

## Violence and persecution levelled at Christians around the world

### SUMMARY

In 2050, Christianity will still be the religion with the most adherents worldwide, with a following outnumbering that of Islam, although the latter will not be far behind it numerically. However, this forecast should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Christianity remains very diverse, being divided into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant branches, and that demographic trends are different for each of them. Despite the fact that Christianity remains the most widely practised religion, Christians are in the minority in many regions of the world, where various communities suffer discrimination and even serious human rights violations. Those responsible may be the state, other social groups or a combination of the two. In this context, the United Nations has recently taken up the cudgels to defend these oppressed minority communities, and the European Parliament has adopted a growing number of resolutions on the subject.

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### Demographic trends in the 21st century

A paradoxical aspect of contemporary Christianity is that, worldwide, its adherents are in the majority,<sup>1</sup> yet are in the minority in many regions of the world. While 75% of people in Europe described themselves as [Christians](#) in 2010, the same was true of only 7.1% of the population in the Asia-Pacific region and 3.7% of people in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>2</sup>

This minority status in regions of conflict, where the conflicts are not always religiously motivated, makes Christians potential targets. Especially in the Middle East, their historical ties with the Western powers or with the [Vatican](#) may cause them to be seen as agents of an unwelcome Western influence.

However, it is not only Christians who are vulnerable because of their minority status. Many religious minorities around the world are victims of violence, for example the Yazidis in [Iraq](#) and the [Bahais](#) in the Middle East, whose religions are both related to Islam and who suffer discrimination or persecution from the radicals of ISIL/Da'esh. The [Sikhs](#) in Afghanistan and the [Rohingyas](#) in Burma are in a similar position, suffering persecution at the hands of Buddhists.

Thus the difficulties faced by religious minorities should be seen in a broader context. In the course of the 21st century, the world is likely to undergo some major religious transformations. According to the [Pew Research Center](#), atheism and agnosticism are likely to decline in proportional terms (from 16.4% in 2010 to 13.2% in 2050) worldwide. With the exception of Buddhism, the main world religions are likely to gain adherents in terms of absolute numbers, and Christianity is expected to remain the most widely practised religion. By 2050, it is forecast that Islam will be the faith of almost as many people as Christianity will. Within these overall trends, there will be disparities in the various regions of the world, because of differentials in birth rates or rates of conversion from one religion to another. Thus India is likely to become the country not only with the most practising Hindus but also with the most practising Muslims. The bulk of the growth of Islam and Christianity will probably occur in Sub-Saharan Africa. By 2050, 40% of Christians worldwide will be living in that region.

**Figure 1 – Comparative trends in the five most widely practised religions in the world between 2010 and 2050**

		2010	2050	change
<b>Christians</b>	Number in billions	2.17	2.92	stable
	% of world population	31.4%	31.4%	
<b>Muslims</b>		1.6	2.76	73%
		23.2%	29.7%	
<b>No religion</b>		1.13	1.23	8.83%
		16.4%	13.2%	
<b>Hindus</b>		1.03	1.38	6.15%
		15%	14.9%	
<b>Buddhists</b>		0.49	0.49	stable
		7.1%	5.2%	

Source of data: Pew Research Center, 2015.

## The great diversity of Christianity

### The three major branches of Christianity

Within these overall trends, Christianity is highly diverse. This makes it complex to describe, but three main branches can be distinguished: Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. As part of this simplified picture, within global Christianity, Roman Catholicism is pre-eminent because it represents the vast majority of Catholics, who, in turn, make up 50% of all Christians in the world. However, Christianity remains very diverse, and there are considerable differences in it in different regions of the world in terms of doctrine, practices and also demographics, as the Evangelical churches are growing extremely rapidly in [Latin America](#) and [Africa](#). Conversely, some Christian churches in the Middle East – Catholic (Chaldean, Catholic Syrians, Maronites) or Orthodox (Copts, Syrians, Assyrians) – are hardly able to survive because of their demographics, [immigration](#) and legal difficulties or even persecution.

