

**THE  
CHRISTIAN  
AND  
PERSECUTION**

# Religious Persecution: Historical and Global Perspectives

**MODULE 1**



# **Lesson One**

## **Religious persecution: historical and global perspectives**

### **Learning Objective:**

By the end of this lesson students will have been introduced to the theme of religious persecution. They will understand religious persecution as a violation of religious freedom norms established in international law. They will be equipped to assess religious persecution affecting contemporary Christian communities in the Middle East and North Africa within a broader context, recognising religious persecution as a long-standing phenomenon of injustice with numerous expressions across time, geography, diverse cultural and political contexts and affecting a wide range of religious traditions.

**Preparatory Bible Reading:** Acts 14

### **Lesson Outline:**

Introduction: Religious Freedom and Religious Persecution

1. What is religious freedom?
  2. Global trends in religious persecution
    - a. State Restrictions on religious freedom
    - b. Social Hostilities
  3. Why does persecution happen?
  4. Biblical reflection on the causes of persecution
  5. Persecution: a historical reality
- Conclusion

**Biblical Case Study**

**Additional Reading**

**Lesson One Test**

**Bibliography**

## **Lesson One**

### **Religious persecution: historical and global perspectives**

*Middle Eastern Christians are not alone in suffering religious-based persecution. Religious persecution is a long-standing phenomenon of injustice, with numerous expressions across time, geography, diverse cultural and political contexts and affecting a wide range of religious traditions*

#### **Introduction: Religious Freedom and Religious Persecution**

*“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”*

*Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human*

*Rights*

For Christians living in the Middle East and North Africa, persecution is a day to day, practical reality and not an abstract conversation. We witness and often experience first hand how because of our faith we might be denied jobs, housing, lose friends, families and worse cases face intimidation by security forces, arrests, closure of our churches and imprisonment and even death.

It is truly encouraging to see Christians continuing their faith and hold on in the midst of such difficult experiences. Yet, perseverance is not enough. We must be able to understand what is happening around us and why, so that we can be better witnesses for Christ and take care of our churches and help our fellow believers.

For this, we must be open to ask questions and reflect on the events we see, but also realise that not every persecution is because of the Cross, and that there are things Christians can do to not cause suffering when it is not inevitable.

In this lesson, we will see that religious persecution is widespread across the world, and just like Christians, many people from other faiths also suffer. As we survey the global situation and look at wider experiences of persecution, it will be clear that there are social and political reasons behind persecution in addition to spiritual reasons. We will trace the roots of these both in the Bible as well as history.

The historical and current reality of persecution will be put in the context of human rights provisions, which have important safety nets to protect individuals that have religious belief. While looking at the global trends we will show how much human rights are abused around the world, nevertheless human rights continues to be one of the most powerful tools we can use to appeal both to our governments and international organizations and demand better treatment of Christians.

#### **1. What is Religious Freedom?**

*Most countries have committed to safeguard rights to freedom of religion or belief.*

Human rights are often used as an elusive language or a point of appeal. But ultimately they are legal provisions, which developed after the horrendous events of WWII.

The vision behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was to ensure that there is a globally agreed basis to protect human beings. All countries that are members of the United Nations have signed the UDHR. The UDHR provides principles to aspire and defines the areas of human lives that need to be protected. These are then taken further and turned into law by international covenants.

International covenants, unlike the UDHR, are legally binding documents. When a country signs it, it is under legal obligation to fulfil the provisions of these covenants. A key covenant that protects religious freedom is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Most countries in the world have signed the ICCPR.

Article 18 of the ICCPR makes upholding religious freedom a responsibility, building up on from Article 18 of the UDHR.

ICCPR Article 18 says:

- 1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.*
- 2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice.*
- 3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*
- 4. The States Parties to the present Covenant undertake to have respect for the liberty of parents and, when applicable, legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions.*

Clause 1 demonstrates how important religious beliefs are for human beings. Together with our capacity to think, and form our own views of the world and live according to it, religious beliefs make us who we are and affect everything we do. Therefore, everyone shall be free to think, believe and live according to his or her beliefs. These beliefs can be religious or non-religious, or even atheistic.

That is why the article makes it clear that human beings should be free to convert to other religions or decide to believe in something else than their societies. Clause 2 raises an important issue; coercion. Individuals should feel free and not be forced by threats and pressure to stop them from changing their religion.

In Clause 1, the covenant also says everyone should be free to manifest those beliefs and freely join communities and religions that share them. Thus, religious freedom not only includes what we believe, but also expressing what we believe, whether in

worship, preaching and teaching our faith. Human beings should be free to open religious centres or attend any church, mosque or temple they choose to.

Yet, Clause 3 brings limitations to this freedom. It says the rights mentioned above can, in certain incidents, have limits. Often, governments around the world cite this article to curb religious freedom. However, the entire ICCPR and the subsequent UN documents that explain the circumstances make it clear that freedom to believe and live accordingly and change your religion can never be stopped or hindered, even during a war. What international law allows is temporary limitations to public expressions of religion, for example in extreme social circumstances, a government can stop a church to meet if it can be proven that it is vital for safety of society. However, even such response has to be for a limited time and cannot be used to stop Christians from freely following Christ, praying and sharing their faith.

