

Baptists worldwide take low-key approach to religious-liberty concerns

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FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP)—Baptists generally prefer to handle violations of religious freedom through quiet diplomacy instead of media headlines denouncing “persecution” of Christians, said a freedom-and-justice specialist for the [Baptist World Alliance](#).

That approach contrasts with well-known organizations like [Voice of the Martyrs](#) and [Open Doors](#) that publicize and advocate on behalf of the “persecuted church.”

Christians in Tehsil Gojra, Pakistan, examine homes they said were burned by Muslim extremists. (PHOTO/Good Shepherd Ministries/Pakistan)

Mistreatment in the name of religion isn’t limited to any particular faith. Protestants and Catholics have waged war in Northern Ireland for decades, and violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims erupted in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

But observers say the majority of people suffering because of their faith today are Christians, typically at the hands of officially atheistic regimes or in Muslim majorities where fundamentalist Islam is enshrined in Sharia law.

By undocumented estimates, some 200 million Christians around the world are persecuted for their beliefs. Rick Warren recently cited a statistic

claiming [146,000 Christians died last year](#) alone for their faith.

New figures compiled by the [Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life](#) report that 70 percent of the world's 6.8 billion people live in countries where some citizens face high or very high restrictions on their religion.

Religious freedom belongs both to individuals and to religious groups. It includes a person's right to walk down the street wearing a yarmulke or a headscarf, and it also includes rights of group to worship as they please.

The fundamental nature of religious freedom was enshrined in the 1948 [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), prompted in large part by the Nazi Holocaust against the Jewish people.

Since passage of the [International Religious Freedom Act](#) in 1998, religious freedom also has been a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy.

Systematic religious persecution by governments takes three main forms—officially atheistic communist regimes like China, North Korea and Vietnam; repressive Islamic states like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Sudan; and nationalist authoritarian states such as Burma, Eritrea and Uzbekistan. Those eight countries have been listed by the U.S. State Department as “Countries of Particular Concern,” a designation for the world’s worst violators of religious freedom.

Other countries have high government restrictions that favor some religions over others. In Greece, for example, only Orthodox Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations are legally recognized as a religion, putting minority sects at a disadvantage, including the right to own property.

Some states have more moderate restrictions. Cambodia, for example, prohibits Christians from going door to door to proselytize or hand out

literature. Switzerland recently created controversy when it banned construction of minarets, reflecting cultural fears of a growing Muslim population but denounced as a violation of religious freedom.

Some countries have low restrictions on religious freedom. In the United Kingdom, for example, the head of state is also head of the Church of England, but the government does not always favor the established church.

In the United States, the free exercise of religion is guaranteed, but churches can be prohibited from things like endorsing political candidates in exchange for being exempt for paying taxes or subject to zoning laws that regulate the construction of buildings.

Because the First Amendment also prohibits the establishment of religion, a Christian majority cannot impose its views on society as a whole. This often results in court battles over issues like community Nativity displays at Christmas, displays of the Ten Commandments on public property and skirmishes like one recently in Georgia over whether football players at a public high school could rush onto the field bursting through paper banners bearing inspirational verses from the Bible.

In some parts of the world, persecution is not at the hands of the government, but social hostility related to factors like politics, ethnicity, the economy and religion cause segments of the population to be treated harshly.

An example is India, where riots late in 2007 by radical Hindu mobs in the state of Orissa were described as the worst attacks ever targeting Christians since India became a democracy.

Some countries, like China, are not officially anti-religion but crack down on particular beliefs that are declared illegal. Buddhism is regulated in China, in part because of its integral association with the Tibetan independence movement.

In 1999, China outlawed [Falun Gong](#), a movement that started in the early 1990s, branding it a “dangerous cult” that the government said posed a threat to Chinese society. Crackdowns on unregistered Christian groups that meet in private homes may reflect anxiety by local officials that secret meetings are a breeding ground for dissent or even revolution.

China’s mixed bag on religion also includes vestiges of the Cultural Revolution, a zealous crackdown in the late 1960s in which all religion was viewed as backward and contrary to social progress. China’s overall attitude toward religion is that a citizen’s No. 1 priority is to the state rather than to any religion.

In some places, religious minorities suffer just for being different. Because of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment, Americans don’t have a particular faith associated with national spirit. That isn’t true in places like the former Soviet Union, where the Orthodox Church is widely viewed as the only “Russian” form of Christianity.

“I think there are many different forms of religious persecution,” said Cindy Wiles of Arlington, executive director of [Global Connection Partnership Network](#), which helps involve congregations in humanitarian missions in various parts of the world, including nations where religious freedom is severely restricted.

“To me, any time you are oppressed for following God as you perceive him to be, that is a form of religious persecution.”

Julie Justus, the staff member assigned to the [Freedom and Justice Division of the Baptist World Alliance](#), said the BWA typically takes a low-key approach when responding to a report of a possible violation of religious liberty.

“Customarily the most supportive action for the parties involved is for the BWA to focus on mediation and conversation rather than on publicity,” she

said. "An untimely and inappropriate external public protest can sometimes prove to be a bigger hindrance than help and could even put the case at risk."

The BWA generally only publicizes a potential infraction if deemed completely necessary, she said. Customarily, that involves campaigning with other organizations, such as other church organizations, to issue statements supporting the religious freedom of those involved in the case.

"Christians around the world are committed to the cause," she said. "Consequently, a compromise is sometimes made in order to help pursue what is a manageable outcome. The BWA wants to assist and is committed to asking for guidance on how we can be most helpful."