**Figure 2 – The major branches of Christianity**

	Catholic	Orthodox	Protestant
Main denominations	Roman	Patriarchates of Constantinople, Moscow, Athens, Belgrade, etc.	Lutheran, Calvinist, Reformed Churches, etc.
Main regions of residence	(worldwide)	(Europe, Russia, Middle East)	(worldwide)
	Uniate churches (Coptic, Syriac, Maronite, Chaldean, Greek Catholic, etc.)	Three-council churches (Coptic, Syriac, Malabar, Malankara, etc.)	Evangelical Churches (Baptist, Pentecostal, etc.)
	(Mainly Eastern Europe and Middle East)	(Middle East, Latin America)	(North and Latin America, Africa)
		Two-council churches (Assyrian etc.)	Anglican Church
		(Middle East, India)	(British Isles and former British Empire)
% of all Christians	50%	37%	12%

Source of data: Encyclopaedia [Britannica](#), [Pew Research Center](#), [Oeuvre d'Orient](#), 2015. Main churches in grey; geographical regions where mainly prevalent in white.

### The role of geopolitics in the difficulties faced by Christians

In the course of history, the perception of Christians in many regions of the world has been a function of the perception of the role that Christians played and the links that they had with Western states, including the Holy See. The crusades made a significant impact, because Christians came from Europe to live in the Middle East, disrupting local equilibria between Christian and Muslim Arabs. Subsequently, thanks to the alliance between King Francis I of France and Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent in 1536, France succeeded in providing a form of legal protection to Christians in the Ottoman Empire, as did Russia in the 19th century. Colonisation was also a factor in the development of Christianity, and in transforming relations between local forms of Christianity, as in India, and other religions.

For these reasons, around the world, Christians are sometimes seen as agents or representatives of the Western powers – wrongly so – and this is a contributory reason for their vulnerability. This is the case particularly in Iraq or Syria, where the war which toppled Saddam Hussein triggered a wave of persecution of Christians and a massive [exodus](#) of them, despite their having lived in the region since the earliest centuries of Christianity. The same is true in [China](#), where the government does not accept that the Catholic Church should be allowed to recognise an authority external to the country, namely the papacy.

## From discrimination to persecution

### Difficulties of classification

According to a [study](#) published in 2015 by the Pew Research Center, religious violence declined worldwide in 2013, although in 77 countries Jews had been suffering mounting hostility over a period of seven years, either from states or from social groups. This situation is comparable to the rise in hostility towards traditional religions (animism, for example). For their part, Christians faced difficulties in 102 of the 198 countries covered by the study (52%) and Muslims in 99 (50%).

All the work done by organisations providing aid to Christians is hampered by difficulties in classifying what constitutes discrimination or persecution, but also by the fact that it is not always easy to show that it is on account of their religion that individuals or groups of individuals have been targeted. The [indexes](#) produced by the Pew Research Center (Government Restriction Index and Social Hostilities Index) and by such organisations as '[Open Doors](#)' or '[Aid to Church in Need](#)' all refer to such difficulties, although in the case of the latter the very dense network of the Catholic Church in all parts of the world makes it possible to communicate information, even from war zones such as Iraq or Syria.

Two major categories can be distinguished: restrictions imposed by the state on the one hand and communal violence against Christian minorities on the other. In reality, and as the organisation Aid to Church in Need points out, some governments, such as that of [Nigeria](#), are doing what they can to halt religious violence perpetrated by transnational terrorist groups such as [Boko Haram](#), but their resources are very limited. Conversely, states may be the source of the difficulties and of religious persecution, as is the case in North Korea, where possession of a Bible is very severely punished by the state and can result in detention in a labour camp or a death sentence, according to the international report on religious freedom of the [US Department of State](#). Meanwhile it may be noted that the states which impose the most restrictions on religion are often those where individual liberties are most threatened, as is shown by a comparison of these various indexes with the report on freedom in the world published by [Freedom House](#). The United Nations ([UN](#)) recalls, however, that in the majority of cases, situations are marked by a combination of legal restrictions, permissiveness or incapacity to act on the part of states and criminal acts by non-state actors.

