



Center for Religious Liberty
at Family Research Council



INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: WHAT IT IS AND WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

by Arielle Del Turco



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OUR MISSION:

The Center for Religious Liberty exists to cultivate religious freedom for every person worldwide.

WHAT WE BELIEVE:

We believe that religious liberty is the freedom to hold religious beliefs of one's choice and to live according to those beliefs. While it was foundational to the formation of the United States of America, religious freedom is not merely an American right, but an inherent human right for all people of all faiths everywhere.

Of all people, Christians understand that we must have freedom to choose God, who does not want belief to be forced or compelled. Ensuring religious freedom is vital to affirming human dignity and treating each person with respect. Therefore, we seek to expand the freedom to choose one's faith, and live it out, as a fundamental human right.

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One day I was called to the local Ministry of State Security... and there, I was tortured and beaten for reasons unknown. I was then asked, did I come into contact with any South Korean intelligence agents? I said I didn't know what you're talking about, and that's when the agent placed my Bible on his desk. He told me to explain what this is all about. At that moment, I felt my heart stop.

Because in North Korea, if you believe in any other God or gods besides Kim Il-sung and the Kim family dictators, you would be sent to a political prison camp or executed. I knew I had to be quick-thinking, so I said I found it while I was walking around and I wanted to turn it in but I didn't have time.

So, I lied. I had to lie because that was the only way I could survive and get out of that situation. The security agent told me he would check on this and he repeatedly told me if I did this again that he would not forgive me. He put fear in me and then released me.

I found out later that my best friend actually turned in the Bible and reported me to the authorities.

— Ji Hyeona, North Korean defector¹



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A global crisis is unfolding, one not often acknowledged. Attacks on religious freedom against those of all faiths continue to mount in many regions of the world. Over 80 percent of the world's population lives in countries with either high or very high levels of governmental or societal religious oppression.²

People of faith face restrictions from governments, hostility from neighbors, and violence from nonstate actors. Thousands of Christians languish in North Korean labor camps,³ Jehovah's Witnesses are imprisoned in Russia,⁴ Christians are targeted to be kidnapped and killed in Nigeria,⁵ and Yazidis in the Middle East struggle to recover from a genocide at the hands of ISIS.⁶ These are just a few of the atrocities taking place around the world. Now more than ever, the world needs advocates for international religious freedom.

Christians should care about international religious freedom for several reasons. First, because God calls us to care for the persecuted church, the downtrodden, and those who cannot help themselves (Psalm 82:3-4, Isaiah 1:17, James 1:27). Second, because Christian theology aligns with the principles of religious freedom. God does not coerce us into believing; likewise, we should not use government to coerce others. True faith must always be a free choice. Third, there are practical humanitarian benefits when religious freedom thrives, leading to freer, safer, and more prosperous societies for those that embrace it. For all these reasons, Christians should advocate for societies in which everyone can freely choose and live out their faith.



WAYS INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IS VIOLATED

At its core, religious freedom is the freedom to choose, change, and live in accordance with one's faith. Religious freedom is fundamental to the human conscience because it affects one's ability to seek answers to life's most profound questions and live according to the conclusions they come to. It protects the freedom to seek and worship God as one sees fit, or not at all.

To allow someone to live according to the dictates of their conscience is to allow them to live with integrity, according to their deeply held values.⁷ In this way, religious freedom affirms the human dignity of every individual. As a basic human right recognized by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, every government has an obligation to protect religious freedom. Whenever that freedom is violated—no matter where it is in the world—everyone ought to care.

Religious freedom affirms the human dignity of every individual.

Both state and nonstate actors at times restrict religious freedom or persecute religious believers. In China, the government is waging what

many have called a “war on faith,” and no religion is exempt. While house churches are systematically oppressed throughout the country, the government is simultaneously working to eliminate the freedom of Uyghur Muslims in the northwestern region of Xinjiang.

Qurban Mamut is a Uyghur Muslim currently detained without judicial process along with one to three million others in a “re-education” internment camp.⁸ Before his detention, Mamut had spent decades as the editor-in-chief of a popular Uyghur magazine.⁹ In February 2017, he traveled with his wife to visit their son in the United States for a month.¹⁰ Shortly after returning to China, Mamut disappeared, and his son in the U.S. heard reports that he had been taken to a “re-education” camp.¹¹

While Chinese government officials have claimed that these internment camps are “free vocational training,”¹² Mamut’s forced

detention proves that this is not the facilities' true purpose. As a retired 70-year-old who spent decades building a professional career, he does not need further vocational training.¹³ In reality, China is cracking down on Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims, targeting them for their faith and ethnicity. China's brutal campaign against Uyghurs is one of the foremost religious freedom issues of our day.

CHRISTIANS ARE CALLED TO CARE ABOUT THE PERSECUTED AND OPPRESSED

As our fellow Christians and those of other faiths endure persecution every day, do we have an obligation to care and respond? When we refer to Scripture, the answer is undeniably “yes.”

