

The persecution trap: vulnerable Christians are running out of allies

John O'Sullivan 4 April, 2019

A Catholic church destroyed by ISIS militants in Karamdes, Iraq

The worldwide persecution of Christians is likely to intensify in the coming decades. Can anything be done to stop it?

Christianity is the largest faith in a world of thriving religions. It's hard sometimes to feel that since the mental picture that grips most Westerners, including many Christians, is one of a dying faith in a disenchanted secular universe in which God is not so much dead as retired on a modest pension. Reality is very different. In 2015 the four largest (conventional) world religions were in descending order Christianity (31.2 per cent of the global population), Islam (24.1 per cent), Hinduism (16 per cent), and Buddhism (7 per cent). If we admit "without religion" as a category, that comes in third today with 16 per cent, a shade ahead of "without religion".

Looking ahead to population projections for 2060, this picture changes only slightly but significantly. All religions see an increase in the number of their believers. "Without religion" falls behind Hinduism into fourth place – so much for the inevitability of secularisation. And Islam overtakes Christianity as the world's largest religion. Islam will be ahead only by a nose – both religions hover around 32 per cent in 2060 – but it's an advantage that will grow in the following years.

The main reasons are innocently demographic: age and fertility. Muslims worldwide are younger than Christians by some six years, and Muslim women have the highest fertility rate among religions. Christians will inevitably fall further behind Muslims in the numbers game for some time to come. That alone need not inspire nervousness. These forecasts are from respectable sources, mainly the Pew Research Centre and the United Nations, but demographic forecasts change over time. Just not quickly.

More worrying than the overall figures is the distribution of Christianity's decline. Almost all the growth in Christian numbers occurs in sub-Saharan Africa. Asian Christianity does no more than hold its own with other religions. And decline occurs in the traditional heartlands of Christianity, namely Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and the Americas.

In Europe the decline is absolute as well as relative. European Christians are falling as a percentage of all Europeans in part because they have a lower birth rate than others, in part because many simply leave their religion. Between 2015 and 2020 the number of Christians in Europe will fall by 8.2 million. Two effects follow. Europeans will have less weight in

world Christianity, declining from 24 to 14 per cent of Christians between now and 2060; and Christians will have less weight in the politics and social life of Europe. It is the latter effect that is likely to be the more ominous for all Christians.

For, in addition to demography, Christians worldwide face two additional and increasing dangers: religious persecution and a lack of powerful friends.

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sometimes governments persecute Christians directly as in Sudan; sometimes they try to restrain and punish mob attacks on Christians, as recently in Pakistan; sometimes they turn a blind eye to such crimes as religious murder and the burnings of churches (in which, indeed, police and soldiers take part) as in Egypt; and often they veer back and forth between these different responses depending on pressures from foreign governments and NGOs. The end result is that some of the oldest Christian communities in the world are being driven from Iraq and Syria, and that the Copts in Egypt – five per cent of the population – live a half-life in the shadows between official protection, Islamist violence and emigration.

The second source of anti-Christian persecution is militantly atheist governments suspicious of all social activity not directly under their control. North Korea is the most extravagant and horrifying example of such oppressive totalitarian regimes. But China – which has exploited the internet to create the first panopticon state – is the most subtle, persistent and effective one. Where necessary, it imprisons religions wholesale as with Uighur Muslims. Where possible, as apparently with the Vatican, it regulates religions into compliance.

Finally, there are states where the government assists its own client religion to keep out rivals by legal regulation. Putin's alliance with Russian Orthodoxy is an embarrassing example for Christians but neither novel nor especially brutal.

In the face of persecution almost all religions can turn to protectors. Muslims in particular have a strong advocate in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation which unites 57 Islamic governments to negotiate their rights in non-Muslim states. Christians in non-Christian states used to enjoy even greater protection from Western governments during the imperial period.

Today, however, persecuted Christian communities outside Europe can expect little help from Europe and, more surprisingly, little sanctuary either. An astonishingly small percentage of Syrian refugees granted asylum in Europe are Christian – namely, 0.2 per cent. And when it is suggested – as it was by then Prime Minister Tony Abbott in Australia – that a special category should be created for them, this was opposed as discriminatory and ran into the sands of bureaucracy. This is a classic case of an abstract principle of non-discrimination being employed in such a way as to ensure (or at least not to correct) an actual practice of discrimination that harms real people.

Many reasons explain this unconcern. Western military and economic power which protected overseas Christians either directly or through diplomacy is no longer so impressive. That impression may be exaggerated, but for the moment it matters. Our human rights charters and laws are simply ignored, when convenient, by non- or anti-Western states.

Even if that were not so, Western European governments have no particular sense of responsibility for Christians abroad since they no longer think of their countries as being Christian in any serious sense, including culturally. Indeed, the transformation of Western liberalism – once the foundation of Western concern about massacres of Christians abroad – into a doctrine of strict neutrality between religions is often interpreted in practice to favour other religions over Christianity abroad as well as at home. As the late Kenneth Minogue pointed out in an essay on “Christophobia”, Western European governments don't want to give special protection to Christians abroad because that would undermine their claims to represent a post-religious liberal international order rather than a specifically (post-) Christian viewpoint. That is the nearest thing to a religious imperative in Western diplomacy, and it was confirmed informally a few years ago at a meeting in Washington between State Department bureaucrats and religious pressure groups. Asked why the US did not call for more Christians to be admitted as refugees, the spokesman replied: “You won't like my answer. The Europeans have asked us not to.”

America is a partial exception to this liberal policy of cautious indifference because of the strong involvement in its political life of religious communities with ethnic links to the persecuted. Its International Religious Freedom Act has given the US a specific responsibility to promote religious liberty throughout the world. It succeeded in getting Vietnam to abandon a policy of forced renunciation of religion. And at the very least its regular reports keep up the pressure on governments to live up to their commitments to religious liberty.

Within Europe, Poland and Hungary are exceptions too. Hungary has pioneered a policy of giving generous and active help to enable Christian communities in the Middle East to rebuild both their churches and their lives in more secure conditions. It sees this as one aspect of Hungary's wider responsibilities as a nation which wants to invigorate as well as protect its distinctively Christian culture. But this puts the country at odds with Europe's post-Christian drift.

All in all, the picture is a bleak one with more dangers and few comforts. Much of mainstream Christianity is being transformed into a vague humanitarianism that seems to believe that Man *does* live by bread alone. It shrinks from confronting the truth of persecution because it does not want to think ill of the persecutors, and it takes the Good Samaritan to be a parable of why Christians should be the last people to be helped.

Some realisation of these dangers is dawning in Europe, however. Both the British Prime Minister and the Foreign

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Victims: Persecuted Believers and Western Governments” at the Reform Club in London on April 9. (For details of the speakers, conference agenda and registration, please [go here](#).)

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