In fact, according to this article, not only the believers, but their children too have the same freedoms and governments are obliged to ensure that children are taught the religion of their parents and not pressured to believe otherwise and attend religious activities of their parents freely.

These vital aspects of religious freedom – what we believe and how we live accordingly, are guaranteed as absolute rights that our governments have to uphold. They undertook this responsibility by signing the ICCPR. In fact, most of the Middle East and North Africa has signed this covenant and therefore promised to abide by them.

Some of the countries that signed it are: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey and Yemen.

Therefore, the laws and practices in these countries should not contradict the legal obligation these countries have under international law.

However, we do know and see that many countries who have signed up to these treaties do not fulfil their obligations. Thus, human rights standards often face major challenges in implementation and making sure states who break these laws are held accountable. That is why human rights organizations continue to develop campaigns to raise these concerns and force countries to obey international law.

### ***Review and discussion questions***

1. List the four basic rights stipulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
2. In your opinion, why have some countries signed the UDHR, but refrained from signing the ICCPR?
3. Do you feel that your government is genuinely committed to allow children be raised according to their parents' beliefs? List some of the difficulties faced, and discuss with your group.

## 2. Global Trends in Religious Persecution

*Yet, most people live in countries where rights to freedom of religion are not respected*

Sadly, even though there is such a strong legal basis for its protection, denial of freedom of religion and belief is one of the most common breaches of human rights in the world today.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life's annual survey of religious restrictions around the world, 75% of world's population live in countries where they face restrictions and discrimination from governments and societies on the basis of their religion.

This brings to light a complex picture and demonstrates a sad fact that Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of all religious beliefs or no belief at all face serious suffering. As seen in the chart below, Christians and Muslims are the most widely persecuted people groups across the world.

### Number of Countries Where Religious Groups Were Harassed, Across All Years

*Any time between mid-2006 and mid-2010*

Christians	139
Muslims	121
Jews	85
Others*	72
Folk religionists**	43
Hindus	30
Buddhists	21
<b>Any of the above</b>	<b>184</b>

\* Includes Sikhs, members of ancient faiths such as Zoroastrianism, members of newer faiths such as Baha'is and other religious groups.

\*\* Includes a variety of groups that practice traditional or folk religions.

This measure does not assess the severity of the harassment. Numbers do not add to total because multiple religious groups can be harassed in a single country.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life  
*Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*, September 2012

Religious persecution takes on two different but interlinked forms: state persecution and social hostility.

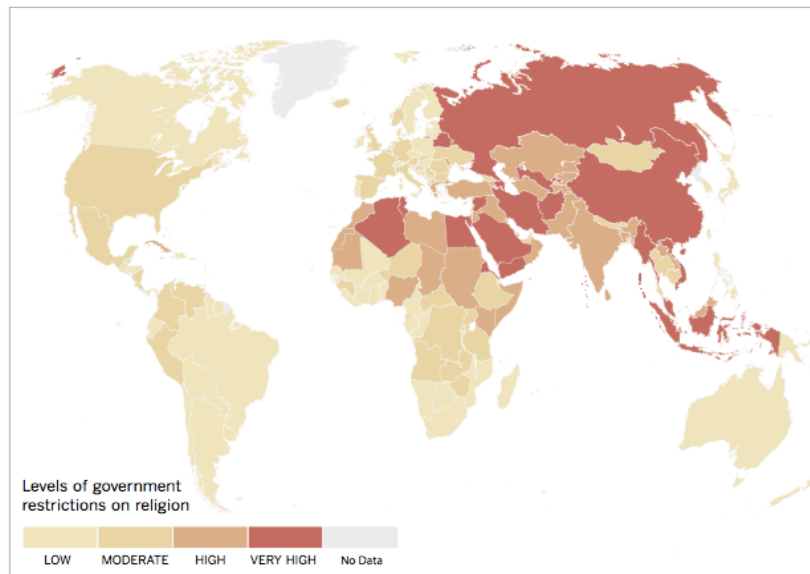
State persecution involves the direct policies, laws and practices of government officials. Social hostility involves actions of non-official individuals and public attitudes towards religious minorities.

This analytical approach to two different types of persecution is important for us to start to understand how and why persecution happens. Only by being aware of these political and social dynamics can we develop a healthy understanding and Christian response.