### Restriction and discrimination

In the field of religious restrictions, it is possible to distinguish various types of human rights violation, including bureaucratic restrictions on the building of places of worship, for example,<sup>3</sup> or a refusal to grant legal status so that religious or social activities can be carried out.<sup>4</sup> Restrictions may also affect individuals because of their religion. Thus, in many countries in the Middle East and Asia, Christians are debarred from certain political and administrative posts.<sup>5</sup> These administrative rules may also often concern freedom of conscience, because conversion to Islam for example is often legally encouraged, whereas conversion to Christianity is not recognised by the judicial authorities, as in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> These restrictions most often also extend into people's private lives, having implications, for example, for the right to education and matrimonial law. In the field of education, some countries make it compulsory to teach the state religion at publicly run schools, without making any allowance for Christians who are not adherents of the state religion, as in [Yemen](#). In the matrimonial sphere, many countries regulate mixed marriages. This is the case with regard to marriages between people

belonging to different religions, which may require prior conversion before a non-Muslim man can marry a Muslim woman, as is the case in [Egypt](#), [Jordan](#) and [Afghanistan](#).

It is difficult to assign all these restrictions to general categories. The NGO [Open Doors](#) has nonetheless tried to do so by classifying them as 'exclusive tribalism' (seeking to create a society which is ethnically or religiously homogeneous), 'extreme secularism' (seeking to promote atheism) and 'abusive power' (government for the benefit of a clan).

### **Violence against Christians**

Most of the difficulties faced by Christians lie at the interface between action by non-state groups and a state framework of surveillance and restriction of freedom of belief and freedom to practise a religion. In certain cases, they arise not from positive action by the state to impose restrictions (the cases cited in the previous section), but from its inability to act. Groups such as Boko Haram in the Sahel, and ISIL/Da'esh in Syria and Iraq, commit war crimes and carry out persecution, abductions, rapes or forced conversions in the absence of a state framework which is capable of protecting minorities. In other regions, such as [India](#), Christians may be victims of violence even though the state does not pursue any policy of restricting that religious community.

For all these reasons, the diversity of situations seems very great, including state restrictions on freedom of belief and freedom to practise a religion, legal discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation, and action by non-state groups. Four case studies may serve to underline these differences.

### **Case studies: China, Pakistan, Nigeria and Iraq**

#### **China**

In China, the [Constitution](#) guarantees freedom of belief and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religious affiliation. The state portrays itself as the guarantor of 'normal' religious activities, which must not endanger order or public health or interfere with the education system. In reality, only five patriotic religious associations (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant) are permitted to register legally and carry out their activities. [Other](#) religious organisations, including the Catholic Church affiliated to Rome, the Orthodox Church and Judaism, are not permitted to register and therefore operate illegally. The restrictions are particularly stringent in the case of believers who recognise a religious authority outside China's borders, such as the Pope or the Dalai Lama. However, some [university researchers](#) believe that in future China will have more Christians among its population than any other country in the world (there are some 58 million Protestants at present, with the figure projected to rise to more than 160 million in 2025).

In reality, many reports underline the difficulties experienced in practising religions in China, which apply to all religions, including Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. The annual [report](#) of the US Department of State deplores cases of imprisonment of clergymen who are affiliated to patriotic religious associations, the closure of churches and destruction of crosses. According to the organisation [Aid to Church in Need](#), a certain number of [senior Catholic clerics](#) are in prison, and some have been there for years, while it is impossible to obtain any information. This applies to Bishop Su Zhimin, aged 80, who has been in prison for 15 years, or Father Joseph Lu Genjun, who has been in prison since 2006, and also to dozens of priests. The

authorities deny the Holy See the right to appoint and transfer bishops to serve a [community](#) of 9 million Catholics (figure for 2010). As a result, only one new bishop has been [ordained](#) since 2012 with the agreement of the Vatican, but on a proposal of the Chinese authorities.

