

# The devastating Situation Christian Minorities face in non-democratic Countries

## Why Christianity increasingly suffers Discrimination and Persecution

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In the First World War, the major Christian nations waged war against each other in the name of the Christian God, and their respective state churches demonized the peoples constituting their opponents. Even into the 1920s, it could not have simply been said that Christianity was broadly peaceful, that it refused to force people into belief, and that freedom of religion was committed to. On the contrary: Fundamentalism in all denominations was on the advance, scheming with allegedly Christian dictators, and even their open support as men of the church was the order of the day. Colonialism dressed up in Christian garb did not want to free the colonies, and above all the dream of a denominational, Christian state or at least the involvement of the state in the spreading of one's own denomination was still commonplace. It was only after the Second World War that Christianity began to broadly recognize democracy and above all the inclusion of human rights, including freedom of religion, in churches' basic teachings. This prevailed in theory (doctrines) in the mid-1960s and determined real life more and more in subsequent decades.

At the latest, the formulation and signing of the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* (2005–2011) by almost all churches made it clear that the Constantinian age was finally a thing of the past and that it goes against Christian doctrine and against the spirit of Jesus Christ to force other people to believe or to misuse the state for such purposes. At the same time, any kind of mission that does not respect the human rights of others is to be rejected. Northern Ireland long came across as a relic of the past, and in the end churches and Christians finally came together to end the religious side of the fighting.

Atheism and non-religious worldviews, respectively, have in a broad sense also experienced a similar, delayed development. Oppressive regimes which have sought to wipe out all religions or have used the state in order to force a non-religious worldview have at times ruled large parts of the world. However, they have largely disappeared since the end of the Soviet Union and have yielded to more peaceful intellectual discourse. Countries such as China, Cuba, and North Korea, which stem from this tradition, are still only conditionally atheistic and difficult to classify.

## Grievous Developments within Islam and Hinduism

In contrast, Islam and Hinduism have unfortunately experienced an opposite development. This has recently been occurring in Hinduism, where the Prime Minister presently ruling India is an adherent of Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva). Also, in one state in India a fanatical priest became prime minister and openly supports people who deprive followers of other religions of their livelihood, for instance because they raise cattle. The increase and geographical expansion of Islamic violence is taking place even more so right before our eyes.

I am not concerned here with denigrating Muslims or Hindus or with sweeping statements about religions with enormously many varieties. After all, peaceful Muslims and Hindus are also in large numbers victims of the wings of their religions prone to use violence. Rather, we are dealing with a worldwide trend: The wings prone to violence within Christianity and non-religious worldviews are in

retreat, but the wings prone to violence within Islam and Hinduism are growing and are steadily winning additional supporters. It is these four groups to which the large majority of people belong. India has only gradually appeared on the map of countries persecuting Christians and Muslims. A sad example is Indonesia, which I have cited for many years as an example of peaceful Islam and a secular democracy. There are increasingly frequent eruptions of local violence and large demonstrations against Christian politicians, and the overall development is a cause for great concern.

## Christians as easy Prey

Only within these terms of orientation can't Christians' situation around the world be understood. Precisely because Christians consciously renounce a violent defense of the churches, and precisely because they promote secular democracies with religious freedom and no longer want and have a 'Christian' state on their side, they become easy victims of violent religious currents and states contemptuous of human rights in which they live as minorities. Where the state does not protect the rights of Christians, they are compliant playthings for discrimination and spiraling violence.

More than four-fifths of Christianity's adherents enjoy the sunny side of religious freedom, and that is more than the other major world religions. That also naturally has to do with the fact that almost all prior 'Christian' countries, that is, states with a majority Christian population today, grant religious freedom. A certain exception to the rule are a number of Orthodox countries, which find themselves in an intermediate state between democracy and autocracy, such as is the case with Russia. It also has to do with the fact that in the meantime 'religious freedom' has become an integral part of Christian teaching within all denominations.

On the other hand, there is no other major religious community which has such a high percentage of its adherents subjected to constant harassment or even threats to life and limb. Also, among small religions there are only a few which have comparable percentages. The Baha'i can be mentioned as an example, who owe this essentially to their foundation in Iran and their strong spreading in the Islamic world.

Christians enjoy so much religious freedom because they live in democracies that have emerged in virtually all former Christian countries. It is just the opposite in the Islamic world. Among the countries where there is no democracy, over 80% are Muslim countries. There are no democratic freedoms in these countries, therefore not for religions other than the state religion and, with that said, not for Christians. For that reason, it is predominantly Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim countries who enjoy religious freedom. This is in diametrical opposition to the situation Christians find themselves in.

One development which is difficult to explain from the outside perpetually exacerbates the problem: It is precisely where religious freedom is limited that churches most often grow fastest. This is not an automatism, as the German Democratic Republic did not result in church growth. And yet, it is a reality found throughout the world.

## Brute Force on a large Scale

Violence against Christians ranges from the murder of nuns in India, arson attacks against churches in Indonesia, and beating up priests in Egypt, to the torture of a 'recalcitrant' priest in Vietnam, and to casting children out of their families in Turkey and Sri Lanka.

There is no parallel in India to the 50,000 affected Christians from the Indian state of Orissa who were expelled from their homes in 2008/2009, whereby about 500 people died, and who still largely live in tents. There are hardly any parallels to the 100,000 Christians displaced by armed force on the Molluk islands of Indonesia in the years 2000/2001 (which resulted in several thousand deaths). The expulsion

of hundreds of thousands of Christians from Iraq in the years 2007 to 2009 was at that time without parallel in the religious world. Today we know that things could get even worse. Unfortunately, this is currently being continued, especially in Syria. Before our very eyes, the share of long-established oriental and catholic churches in core Islamic countries has dramatically decreased.

Furthermore, on practically a daily basis we receive reports from churches which have been torched or bombed, and whereby Christians die. These reports come more rarely from countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka, or India but more frequently from Pakistan and Indonesia. However, they constantly come from Egypt, Iraq, Syria or Nigeria. And quite often the number of deaths is over 20, sometimes 50. The sometimes mentioned number of 100,000 Christian martyrs per year does not have any foundation, but – varying widely – one can assume a number from 3,000 to 10,000 such martyrs annually.

## **Democratic, secular States are called upon to be actively involved**

The German state has long ceased to be a Christian state. It can no longer act as a colonial protective power for discriminated and persecuted Christians in other countries. The same applies to atheists around the world, who live in much smaller numbers in many of the same countries but are often even more brutally persecuted. However, if secular constitutional states do not stand up for Christians who are discriminated against and persecuted, i.e., above all for Christian minorities in non-democratic countries – and naturally also for followers of every other faith – in the end there will no longer be anyone to stand up for Christians. I think that secular constitutional states can achieve good success in standing up for human rights and Christians' religious freedom all over the world. This can be done without coming under suspicion for not standing up for other religions or non-religious people or for wanting to propagate a certain religion or ideology.

In addition: If there were more comprehensive democracies in the Islamic world, there would also be more religious freedom there, and of course then also more religious freedom for Christians. Thus, it must be in the interest of a secular constitutional state like Germany to promote approaches to democracy in the Islamic world along all channels, to facilitate dialogue, and to help restrict violent religious movements around the world.

The security authorities in Germany can also pay special attention to currently threatened church services or places of worship of the Coptic Church and other oriental churches and, if necessary, protect them by police presence. This should be done without giving up the equally necessary protection of synagogues and mosques. Precisely because human rights and religious freedom are indivisible, we owe it to the Christian minority worldwide to make their fate known and to use every legal means to protect them.

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