## a. State Restrictions on Religious Freedom

### Government Restrictions Around the World

Level of government restrictions in each country as of mid-2010



Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life • *Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*, September 2012

### Countries with Very High Government Restrictions on Religion

Scores of 6.6 or higher on the 10-point Government Restrictions Index

baseline year, ending  
**MID-2007**

latest year, ending  
**MID-2010**

Saudi Arabia	Egypt
Iran	<b>Indonesia</b>
Burma (Myanmar)	<b>Maldives</b>
China	Saudi Arabia
Uzbekistan	<b>Afghanistan</b>
Brunei	Iran
Egypt	Uzbekistan
Eritrea	<b>Tunisia</b>
Turkey	Eritrea
Vietnam	China
	<b>Syria</b>
	Burma (Myanmar)
	<b>Russia</b>
	Vietnam
	<b>Yemen</b>
	<b>Azerbaijan</b>
	<b>Algeria</b>
	<b>Belarus</b>

Gray text indicates a country that had very high government restrictions in the year ending in mid-2007 but not in the year ending in mid-2010. Bold indicates a country that had very high government restrictions in the year ending in mid-2010 but not in the year ending in mid-2007.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life  
*Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion*, September 2012

As can be seen in the map above, religious restrictions in the world differ around the world. While in Latin American countries, we see low levels of state interference with people's religions, in Asia, Middle East and North Africa we see high and very high levels of state restrictions and persecution. Since the regions which has high and very high levels of persecution include some of the world's largest countries, 75% of all world's population live under varying levels of oppression.

While each country is unique in its own context, we can note widespread trends.

In 39 countries in the world, governments formally ban religious groups and their activities. In 26 countries, government attempts to eliminate an entire religious group's presence in the country. Such policies affect Christians and others alike. For example Baha'is and Ahmadi Muslims suffer tremendously under such policies. In Iran, Baha'i faith is banned. More than 200 Baha'is have been killed since 1979, hundreds have been arrested, thousands have been denied university education and jobs. It is illegal to meet as Baha'is and teach Baha'i faith. They number around 300,000 in Iran and currently all of their national leaders are in jail.

Ahmadi Muslims face the same fate as Baha'is and are seen as heretics across the Islamic world. They are officially banned in various countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia. They are often subjected to police intimidation, attacks on mosques, denial of justice, protection, education and right to worship and believe in their own reading of the Qur'an. There are at least 3 million Ahmadis in Pakistan.

In Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it says everyone has the "freedom to change his religion or belief". It is a right that cannot even be denied under war or the worst conditions where governments can stop certain social activities due to emergencies. However, in 39 countries, there are laws and regulations that stop and punish individuals from choosing to believe in another religion or no religion at all.

Religious conversion is an issue across the world. For example, in India, there are seven federal states that have laws to stop Hindus from converting to other religions. In five Indian states- Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat, these laws are used regularly. The laws especially affect the Hindu outcasts, called Dalits, who convert to Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. Often, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist clergy and individuals are attacked on allegations of 'converting' Hindus and converts have been subjected severe conditions. There have been attempts to bring a similar law into power in Sri Lanka, which is a Buddhist majority nation, to stop religious conversions.

All across Muslim-majority states, conversion from Islam to another religion attracts immense state reactions. However, it is not only conversion to another religion but also becoming atheist results in persecution. In Indonesia, Alexander An was sentenced to two and a half years in prison in 2012 for allegations of blasphemy and declaring himself as an atheist, following his posts in an a Facebook groups page set up by atheists in Indonesia.

Pew Forums research found that in 37 countries, governments prohibit worship or religious practices of a religious group as a general policy, 47 countries prohibit freedom of worship in many cases. In 81 countries the registration processes that religious groups are required to go through are used to discriminate against some religious groups and that, in 18 countries, this adversely affects the ability of all religious groups to operate freely. For example, Muslims are often denied the right to worship in or open mosques in China, Russia and across Central Asia and Europe. To this day, there is still not a single mosque in Athens, Greece where more than 300,000 Muslims live.

Registration requirements are used to hinder worship services. For example in Kazakhstan, you need to have at least 50 adult members to register a church or a mosque and have permission to publish religious materials. In practice, registration is denied, delayed and even if granted, laws are used to intimidate and arrest. Similar laws apply in Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and Belarus, where Muslims, Christians and Jehovah Witnesses are regularly arrested and fined for having religious books, or holding prayer and study meetings. This is a similar problem across Middle East and North Africa, where Christians are often denied the right to build or repair churches or meet for prayer and Bible study on the basis of bureaucratic laws.



In 40 countries some religious groups are not allowed their right to share their faith with others and in 26 countries there is a ban on all religious groups to do so. However, even when religious groups enjoy exercise of their rights to publicly preach and proselytise their beliefs to others, in 86 countries governments limit religious literature and broadcasting. Punishments can be severe. An Uyghur Muslim in China was sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2012 for having Islamic literature. Christians are often arrested across Central Asia and Middle East for having Bibles.