The New Testament makes it clear that the universal church is linked: “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:26). Writing to the early church already beginning to experience persecution, the writer of Hebrews admonishes Christians, “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body” (Heb. 13:3). Christians have an obligation to learn the stories and care about the plight of the persecuted church.

Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). Christians are not meant solely to pray and express concern for the persecuted; there is a practical element of caring and providing physical aid for those in need.



Religious freedom is not just for Christians, and we are called to care for the oppressed and downtrodden beyond fellow believers in the persecuted church. Likewise, Christians ought to care not only for our religious freedom but for the freedom of people of all faiths to seek after God as they see fit.

Apostasy, blasphemy, and anti-conversion laws utilize government power to oversee “prohibited” religious speech and bar people from choosing their faith.¹⁴ Such laws pose some of the greatest threats to religious freedom around the world.

Pakistani Christians Shafqat Emmanuel and Shagufta Kausar’s world came crashing down, and a years-long nightmare ensued, when a Muslim cleric claimed he received a blasphemous text message written in English from Shagufta’s phone in June 2013. The cleric pressed charges under Pakistan’s notorious blasphemy laws.¹⁵

But Shagufta and Shafqat come from a poor background and are illiterate. They are unable to craft such a text in English. The couple suspects the cleric’s accusation is retaliation for an argument between their children and their neighbors. In April 2014, Shafqat and Shagufta were sentenced to death, and they are still appealing the court’s decision.¹⁶ After years languishing apart in separate prisons, the married couple was finally released after being acquitted in June 2021.

In addition to legal protections, cultures must foster social respect for religious freedom. Though laws such as Pakistan’s blasphemy law are a major problem, it is often neighbors and acquaintances who bring



forward blasphemy charges to punish people for unrelated disputes. Pakistani society is actually *more* hostile to religious freedom than the law is. For religious freedom to truly flourish, it must have the support of the culture at large.

Supporting this freedom does not mean we give up our own beliefs or do not seek to persuade people of the truth. Rather, we rely on free discourse and persuasion than on the power of government to compel people to give up a faith or convert to a preferred one.

Jesus did not force people to follow Him. He allowed them to choose for themselves, recognizing that true belief cannot be coerced. In the parable of the rich young ruler, Jesus tells a young man who is seeking the kingdom of God, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Matt. 19:21-22).

A Christian understanding of the freedom that God has given humans to choose to follow Him requires us to allow people to make faith decisions for themselves. We should support government policies that allow such freedom.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM MAKES THE WORLD SAFER AND MORE PROSPEROUS

Religious freedom has practical benefits for society as well. Evidence suggests that religious freedom is a factor that leads to economic growth and stability. The building blocks necessary for religious freedom—limited government, the rule of law, freedom of association, and dignity of the individual—are the same as those needed for economic freedom to thrive.¹⁷

Religious freedom promotes religious plurality, and the benefits of this diversity are creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship.¹⁸ Religious restrictions stifle creative power, thereby limiting what new ideas can be shared or implemented, thus inhibiting economic development.¹⁹

Human capital, the knowledge and skills that people possess, is a necessary component for economic growth and development. When a country offers a safe haven for religious minorities, they flock to it and bring with them unique talents that enhance the



country.²⁰ Consequently, countries with high religious restrictions or discrimination endure a “brain-drain.” While further research is needed on this topic, the economic benefits of religious liberty should not be ignored.

In addition, recent studies have shown that religious freedom, “mitigates terrorism and civil war, strengthens democracy, enhances economic development, fosters peace, enables reconciliation and advances opportunities for women.”²¹ Allowing the government to hinder one freedom makes it likely that they will have no qualms about inhibiting others.²² The insecurity in these countries make it impossible for a stable democracy to be built.²³

Perhaps nowhere is the connection between religious freedom and national security more obvious than in Nigeria, where two Islamist terrorist groups routinely target Christian villagers.

In 2018, Leah Sharibu was one of 110 young schoolgirls abducted by Boko Haram in northeastern Nigeria during an attack on an all-girl science and technical school. She was just 14 years old at the time.²⁴ Unlike the rest of the girls (who were released by the terrorists two months later), Leah remains in captivity as of August 2020, more than two years since her abduction. The reason? She refused her abductors’ demands to abandon her Christian faith and convert to Islam.

Because Leah stuck to her beliefs, Boko Haram militants keep her enslaved. Reports now suggest Leah is suspected to be a victim of a forced marriage to one of her captors and has given birth to a baby.²⁵

But Leah is not alone. Boko Haram and Fulani militants regularly kidnap and attack Christians. An estimated 12,000 Christians have been killed in Nigeria since 2015.²⁶

Inadequate religious freedom protections cause regional chaos and instability. For the past two decades, the absence of religious freedom has led to “violence, terrorism and instability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and other countries.”²⁷ Every major war fought by the U.S. over the last 70 to 80 years, including World War II, was fought against an enemy who was guilty of egregious religious freedom violations.²⁸ Religious freedom is connected to national security and economic

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growth. We cannot afford to ignore or misunderstand that connection any longer.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

Often called America’s “first freedom,” many people in our country have recognized the importance of promoting religious freedom abroad. Since the emergence of international religious freedom as an American foreign policy issue in the 1980s and 90s, its promotion has sustained bipartisan support.