It is therefore clear that, in China, the situation of Christians is made difficult by a series of legal or regulatory prohibitions on practising their religion, which lead to destruction and arbitrary detention. However, Christians do not find themselves under attack from other groups in society.

### **Pakistan**

The [Constitution](#) of Pakistan declares Islam to be the state religion and stipulates that all laws must accord with this first principle. It also recognises the right of citizens to practise their religion. The [personal status](#) of citizens of Pakistan is governed by religious rules. The state does not recognise civil marriages, and restricts freedom of conversion, preventing Muslim women from marrying men who are of a different religious persuasion, or dissolving marriages in which the wife converts to Islam but the husband does not. The rules on inheritance also depend on religious affiliation. The law on blasphemy is applied [very broadly](#). One of the cases which has received the most media coverage in recent years is that of [Asia Bibi](#), who in 2010 became the first woman to be sentenced to death for blasphemy. Two politicians who had sought to defend her were murdered.

Violence against religious minorities is widespread in Pakistan. On 4 November 2014, a crowd of 1 500 people [accused](#) a couple of Christians of blasphemy and burned them alive. The police arrested 59 suspects and prosecuted another 468. Each year, some [1 000](#) Pakistani women – 700 Christians and 300 Hindus – are said to be compelled to convert to Islam under pressure from the community or by means of abductions.

The reports of the [Minority Rights Group International](#) and [Amnesty International](#) deplore the feeble response of the public authorities to such communal violence. In Pakistan, therefore, the restrictive legislative framework is combined with serious communal violence.

### **Nigeria**

The [Constitution](#) of Nigeria stipulates that neither the federation nor its states can have an official religion or enforce religious education or ceremonies. Freedom of belief is reinforced by an explicit mention (in Article 38) of freedom to convert to a different religion and to practise one's religion.

In practice, the situation in the centre and north of the country casts doubt on compliance with these principles. Firstly, at [local level](#), non-Muslims are sometimes compelled to appear before Islamic courts, and conversion to Christianity is severely punished, as is blasphemy, under a law whose application is very vague. Communal violence is not only frequent but extreme, and many reports, such as [that](#) of the US State Department or that of the NGO [Aid to Church in Need](#) highlight the difficulties experienced by the state in putting an end to it. The situation in Nigeria shows that, although the Constitution guarantees respect for freedom of conscience, the state can be by-passed by a spiral of religious violence accompanied by a transnational armed conflict which it is unable to bring under control (see box below).

### Iraq

Iraq seems to be among those countries where there is not only a systematic state policy of restricting freedom of conscience, but also a regional war conducted by non-state groups such as ISIL/Da'esh.

The [Constitution](#) stipulates that Islam is the state religion and that no law can be adopted which contradicts this first principle. It also lays down that the rights of Christians, Yazidis and Mandeans<sup>7</sup> shall be respected. Nonetheless, the law prohibits conversion of Muslims to other religions and requires minor children to be converted if one of their parents converts to Islam. In Parliament, Christians hold 3 of 275 seats. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the situation seems to be better: Christians are relatively well represented in the regional Parliament and in administrative bodies. In 2012, the Kurdish Government [declared](#) schools to be religiously neutral and announced that religions were equal in the school system.

At [local](#) level, respect for the rights of Christians is highly problematic. Iraq is traditionally the cradle of numerous Christian minorities, particularly the Assyrians (Orthodox) and Chaldeans (Catholics). Members of these minorities encounter both legal and social difficulties. They find it difficult to secure recognition of their property rights. This is particularly the case because religion is explicitly indicated on identity documents, making Christians vulnerable to administrative discrimination. There are therefore many legal obstacles, which is reflected by Iraq's ranking as a state whose restrictions on freedom of belief are severe according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

#### Attacks by international terrorist groups

In various regions of the world, states are involved in armed conflict with international terrorist groups. These groups, such as ISIL/Da'esh in Syria and Iraq, and Boko Haram in the Sahel in Africa, have committed crimes against Muslims, Christians and members of other minorities.