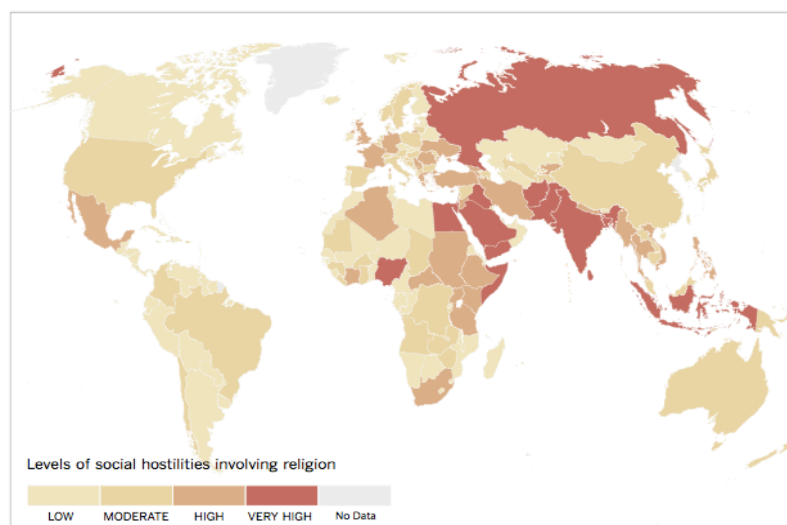
More worryingly, there is an increase in number of states that use harassment, intimidation and physical abuse against religious groups. Pew recorded widespread harassment and intimidation of religious minorities by governments in 86 countries. Out of these countries, in 51 countries in the world, there were clear reports government displaying physical violence toward minority religious groups. State use of illegal power involve property damage in 108 countries, detentions and abductions in 79 countries, displacement in 41 countries, physical assaults in 46 countries and deaths in 23 countries. For example, in Burma, Muslims and Christians face unseen levels of violence and are forced out of their villages into refugee camps in bordering towns. Thousands have been killed, jailed and hundreds of thousands have been forced to flee by Buddhists.

Issues of government restrictions on religious groups are also present within developed, Western nations. In the USA, the Pew research noted that there has been an increase in the number of incidents in which members of some religious groups faced restrictions on their ability to practice their faith. This included incidents in which individuals were prevented from wearing certain religious attire or symbols, including beards, in some judicial settings or in prisons, penitentiaries or other correctional facilities. Some religious groups in the US also faced difficulties in obtaining zoning permits to build or expand houses of worship, religious schools or other religious institutions.

## b. Social Hostilities

### Social Hostilities Around the World

Level of social hostilities in each country as of mid-2010



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Increasingly, it is not only governments that persecute or bring restrictions on the lives and practices of religious communities. We see a worrying trend of pressure and persecution from societies towards religious minorities all around the world.

If you compare the Social Hostilities map above with that of State Restrictions map at the start of this session, you will realise that while some countries

rank 'low' in restrictions against religion, they rank 'high' in social hostilities. This is clear most visibly in Europe, where the law and governments reflect good human rights standards, but increasing attacks on Muslims and Jews all across the continent by far-right extremists are causing danger bells to ring. A report by Tel Aviv University's Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry showed there were 688 attacks in 34 countries against Jews, synagogues and cemeteries in 2012, compared to 526 in 2011.

Christian experiences also show a complicated pattern too. For example, while in some states Christians face high level state restrictions, they do not face social hostilities, but in others while state restrictions weaken, they face social hostilities. For example, in Iran, Christians face a complete level of denial of rights by the regime and more than 200 have been arrested and detained since 2011. However, there are almost no recent incident of attacks on churches or Christians in Iran by mobs of non-state actors. In contrast, in Turkey, we have witnessed great reforms on religious freedom and improvement of rights of Christians. Turkish government does not arrest or intimidate Christians anymore. However, there have been fatal attacks on Christians, churches, Christian cemeteries last 10 years and social attitudes against Christians remain high.

Sadly, Pew's 2012 report on religious restrictions notes that there were crimes, malicious acts and violence motivated by religious hatred and bias in 146 countries. In 135 of them, this included harassment and intimidation; in 83 countries there were cases of property damage; in 19 there were abductions; displacements in 22; physical assaults in 82; and deaths in 38 countries. In 59 countries, individuals were assaulted or displaced from their homes because of religious activities that were considered

### Countries with Very High Social Hostilities Involving Religion

Scores of 7.2 or higher on the 10-point Social Hostilities Index

baseline year, ending MID-2007	latest year, ending MID-2010
Iraq	Pakistan
Pakistan	India
India	Iraq
Afghanistan	Sri Lanka
Bangladesh	Bangladesh
Indonesia	Somalia
Israel	Israel
Sri Lanka	<b>Nigeria</b>
Somalia	<b>Yemen</b>
Saudi Arabia	Afghanistan
	<b>Palestinian territories</b>
	<b>Egypt</b>
	<b>Russia</b>
	Saudi Arabia
	Indonesia

Bold indicates a country that had very high social hostilities in the year ending in mid-2010 but not in the year ending in mid-2007.

Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life  
Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion, September 2012

offensive to the majority. Pew states that in 51 countries there were instances when the government did not interfere in social discrimination and abuses of religious groups.

For example, in Pakistan, Shiite Muslims are often targeted and suffer fatally. In March 2013 alone, a bomb attack on Shiite Muslims killed 45 in Karachi and in February, another attack on Shiites in Quetta killed 89 people, which was preceded by an attack in January that killed more than 90 people.

Christians in Nigeria face unparalleled levels of violence. Open Doors UK states that "between November 2011 and October 2012, we recorded 1,201 killings of Christians worldwide (which gives an average of 100 killings a month), of which 791 happened in Nigeria, making this arguably the most dangerous country for a Christian to live, with outright slaughters in places like Jos, Abuja, Kaduna and Bauchi."