The U.S. International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998 sought to prioritize religious freedom and define what constitutes a violation in U.S. foreign policy. IRFA defines violations of religious freedom to include arbitrary prohibitions on, restrictions of, or punishment for assembling for religious activities, speaking about religious beliefs, changing religions, possessing and distributing religious literature, and raising children according to religious teachings.²⁹

Yet religious freedom cannot exist alone; it is tied to other freedoms. The freedom to truly live in accordance with one's faith requires freedom of speech and assembly, to name a few. When a country embraces religious freedom, other basic human rights come along with it. And the pluralism and tolerance fostered by religious freedom policies have been linked to more prosperous and stable societies.

Thus, promoting religious freedom is in the United States' national interest and has, to varying degrees, played a role in American diplomatic interactions since the passage of IRFA. U.S. officials have successfully advocated for the release of political prisoners such as American pastor Andrew Brunson, who spent two years in a Turkish prison on bogus charges of aiding a coup attempt.³⁰ Brunson was finally released after the U.S. put economic pressure on individual Turkish officials.³¹

As U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Sam Brownback says, “[i]f you can sell agricultural products to other countries, you can sell religious freedom.” When religious freedom is prioritized in U.S. diplomacy, it signals to our friends and foes that we value this human right and notice when it is being abused. The U.S. has a significant role to play in advocating for religious



freedom abroad. Religious freedom conditions around the world are getting worse, not better, and it is in our national interest to help turn the tide in favor of freedom. The U.S. is considered the leader of the free world, which puts us in a unique position to advocate for the freedom of religion.

OUR RESPONSE TO ATTACKS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Given the magnitude of the problem, how can we respond to the abuses against and repression of religious believers around the world?

Learn: In order to make a difference, we must first become informed. Scripture prompts us to remember those who are imprisoned and mistreated (Heb. 13:3). Christians have an obligation to the persecuted church to learn their stories and care about their plight.

Read and listen to the stories of those who have been persecuted for their beliefs. Research the religious freedom violations occurring around the world today. Understand how regimes abuse their people, how mob violence takes the lives of innocent people, and how oppressive laws dictate what people are allowed to believe.

The State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report³² and the United States Commission of International Religious Freedom's annual report³³ are great places to start.

Advocate: Everyone has a role to play in moving the needle forward. A key way to make a difference is to publicly care about international religious freedom. Share information about current issues on your social media. Write op-eds for your college or local newspaper. Nothing will change if the world does not know the extent of the problem.



Call your elected representatives and tell them they need to support religious freedom abroad. When a relevant bill is introduced in Congress, let your representatives know you support it. International religious freedom is often bipartisan, but if members of Congress think their constituents do not care, they will often not prioritize it themselves.

Those of us in free societies must use our voices to defend those who cannot defend themselves. In some countries, repressive governments have effectively silenced religious minorities. In these cases, especially, it is critical that we speak up on their behalf.

Pray: As we learn about the dire situations faced by religious communities around the world, the magnitude of the problem ought to drive us to our knees in prayer on behalf of the persecuted.

Persecuted believers can find meaningful encouragement by knowing others are praying for them. When Pastor Andrew Brunson was held captive in a Turkish prison for his faith, he had a deep need to know that people were praying for him and did not forget him. In his darkest moments, Brunson valued the prayers of those around the world. Those in hopeless situations may find hope in the knowledge that believers around the world are lifting them up in prayer.

As we pray, the Lord will stir our hearts to act. Prayer not only has the power to change situations but also to change us.

CONCLUSION

Everyone everywhere ought to have the ability to choose their religion, change their religion, and live according to their faith. Whenever this basic human right is acknowledged and respected, whole societies benefit. Whenever this right is violated, whether by governments or by individuals, people suffer. This fact alone is a more than sufficient reason for the world to care about religious freedom.

Christians have an even greater reason to care about religious freedom than the world does. Scripture compels us to share the gospel and care for the persecuted church, the downtrodden, and those who cannot help themselves. Because God has allowed us to freely choose Him, it is good and right that we follow His example by ensuring everyone everywhere has the freedom to believe, without government or social coercion.



Arielle Del Turco serves as the Assistant Director of the Center for Religious Liberty at Family Research Council, coordinating FRC's international religious freedom advocacy and crafting effective policy solutions through research and analysis. Her work has appeared in *USA Today*, *RealClearPolitics*, *Newsweek*, *National Review*, *The Federalist*, *Washington Examiner*, and *The National Interest*.

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FRC seeks to inform the news media, the academic community, business leaders, and the general public about family issues that affect the nation from a biblical worldview.

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Why should Christians engage on international religious freedom?

Around the world, Christians and others face immense challenges to living their faith out in the open. Government restrictions and attacks from extremists cause innocent believers to suffer. This reality should deeply affect those of us who have been blessed with religious liberty and prompt us to act on behalf of the oppressed. This pamphlet explores what Scripture has to say about the persecuted and downtrodden and explains why Christians should care about promoting religious freedom for all people around the globe.



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