In Nigeria, confronted by the group Boko Haram, the armed forces are often poorly equipped or sometimes rather reluctant to defend members of the public in conflicts that have religious, economic and ethnic roots. According to the US Department of State, the majority of the victims of Boko Haram are Muslims, although the group also officially targets Christians. On 14 April 2014, the group [captured](#) 276 Christian girls in Chibok in the north of the country, compelling them to convert and to enter into forced marriages. In 2014, at least 500 000 people were [displaced](#) inside Nigeria's borders because of these religious conflicts.

In Iraq, despite the efforts of the Iraqi army, Christians are likewise victims of [attacks](#), degrading treatment, abductions or forced conversions by ISIL/Da'esh or criminal organisations taking advantage of the disorganisation on the ground. Thus nearly 50 000 Christians left Mosul in the months preceding the attack on it by ISIL/Da'esh in the summer of 2014.

In these particular cases, the violence against Christians is attributable both to the state framework and to a spiral of transnational violence inflicted by terrorist groups, which the state is poorly equipped to tackle.

### Action by the European Union and international organisations

#### The principles and actions of international organisations

##### *United Nations instruments*

The UN [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) provides that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration, 'without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status' (Article 2). It also stipulates that 'men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to

marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution' (Article 16), and that '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.' In 1981, the UN adopted a [Declaration](#) on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. It reaffirms freedom to choose a religion or belief without coercion (Article 1) and the prohibition of discrimination or restrictions based on the religion of individuals (Article 2). It proclaims the right to worship, to found the institutions necessary for the purpose and to disseminate and teach beliefs. All these rights are reasserted in various international conventions of the [UN](#).

In 1986, the UN appointed a [Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#). He works in close cooperation with the [Human Rights Council](#), to which he forwards individual complaints and also annual reports. The latter concern specific aspects such as freedom of religion and belief, and [discrimination at work](#), [gender equality](#) or [membership of religious minorities](#). In the latter report, he calls on states to take reasonable measures to accommodate religious minorities, but also to pursue a dialogue with the religious authorities in each country. The rapporteur also calls for apostasy, blasphemy and missionary work not to be defined as criminal offences.

### **Action by the European Union and international organisations**

#### *European instruments*

The European [Convention](#) on Human Rights of the Council of Europe protects freedom of conscience and religion (Article 9), and the right to profess a religion or convert to a different one. The European Court of Human Rights has also built up a body of [case law](#) over many years interpreting Article 9.

The European Union protects the same freedom in its [Charter](#) of Fundamental Rights, Article 10 of which reaffirms freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

In 2013, the Council of the European Union adopted [principles](#) for the promotion and protection of freedom of religion and belief. Just as the EU has committed itself to protecting this freedom within its own territory, it undertakes to promote it in its foreign policy, impartially and without promoting any particular belief. The Council recalls that states are the prime guarantors of this freedom in the world, by protecting freedom to believe or not to believe, alone or in a group, to change religion and to express such opinions. The EU undertakes to combat breaches of this right which take the form of compulsory registration and bans on activities of unregistered religious groups, and to combat breaches by encouraging the preservation of places of worship against acts of vandalism. It also condemns discrimination on grounds of religion and encourages states to recognise the right of conscientious objection to military service. The European Union also finances organisations active in inter-faith dialogue and protection of religious minorities by means of the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights ([EIDHR](#)). The High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs has on several occasions condemned the atrocities committed against religious minorities, for example after the execution of 21 Egyptian Copts in [Libya](#) in February 2015.

#### *Dialogue between the European Union and religious authorities*

Article 17 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union commits the Union to a [dialogue](#) with churches and philosophical organisations. High-level meetings have been [held](#) since 2005; and since 2007, they are co-chaired by the President of the



European Parliament or by the Vice-President in charge of inter-faith dialogue. In his [address](#) of November 2014 to the European Parliament, Pope Francis recalled that religious minorities, and particularly Christian minorities, were the victims of violence in the world. Likewise in November 2014, the Pope [joined](#) Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople<sup>8</sup> in denouncing the expulsion of Christians from the Middle East.