In Israel, which ranks highly on Pew's index, rights

for Israeli citizens are generally well-respected but Palestinian and some Christians face restrictions, including legal status issues. Extremists have carried out vandalism and graffiti attacks on churches and monasteries, and the authorities have been slow to respond and detain perpetrators. Those engaging in activities perceived as proselytising of Jewish people face hostile societal attitudes. This hostility come especially from Jewish religious organisations such as Yad L'Achim and Lev L'Achim, though some foreigners have been deported by the authorities for such activities. The Pew study also noted an increase in societal hostilities in the USA based on religion, including opposition to the construction of mosques, and religiously based workplace discrimination complaints.

We saw a sharp increase in such violent incidents and social tensions across Middle East and North Africa. Christians, Sufis, Baha'is and a wide range of groups attracted violence as political systems across the region began changing.

### **Review and discussion questions**

1. What is the difference between government restrictions and social hostilities against religious freedom? Explain briefly in your own words.
2. What measures are often taken by governments to eradicate a specific group? What reasons seem to drive them?
3. Describe how registration laws are used by government to restrict religious activity.
4. Have you, or your community been exposed to any social hostilities that were aimed at curbing some of your religious rights? Describe in one paragraph the circumstances, and briefly share the outcome.

### **3. Why does Persecution Happen?**

*The causes that drive persecution are many, and may differ from one country to another.*

The widespread state restrictions and social hostilities around the world demonstrates that not only more than 200 million Christians live in countries where they suffer just because they are Christians, but that their suffering is also shared by millions of human beings from other religions.

The question is simple; why? Yet, the answer is not easy to give. All these countries where individuals face persecution differ from each significantly in social, religious and political outlooks.

For example, China, where Muslims, Christians and a wide range of religious groups face restrictions is officially an atheist country that blends authoritarianism with some traditional values and strong state structures from the communist era. In China, not just Christians and religious communities but every large scale civil society movement is seen as a potential threat against the unity of the country and power of the one-party system. Thus, the Chinese regime is ok with Christianity as long as it can control who is appointed as a bishop or keep an eye on sermons. In fact, China now officially publishes more Bibles than any other country in the world. What the regime does not

like is the under ground Churches that meet in houses that the regime cannot see or control. Today, according to estimates, there are more than 70 million Christians in China.

The same authoritarian state policy and desire to control all civil society is why all religious groups as well as any civil society organization across Russia and Central Asia face severe restrictions and persecution. Simply because, the states see any potentially large and organised group as a threat to its weak hold on the country.

In contrast, in Burma we see a multi-ethnic state ruled by a strong military based up on a particular ethnic group that seeks to control and assimilate others. Thus, Christian and Muslim people groups suffer together not simply because of their faith, but because their religion is part of an ethnic group they belong to with distinct language and origins that the Burmese state see as a threat.

The reality of these macro political and social frameworks that result in religious persecution is also visible in the issue of religious conversion. It is a fact that traditional Islamic jurisprudence asks for death penalty for a male who converts from Islam to another religion after a chance of repentance is given. However, in actuality, very few Muslim-majority countries abide by such harsh Shari'a provisions, and treatment of converts differs across the Islamic world.

For example, in Iran, converts from Islam to another religion suffer significantly. This is primarily because the country is a self-declared theocracy and constitutionally enshrines traditional Islamic jurisprudence. Since it is a theo-political system that unites Farsi nationalism with being a Shiite Muslim, religious affiliation becomes an important issue. So in Iran, if you are among one of the constitutionally protected religious groups, such as historic Christian churches and Jews, as long as you accept a rigid minority status you can remain untouched within that parameters.

But, if you are, say a Sunni Muslim or even a Shiite theologian who challenges the regime's beliefs, you face trials and persecutions. In particular, two groups attract serious persecution; Baha'is and Muslim-background believers, both of whom are seen as apostates. They both face the same treatment; Baha'is are seen as heretics and allies of Israel, and converts to Christian faith are seen as those who betrayed Iran and Islam, thus potential allies of the United States and the West.

Since Iran's politics and society have a strong religious aspect, we might be tempted to see the root cause of treatment of Muslim-background Christians to be simply an issue about Islamic law. The complexity of the issue becomes clear when we compare Iran to Turkey. In Turkey, converts to Christian faith have faced severe treatment and been seen as a national threat and monitored by the state closely. They have been victims of mob and organised attacks. Yet, none of the groups that attack Christians in Turkey or the reasons behind the Turkish state's focus on them are primarily about Islamism. In fact, till very recently, religious Muslims too faced severe restrictions from the secular state.

Turkish law has no Shari'a provisions and in fact it is based upon Swiss law. The clues as to why it has reacted so harshly to conversion while at the same trying to limit Islam in the country lie in the profile of people who attack religious minorities; nationalist

groups. Turkish state is founded on a strong nation-state vision, that developed a particular type of Turkishness after the collapse of a multi-ethnic empire. In reconstruction of the country after WWI, the founders enforced a vision of one language, one religion and one race to build a nation. Thus, anyone who did not share these either had to be assimilated or forced to leave. In fact, ethnic minorities such as Kurds and religious minorities such as Armenians and Greeks suffered significantly because of this. So when ethnic Turks who are not minorities began accepting Christ, they were seen as betraying the Turkish nation and thus challenging the roots of the Turkish society.

