

CHANGING FACE OF RELIGIOUS PERSECUTION

The 2021 report on Religious Freedom in the World, issued by Aid to the Church in Need, details two genres of religious persecution. The first is the most familiar one: violence against people and property (houses of worship). The second is a more subtle way of persecuting the faithful, typically relying on restrictive measures encoded in public policy and law.

Pope Francis is credited with broaching this second strand: non-violent expressions of religious persecution may not be as immediate or acute, but they can be culturally lethal.

The report found that the most persecuted religion in the world is Christianity. As in years past, Muslim-run nations and Communist states continue to be the worst offenders. The evidence shows that Africa, Asia and the Middle East remain hotbeds of Christian persecution in its most violent form.

The report also notes that “the predominance of Christianity is no guarantee that religious freedom is upheld.” Nations that disrespect religious liberty tend to disrespect human rights in general. For example, in Latin America and the Caribbean, the worst offenders are Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. All three are Marxist-inspired police states.

It is the second type of religious persecution, the more gentle one, that should concern those who live in North America and Europe.

Pope Francis calls it “polite persecution.” He is alarmed by the spike in new “rights,” cultural norms or laws that relegate religion “to the quiet obscurity of the individual’s conscience,” or that narrowly confine them to “the enclosed precincts of churches, synagogues or mosques.”

The Holy Father has put his finger on a real problem. If Christians in the Middle East need to fear the machete, Christians in the Western world need to fear the media, higher education, activist organizations and government. They are the ones advocating, or imposing, a secular agenda on religious institutions.

The report quotes Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Vatican's Secretary for Relations with States, warning us about "a radically individualistic interpretation of certain rights and the affirmation of 'new rights.'" The report cites by way of example violations of the conscience rights of those in the medical profession. Forcing doctors to end life (euthanasia), or to stop it from developing (abortion), is a growing threat to people of faith in many nations.

Laws aimed at curtailing the rights of religious schools are also a problem. Graduates of some religious colleges and universities are being discriminated against in employment. Parents who object to classroom instruction that explicitly runs roughshod over their religious beliefs (e.g., sex education) are being summarily ignored by administrators. "Hate crime" legislation is being used to criminalize the beliefs of those who hold to traditional moral values.

Another variant of "polite persecution" are attempts to limit the scope of religious liberty, or that undervalue its role in a free and democratic society.

For religious liberty to thrive, it must be afforded a wide scope and not be suffocated by restrictive norms and laws. It is not only offensive, it is downright insulting, to tell the faithful that they can pray in their house of worship. Faith that cannot be exercised in the public square is faith denied. To be sure, no right is absolute, but efforts to narrowly define religion's reach are stifling.

There would be no liberty, anywhere in the world, had it not been for the Western vision of individual rights and justice

before the law. These ideas did not spring from Africa, the Middle East or Asia. It is the West that gave birth to liberty and equality, and it is our Judeo-Christian ethos that shaped it. That is why the movement to secularize our religious institutions makes no sense historically, logically, or morally.

“Polite persecution” of religion may not put us in imminent danger, but in the long run it can accomplish the same end. Campaigns to subvert it are in everyone’s interest.