### The position of the European Parliament

The European Parliament has committed itself to protecting European values and supporting religious minorities in difficulty.

In September 2014, Parliament [denounced](#) the persecution of minorities in Iraq by ISIL/Da'esh, and in February 2015, it [reiterated](#) this condemnation in relation to the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and Syria. In these two resolutions, Parliament supported Christian and non-Christian religious minorities. In November 2014, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on the blasphemy laws in Pakistan, calling in particular on the authorities to refrain from sentencing people to death on the basis of them. In March 2015, Parliament [denounced](#) the attacks by ISIL/Da'esh in the Middle East, particularly on Assyrians. In [April](#) 2015, Parliament denounced the persecution of Christians in the world in relation to the murders of students in Kenya, and in [July](#) 2015, it pledged its support to members of the clergy in Sudan.

Moreover, Parliament has become a forum for dialogue with religious leaders. The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawki Allam, was received there in September 2014, and [Pope Francis](#) in November 2014. High-level conferences have been held, particularly in [March 2015](#), on preventing religious radicalisation.

### Main references

Annual [reports](#) of the US State Department on religious freedom in the world.

[Reports](#) of the Pew Research Center on religious demographics in the world

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Information about the difficulties really faced by Christians remains limited. It is necessary to take into account the fact that data are based on statements by individuals in those cases where it is possible to obtain statistics at all (they are, for example, prohibited in [France](#)). Their responses do not necessarily reflect their actual religious practices. Since 1998, the US State Department has published a report on religious freedom each year, detailing legislation and the situation in each country in the world. Various think tanks such as the Pew Research Center, and NGOs such as Open Doors or Aid to Church in Need also publish reports and statistics. This effort to provide information is, in itself, necessary, as the situations that exist in the various regions of the world vary widely, and as data are sometimes difficult to gather, because of wars or authoritarian regimes. In 2015, for the first time, France asked the UN Security Council for an open debate on the persecution of Christians in the East. The UN has committed itself to adopting an action plan against violent extremism and setting up a group of wise persons on the issue.
- <sup>2</sup> Brian Grim et al., *Yearbook of International Religious Demography 2014*, Brill, 2014.
- <sup>3</sup> According to the UN, the Chin Christian minorities (the [Chin](#) are an ethnic group) in Burma, for example, face multiple constraints on the construction of new churches ([A/HCR22/67](#)). In [Egypt](#), since 1934, any new church construction project has required special permission from the President, which can be granted only after a long series of approvals by national organisations and the Ministry of the Interior.
- <sup>4</sup> In Turkey, the status of certain Christian religions is regulated by the law, based on the [Treaty of Lausanne](#) of 1923, granting freedom of religion. But this status is not fully respected, as the churches have difficulty in training their priests and as the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is refused its title, according to the [European Commission](#). Moreover, the status is also used to deny branches of Christianity which have arrived in Turkey more recently, such as the [Protestant churches](#), the right to secure a genuine legal status.
- <sup>5</sup> In [Pakistan](#), all holders of high political office, including Members of Parliament, have to take an oath to protect the country's Islamic identity. In [Saudi Arabia](#), the application of the criterion of religion is even stricter, as all citizens have to be Muslims. In [Iran](#), no senior post in government or the military can be held by a non-Muslim, except for the 5 of 290 seats reserved in Parliament (the Majlis) for minorities.
- <sup>6</sup> In [Egypt](#), for example, the Constitutional Court has ruled that recognition of a conversion from Islam to another religion is illegal because it is contrary to the Sharia-based Constitution.

- <sup>7</sup> The [religion](#) of the Mandaeans is a very old one; it is monotheistic and its adherents do not seek to convert non-believers. Baptism plays a vital role in it, John the Baptist being a key figure. In 2004, the faith had 150 000 adherents worldwide, half of them in Iraq.
- <sup>8</sup> The Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is the *primus inter pares* of the patriarchs of the Orthodox Churches in the world.

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