The same mix of religion and national identity can be seen in India, where Hindu nationalists see religious conversion of Hindus, particularly the outcasts to escape the oppressive caste system, as a direct threat to their vision of a Hindu society and social structures. We see the parallel case in Sri Lanka, where Buddhist nationalism results in attacks on non-Buddhists, particularly to Christians and Muslims who are seen as converting and promoting their faith, thus challenging the basis of Sinhalese nationalism. The same ethno-religious nationalism is also the reason why Tamils, who are Hindus, face gross human rights abuses from the Buddhist majority.

In some places, however, the causes behind religious persecution and violence is a lot more mundane than same higher vision of nationalism or strong authoritarianism that seeks to maintain state unity. Sometimes, it is simply personal grievances and desire for benefit. For example, in Pakistan and Afghanistan, blasphemy laws have often used to settle down personal scores or grievances against personal enemies or seize the fields and properties of non-Muslim or often even Muslim neighbours. In central Nigeria where immense attacks on Christians take place and sometime Christian tribes demonstrate equal levels of violence is often caused by local politics and access to local resources as well as raids by Hausa-Fulani tribesmen who steal the livestock of Christian villagers.

However, one can also not deny that sometimes, religious persecution happens not because of macro level politics but because of clear ideologies. There are clearly religiously driven groups and terror organizations around the world that make fighting the 'infidels' and subjugating all other religious groups a key part of their religious ideology. Thus, Christians and others that are seen as such face attacks all across Africa, Middle East and Asia from such ideological militant groups.

### ***Review and discussion questions***

1. List three main reasons mentioned in this section why some religions are persecuted in some countries.
2. Compare the dynamics that drive discrimination and persecution in Iran and Turkey.
3. Have you, your associates, or a community you know, been in a situation where discrimination was triggered by personal grievances and interests? Describe the circumstances in one paragraph, and share the outcome.

#### 4. Biblical Reflection on Causes of Persecution

*The Cross is only one reason among many that triggered persecution in the New Testament.*

When we reflect up on why Christians are persecuted in line of what has been discussed thus far, a similarly complex picture emerges.

It is clear that there is a level of persecution we face that can never be explained by anything else but the fact that we believe in and follow Jesus Christ. He promised that just as he was persecuted, we too will be persecuted and that the Cross ultimately comes against the values of the world. This is a given. This is a persecution that is based up on the Cross and that continues the work of Christ as part of our calling to follow Him and bring His life and gospel to the world. Therefore, there is a level of persecution that we will always face in the world and there is nothing that can be done about it.

However, what is also clear when we reflect up on what is happening in the world to all religious groups as well as Christians and wide range religious persecution, that sometimes our faith is an indirect cause or only one of the reasons why we are persecuted.

It is clear that sometimes Christians are persecuted around the world because of macro-level international relations that have nothing to do with Christian faith or the church. Yet, nationalist groups see Christians as foreigners or foreign allies and attack us. We do not realise, but our desire to share our faith and lead others to Christ sometimes touches deep wounds or fears or politics in a country and community.

In fact, we see all of these different causes and dynamics behind persecution at play in the Bible.

Example I: Acts 14:8-19

In this passage we see Paul and Barnabas arriving in Lystra to preach the gospel. Paul sees a crippled man and performs a miracle. The crowd are amazed with what they saw and they are in jubilation, but not the kind Paul and Barnabas can accept. In local language, they declare Paul and Barnabas to be Greek gods who came among them. In fact, the priest of the pagan temple wants to sacrifice an animal to honor them as gods. When they understand what is happening, Paul and Barnabas tore their clothes in expression of the blasphemy of being declared gods and try to stop the crowd from sacrificing animals to them. Yet, a group of Jews disrupt the setting and turns the hysterical crowd against them. Soon after, Paul and Barnabas become victims to mob violence and are left alone only when the attackers think they are dead.

What we see here is a complex human phenomenon. Without ever knowing, Paul and Barnabas triggered a complete misunderstanding of the gospel and found themselves amidst a senseless crowd with agitators attacking them. The cultural lenses of the people of Lystra read what they witnessed by Paul and Barnabas completely different than what the apostles would ever want to communicate.

Today too, in various places where Christians have been attacked or face persecution because of their evangelism, we see similar patterns; Christians trying to preach salvation out of a good heart, and yet local people reading what is happening completely differently due to their own cultures, often leading agitators to turn hysterical crowds against Christians.

#### Example II: Acts 19: 23-41

At the start of Acts 19, we are first told of how effective Paul's ministry in the Ephesus has been and how people have turned to the Lord. But then in verse 23, we are told that a craftsman who makes idols gathers other idol makers and tells them Paul and Christianity is bad for their business and they turn people away from idol worship. If more people convert, then they will be left without a work. The idol maker also points out that if the ministry of Paul continues in the city, the famous temple of Artemis which attracts people to the city of Ephesus will also be harmed and lose its significance. Thus, not only their personal trades but also the name of god they worship and their world famous city will suffer too.

