freedom should get stronger mandate' www.europeanpost.eu 23rd November 2018. Accessed 25th January 2019.

⁸ This was acknowledged in the recent Ministry of Defence Strategy paper, *Global Strategic Trends: The Future Starts Today* (6th Edn) Published 2nd October 2018. p83. As well as in the National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* Published January 2017. It's overview assessment of global trends through to 2035 include the following statement: 'Religious influence will be increasingly consequential and more authoritative than many governments.' p 4. See also the assessment in the report Annex, pp193-4.

⁹ The text is taken from the Centre's website: <http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/research-life/oxford-centre-christianity-culture/> accessed 23rd January 2019.

- 5.2. The Centre aims to bring a Christian perspective to the experience of life in the twenty-first century through:
- Encouraging theological study in the light of other disciplines
 - Facilitating the study of other disciplines in the light of a Christian mind
 - Developing research in inter-disciplinary Christian studies
 - Fostering culturally aware Christian ministers and leaders
 - Enabling critical Christian thinking on practical and ethical issues
- 5.3. It pursues these aims by:
- Appointing Research Associates to work in the field of inter-disciplinary Christian studies
 - Supporting Postgraduate Scholars to take research degrees in the University of Oxford
 - Hosting conferences and public lectures by distinguished scholars and practitioners
 - Producing publications resulting from its events

5.4. Message from the Director

“‘Only connect’, the words of the English novelist E. M. Forster, are an apt motto for the Oxford Centre for Christianity and Culture. Since its inception over two decades ago, the Centre has made connections between the academy, the churches and the wider world. Now our dream is to move into a new, exciting phase in which valuable debates on faith traditions, social and cultural questions are set in a global context. For centuries, the world has come to Oxford, now we want the Centre to relate to that world in a richer and more dynamic way. We hope that you will catch the vision and enable us to reach more people, so they too can make new connections.”

Dr Nicholas Wood became Director of the Centre in 2000, following Dr Alan Kreider, who served from 1995.