Angry crowds fuelled by these talks grab two companions of Paul and pull them into the theatre where public meetings and hearings are held. Acts tells us that crowds were confused, everybody was saying something different and were angry about other things. But when they realised Paul's companions were Jewish, they began shouting nationalist chants about their god and city. The crowd was only calmed by the city clerk who threatened to take action against them and the Christians were set free.

In this account, we see multiple factors. We see agitators who are worried that they will lose money because of Christian activities looking for a way to stop the work of Christians. While idol makers use the economic argument among themselves, to recruit others they appeal to the nationalism and sensitivities of Ephesians. They fuel the crowds by saying that Christianity would bring harm to their values, their gods and the reputation of their city. What follows is the similar irrationality of mobs in hysteria, not knowing why they are angry or demanding punishment on innocent people, but somehow they see their nation at stake. They are only calmed by the authorities. In fact, other Christians wisely prevent Paul from going and speaking before the crowd, lest his presence should fuel more tensions. Wisdom of the officials and people who stop Paul prevented a potentially fatal incident.

Today too, in various places across the world Christians are accused of causing harm to their nations or their community's fame or political and economic interests of particular people or groups. We see similar patterns of agitators purposefully turning crowds against Christians, saying they are agents of another country or that they hold too much power and money or have aims to convert and destroy an entire country. When states uphold rule of law and security forces do their job properly, such accusations or prejudices against Christians do not lead to violence. Yet in moments of political crisis or change or when governments do not interfere, Christians can find themselves the targets of irrational campaigns.

## ***Review and discussion questions***

1. Explain briefly how in your opinion the Cross can become one reason behind the persecution believers in Christ experience in the world.
2. Briefly list the different reasons that were at the root of Paul's persecution in Ephesus.
3. In your opinion, does the outcome of persecution depend on the reasons that were behind it? Bring Biblical support to your answer.

## **5. Persecution: a Historical Reality**

*Christ and his church have been experiencing persecution since the very early days*

While it is true that religious persecution is increasing in the world, and global developments are creating new forms of human rights abuses, Christians have always faced persecution from the very start of ministry of Jesus Christ.

Christ himself was thrown out of towns, faced discrimination, slurs and found himself in many risky situations, and ultimately was tortured to death by Roman soldiers on the order of authorities who did not want to create a much larger crisis in the city and thus chose to sacrifice an innocent man.

Followers of Christ faced equally challenging circumstances. In fact, 11 out of all of the 12 apostles were killed for their faith. Only John lived to die in peace. Traditions say Peter, who had denied Christ three times out of fear and who was restored to faith, was crucified upside down.

Paul, whose ministry was key in not only taking the Christian gospel beyond Judea and whose epistles played a major role in the development of Christian faith was ultimately executed in Rome.

In fact, till the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the first 300 years of Christian church, believers faced persecution from authorities and public all across the Middle East and North Africa and the Mediterranean. Christian faith was officially banned by the Roman Empire and thousands of Christians were forced to either give up on Christ or face death by gladiators or fire or prolonged torture till they gave up.

Even when Christianity became official religion of the empire and many subsequent kingdoms in Europe and Middle East and the churches became powerful and rich through out the Middle Ages, many still faced persecution. In fact, church authorities in Europe were often guilty of denying religious freedom and even torturing and killing other Christians who held different doctrines.

When Christianity became a religious political tool for rulers of Europe, we saw how military campaigns were fought in the name of Christ for aims and outcomes which had nothing to do with Christ. For example, during the Crusades, the not so holy warriors from Europe attacked and persecuted Christians in Asia Minor and Middle East.

It took Europe decades of wars between smaller kingdoms caused by political



allegiance surrounding Protestant reformation and harsh responses of Catholic rulers to finally come to peace and accept religious freedom for Protestants and Catholics.

In 1600 to 1800s, there were large Christian communities all across Central, South, East and Far East Asia. One by one they were either forced to convert or pushed out. Japan was once home to hundreds of thousands Christians and far before start of Evangelical mission movements, Catholic missionaries saw Japan as the rising sun of the East that was going to be a Christian nation. Yet, when the Emperor decided to stop spread of Christianity, almost all Christians in Japan perished. A remaining number of Christians remained as secret believers for almost a century till Japan saw more religious freedom after WWII. When a Catholic church was opened in Japan officially after the war, hundreds of secret believers emerged.

20<sup>th</sup> century saw brutal persecution of Christians across Middle East and North Africa, as well as in the Soviet block countries that banned religions. Today, it is heartbreaking to see how once North Africa was a major Christian centre and gave birth to such spiritual giants such as Augustine has very few Christians left. In Turkey, at the start of 20<sup>th</sup> century, there were still couple of million Christians. Yet, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Armenian Christians found themselves facing massacres and forced to flee. Greek Christians were sent to Greece in large numbers as part of an agreement between Turkey and Greece to exchange Muslim and Christian populations.

So there is a direct link from the time of Christ to the suffering of the believers in Iraq and Syria and Egypt and Iran today. That link is the truth Christ warned us with; if they had persecuted him, they will surely persecute us too. And just like in the life of Christ, we see how Christians can evoke strong reactions simply by the teachings they follow and lives they live, and how sometimes other religious groups and politicians can be playing personal games of power with our lives and how even our neighbours and families can turn against us in moments of hysteria and social chaos.

### ***Review and discussion questions***

1. Describe how discrimination or persecution in your country compares with some of what was described in this section on the historical reality of persecution.
2. What help can we derive, theologically and practically, from the fact that persecution has been a historical reality? Read 1 Peter 5: 8-9.

### **Conclusion**

In this lesson, we saw that international law protects an individual's right to freely believe and express his or her belief. This includes the right to change your religion, teach to others, write and publish and preach your faith freely.

Yet, we also saw that even though governments are obliged to adhere to these standards, worryingly, most countries on earth seek to limit religious freedom and in some cases either actively persecute people who belong to religious communities that are different from officially sanctioned religions or stand passively as mobs and other religious groups target minorities.

We saw that this affects all religions, including Islam, Christianity, Judaism and Baha'i faith. Experiences of these religions share similar features, highlighting the social and political contexts in which religious persecution happens.

When we reflected on the dynamics behind why persecution happens, we saw a two fold reason: spiritual and temporal. We saw that there are spiritual reasons behind persecution: Christ himself told us that because of the Cross we will be hated just like him. We also saw that there are temporal reasons: politics, economy, social chaos, all of which show themselves in persecution accounts in the Bible as well as through out the history and today.

Such a reflection on persecution helps us to develop a more mature theology of persecution, as well as practical insights into how best we can serve our churches and represent our faith to the general public as Christian leaders.

## **Biblical Case Study**

### **Paul in Corinth**

Read Acts 18: 1-16, and answer the following questions in light of what you have learned in this lesson.

- a. Describe the circumstances that have led Paul before the governor in Achaia.
- b. What is the explicit reason voiced against Paul by his opponents?
- c. What are some of the real causes one may find in the text that seem behind the accusers' actions?
- d. If you were to judge the governor against contemporary rights to freedom of religion, how would he fare?
- e. What were the outcomes of this wave of potential persecution?

## **Additional Reading**

Ziya Meral, 'What are the Current Trends in Practice Regarding Article 18?' In: *Article 18: An Orphaned Right – a Report of the All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom*, Westminster, 2013.

## Lesson One Test

1. What are some examples of what religious freedom includes?
2. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights acknowledges the freedom to
  - a. believe as one wishes
  - b. choose one's religion
  - c. manifest one's beliefs
  - d. instruct own children
  - e. all of the above
  - f. only a and b
  - g. only b and c
3. What is the legal difference between Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights?
4. While Article 18 has reiterated the rights to freedom of religion and beliefs, it declares also commitments most countries made to safeguard this freedom. What actions the signatories can be held accountable for neglecting in practice?
5. According to Article 18, what restrictions to religious liberties are governments allowed in extraordinary circumstances? How do some countries tend to abuse this exception?
6. What are the two forms religious persecution takes?
7. How can the reasons behind persecution differ from one country to another? Give three different examples.
8. Why do some countries see religious freedom as a national political and security threat?
9. Do you think Christians themselves can be a cause of some of the persecution they face? Explain.
10. What message does 1 Peter 3:13-17 convey to Christians who may be exposed to persecution (See also 1 Peter 2: 11-21, 4: 14-16)?
11. What are some other examples of incidents of persecution in the New Testament? Give two examples.
12. What are three main waves of persecution against Christians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Describe circumstances and outcomes.
13. How does the fact that discrimination and persecution touch all religious backgrounds help you understand the underlying dynamics of such an evil? Explain briefly in one paragraph.

14. Explain to what extent you think can human rights declarations and covenants help facilitate the spread of the gospel in countries with restrictions or social hostilities.
15. In light of the extra reading by Ziya Miral, describe the type of persecution challenges that Christians face in the Middle East and North Africa.
16. What are some of the expected potential outcomes of unrestrained persecution that Ziya Miral underlines in the conclusion of his article?

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Penner, Glenn M (2004) In the Shadow of the Cross: a Biblical Theology of Persecution & Discipleship. Living Sacrifice Books

Cavanaugh, William T (1998) Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ. Wiley-Blackwell Publishers

Endo, Shusaku, (1980) Silence. Taplinger Publishing Company

### Reports

Meral, Ziya (2008) No Place to Call Home: Experiences of Apostates from Islam and Failures of the International Community. Christian Solidarity

For annual country specific reports on religious freedom around the world, see the following links at the websites of US Department of State and US Commission on International Religious Freedom:

US State Department: <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/>

USCIRF: <http://uscirf.gov/reports-and-briefs/annual-report.html>

### Worldwide Journals

International Journal for Religious Freedom, World Evangelical Alliance

Review of Faith and International Affairs, Institute of Global Engagement

